JOHN GOWER AND THE LEGITIMATION CRISIS:

PRODUCING CONSENT THROUGH THE CONFESSIONS OF A LOVER

BY

LYNN ARNER

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Canada

Name _ _ _ _ _

Dissertation Abstracts International is arranged by broad, general subject categories. Please select the one subject which most nearly describes the content of your dissertation. Enter the corresponding four-digit code in the spaces provided.

SUBJECT TERM   SUBJECT CODE

Subject Categories

THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS
Architecture 0729
Art History 0377
Cinema 0900
Dance 0378
Fine Arts 0357
Information Science 0723
Journalism 0391
Library Science 0399
Mass Communications 0708
Music 0413
Speech Communication 0459
Theater 0465

EDUCATION
General 0515
Administration 0514
Adult and Continuing 0516
Agricultural 0517
Art 0273
Bilingual and Multicultural 0282
Business 0688
Community College 0275
Curriculum and Instruction 0727
Early Childhood 0518
Elementary 0524
Finance 0277
Guidance and Counseling 0519
Health 0680
Higher 0745
History of 0520
Home Economics 0278
Industrial 0521
Language and Literature 0279
Mathematics 0280
Music 0522
Philosophy of 0998
Physical 0523

Psychology 0525
Reading 0535
Religious 0527
Sciences 0714
Secondary 0533
Social Sciences 0534
Sociology of 0340
Special 0529
Teacher Training 0530
Technology 0710
Tests and Measurements 0288
Vocational 0747

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS
Language
   General 0679
   Ancient 0289
   Linguistics 0290
   Modern 0291
Literature
   General 0401
   Classical 0294
   Comparative 0295
   Medieval 0297
   Modern 0298
   African 0316
   American 0591
   Asian 0305
   Canadian (English) 0352
   Canadian (French) 0355
   English 0593
   Germanic 0311
   Latin American 0312
   Middle Eastern 0315
   Romance 0313
   Slavic and East European 0314

PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND THEOLOGY
Philosophy 0422
Religion
   General 0318
   Biblical Studies 0321
   Clergy 0319
   History of 0320
   Philosophy of 0322
Theology 0469

SOCIAL SCIENCES
American Studies 0323
Anthropology
   Archaeology 0324
   Cultural 0326
   Physical 0327
Business Administration
   General 0310
   Accounting 0272
   Banking 0770
   Management 0454
   Marketing 0338
Canadian Studies 0385
Economics
   General 0501
   Agricultural 0503
   Commerce-Business 0505
   Finance 0508
   History 0509
   Labor 0510
   Theory 0511
Folklore 0358
Geography 0366
Gerontology 0351
History
   General 0578

Ancient 0579
Medieval 0581
Modern 0582
Black 0328
African 0331
Asia, Australia and Oceania 0332
Canadian 0334
European 0335
Latin American 0336
Middle Eastern 0333
United States 0337
History of Science 0585
Law 0398
Political Science
   General 0615
   International Law and
      Relations 0616
   Public Administration 0617
Recreation 0814
Social Work 0452
Sociology
   General 0626
   Criminology and Penology ... 0627
   Demography 0938
   Ethnic and Racial Studies 0631
   Individual and Family
      Studies 0628
   Industrial and Labor
      Relations 0629
   Public and Social Welfare 0630
   Social Structure and
      Development 0700
   Theory and Methods 0344
Transportation 0709
Urban and Regional Planning 0999
Women's Studies 0453

THE SCIENCES AND ENGINEERING

BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES
Agriculture
   General 0473
   Agronomy 0285
   Animal Culture and
      Nutrition 0475
   Animal Pathology 0476
   Food Science and
      Technology 0359
   Forestry and Wildlife 0478
   Plant Culture 0479
   Plant Pathology 0480
   Plant Physiology 0817
   Range Management 0777
   Wood Technology 0746
Biology
   General 0306
   Anatomy 0287
   Biostatistics 0308
   Botany 0309
   Cell 0379
   Ecology 0329
   Entomology 0353
   Genetics 0369
   Limnology 0793
   Microbiology 0410
   Molecular 0307
   Neuroscience 0317
   Oceanography 0416
   Physiology 0433
   Radiation 0821
   Veterinary Science 0778
   Zoology 0472
Biophysics
   General 0786
   Medical 0760

EARTH SCIENCES
Biogeochemistry 0425
Geochemistry 0996

Geodesy 0370
Geology 0372
Geophysics 0373
Hydrology 0388
Mineralogy 0411
Paleobotany 0345
Paleoecology 0426
Paleontology 0418
Paleozoology 0985
Palynology 0427
Physical Geography 0368
Physical Oceanography 0415

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES
Environmental Sciences 0768
Health Sciences
   General 0566
   Audiology 0300
   Chemotherapy 0992
   Dentistry 0567
   Education 0350
   Hospital Management 0769
   Human Development 0758
   Immunology 0982
   Medicine and Surgery 0564
   Mental Health 0347
   Nursing 0569
   Nutrition 0570
   Obstetrics and Gynecology .. 0380
   Occupational Health and
      Therapy 0354
   Ophthalmology 0381
   Pathology 0571
   Pharmacology 0419
   Pharmacy 0572
   Physical Therapy 0382
   Public Health 0573
   Radiology 0574
   Recreation 0575

Speech Pathology 0460
Toxicology 0383
Home Economics 0386

PHYSICAL SCIENCES

Pure Sciences
Chemistry
   General 0485
   Agricultural 0749
   Analytical 0486
   Biochemistry 0487
   Inorganic 0488
   Nuclear 0738
   Organic 0490
   Pharmaceutical 0491
   Physical 0494
   Polymer 0495
   Radiation 0754
Mathematics 0405
Physics
   General 0605
   Acoustics 0986
   Astronomy and
      Astrophysics 0606
   Atmospheric Science 0608
   Atomic 0748
   Electronics and Electricity 0607
   Elementary Particles and
      High Energy 0798
   Fluid and Plasma 0759
   Molecular 0609
   Nuclear 0610
   Optics 0752
   Radiation 0756
   Solid State 0611
Statistics 0463

Applied Sciences
Applied Mechanics 0346
Computer Science 0984

Engineering
   General 0537
   Aerospace 0538
   Agricultural 0539
   Automotive 0540
   Biomedical 0541
   Chemical 0542
   Civil 0543
   Electronics and Electrical 0544
   Heat and Thermodynamics ... 0348
   Hydraulic 0545
   Industrial 0546
   Marine 0547
   Materials Science 0794
   Mechanical 0548
   Metallurgy 0743
   Mining 0551
   Nuclear 0552
   Packaging 0549
   Petroleum 0765
   Sanitary and Municipal 0554
   System Science 0790
Geotechnology 0428
Operations Research 0796
Plastics Technology 0795
Textile Technology 0994

PSYCHOLOGY
General 0621
Behavioral 0384
Clinical 0622
Developmental 0620
Experimental 0623
Industrial 0624
Personality 0625
Physiological 0989
Psychobiology 0349
Psychometrics 0632
Social 0451

JOHN GOWER AND THE LEGITIMATION CRISIS:

PRODUCING CONSENT THROUGH THE CONFESSIONS OF A LOVER

BY

LYNN ARNER

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

© 1993

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Borrowing the methodology of Stuart Hall, this thesis examines John Gower's attempts in the Confessio Amantis to help produce hegemony for the ruling group in the midst of a legitimation crisis. This investigation includes a discussion of the audience which Gower courts in his efforts to generate consent, an audience which specifically includes occupants of the middle strata of society, large portions of which had participated in uprisings in the 1380's. Gower's renowned formulation of "comun profit" in the Prologue is explored as a political strategy that reshapes the interests of readers through its relation to the audience's nationalist fantasies and anxieties about peasant usurpation.

In his amorous tales, Gower continues his hegemonic project through the cultural narratives that these tales reinscribe, specifically narratives related to aristocratic ideology, as formulated by Michael McKeon. After defining "aristocratic ideology," this study investigates the status of this powerful collection of fictions during the historical moment when Gower wrote the Confessio, and, drawing on McKeon's work, explains the ways in which this ideology works itself out in late fourteenth-century Middle English romance. This thesis explores the specific ways in which the cultural narratives endorsed by Gower's stories deviate from those typical of the romance tradition. These deviations are

discussed as part of Gower's larger attempt to help reproduce

social relations in the face of social unrest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Joseph Donatelli, for his patience, hard work, and open-mindedness. I am extremely grateful for his support. I would also like to thank Rosemary Kegl, one of my current professors at the University of Rochester. She has helped me become a sophisticated cultural materialist and has been unfailingly supportive throughout my Ph.D. study.

I am very grateful to my parents, Don and Joan Arner, for financial support, without which I would never have been able to attend university. I would also like to thank my grandmothers, Ruby Handysides and Muriel Arner, who not only told me since I was knee-high that it was important for a woman to have a career, but who also provided financial support so that I could have one. As someone whose work has been chronically overlooked by awards committees, I am more grateful to my family for their financial support than they could possibly realize.

I would also like to thank several friends for their endless love and support while I produced this text: Mark Anderson, Michele Balze, Lorraine Weston, and Stuart Kane.

Finally, I am indebted to several others who helped me complete this thesis: Erica Walker, Professor Finnegan, Professor Wortley, Russell Peck, and especially Tom Hahn.

INTRODUCTION

These revisions [to the <u>Vox Clamantis</u> and the
<u>Confessio Amantis</u>] are the product of mingled
motives: there actions of the man to twenty years
of political turmoil, the uncompromising world view
of the moralist, and the esthetic sense of the
poet. However, when all is said, our judgment upon
the structural coherence of the three major works
must be . . . that the three works were intended to
present a systematic discourse upon the nature of
man and society. For this they do. In spite of
their length and involution, they provide as
organized and unified a view as we have of the
social ideals of England upon the eve of the
Renaissance.
--John Fisher, <u>John Gower: Moral Philosopher and
Friend of Chaucer</u>, 136.

Medievalists have been surprisingly willing to discuss
the politics behind John Gower's poetry, a willingness perhaps
induced by Gower's explicit discussion of the Peasants' Revolt
in the <u>Vox Clamantis</u> and by his overt criticisms of the three
estates in the Prologue of the <u>Confessio Amantis</u>. The shape
that these investigations of Gower's politics usually take,

1

however, echoes John Fisher's assessment of Gower. Scholars endorse Gower's self-proclaimed title as a voice crying in the wilderness, a man with exceptional insight who sees the ills of society and who can prescribe the appropriate remedies. Gower is praised as an uncompromising moralist who understands the nature of man and society and who can advise his fellow Englishmen how to flee from vice and turn towards virtue for the benefit of individual men and England as a whole.[1]

These representations of Gower as a politically disinterested philosopher camouflage the specificity of the poet's political agenda. Despite his posture in the Confessio Amantis as a moralist dedicated to the greater good, Gower promotes the interests of certain groups at the expense of others. Gower is less concerned with redeeming men's souls than with salvaging the power of England's ruling group during its crisis of authority in the last two decades of the fourteenth century. The goal of this investigation of the Confessio Amantis is to uncover Gower's specific political agenda, foregrounding where his allegiances lie and which cultural narratives he tells as a result. This thesis uses the famous Marxist formulations of hegemony and consent, as articulated by Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, to investigate the Confessio Amantis' participation in the process of hegemony in the midst of the legitimation crisis in late fourteenth-century England. Gower's participation in the production of hegemony and consent is interrogated in terms of

the cultural narratives which the poet endorses, namely the narrative of aristocratic ideology (as articulated by Michael McKeon), a powerful fiction used to legitimate the unequal distribution of wealth and power in feudal England.

As the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and events which preceded it indicate, late-fourteenth-century England was immersed in what Antonio Gramsci calls a "crisis of authority." According to Gramsci, a crisis of authority entails a gap between the dominant group and the ideology which is supposed to hold that group in place. During a crisis, stresses and contradictions at the political level are foregrounded so that the credibility of the ideological narratives which reproduce social relations are strained. Because the ideology which should reproduce social relations is no longer compelling to social subordinates, the dominant group must rule at that moment through force and legal compulsion rather than through hegemony.[2]

Gramsci explains that a dominant group will attempt to emerge from a legitimation crisis by producing hegemony, a process which involves winning consent through ideological means from a significant portion of the non-ruling groups. In The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left, Hall provides the most renowned use of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hall's book examines the process of hegemony under Thatcherism in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. In his chapter entitled "Gramsci and Us," Hall explains how

Thatcherism came into existence in contestation with the welfare state of post-war Britain, with the project of restructuring society. Thatcherism aimed for a reversal of the social alliances that underpinned the post-war formation, which had been in place since 1945 through the 1960s, and the values that had made socialism popular. As Hall explains, the production of consent involves a continual restructuring and reorganization of the economic, social, and cultural order: hegemony must be constructed, contested, and won on many different sites because of the complexity of social struggles and the numerous points of social antagonisms. The Thatcher regime in Britain interpolated different subjects, identities, projects, and aspirations and constructed "unity" from difference by seeming to represent some of the interests of everyone: this project involved a type of recruitment, where Thatcherism addressed a variety of social antagonisms, aligning them within a common project. Thatcherism did so, in part, by addressing the fears, anxieties, and lost identities of Britain as a whole. It played upon British subjects' collective fantasies about themselves as a nation. Political alliances were thereby formed among groups who might seem to have very different interests. Ordinary people were won over because the right wing in Britain constructed a politics which spoke to people's experience, which inserted itself into what Gramsci calls the necessarily fragmentary, contradictory nature of common sense. Conservatism in Britain inserted

itself into the ways in which ordinary people thought about their lives and their needs and, by doing so, managed to alter the ways in which subjects thought about themselves and their relations with others.[3]

Since literature is certainly one of the numerous sites of contestation for hegemony, it is possible to read John Gower's Confessio Amantis as one of the many participants in the battle for hegemony in late fourteenth-century England. In the Vox Clamantis and in the Confessio Amantis, Gower demonstrates a keen awareness that a legitimation crisis is unfolding in England at the time, and in response, he attempts to produce consent for the continuation of social relations. Although it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty who actually read the Confessio in the 1390s, Gower provides several indications regarding the audience whom he is addressing. It is therefore possible to infer an audience consisting of aristocrats and members of the clergy, but more importantly, one also consisting of those who occupy the middle rungs on the socio-economic ladder. It is from these social groups, but particularly from those in the middle socio-economic positions, that Gower attempts to elicit support for the ruling group.

As revisionist historians have argued in recent years, large portions of the middle ranks of society in urban areas had participated in the uprisings of 1381 and had otherwise demonstrated discontent with the social order in England in

the last two decades of the fourteenth century. Gower appears to be especially interested in this group, seeking to win support for the status quo. Gower attempts to help reshape the interests of his readers so that they envision themselves united in a project for "comun profit." By positing a formulation like "common profit," Gower claims that his readers--despite their being from different groups with a plethora of social antagonisms among them--actually share the same political interests. In making this claim, Gower attempts to inscribe a vast range of different positions and interests into a hegemonic configuration. Readers are encouraged to see the proffered agenda as representing their best interests and are thereby encouraged not only to adopt this agenda as their own, but to unite in a strategic social alliance. Gower is involved in a type of recruitment, as he addresses different groups in society in an attempt to unite them, despite competing political interests, within a common project.

The poet attempts to alter the ways in which his readers think about themselves and their relations with others by addressing them through cultural narratives which were commonplace and authoritative at the time. One key cultural narrative which Gower employs in the process of producing hegemony is a fiction that Michael McKeon calls "aristocratic ideology." The first chapter of this thesis examines McKeon's formulation of aristocratic ideology, a narrative which claims that descendants of noble lineages are likely to be superior

men and which thereby helped legitimate the unequal distribution of wealth and power in feudal England. However, the fiction of aristocratic ideology is structurally impossible to live out, for the ways in which a patrilineal system of inheritance works in practice are inevitably in tension with a myth of genetic superiority. Because it is impossible for any patrilineal system to live out the direct descent of inherent nobility that aristocratic ideology celebrates, there was a large repertoire of attendant fictions designed to cover the gap between this cultural narrative and the replication of the status hierarchy that the narrative legitimated. McKeon's work investigates how this collection of attendant fictions typically manifests itself in late medieval romance, with the goal of explaining contradictions in a compelling way so that aristocratic ideology--and ultimately, the replication of the status hierarchy--remains naturalized.

After explaining McKeon's paradigm, the first chapter investigates how aristocratic ideology and the contradictions which continually threatened this narrative were played out in England at the particular moment when Gower wrote the Confessio Amantis. This historical investigation begins with Gramsci's famous formulation of a "legitimation crisis," a concept which aptly describes events at the end of the fourteenth century in England. Aristocratic ideology was bound up with the larger legitimation crisis, for there are several historical indications that this cultural narrative was in

crisis at the time. This crisis resulted from a dramatic foregrounding of the structural contradictions in the replication of the status hierarchy, contradictions which aristocratic ideology's repertoire of attendant fictions usually camouflaged much more effectively. In response to the widening gap between aristocratic ideology and the structural arrangement which the narrative helped reproduce, the ruling group made numerous attempts at various sites to reinscribe aristocratic ideology as part of a larger attempt to regain hegemony.

The second chapter of this thesis uses Hall's model to investigate Gower's participation in these attempts to reinscribe aristocratic ideology and, by extension, his participation in attempts to help the ruling group regain hegemony. The second chapter begins with a profile of Gower's anticipated audience so that the connections among this audience, social uprisings, and Gower's agenda become clearer. A discussion of the politics of the Prologue follows, focusing on Gower's notion of "comun profit" as a strategic means of recruiting different subjects with competing interests in an effort to construct a cohesive group identity, thereby producing consent for the dominant group. The examination of the Prologue is followed by an exploration of the _Confessio_'s amorous tales, tales in which Gower continues his attempts to generate hegemony but in more insidious ways, particularly through the use of aristocratic ideology. The _Confessio_

responds to the crisis that aristocratic ideology was undergoing at the time--and, by extension, to the larger legitimation crisis--not with a direct reinscription of the cultural narrative, but with much more subtle revisions of the accompanying social fictions designed to mask the inconsistencies within the structural arrangement that aristocratic ideology seeks to justify. The second chapter investigates the specific ways in which Gower deviates from the scenarios of Middle English romance with which McKeon is primarily concerned. The study concludes by explaining how these deviations relate to the larger production of hegemony and to Gower's specific political agenda.

CHAPTER ONE: MCKEON AND ARISTOCRATIC IDEOLOGY

I. ARISTOCRATIC IDEOLOGY: DEFINITIONS

In The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740, Michael McKeon examines the relationships between socio-economic forces and certain literary genres at specific historical moments in England. In the chapter entitled "The Destablization of Social Categories," McKeon focuses on the ways in which one particular fiction--which he calls "aristocratic ideology"--functioned as a cultural narrative that helped reproduce social relations in feudal England. He examines how this narrative worked itself out in the literary genre of romance. McKeon provides the following explanation of "aristocratic ideology":

> The traditional terms of social distinction in early modern England--"degree," "estate," "order," "rank"--are variously based on an idea of status derived from the personal possession, or nonpossession, of honor. And honor is a quality that points, through the crucial mediation of repute, both outward and inward. On the one hand, it is a function of ancestry and lineage; less obligatory, but likely to confirm the primary facts of ancestry, are other external circumstances like wealth and political power. On the other hand,

honor is an essential and inward property of its
possessor, that which the conditional or extrinsic
signifiers of honor cease to signify. In this
respect, honor is equivalent to an internal element
of "virtue." The notion of honor as a unity of
outward circumstance and inward essence is the most
fundamental justification for the hierarchical
stratification of society by status, and it is so
fundamental as to be largely tacit. What it asserts
is that the social order is not circumstantial and
arbitrary, but corresponds to and expresses an
analogous, intrinsic moral order. This assumption
lies at the heart of what in the following pages I
will be calling "aristocratic ideology" (131).

As McKeon explains, according to "aristocratic ideology,"
honor is an inherited virtue; this inheritance, according to
the logic of such "authorities" as Aristotle, claims that
descendants of noble lineages are likely to be superior men,
for virtue is inherent in noble blood. The appearance of
privileged members of English society in the late Middle Ages,
McKeon continues, seemed to substantiate this claim that honor
was truly intrinsic, an inherited trait in both the biological
and genealogical senses of the term, for the privileged tended
to be physically "superior"--i.e., taller, heavier, better
developed--than occupants of lower socio-economic ranks. The
claim that nobility was intrinsic was substantiated by more

material markers as well, including clothing, for those with higher incomes could array themselves in costly, impressive garments. These visual signifiers of superiority were reinforced by sumptuary legislation, beginning in the mid-1300s under Edward III, which sought to protect the correlation between inward nobility and outward splendor by regulating the types of garments and fabrics that subjects could wear in accordance with socio-economic positions. In effect, such legislation sought to make clear by outward signification the inward degree of honor possessed by an individual. A more formal means to the same end was the heraldic system of recording genealogies through the blazoning of arms, a medieval practice which gained new momentum in the fifteenth century. Such outward markers of nobility were read as reflections of inward nobility and thereby legitimated the unequal access to wealth and power (McKeon, 132).

McKeon's consideration of aristocratic ideology presupposes a background in cultural materialist studies; therefore, it is necessary to develop further the methodology implicit in his position to make his argument clearer. In late fourteenth-century England, aristocratic ideology was a cultural myth which helped legitimate structural inequalities within feudalism. It legitimated inequalities in the way in which Althusser explains that the superstructure--laws, institutions, culture, beliefs, values, customs--interacts with the economic base, rationalizing it and protecting its

relations. Various ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) continually produce certain cultural discourses--such as humanism, nationalism, chauvinism--with the result that social relations are reproduced in specific ways.[4] As an illustration of how this principle works, it is helpful to recall Richard Halpern's study of Renaissance cultural production, entitled The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation. In the chapter "Breeding Capital," Halpern explains how Tudor humanist education produced/reproduced discourses of capacity and hard work (i.e., He who has the greatest ability and who works the hardest is the most successful). These two discourses helped create an ideological climate in sixteenth-century England in which the social relations necessary for capitalist production could exist, for these discourses legitimated the possession both of wealth and of the tools of production by a small ruling group, while condoning the poverty of others. (After all, those who were intelligent and who worked hard succeeded, while those who failed were stupid and lazy.) Ultimately, these social fictions helped justify the unequal access to wealth and power, while preserving the illusion of democracy and equality.[5]

Like Halpern's discourses of capacity and hard work, aristocratic ideology was a social fiction which validated fundamental structural inequalities in an economic arrangement. Cultural narratives developed to justify these inequities and to reproduce the social relations which

sustained the feudal economy. The social fiction that McKeon calls "aristocratic ideology" helped facilitate these relations by naturalizing socio-economic positions. According to this fiction, a person with power deserved it by virtue of being born into it: conversely, a peasant was simply meant to be a peasant. Birthplace decreed one's lot in life. This hierarchy was a fundamental fact of life, ordained by God and nature alike. As such, the social order could neither be questioned nor altered. The visible manifestations of nobility--including costly fabrics, impressive garments, a healthy body, blazons, etc.--were outward markers of a person's inner essence and assigned lot in life. Because outward appearance was the third term in the equation, production and consumption were also figured into the order of things: while some were naturally meant to produce commodities (e.g., costly fabrics and impressive garments), others were naturally meant to consume them. In short, the fiction of aristocratic ideology helped preserve and reproduce the status hierarchy and the social relations that reproduced that hierarchy.

However, as McKeon explains, the narrative of aristocratic ideology is structurally impossible to live out; the ways in which a patrilineal system of inheritance works in practice are inevitably in tension with a narrative about genetic superiority. McKeon explains this incongruity as follows:

any status hierarchy that is based on a principle of direct genealogical descent must confront the facts of demography, which militate against the belief in the purity of the blood line that is implicit in aristocratic ideology. A patrilineal system of inheritance like that traditional to English culture cannot generate a male line that will be continuous and self-sufficient over time, for demographical constraints ensure that in a stationary population, forty percent of all families will fail to produce a male heir. Attrition in the direct male line is therefore a complication that aristocratic ideology is obliged to accommodate, and it does so by several means of "patriline repair": more distant male relatives may be assimilated to the line as "surrogate heirs," and the husbands of female members of the line may even be absorbed into it, a process facilitated by a change of name. Related institutional and legal fictions might be used to resolve inconsistencies in the status hierarchy, the causes of which are not strictly demographic but which tend to occur from time to time even in the most stable societies--like the rise of the extraordinary to great wealth or political power. Thus the royal grant or sale of fictitious genealogies and titles

of nobility to ignoble families reasserted the integrity of honor by reuniting status with wealth and power . . . with respect to questions of truth, . . . the transmutation of lineage is accomplished most effortlessly in the absence of written documentation. Nevertheless, social fictions like these played a vital role in stabilizing medieval scribal culture as well, where their tacit efficacy depended also on a judicious resistance to overuse (132-133).

Although methods of patriline repair uphold the larger structure of inheritance, they simultaneously foreground the contradictions within such a system. The reliance on daughters' husbands, for example, undermines the myth of inherent nobility because crossing into different lineages disrupts the illusion that nobility flows through the genes in some direct, natural way. This particular method of resuscitating male lines also foregrounds other important contradictions built into a patrilineal system of inheritance, namely those revolving around status inconsistency. There is always status inconsistency in a patrilineal system of inheritance, for members of the same family have different access to wealth and power (McKeon, 147). These disparities become particularly obvious over the course of a few generations, for downward mobility is the continual fate of certain branches of a family, and in this respect, downward

mobility was a persistent phenomenon in feudal England (McKeon, 141).

Status inconsistency is not only evident across different branches of the family tree, it is also evident within the lifetime of an individual. As Frances and Joseph Gies explain in their chapter entitled "Aristocratic Lineages: Perils of Primogeniture" in Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages, in patrilineal inheritance systems, it is not uncommon for a daughter, especially a second or third daughter, to be wed to a "nobody" to economize on her dowry, thereby preserving the estate for the male heir. Years later, through the death of siblings, the daughter might suddenly become an heiress, converting her nobody of a husband into a very wealthy baron (195). This type of status inconsistency during an individual's lifetime obviously challenges the claim that one simply is--or is not--born noble. These are just a few examples of the inherent structural contradictions built into a patrilineal system of inheritance, and these contradictions are clearly at odds with a narrative like aristocratic ideology which works to legitimate larger structural inequities.

In his discussion of medieval romance, McKeon is less interested in the primary narrative of aristocratic ideology than in the large repertoire of attendant fictions which supported this narrative by masking structural inconsistencies like the ones just mentioned. McKeon examines the subtle ways

in which a seemingly innocuous arsenal of amusing tales explained these flaws and, by doing so, helped to negotiate the gap between aristocratic ideology and the structural arrangement which it validated. McKeon draws on the work of several medievalists--including F. L. Ganshof, David Herlihy, R. Howard Bloch, Georges Duby, Herbert Moller, and Lionel Rothkrug--who have demonstrated that it is possible to see the social purpose of the courtly fictions of medieval romance as the mediation and explanation of recurrent instances of status inconsistency within the system of patrilineal inheritance.[6] Twelfth-century romance explores the substance of status categories at a time when status inconsistencies were present, although not unwieldy. Romance anatomizes "aristocratic honor" into its constituent parts--without admitting that these elements are separable--and ultimately reconfirms the alliance of these terms as "natural" (142-143). Arthurian romance, McKeon continues, often transforms the degrading search for material livelihood into noble quests. Over the course of a quest, a character typically performs a series of noble feats, thereby proving that he possesses internal merit and earning riches and a lofty position as a result. The demonstration of internal merit legitimates the final acquisition of status and wealth because it proves that the character is worthy of the position which he ultimately acquires. In many works, the demonstration of honor is coupled with the final disclosure of aristocratic birth so that a character's display of knightly

prowess only reconfirms that he possesses what he inherited at birth. Frequently, however, there is no disclosure of noble lineage so that over the course of the narrative the character successfully climbs the socio-economic ladder. This social mobility, however common in the tales, is presented as a rare case of a character who possesses outstanding qualities and internal worth and who therefore naturally belongs in the rank which he ultimately acquires (141-143).

Courtly love also plays a key role in mediating status inconsistency in medieval romance, especially in fourteenth-century romance. Love service, McKeon explains, reflects a pervasive sense of status disparities, a desire to overcome those disparities, and even a means to achieve that end. The means for achieving this end are located in the power of love, which permits passage both upward and downward so that problems of inconsistency may be understood as various kinds of transformations. After an initial transformation downward, love typically ennobles a character, causing him to perform magnanimous acts, usually consisting of such feats as simply proving himself unswerving in love. Such constancy or comparable love service proves that a character possesses "true nobility" or the "cor gentil." Having thus proven internal worth, the character usually marries the beloved, who occupies a substantially higher rank and the accompanying fortune and title (143-144). This paradigm recurs in late medieval popular English romance, which does not flee from

love themes, but which concentrates on their most socially significant feature--marriage. Love legitimates the acquisition of position, certifying that the absence of noble rank need not mean the absence of aristocratic honor, for when a character demonstrates his possession of the "cor gentil," this proof alleviates the incongruity involved in his entry into the aristocracy of birth, because love has ennobled him. Internal and external nobility are thereby united through marriage as a reward for loyal services (146-147). McKeon's formulation of the ways in which the medieval romance tradition mediates status inconsistencies will be examined further in the later discussions of Gower. In short, McKeon argues that medieval romances produced/reproduced various cultural fictions (fictions which changed to accommodate the needs of the status hierarchy at different moments) that helped mediate status inconsistencies in the patrilineal systems of inheritance throughout the Middle Ages.

In the early modern period, McKeon explains, the concept of aristocratic honor was gradually discredited. This discrediting did not follow a linear trajectory: some of the fictions which aligned the relations between rank and virtue and between birth and worth became outmoded, while others were transmuted into servants of other ideologies (133). There came a point at which social institutions systemically attested not to the alignment, but to the incongruity between internals and externals and among virtue, status, wealth, and power. McKeon

points to phenomena such as the Heralds' Visitations (c. 1529-
1686), sumptuary legislation (which began in 1337 and ended in
the early seventeenth century), and scandalum magnatum (a
legal recourse by which peers of the realm vindicated their
honor against slander by their inferiors) as actions which
reinforced social distinctions between the nobility and lower
socio-economic groups. But, McKeon adds, the fact that such
mechanisms increased in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth
centuries, and peaked under Charles II, suggests that they
reflect a defensive awareness that the social hierarchy was
increasingly under attack. It is important, McKeon continues,
to understand the force by which authority is asserted as a
telling sign of its weakness (150-151). By the end of the
seventeenth century, the relations among the terms internal,
external, virtue, worth, nobility, and so forth were
configured in very different ways than they had been three
centuries earlier (155).

II. THE LEGITIMATION CRISIS IN LATE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

McKeon spends very little time investigating the status
of aristocratic ideology (and the collection of fictions that
buttress this larger narrative) in the last two decades of the
fourteenth century in England. However, it is possible to use
McKeon's paradigms to investigate the status of these
ideological tales in the specific historical context which
produced the Confessio. Late fourteenth-century England was

immersed in what Antonio Gramsci terms a "crisis of authority." Gramsci's formulation appears in his Prison Notebooks, where he describes a "crisis of authority" as follows:

> If the ruling class had lost its consensus, i.e., is no longer "leading" but only "dominant", exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear . . . [this is the] "problem of the younger generation"--a problem caused by the "crisis of authority" of the old generations in power, and by the mechanical impediment that has been imposed on those who could exercise hegemony, which prevents them from carrying out their mission. The problem is the following: can a rift between popular masses and ruling ideologies as serious as that which emerged after the war be "cured" by the simple exercise of force, preventing the new ideologies from imposing themselves? Will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked in this way,

necessarily be resolved in favour of a restoration
of the old? Given the character of the ideologies,
that can be ruled out--yet not in an absolute
sense. Meanwhile physical depression will lead in
the long run to a wide-spread scepticism, and a new
"arrangement" will be found--in which, for example,
catholicism will even more become simply Jesuitism,
etc. (275-276).

In The Hard Road to Renewal, Stuart Hall glosses
Gramsci's formulation of a "crisis of authority" in the
following way:

> Gramsci warns us in the Notebooks that a crisis
> is not an immediate event but a process: it can
> last for a long time, and can be very differently
> resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by
> passive transformism . . . . Gramsci warns us
> that organic crises of this order erupt not only in
> the political domain and the traditional areas of
> industrial and economic life, and not simply in the
> class struggle, in the old sense; but in a wide
> series of polemics and debates about fundamental
> sexual, moral and intellectual questions, in a
> crisis in the relations of political representation
> and the parties--on a whole range of issues which
> do not necessarily, in the first instance, appear
> to be articulated with politics in the narrow sense

at all. That is what Gramsci calls the crisis of authority, which is nothing but "the crisis of hegemony or general crisis of the state" (167-168). Gramsci's "crisis of authority" entails a gap between the dominant group and the ideology which is supposed to hold that group in place. This crisis is related to crises in the economic structure and in the ideological superstructure, with the superstructure and economic structure mutually acting upon each other simultaneously. During the crises, stresses and contradictions at the political level are foregrounded. These stresses strain the credibility of the ideological narratives which reproduce social relations. Because ideological narratives which reproduce these relations are no longer naturalized for members of subordinate socio-economic groups, the dominant group must rule at that moment through force and legal compulsion rather than through hegemony (or consent).

The plethora of social uprisings during the last three decades of the fourteenth century testify that a legitimation crisis was unfolding in England. In Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism, Rodney Hilton continually emphasizes the importance of remembering that the widespread Peasants' Revolt of 1381 did not erupt in an otherwise tranquil society: the social harmony idealized in the writings and sermons of ecclesiastical, political and social theorists never actually existed (153). As the revolt of 1381 indicated, Hilton continues, there was a great deal of discontent in late

medieval England that was no longer simply expressed grievances against local oppression, but a fundamental disillusionment with the way that society was organized. This discontent resulted from crises in the socio-economic structure by the close of the fourteenth century: feudal social and economic relations were stagnant, and structural arrangements could no longer function effectively.[7]

This discontent was not restricted to peasants, either, for the ruling group was repeatedly challenged from numerous sectors of society. Medievalists have traditionally assumed that peasants were the almost exclusive participants in the Peasants' Revolt, as the name of the uprising indicates. More recently, however, historians have begun to examine the roles of various other socio-economic groups in this insurrection and in uprisings which immediately preceded the June 1381 rebellion. The annual conference organized by Past and Present in 1981, for example, revolved around uncovering the demographics of those who participated in urban uprisings in and around 1381, because, as Rodney Hilton announces in the introduction to the papers published from that conference in a volume called The English Rising of 1381, urban rebels of this period in England have been almost entirely overlooked by historians (1). This volume demonstrates that the rebels emerge from a wide variety of socio-economic positions, with the statistical characteristics of the insurgents varying according to locale, as the precise forms of oppression varied

according to time and place.

The contributors to this volume (including R. B. Dobson, A. F. Butcher, and Alan Harding) emphasize that the urban socio-economic groups commonly referred to by medievalists as "the middling sorts" participated heavily in the so-called Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and in numerous other overt acts of defiance against authority in the decade preceding the widescale rebellion. For example, R. B. Dobson examines unrest in York, Beverley, and Scarborough in 1380-1381 and emphasizes the diverse groups which participated in these insurrections. In Beverley, the rioters of 1381 consisted of drapers, mercers, tailors, butchers, and probably representatives of all the craft guilds united in opposition against the mercantile elite of that area. In York in 1380, mercers, drapers, and craftsmen were imprisoned for seriously defying authority. In Scarborough, bailiffs assaulted and robbed burgesses more than once before the huge insurgence, while in the rising of June 1381, at least two of the three main instigators of the rebellion were individuals of considerable substance. Some men of considerable wealth and standing lent their support to the populist opposition at the time, while numerous middle-rank merchants were detectable among the Scarborough, York, and Beverley rebels.[8] Similarly, A. F. Butcher argues that tradesmen and craftsmen in the middling ranks committed various aggressive acts against the governing elite of Canterbury in the 1370s and 1380s.[9] Alan Harding

points out that in June 1381 hatred against an oppressive law administered in London briefly united different ranks of the commons for political action, including those who occupied diverse positions in the status hierarchy, from peasants to quite prosperous burgesses.[10]

In <u>Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism</u>, Rodney Hilton explains that many occupants of the middle and lower strata of smaller industrialized towns (e.g., in East Anglia) participated in the English Rising of 1381. Hilton explains that in addition to such sectors as journeymen and apprentices, elements from the mercantile bourgeoisie are also found temporarily in the rebel camp. It is unlikely that members of the London patriciate were in league with the insurgents, but the ruling circles of some smaller towns united with rebels for their own ends.[11] In St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds, for example, burgesses harnessed rebels to challenge old, established ecclesiastical overlordship. In Cambridge, the bourgeoisie led rebels to try to throw off the jurisdiction and influence of another type of ecclesiastical institution, the University. Hilton adds that even members of the lesser nobility (i.e., knightly class or gentry) occasionally identified themselves with the insurgents, even assuming positions of leadership, although the gentry as a whole remained faithful to the interests of the Crown and the higher nobility.[12] In <u>The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500</u>, J. L. Bolton concurs with Hilton's demographics, adding

Bridgwater to the list of towns where burgesses led forces
against the Augustinian hospital of St. Thomas. Bolton agrees
that the Peasants' Revolt was more than a revolt by peasants,
emphasizing that townsmen, artisans, lesser clergy, and lesser
landlords throughout England were typically among the
rebels.[13]

These studies are important for readers of the _Confessio_
in at least two ways. First, the extent of rebellion
throughout the social ranks confirms that late fourteenth-
century England was in the midst of a legitimation crisis. The
number of open acts of defiance against authority indicates
that social relations were no longer being effectively
reproduced at the level of the superstructure, through
ideological state apparatuses and through various
institutions. Because of widespread opposition against those
who held the balance of wealth and power, the dominant group
had to ensure its rule through force and legal compulsion,
instead of through hegemony. Second, the demographics of the
participants in these uprisings are very significant. The
studies cited above indicate that occupants of the middle
socio-economic ranks in English urban areas were active
participants in the social unrest in the last three decades of
the fourteenth century. This group, as the second chapter will
demonstrate, is the community of readers which Gower is
particularly interested in reaching through the _Confessio_.

The strain on aristocratic ideology at the close of the

fourteenth century is bound up with--and exemplifies--the
larger legitimation crisis in England at the time, for this
particular cultural narrative illustrates the type of
political stresses and ideological fractures that Gramsci
discusses: the thinness of the narrative of inherent nobility
(and the collection of supporting social fictions)
simultaneously facilitates and reflects the disjunction
between the ruling group and the ideology which validated its
power. Because this social fiction no longer had the
commonsensical appeal that effective cultural narratives
possess, the dominant group had to legislate this fiction--and
the act of legislating this narrative, in turn, demonstrates
just how strained the fiction was. If social relations could
not be effectively reproduced through ideology, they were to
be reproduced through legal coercion.

The ineffectiveness of the narrative of inherent nobility
and the dominant group's anxiety about the strain on this
fiction manifested itself in several legal attempts to
reinscribe the connections among privileged status, inherent
nobility, and the outward manifestations of this inherent
nobility. One such legal attempt took the form of legislation
regarding blazons. As Roger Virgoe explains in <u>Private Life in
the Fifteenth Century</u>, upward mobility was not regarded
favorably by the nobility and gentry (not surprisingly), and
it was advantageous for the social climber to acquire as
quickly as possible some of the blood, as well as the

lifestyle, of the socio-economic position that s/he was entering. It was also advantageous to adopt other signifiers of nobility, including establishing a distinguished ancestry—often fictitious—and representing that ancestry by the adoption of an appropriate coat of arms, a common fiction that the famous Pastons, for example, lived out (Virgoe, 19-20). At the beginning of the fifteenth century, there was no effective control over these fictitious ancestries and the associated badges on such things as banners and liveries. The College of Heralds, which enforced injunctions against such posing, was not incorporated until 1484, but various attempts to distinguish legally between "rightful" owners of impressive genealogies and various symbolic accoutrements of nobility versus fraudulent borrowers of such trappings were already in place at the beginning of the fifteenth century (19-20). The beginning of royal control of unlicensed arms, for example, is reflected in Henry V's decree in 1417 that no one joining the army for the campaign in France "'shall assume such coats of arms unless he has or ought to have the same by right of his ancestors or by the gift of some person having sufficient power for this purpose'" (quoted in Virgoe, 20). This decree indicates that in the preceding years a significant number of people had been falsely assuming the visual accoutrements of nobility and hence that a significant number of people in the years preceding this statute did not believe that the alignment among privileged status, inherent nobility, and

outward manifestations of nobility was <u>natural</u>: they obviously believed that the alignment was--and could be--constructed. Hence, this legislation represents an attempt by the ruling group to insist upon the correlation among these terms, thereby forcing a social fiction which--as the violations prompting this decree indicate--was no longer compelling at an ideological level.

Another legal attempt to prop up this withering social fiction took the form of sumptuary legislation. As Frances Elizabeth Baldwin explains in her extensive study <u>Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England</u>, the first sumptuary legislation in England was passed by parliament under Edward III. An act in 1337 limited the class that could wear fur, furs constituting the most important single article of luxury in terms of dress. There is no record indicating whether or not this restriction was enforced, although Baldwin assumes that it was not, judging by the attacks on clothing extravagances by chroniclers and satirists of the time. Another statute was enacted by parliament in 1355, defining the specific garments that sex-workers could wear. The first comprehensive act which regulated in detail the dress of various classes of English subjects was passed in 1363. This document prescribed at length the garments and fabrics that could be worn by citizens in accordance with their incomes; social ranks were listed in hierarchical order, along with annual incomes and specific property requirements. The

preamble to the statute announced that this legislation was designed to correct "'the outragious and excessive apparel of divers people against their estate and degree'" (quoted in Baldwin, 47).[14] This act was repealed the following year, and in 1378-1379 parliament petitioned Richard II to reenact, in a less detailed form, the substance of the 1363 sumptuary act, but Richard refused. In the late fourteenth century, luxury and ostentation became a recurrent "problem" in nearly all English classes.[15] The inadequacy of the sumptuary laws passed under Edward III to control dressing beyond one's means and the increasing fashion crimes perpetrated under Richard II's rule met with continual censures heaped by moral and religious writers, poets, and satirists in the second half of the fourteenth century.[16]

Like Baldwin, Michael McKeon, Roger Virgoe, Karen Newman, and Richard Halpern all view medieval and renaissance sumptuary legislation in England as having the primary goal of rigidly maintaining boundaries among different positions in the social hierarchy.[17] These writers explicitly link sumptuary laws both to increasing anxiety about social mobility and shifting class positions and to anxiety about shifting class signifiers and the difficulty of reading these signifiers. The rulers of the realm were determined to inscribe a subject's "proper" status on the body so that it was visible for all to read. Such an inscription reasserted connections among outward nobility, inward nobility, and

divinely ordained social hierarchies, thereby legitimating the inequitable distribution of wealth and power and warding off threats to the beneficiaries of the economic structure. As Althusser explains, when a fiction is compelling to subjects, it is accepted in an internalized way.[18] If the correlations between outward and inward (inherent) nobility seemed "natural" and, by extension, the distribution of wealth and power that these correlations helped to legitimate seemed to be the order of things, ideology would have been working effectively. In the second half of the fourteenth century, however, as the sumptuary laws indicate--and as the numerous ballads, poems, and attacks by satirists on those who refuse to dress according to their station indicate[19]--the formerly "natural" alignment of these terms had lost its "commonsensical" appeal; the cultural narrative had been partially demystified and, therefore, had to be forced upon subjects legally. Those in power threatened subjects with external, compulsory force because aristocratic ideology was no longer regulating behavior and effectively playing its role in reproducing social relations.

The anxieties which propelled sumptuary laws are not difficult to uncover. Transgressions in apparel were one way in which a person--like the socially mobile families who constructed fraudulent genealogies--donned the accoutrements of a higher socio-economic position and, in essence, assumed the position to which s/he aspired. The blurring of socio-

economic boundaries which clothing violations represented flaunted the possibility that privilege was not an <u>inherent</u> position, one ordained by God and nature. This realization about social positions was part of the demystifications that had occurred in late medieval England, demystifications evidenced by the Peasants' Revolt. Hilton and Bolton's reading of the revolt as an overall disgruntlement with the way in which society was organized indicates a realization by significant factions of English society that socio-economic positions and social relations could be different, that they were not ordained by God. If subjects realized that the dominant group ruled because it had the monopoly of wealth and power--rather than because of some inner essence which made this group superior--then this group was open to challenge. Similarly, the violation of socio-economic boundaries which trangressions in apparel represented also foregrounded the possibility that a person could construct him/herself. If a person could don the clothing aligned with a higher position, brandish symbols appropriate to nobility, concoct an impressive genealogy, and actually end up in a significantly higher social position (as many families in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England did), then it was possible that positions were constructed and not divinely ordained. This type of demystification threatened the reproduction of the status hierarchy, and beneficiaries of the inequitable social arrangement were anxious as a result. This anxiety manifested

itself, in part, in the forced reassertion of aristocratic ideology and in the larger over-insistence on the "natural order" that this cultural narrative exemplifies.

The demystification that aristocratic ideology suffered at that moment was due to the dramatic foregrounding of contradictions within the structural arrangement that aristocratic ideology endorsed. As explained earlier, there is an inevitable disparity between a cultural narrative and the economic arrangement which it legitimates. This disparity is typically hidden through various means, including legal and institutional mechanisms. These mechanisms may be more effective at certain times than at others: in times of relative stability, such devices might camouflage fundamental structural inconsistencies in a fairly convincing manner; but if historical forces amplify the contradictions in the economic structure, the legal and institutional mechanisms that disguise these contradictions may not be able to function effectively. As a result, the cultural narratives that reproduce a particular economic arrangement risk being undermined so that the ideology reproducing certain social relations risks becoming ineffectual, forcing the dominant group to rule by compulsion and not by consent. When Gower was writing the Confessio, aristocratic ideology was less compelling than versions of this cultural narrative had been earlier. In the last two decades of the fourteenth century, numerous factors greatly intensified the inconsistencies

within the reproduction of the status hierarchy so that these inconsistencies could no longer be effectively masked. Because of the eruption of these contradictions, the credibility of aristocratic ideology was strained, for the tale of inherent nobility no longer made sense in terms of the ways in which the status hierarchy was being reproduced.

Frances and Joseph Gies illustrate the coincidence between structural flaws in the system of primogeniture and the historical forces which disrupted primogeniture in late medieval England, a coincidence which dramatically foregrounded structural contradictions in the system of inheritance and which ultimately rendered aristocratic ideology ineffectual in Gower's England. Gies and Gies begin their discussion of primogeniture in late medieval England in the following way:

> The system of primogeniture, buttressed by the adoption of estate names, genealogies, coats of arms, family mottos, and the impressive symbol of the family castle, gave the self-conscious aristocratic male lineages of the thirteenth century an appearance of invincible solidity. The earl of Lancaster, the earl of Leicester, the count of Champagne, the duke of Burgundy-- such titles seemed to breathe a lofty perpetuity, a descent proceeding majestically through unbroken generations and centuries. The appearance was

deceiving. "It is not generally realized," says Kenneth McFarlane in his study of the English nobility, "how near to extinction most [noble] families were; their survival was always in the balance and only a tiny handful managed to hang on in the male line from one century to another." In England the upper nobility was explicitly identified at frequent intervals when the king summoned his "barons" to meet in what was turning into Parliament. Between 1300 and 1500 the number of heritable ranks was increased from one to five, but of the 136 baronial families favored with a summons at the end of the thirteenth century, 36 were extinct by 1325, 89 by 1400, and all but 16 by 1500 (186).

A few pages later, Gies and Gies continue:

Thus by a variety of means the purpose of primogeniture was frustrated and lordly lineages were robbed of their property bases. By far the commonest root cause of the extinction of noble lines, however, was mortality. A scholar [Georges Duby] has estimated that in a stationary population 20 percent of married men have no children when they die, and another 20 percent have only daughters. For the medieval lineage, infant mortality, disease, and war all accentuated the

danger (191).

Gies and Gies provide concrete examples of mechanisms used in the late Middle Ages to mask the impossibility of generating a continuous patrilineal line: estate names, genealogies, coats of arms, family mottos, family castles, and titles created the illusion of perpetuity, of descent proceeding through unbroken generations and centuries. These and other social mechanisms helped hide the disjunction between the structure of patrilineal inheritance and the narrative of inherent nobility which legitimated that structure. The impossibility of a continuous bloodline of inherent nobility was masked behind this array of fictions which collectively created the illusion that there was no social climbing, social descent, or status inconsistency but that the status hierarchy in late medieval England was "the same as it ever was."

The structural problems of primogeniture, Gies and Gies explain, were amplified in late medieval England by infant mortality, disease, and war. It is important to emphasize that by far the highest mortality rates occurred during the period of recurrent bouts of plague in England, a period which ended shortly before Gower wrote the <u>Confessio</u>. In <u>The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500</u>, J. L. Bolton explains that the first outbreak of the plague swept through England between 1348 and 1350 and recurred in 1361, 1369, and 1375. Between 1348 and 1380, the population of England declined dramatically: according to conservative estimates, the

population declined in this period by approximately one-third; according to liberal estimates it fell by 50%; and according to historians, like Bolton, who take the middle-road, it decreased by 40% (64-65). Although Bolton makes no pronouncement either way, Gies and Gies remark that the plague wrought havoc even-handedly among rich and poor (229). In the English countryside, recorded mortality in some districts ran as high as 65 percent. Many families disappeared, and in some cases entire villages vanished (Gies and Gies, 224 and 229). With the recurrent bouts of plague throughout the fourteenth century and the subsequent death of 40% the population, it would have been impossible to sustain the illusion of direct lineage. Numerous other factors which intersected at that particular moment--including the endemic warfare of the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453)--wreaked further havoc on demographics, thereby foregrounding even more the transparency of the narrative of inherent nobility. Inheritance patterns in late medieval England would have had to resort continually to various methods of patrilineal repair, methods which were used much more sparingly in times of relative demographic stability. Attrition in the male line was usually effectively camouflaged by various legal and institutional mechanisms, but, McKeon warns, the effectiveness of such mechanisms depends on a judicious resistance to overuse (132-133). Inevitably, in the second half of the fourteenth century in England, with the devastation caused by the plague alone, the

judicious use of such mechanisms <u>must</u> have been strained, making it extremely difficult to live out the alleged correlation between noble blood and noble possessions in a convincing manner.

Not only did demographic upheavals dramatically foreground contradictions in the reproduction of the status hierarchy at the time, but increased social mobility further amplified structural inconsistencies. Some degree of social mobility is a structural inevitability of a patrilineal status hierarchy because of the demographic impossibility of generating sufficient heirs. The structural inevitability worked itself out in late fourteenth-century England at an accelerated rate due to abnormally high mortality, for the increased death rates and hence the increased number of vacant landholdings meant greater opportunities for social mobility (McKeon, 132 and Virgoe, 19). Chances improved for a yeoman or substantial farmer to acquire enough land and wealth to begin to live like a gentleman, to educate his sons, and to marry his children (or grandchildren) into noble families. Clement Paston (d. 1419) is a famous example of this phenomenon.[20]

Demographics were further complicated by economics, for late fourteenth-century England witnessed increasing social mobility due to burgeoning trade. As Bolton explains, English trade grew steadily throughout the fourteenth century; the cloth-manufacturing industry was particularly prosperous, especially in London and East Anglia. Many merchants involved

in such successful ventures as the cloth trade accumulated substantial amounts of capital and, in many cases, accumulated sufficient funds to purchase land and thereby move into the gentry. In other cases, wealthy merchants moved into advantageous social positions through their abilities to make strategic marriages for their children. It was also common for merchants' sons to move into prestigious occupations, including law or some type of administrative position in London. The development of law as a profession for the laity in the second half of the fourteenth century offered ways of accumulating wealth, purchasing land, and improving one's socio-economic status. Such occupations were part of a newly emergent group of professionals in large English urban centers. This group was emerging from the growth of commerce and included not only those directly involved in trade, but also the members of the new service industry which developed to accommodate the needs of those involved in trade (e.g., lawyers, accountants, and secular clerks). Overall, at the end of the fourteenth century, mobility in England was much greater than it had been in the previous two centuries.[21] Such mobility intensified the already glaring gap between the narrative of inherent nobility and the way that significant portions of the population acquired their socio-economic positions. This strain indicates that it must have been nearly impossible for aristocratic ideology to be compelling to those living in England in the last two decades of the fourteenth century.

Increased social mobility, like demographic upheavals, are very relevant to the <u>Confessio</u>. The increase in social mobility intensified the already glaring structural contradictions in the system of patrilineal inheritance caused by demographic upheavals. Because these contradictions were so obvious, the narrative of aristocratic ideology was heavily strained. Aristocratic ideology played an important role in the reproduction of the status hierarchy in medieval England, and its ineffectiveness simultaneously reflected and hampered ideology's ability to maintain social relations at the time. Because ideology could not adequately reproduce social relations, the dominant group's power was seriously threatened, as the 1381 uprisings indicate. As the second chapter will demonstrate, Gower's <u>Confessio</u> responds to these uprisings and to the larger legitimation crisis by attempting to help the ruling group regain hegemony. These attempts to produce consent involve an investigation of the structural inconsistencies whose over-abundance strained aristocratic ideology in the first place. Gower addresses the problem of glaring structural contradictions in the system of patrilineal inheritance by employing the paradigms from medieval romance which deal specifically with these contradictions. Although Gower inserts himself into this tradition, he does not endorse the typical ways in which romance explains away structural inconsistencies as part of its larger attempt to legitimate an unequal distribution of power and wealth. Instead, Gower

alters these paradigms in significant ways, betraying his enormous anxiety about the obviousness of these structural contradictions and, by extension, about the larger failure of ideology. Ultimately, the ways in which Gower alters romance's fictions about status inconsistencies reflect his larger attempt to help the dominant group regain hegemony in the midst of the legitimation crisis.

CHAPTER TWO: GOWER'S <u>CONFESSIO AMANTIS</u>

I. THE <u>CONFESSIO AMANTIS</u>: LITERATURE AND HEGEMONY

Like the parliament members who produced sumptuary legislation and restrictions on blazons, John Gower demonstrates anxieties about recent attacks on the status hierarchy and about the larger legitimation crisis unfolding in England.[22] In part as a response to this crisis, Gower composes the <u>Vox Clamantis</u> and the <u>Confessio Amantis</u>, which represent only two examples of a plethora of attempts in the last two decades of the fourteenth century to regain hegemony for the ruling group: Gower's <u>Confessio Amantis</u> is only one participant in a much larger process of hegemony at the time. This is not to claim that readers of the <u>Confessio</u> were somehow instantaneously converted by reading the poem, nor is it to claim that readers were duped by such texts into misrecognizing their political interests. Hegemony is not false consciousness, conspiracy, manipulation, nor an imposition from the ruling class onto its social subordinates. Hegemony, one of Antonio Gramsci's most important contributions to Marxist cultural theory, is a complex process through which a class gains or maintains its dominance through ideological means as opposed to sheer force. It is the process through which consent for a certain social order is created and recreated continually through a web of institutions, social relations, and ideas. When widespread, this consent,

forming what Gramsci calls an "historical bloc," rests on a collective will in which various groups in society unite. An historical bloc represents the coming together of different groups with various interests to reach some agreements about a dominant ideology, which then serves as the principle of organization for social institutions.

In the _Confessio_, Gower tries to address the largest audience possible to encourage social alliances among groups with diverse interests, including aristocrats and clerics but, more importantly, including those who occupied the middle ranks of society. The _Confessio_ insists that these groups have similar interests and that they should therefore align themselves in certain ways. By offering a formulation like "comun profit," Gower attempts to make hegemonic interests seem like the best interests of all who read his text. By making his political agenda allegedly represent the best interests of his audience, Gower is involved in a type of recruitment, addressing a diversity of different points of antagonism in society and unifying them, in their differences, within a common project. By attempting to unify them in a common project, Gower is trying to win consent from members of various groups for an ideology which would help solidify the power of the ruling group.

i. <u>Gower's Audience</u>

Although it is impossible to determine who read the <u>Confessio Amantis</u> in the 1390s, it <u>is</u> possible to discuss who had the ability to read the text (or who would have had the opportunity to have a text read to him or her). More importantly, it is also possible to consider the demographics of the anticipated audience, for Gower provides clues as to whom he hoped would read his work. The issues of who could have had access to the text and who comprised Gower's projected audience are related to consent: How does the poet imagine the audience that he needs to influence? The best indication of the audience's demographics is the idea of the linguistic community operative in the poem. Gower composed his first major text, the <u>Mirour de l'Omme</u> (c.1376-1378), in Anglo-Norman French; and he wrote his second major text, the <u>Vox Clamantis</u> (c.1379-1381), in Latin. Although there is very little agreement about literacy in the Middle Ages among historians, there are a limited number of claims that one can make about the topic with a reasonable degree of certainty.[23] One such claim is that there was an extremely limited number of people living in England at the end of the fourteenth century who could read Latin and/or French.

In his influential article entitled "The Period of the Final Decline of French in Medieval England (Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries)," Rolf Berndt examines which socio-economic groups in England had reading and/or speaking

abilities in French and/or in Latin at the end of the fourteenth century. Berndt explains that the use of Anglo-Norman French as a literary, legal, and spoken medium began to decline around 1350 and continued to decline until its virtual obsolescence in the first few decades of the fifteenth century. By the end of the fourteenth century, knowledge of French and/or Latin was far from common. Lawyers typically knew Latin and French, and scribes, secular clerks, and administrative officials were trained in both languages as an obligatory part of their professional training. Among the English clergy, only those in the highest ranks knew French by that point, while both those in the highest ranks and in the middling ranks knew Latin. It is probable that some members of the exclusive urban oligarchies knew French (but not Latin). A knowledge of French even among members of the aristocracy in the late fourteenth century could no longer be regarded as a matter of course. French, however, was decidedly maintained by the upper echelons of the feudal aristocracy and by those closely associated with the court.[24] Aside from these exclusive groups, the overwhelming majority of Englishmen and women know neither French nor Latin at the end of the fourteenth century.[25] Therefore, Gower's audiences for the Mirour de l'Omme and for the Vox Clamantis would of necessity have been extremely limited, consisting primarily of clerics who occupied middle and upper positions in the church, the more powerful aristocrats (and those who moved in these

circles), and members of a limited number of professions whose careers required a knowledge of Latin and/or Anglo-Norman French.

By writing the Confessio in English, Gower made his work accessible to an audience whose demographics were very different from the audiences of his previous two major texts. Gower's decision to write the last of his major poems in English suggests that he felt that his first two major texts did not reach as large a readership as he wanted to address. By writing in English, he opened up the possibility of a much more diverse audience. In the Confessio's opening lines, Gower suggests that this possibility of a greater readership helped motivate his decision to write in English. Gower says that since few men compose "In oure englissh, I thennke make/ A bok for Engelondes sake" (Prol.23-25).[26] This statement indicates that Gower's decision to write in the vernacular was a strategic choice and that this choice was bound up with the welfare of England as a whole: the wider an audience for the text, the better the chance of having a wider effect. Immediately preceding the statement concerning the vernacular, Gower claims that he decided to "go the middel weie/ And wryte a book betwen the tweie,/ Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore" (Prol.17-19). His decision to do so, Gower claims, results from the perception that texts which contain wisdom only are difficult to read for extended periods (Prol.12-16). Of course, it is impossible to know how sincerely to take this

remark, but if it is meant with any degree of seriousness, this comment, like the comment about the vernacular, suggests something about Gower's projected audience. Brief, amusing tales of love are much more likely to entice a more diverse audience than heavily theological discussions, for example, would attract. Furthermore, the type of readerly commitment required by a series of brief tales such as those contained within the Confessio is much less demanding than the type of commitment necessary for such texts as Robert Mannyng's Handlying Synne, for example, which requires much longer sittings and more intense concentration.

Who would comprise this more diverse audience that Gower courts through the use of the vernacular and with the lust and lore? Chaucer's Man of Law seems to be a starting point to answer this question. In the dialogue preceding his tale, the Man of Law talks about Chaucer and his poetry, however inaccurate the Man of Law's recollections may be.[27] When discussing what appears to be Chaucer's Legend of Good Women, the Man of Law remarks that the poet does not soil his work with such abominable tales as Apollonius of Tyre. This comment, Macaulay explains in his edition of the Confessio, has been commonly assumed to be a reference to Gower's tale in the Confessio (xxvi). The Man of Law's comments are interesting because the allusion to the Confessio indicates that a late fourteenth-century London lawyer would be a likely reader of the Confessio. The Man of Law also shows himself to

be a reader of both Chaucer and the later Gower, suggesting there is some degree of overlap between readers of Chaucer and readers of the <u>Confessio</u> at the time.

Given that lawyers were typically versed in both Latin and French at the time, the inclusion of lawyers in Gower's audience would not seem to represent a significant shift from Gower's earlier potential readership in terms of demographics. But if lawyers are contextualized as part of a much larger group of literate professionals emerging in English urban centers in response to the growth of commerce, then the inclusion of lawyers in this audience is significant. A London lawyer in the 1390s was part of a much larger literate service sector which was appearing in response to increased trade in English urban areas in the late fourteenth century. Literacy was required in these centers not only by those directly involved in trade (e.g., merchants, guild members, and small artisans), but also by members of the new service industry which developed to accommodate the needs of those involved in trade (e.g., lawyers, accountants, and clerks).[28] As Nicholas Orme explains in his study of literacy in medieval England, <u>English Schools in the Middle Ages</u>, the private and public affairs of merchants and prosperous craftsmen in medieval towns in the late fourteenth century required literacy. Merchants needed to keep records of their stocks, their orders, and their sales, and if their trade went beyond local transactions, correspondence with suppliers and customers was

also necessary. These recordings were typically neither in French or Latin, but only required literacy in English. Orme also explains that guild members were also usually literate in English, but not in Latin or French. Orme notes, for example, that in 1422, the London guild of brewers resolved to keep their records in English, observing that many of their craft knew how to read and write English but were illiterate in Latin and French. Similarly, in 1402, a Yorkshire knight, Sir John Dependen, left twenty pounds for the education of a boy named John FitzRichard, with instructions that when he could read or write he should be sent to London to learn the craft of the fishmongers, grocers, or mercers. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, court records reflect a considerable increase in literacy among merchants, craftsmen, and even agriculturalists.[29] The growth of literacy due to the burgeoning of trade also intersected with the growth of literacy due to Lollardy in late fourteenth-century England.[30] It is clear that there was a substantial portion of the middling sorts in urban areas in the 1390s who could read English, thereby providing a ready audience for literary texts written in the vernacular.

Even if a person was illiterate, being unable to read did not prevent a person from having access to texts written in English. Silent, individual reading was not the typical method of interacting with a text in late fourteenth-century England.[31] Instead, groups of varying sizes usually assembled

around a person who would read aloud. These groups could consist of families, of neighbors and friends, of professional performances, and so on.[32] The Wife of Bath's paradigm, where one family member reads to other family members, was common, as were the infamous secret gatherings to read biblical passages in English. Because of these group formations, a text written in English would have a much larger audience--whether literate or not--than a text written in Latin or in Anglo-Norman French. (After all, not a very substantial percentage of the population could have understood Latin or French, even if it was read to them.) This is not to claim that a person from _any_ position in the status hierarchy could have had access to a poem like the Confessio. Listening to a reading of a text (excluding, obviously, texts read at mass) required a certain degree of privilege because listening presupposed that a person had the leisure to do so, and leisure was a luxury. Listening to readings also presupposed that audience members had enough money to hire professional clerks to read to them (a common practice), to have facilitated the education of a family member, or to be in a sufficiently high rank to have literate acquaintances. Plus, one also needed enough funds, or to know people with a sufficient income, to purchase a text. Most Englishmen and women in the 1390s could not meet these criteria, but those who lived in urban areas and who occupied the middle ranks of society did. Members of these ranks had the economic resources to have literacy or to have access to

texts, like the <u>Confessio</u>, written in English. This was the group that Gower apparently decided to add onto his former (predominantly) clerical and aristocratic readership when he chose to write the <u>Confessio</u> "In oure englissh . . . for Engelondes sake" (Prol.23-24). This is the audience from which Gower was particularly interested in eliciting consent for the social order. The large number of extant manuscripts of the <u>Confessio</u> suggest that Gower actually did earn the large readership that he set out to woo.[33]

II. COMMON PROFIT AND THE PROLOGUE

As John Fisher explains in <u>John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer</u>, Gower emphasized the social-political concept of "the comun good" throughout his literary career. Fisher explains that this concept was commonplace in fourteenth-century England: when used by John Ball and the Lollards, it was potentially subversive, but "common profit" was usually "a synonym for the responsible state in which each class performed its proper function" (178). Gower, Fisher continues, emphasized this concept more than any of his English contemporaries. To demonstrate this point, Fisher provides a lengthy list of citations from the <u>Mirour de l'Omme</u>, where Gower overtly refers to "'le commun profit,'" "'le proufit de communalite,'" "'le bien commun,'" and so forth. As Fisher further explains, the theory that each estate "'est ordine' par son endroit/ De fair au siecle ascun

labour'" (MO,23618, quoted in Fisher) is implied throughout the Mirour, but this theme becomes the principal subject of the Vox Clamantis. In the second book of the Vox, Gower disputes the "'common view'" that misfortunes at that time were the result of fortune and claims instead that they resulted from sin. Gower insists that "'since man does not understand the circumstances of the world'" (VC,II.451, quoted in Fisher), he should place his faith in God and accept the divine order. Hence, for Gower, the three estates are part of the "'ordo munde,'" and the central question is how well members of each estate fulfill their designated roles, as defined by the "'commune bonum'" (Fisher, 178-180).

Gower continues his discussion of common profit in the Confessio. This theme is the most explicit in the Prologue, and this formulation foregrounds Gower's participation in the process of hegemony. In his introductory remarks, Gower announces that he is writing "A bok for Engelondes sake" (Prol.24), a phrase which makes it clear that the Confessio claims to promote the common good. Shortly after this comment, Gower bemoans the present condition of England, claiming that the three estates (the clergy, knighthood, and the commons) are failing miserably in their social responsibilities. He begins his attack on the estates by holding up an image of how society once flourished when each estate fulfilled its proper duties:

If I schal drawe in to my mynde

The tyme passed, thanne I fynde

The world stod thanne in al his welthe:

Tho was the lif of man in helthe,

Tho was plente, tho was richesse,

Tho was the fortune of prouesse,

Tho was knyhthode in pris be name,

Wherof the wyde worldes fame

Write in Cronique is yit withholde;

Justice of lawe tho was holde,

The privilege of regalie

Was sauf, and al the baronie

Worschiped was in his astat;

The citees knewen no debat,

The poeple stod in obeissance

Under the reule of governance,

And pes, which ryhtwisnesse keste,

With charite tho stod in reste:

Of mannes herte the corage

Was schewed thanne in the visage;

The word was lich to the conceite

Withoute semblant of deceite:

Tho was ther unenvied love,

Tho was the vertu sett above

And vice was put under fote.

<div align="right">(Prol.93-118)</div>

In this passage, Gower recalls a time when everyone prospered:

the world was full of wealth; humankind was healthy; it was a
time of plenty; there were abundant riches; law was
judiciously upheld; and vice was trampled, while virtue
reigned. Common profit obviously prevailed and, Gower implies,
England could also enjoy such prosperity, if people truly
wanted to. This passage involves the type of recruitment that
Stuart Hall discusses. By positing a formulation like "comun
profit," Gower claims that his readers--despite their being
from different groups with a plethora of social antagonisms
among them--actually share the same political interests. In
making this claim, Gower attempts to inscribe a vast range of
different positions and interests into a hegemonic
configuration, allegedly representing the interests of
everyone to some degree: through the formulation of "the
common good," Gower attempts to shape his readers' interests
through a type of recruitment, for readers are encouraged to
see the proffered agenda as representing their best interests
and are thereby encouraged to adopt this agenda as their own.
By doing so, Gower tries to unite members of different groups
into a strategic social alliance.

Clearly, however, no political agenda can be in the best
interests of every member of a social arrangement. Any
platform will benefit certain groups in society more than
others, and Gower's fictional "comun profit" is no exception:
different groups in Gower's audience had competing interests
and not every group benefitted from the reproduction of the

social hierarchy. Who would actually profit the most from the position which Gower advocates? The criticisms which Gower launches against the three estates clarify the political interests behind Gower's formulation of "common profit." Throughout the Prologue, Gower continually bemoans the state of England and the larger world, positing divisiveness as one of the primary causes of the current demise of England and humanity. For example, in his discussion of the state, Gower remarks, "men now clepe and calle,/ And sein the regnes ben divided,/ In stede of love is hate guided" (Prol.126-128). Gower identifies England's war with France as the cause of much of England's factionalism. To reconcile the first estate with the rest of society, Gower advises the king to abandon the war with France and encourages subjects to remain faithful to the king: "That unto him which the heved is/ The members buxom scholden bowe" (Prol.152-153). Divisiveness is also at the heart of the crisis in the church. Gower laments the great schism and the rise of heresies like Lollardy. "Betwen tuo Stoles lyth the fal," he mourns, "Whan that men wene best to sitte:/ In holy cherche of such a slitte/ Is for to rewe un to ous alle" (Prol.336-339). Clerics argue fiercely about the Pope so that "non entendeth/ To that which comun profit were" (Prol.376-377). Because of such divisiveness there is no guidance for parishioners, and Christ's fold is broken into pieces and devoured on every side (Prol.390-395).

Similarly, in the catalogue of great empires which have

fallen throughout history, divisiveness is denounced as the primary cause. The poet introduces the litany of fallen kingdoms by announcing that he will draw upon a tale from the Bible "that as in conclusioun/ Seith that upon divisioun/ Stant, why no worldes thing mai laste,/ Til it be drive to the laste (Prol.575-578). Gower then recounts Nebuchadnezzar's dream, featuring a statue whose feet were separated, and "that betokneth mochel wo," Gower's Daniel explains, "Whan that the world divided is,/ It moste algate fare amis" (Prol.643-645). Just as the integral upper body of the statue connotes prosperity, in the ensuing repertoire of empires to which the respective layers of the statue corresponds, harmony among humankind resulted in overall prosperity. But once these social bodies began to fragment, the great empires crumbled: when the world became diverse, Babylon fell (Prol.677); Persia fell when the monarchy left (Prol.695-696); and the Roman empire collapsed because of dissension among its rulers (Prol.781-785). After recounting Daniel's reading of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Gower announces that the world is now in the final stage of the ages of man and warns "thurgh lacke of love/ Where as the lond divided is,/ It mot algate fare amis" (Prol.892-894). Gower applies this maxim explicitly to wars among countries (Prol.985-904); to individual men, with reference to their bodies and souls (Prol.974-1005); and to the relationships among different segments of society (Prol.1052-1076). According to Gower, not only does division

cause the demise of worldly things, including civilizations, but it is also the cause of the fall from grace (Prol.970-1005), the product of the Tower of Babel (Prol.1019-1031), and the state of existence in hell (Prol.1045-1046).

The characteristics of the prosperous civilization versus those which produced the demise of great empires and which plague England make Gower's prescriptions for the country's salvation clear. First, the blatant correlation between a country's division and its demise represents an attempt to urge different socio-economic groups of readers to unite. In the idyllic past, everyone shared the same interests, with no class antagonisms and no struggles among different groups in the social hierarchy. Everyone's interests were aligned, and there was a consensus about what the common good entailed and how to achieve it: "The citees knewen no debat" (Prol.106). By implication, to prosper, readers must abandon competing interests and work towards common goals. They must stop voicing demands which differ from England's rulers, for such demands, Gower claims, render the country stagnant and unable to function as an effective social organization. Second, readers must submit themselves to their rulers. In the perfect social arrangement of the past, knighthood was valued; the privilege of royalty was safe; and the barony was worshipped according to its status (Prol.99-105). Similarly, law was upheld and "The poeple stod in obeissance/ Under the reule of governance" (Prol.107-108). In short, rank was respected, and

people honored those who occupied higher positions in the status hierarchy and willingly subjugated themselves to authority.

These visions of the past and present naturalize correlations between respect for rulers and the state of society, in terms of its overall wealth, abundance, and health: as the golden age demonstrates, when the lower ranks are obedient, society flourishes; as the demise of great empires and the current state of England testify, when social subordinates are not docile, society is a wreck. By making these correlations through historical examples, Gower grants the social relations which exist in late fourteenth-century England the appearance of having the unalterable character of natural law. As history demonstrates, socio-economic hierarchies are a part of the natural order, and rulers were meant to reign, while the lower ranks were meant to obey. As history also demonstrates, a society naturally flourishes when occupants of the lower ranks remember their places.

Gower explicitly claims that for society to operate as a coherent whole subjects must be docile and obedient, acknowledging the rightful superiority of those who rule: "That unto him which the heved is/ The members buxom scholden bowe" (Prol.152-153). The implicit argument behind this advice is that different members of the social body are naturally suited to perform different functions, just as various parts of the human body naturally perform specific functions. Like

the human body, for the social body to function the most
efficiently, every part must assume its prescribed role,
thereby enabling the social body to work as an effective unit.
This integral body, in turn, will benefit every member of that
body by guaranteeing widespread health and prosperity for the
entire social organism. This is an argument based on
aristocratic ideology, for it presupposes that certain
individuals are naturally suited to perform certain functions;
and, of course, the functions for which one is suited neatly
correspond to one's birthplace. This division of labor
according to some notion of biologism attempts to naturalize
socio-economic position: one performs a certain type of labor
and occupies a certain position in the hierarchy because one
is born into it, and adherence to this birthplace ensures the
smooth operation of society as a whole. Hence, social
relations reflect biology. This argument legitimates the
social order by naturalizing it, by giving it the appearance
of unalterable, eternal law.

Gower grounds the social order in natural law not only
through his use of history, but also through his use of the
Bible. Just as his representation of the golden age erases
social struggle, making that society seem like a coherent,
seamless whole, Gower's prescription for the present calls for
the end of social struggle, despite the fact that social
struggle is a structural inevitability, for different groups
in any socio-economic arrangement have competing interests.[34]

But not only does Gower erase the fact of social contradiction, dissent, and struggle, but he condemns dissent as sinful, using the Bible to buttress his pronouncement. Gower fortifies his claim about social struggle by drawing upon two biblical tales where division is unequivocally pejorative, the Tower of Babel and Nebuchadnezzar's dream. In the discussion of the latter, the poet merges the biblical pronouncement about division (as represented by the statue's clay feet) with his own apocalyptic vision of England's continuing demise. By conflating the biblical remarks with his own concerns, Gower's political agenda gains authority, for his agenda seems to be validated by the word of God.

Gower continually legitimates his position with Christianity throughout the Confessio in this way. In the Vox Clamantis, Gower literally adopts the stance as the voice crying in the wilderness, as the neglected prophet whose visionary eyes perceive the ills of society. Gower continues this posture in the Confessio, particularly in the Prologue, where it manifests itself in Gower's prophetic tone; in the apocalyptic predictions about the future of England; through the conflation with the divinely inspired Daniel; through the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream; by the remarkable insight into the reasons for England's demise; and by the biblical discourse throughout.[35] This reliance on Christianity to legitimate Gower's class interests continues throughout the text in a less pronounced way. For example, the

<u>Confessio</u> intersects with the penitential tradition through its adoption of the sinner-confessor paradigm and through its division into books on the seven deadly sins.[36] By posing as someone who can explain the differences between vice and virtue and as someone who can teach others, Gower claims a version of divine authority.[37] This posture not only helps Gower's agenda gain credibility by making it seem like the law of God, but it also makes the poet's work appear politically disinterested. How could a book about a topic so sanctioned by church authority as the seven deadly sins be politically motivated? Isn't Gower only discussing transcendental notions of Right and Wrong?

Obviously, however, Gower's didacticism is anything but politically disinterested. If different groups in England humbly submitted to those who occupied higher positions in the status hierarchy, as Gower recommends, then those who already held the country's balance of wealth and power would be the beneficiaries. If social subordinates abandoned competing demands and accepted the wisdom of their socio-economic superiors, then again England's ruling group would benefit. In essence, Gower's vision of an ideal system is actually a highly visible defense of the social order. Gower universalizes the sectional interests of the ruling group in the guise of common profit. The <u>Confessio</u>'s Prologue is a politically conservative reaction to the legitimation crisis and to challenges to the status quo. Gower attempts to produce

an historic bloc of support for the ruling group in the guise
of the common good in an effort to reproduce social relations
at a time when they are being seriously challenged.

Gower's promotion of "comun profit" in his larger attempt
to produce hegemony takes on more subtle forms as well. An
important element in Thatcherism's success, Hall explains, was
its ability to interact with popular conceptions and
discourses. The Thatcher regime insecurities and the lost
identities of Britain as a whole. It drew upon British
subjects' shared fantasies about themselves as a nation. In
his attempt to participate in the production of hegemony,
Gower adopts a similar strategy. For example, Gower taps into
England's collective fantasies about itself in terms of its
burgeoning nationalism. In the mid-to-late fourteenth century,
England was becoming increasingly aware of itself as a nation.
This growth of nationalism during this period is reflected at
numerous sites, including parliamentary petitions. The
developing sense of England as a country is reflected in the
plethora of petitions to parliament from merchants at the time
soliciting protectionism for English goods. These petitions
claimed, for example, that England's welfare was jeopardized
by the infiltration of foreign goods. (There were also a large
number of related poems, such as the Libel of English Policy,
which bragged that English goods were superior to those of any
other country and that commercial ships from England should
dominate the seaways. Gower wrote one such poem.[38]) There are

other parliamentary records as well which reflect burgeoning nationalism. In 1340, for example, Edward III solicited funds from parliament for wars against France, arguing that the French would destroy the English language.[39]

Gower draws upon these nationalist fantasies in his attempts to produce an historical bloc. In his list of history's great empires, England becomes a great empire as well, by virtue of being listed alongside Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome. England implicitly becomes the inheritor of Rome, a tradition which is fairly common in Middle English literature (including, for example, Layamon's Brut, where Brutus, the founder of England, is a direct descendant of Aeneas). Gower participates explicitly in this tradition in the Vox Clamantis, for he continually represents London as "the New Troy." The appeal to nationalism in the Confessio is also noticeable in such remarks as Gower's claim to be writing this book "In oure englissh . . . for Engelonde's sake" (Prol.23-24). Not only does the announcement that this book is for the sake of the country overtly proclaim nationalism, but the very act of writing poetry in the vernacular in England in the 1390s is of necessity bound up with nationalism.[40] The rise of the vernacular in the second half of the fourteenth century is intimately intertwined with the rise in nationalism, including (at a reductive level) its displacement of French, the language of England's martial foe. Therefore, even at the fundamental level of writing in English instead of

in the language of the <u>Mirour de l'Omme</u>, Gower's decision to write in the vernacular is bound up with nationalism. By appealing to nationalism (both overtly and more implicitly), Gower conflates his defense of the status quo with allusions to England's greatness and thereby appeals to subjects' collective fantasies about themselves in order to make his agenda seem compelling. Gower simultaneously reflects and constructs his readers' interests: the idea of national glory probably felt compelling to Gower's audience and, therefore, by extension, supporting the ruling group could also seem compelling. This is a <u>process</u> of gaining consent, a process of constructing interests politically and ideologically.

This appeal to nationalism intersects with Gower's attempt to play on his audience's anxieties. Throughout the Prologue, Gower repeatedly articulates the implicit threat of what could happen if readers do not unite in their efforts. This threat is announced the mostly clearly at the beginning of the section on the commons:

> Now forto speke of the comune,
>
> It is to drede of that fortune
>
> Which hath befalle in sondri londes:
>
> Bot often for defalte of bondes
>
> Al sodeinliche, er it be wist,
>
> A Tonne, whanne his lye arist,
>
> Tobrekth and renneth al aboute,
>
> Which elles scholde noght gon oute;

> And ek fulofte a litel Skar
>
> Upon a Banke, er men be war,
>
> Let in the Strem, which with gret peine,
>
> If evere man it schal restreigne.

(Prol.499-510)

Not only will England fail to be glorious if the current dissension continues, but if unchecked, the third estate could overrun the country. Like a broken cask spilling its contents into a ruinous flood, the Commons could break their bonds and wreak havoc. Gower provides a proverbial maxim about the blemish on the bank which, before men notice, lets in a stream only containable through great effort. The underlying message is that if the readers fail to unify in their political actions, peasants will rage until they are unstoppable and ravage the land.

Gower is clearly playing upon the anxieties of his audience, anxieties which various groups must have felt in light of the recent and continuing barrage of social uprisings. As occupants of the upper and middle ranks of the social hierarchy, Gower's readers would be the ones who would lose power, wealth, and property if peasants seized control of England. Gower emphasizes this possibility throughout the Prologue. For example, shortly after the passage quoted above, Gower bemoans the dominance of Fortune over England: because of divisiveness within the country, Fortune's wheel is spinning wildly and nothing seems to last more than a short

time, "So may be seker non astat" [No estate is secure] (Prol.552-568). In this formulation, change is unequivocally bad, while the continuation of the status quo is desirable. Even though a substantial portion of Gower's own readership would have participated in various ways in the social uprisings at the time, Gower claims that his readers stand to lose from social unrest, whether or not they actively participate in rebellions. Although portions of the readership may have seen their own complicity with rebellion as being in their best interests, Gower presents a different interest as their own. This interest involves standing united to safeguard against peasant usurpation, for according to Gower's logic, any dissension could result in the triumph of the populace: if we are divided, the poet claims, the masses will conquer us all. By making this equation, Gower attempts to produce a cohesive group identity. This identity involves the ideological process of constructing an Other: the peasants are the Other; the peasants are a threat against which readers must unite. This construction of the Other encourages members of the audience to think of themselves collectively, as a group with shared interests. By encouraging readers to think of themselves as united, Gower is shaping their interests and creating a strategic alliance among members of different groups with various interests.

III. STATUS INCONSISTENCIES AND TALES OF LOVE

There may appear to be an unbridgeable gap between the political platform outlined in the Prologue and the amorous tales which form the bulk of the Confessio; these innocuous stories have little apparent connection with social unrest in late fourteenth-century England. But if these tales are examined in terms of the cultural narratives that they endorse, then the gap between the Prologue and the stories narrows. As the following discussion will demonstrate, these confessions of a lover subtly reinforce the political agenda outlined in the Prologue. Gower tries to generate hegemony through his reinscription of certain cultural narratives which were compelling to late fourteenth-century audiences. Although seemingly innocuous, cultural narratives act in ways which Hall considers important in the production of hegemony. They intersect with people's ideas about themselves and insert themselves into the necessarily contradictory, fragmentary nature of common sense. They reflect what seems natural and wise, while simultaneously revising what is natural and wise. They also tap into popular discourses and traditions to explain the world in ways that people understand, in an effort to modify these conceptions.

Throughout the Confessio, Gower recurrently draws upon the common cultural narrative of aristocratic ideology. Aristocratic ideology supports the agenda outlined in the Prologue because it naturalizes socio-economic positions. A

cultural narrative which claims that virtue is inherited and that descendants of noble blood are superior men supports Gower's attempt to reassert existing relations of domination and subordination. This fiction buttresses Gower's insistence that the social order must remain intact by arguing that occupants of the higher ranks are innately gifted; thus, the social hierarchy merely reflects the natural order. Because of nature's unequal distribution of gifts, everyone should remain in the positions allotted at birth, respect rank, and obey England's rulers. The unequal distribution of wealth and power reflects the human condition, and as history shows us, Gower contends, people are happy when they remember this fact and miserably wallow in sin when they forget it.

Gower's reassertion of aristocratic ideology not only functions as an overt affirmation of blood and bloodline, but he couches the cultural narrative in the terms found in Middle English romance. It is important to remember that these tropes do not convey the imperative of descent in a forthright manner but that they mediate status inconsistencies by rationalizing them through compelling scenarios which, in turn, reproduce the status hierarchy. Although this tradition has a large repertoire of scenarios which ultimately reinforce aristocratic ideology, Gower is only willing to legitimate a few of them. His refusal to validate other portions of the tradition is significant because Gower's restrictions point to some of the specific terms of the larger political agenda for

which he is trying to gain consent.

i. <u>Legitimate Status Inconsistencies:</u> The Tale of Florent <u>and</u>
The Tale of Constance

By examining the <u>Tale of Florent</u>, a classic example of
the paradigms in romance which mediate status inconsistencies,
it is evident which status inconsistencies Gower is willing to
condone as legitimate. In the <u>Tale of Florent</u>, the knightly
Florent (an emperor's nephew) is cast in the role of the noble
descendant far enough removed from direct lineage (i.e., not
the first-born son of the emperor) to be excluded from
paternal inheritance. Following convention, Florent therefore
undergoes a delayed adolescence, where he quests for knightly
feats. Being the hero of a fourteenth-century romance instead
of a twelfth-century romance, however, Florent does not gain
nobility through brave deeds but in a more social realm. He
gains nobility by honoring his pledge to return to his
accusers and, more importantly, by upholding his troth to a
hag. In keeping with such chivalry, Florent allows his loathly
bride to decide whether to be beautiful by day or by night. It
is such courtly behavior, partially in the arena of marriage,
which earns him the reward of a beautiful princess for a wife.
Such a marriage makes him the inheritor of his bride's royal
fortune, and hence, his gentle birthplace is aligned with an
appropriate station in life and the accompanying power and
riches.

The alignment of birth, position, and outward nobility is further reinforced through the transformations of the female character. An evil stepmother maliciously disrupted the harmony among blood, position, and appearance in the female character by turning her into a hag. But just as the marriage realigns these terms for Florent, the marriage also realigns these terms for the bride by restoring the princess to her former state. McKeon explains that the revelation of a high birth at the end of a medieval romance happens quite often, but not in the majority of cases. The revelation of a high birth, McKeon continues, eases the contradiction in the narrative caused by the temporary misalliance of the terms of aristocratic ideology: their separation indicates that the coincidence among the terms is not inherent after all. But the even more damaging contradiction in the mediation of status inconsistency which the revelation of noble parentage seeks to ease is the problem of a character performing noble deeds and thereby rising in rank. Such a tale inadvertently legitimates social mobility, and of course, social mobility is at odds with the narrative of aristocratic ideology. This potential contradiction inherent within the narrative itself is eradicated by the revelation of a high birthplace. By providing the female bride with a high rank (unlike the Wife of Bath's comparable character[41]) Gower ensures that Florent's wife is a suitable companion in the status hierarchy for a knight. More importantly, by providing the bride with a

high rank and the accompanying riches, Florent weds into a position comparable to the one from which he was disinherited. Thus, the subversive potential of this tale is effectively contained.

The Tale of Constance also mediates status inconsistency according to the conventions of late fourteenth-century Middle English romance. According to the patrilineal system of inheritance in late fourteenth-century England, nobility flowed through the veins of male descendants, particularly first-born sons. Daughters were not in the direct line either of nobility or of the accompanying goods. Because of the high rate of male attrition and the frequent search for surrogate heirs, daughters often became heiresses and continued family lineages. The Tale of Constance rationalizes the continuation of virtue through a female descendant, thereby validating the use of a female heir in lieu of having a male counterpart. Constance never holds the inheritable position of emperor herself; she merely provides a male heir in lieu of her father's inability to generate one. But because the descent of nobility is not direct but passes into the female line, it is crucial that Constance be deemed an appropriate transmitter of nobility. The tribulations prove that Constance does indeed possess this trait, for she undergoes trials with the utmost patience and with constancy and faith in God. Constancy, McKeon explains, is the utmost proof of a woman's nobility in late fourteenth-century English romance and is therefore a

typical convention by which status inconsistency is justified. Constancy typically revolves around a romantic relationship, but given the discursive intersections in medieval women's spirituality between a woman's love for her lover and God, it is reasonable to claim that Constance's constancy in her faith fulfills the same function as constancy for a lover.[42] By showing herself to be constant and thus virtuous, Constance proves herself a suitable conduit for a noble inheritance and thereby mediates the status inconsistency involved in the process of locating surrogate male heirs.

In addition to reconfirming aristocratic ideology by mediating status inconsistency, The Tale of Constance also reconfirms this cultural narrative at more localized moments. This reconfirmation occurs, for example, through the instantaneous recognition of Constance's nobility by her future husband:

> Sche tolde hem nevere what sche was;
>
> And natheles upon the cas
>
> The king was glad, how so it stod,
>
> For wel he wiste and understod
>
> Sche was a noble creature.

<div align="right">(II.911-915)</div>

Evidently, Constance's nobility shines through, a trope which is a common affirmation of aristocratic ideology in late fourteenth-century English romance. When Constance lands in Northumberland, a worthy knight finds her and commits her to

the care of his wife, who loves Constance and is converted by her. Likewise, when Constance drifts to Rome, she and her child dwell for twelve years with the wife of a Roman Senator. The rank of the host families with which she dwells (she is not adopted by a carpenter's family, after all) points to how Constance naturally belongs in the company of those of high rank. These and other coincidental moments in the narrative reinforce "natural" affinity among birthplace, inherent nobility, and outward appearance.

The types of status inconsistencies these tales validate are extremely limited. Florent occupies the role of the disinherited son (at one remove) in medieval romance, the son who undergoes an extended adolescence, seeking adventures or love and ultimately finding a wealthy heiress to wed, thereby gaining wealth through marriage in lieu of inheriting it. By marrying a princess, and thereby becoming a prince, Florent gains a position comparable to the one into which he was born in terms of the status hierarchy; the gap between what Florent was (a knight who is the emperor's nephew) and what Florent becomes (a prince) is negligible in terms of social mobility. Florent simply exchanges one extremely high-ranking position for another, gaining through marriage a position like the one from which he was disinherited. Similarly, Constance's son does not climb the socio-economic ladder. His grandfather is an emperor, and he too becomes an emperor. The only status inconsistency is in the use of Constance as the conduit of

nobility. In that sense alone does the crowning of Morris as emperor deviate from typical patrilineal inheritance patterns. Thus, in the cases of Florent and Constance, status inconsistencies operate in a very limited sphere, enabling only minor substitutions in positions and inheritances. Evidently, Gower is very willing to validate status inconsistencies within restricted perimeters, namely those involving the exchange of one position for another of equal value.

ii. Illegitimate Status Inconsistencies

But minor substitutions are not the only status inconsistencies which late fourteenth-century Middle English romances seek to explain. These romances often facilitate much greater discrepancies in rank. Although the Confessio frequently narrates inconsequential heir substitutions, involving equivalent or near-equivalent status changes, there is a noticeable absence of tales involving significant changes in status. This absence of tales which mediate pronounced status inconsistencies indicates that Gower is unwilling to reproduce the recurrent paradigms from medieval romance which negotiate significant status changes.

The continual presence of Amans foregrounds how negotiations of status inconsistencies operate in a closed system in the Confessio. Throughout the poem, Amans proves himself unswerving in love: Amans has dressed better for love;

he frequents his lady's dwelling; he reads to his beloved; he chats to her servants to linger longer in her presence; he rides with her to church; he thinks about her during mass; and he shows his devotion in numerous other ways. Even after Genius has explained every vice in great detail, even after Genius has provided a vast repertoire of stories to illustrate his points, and even after nearly thirty thousand lines of poetry, Amans is still constant in love. Although constancy is the most common method by which status inconsistency is reconciled in late fourteenth-century English romance, Amans' unswerving devotion comes to no avail.

Why? Venus provides the answer in the closing scenes, in response to Amans' request for help. Venus appears and explains to her devotee that he is not an appropriate member of her exclusive court:

> For loves lust and lockes hore
>
> In chambre acorden neveremore,
>
> And thogh thou feigne a yong corage,
>
> It scheweth wel be the visage
>
> That olde grisel is no fole:
>
> There ben fulmanye yeres stole
>
> With thee and with suche othre mo,
>
> That outward feignen youthe so
>
> And ben withinne of pore assay.
>
> Min herte wolde and I ne may
>
> Is noght beloved nou adayes;

> Er thou make eny suche assaies
>
> To love, and faile upon the fet,
>
> Betre is to make a beau retret;
>
> For thogh thou myhtest love atteigne,
>
> Yit were it bot an ydel peine,
>
> Whan that thou art noght sufficant
>
> To holde love his covenant.
>
> Forthi tak hom thin herte ayein,
>
> That thou travaile noght in vein,
>
> Wherof my Court may be deceived.

> (VIII.2404-2423)

Venus explains that love's lust cannot dwell in a hoary chamber and that although he adopts a "yong corage," Amans' face betrays his age. The outward appearance feigns youth but the inward essence is of poor metal ("That outward feignen youthe so/ And ben withinne of pore assay" [VIII.2410-2411]). Before attempting love and failing miserably, Venus continues, it is better to retreat gracefully. Although Amans might attain love, he is insufficient to hold love's covenant. She therefore advises Amans to take his heart home again so that he doesn't labor in vain.

In effect, Venus' argument is grounded in aristocratic ideology. Venus points out that Aman's old face and hoary locks are inconsistent with his actions, the love-longing and courting appropriate to youth. More importantly, she also argues that Amans' outward pretense does not coincide with his

inward essence, because he is of poor metal, a reference recalling the tiered statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the relation of its metals to the status hierarchy. This reference (which will be discussed at length shortly) provides insight into one of the main reasons for Amans' failure. Fins amor is a courtly occupation, and Amans lacks the proper essence to succeed at fins amor. Amans gains nothing for his dedication because he is inappropriate for the exclusive court of love. When Amans is cured, he stops occupying himself with pastimes above his station and adopts the more suitable occupation of poet. Florent and Constance (who are born noble) can prove their nobility through trials, love, and constancy, while Amans (who is not born noble) proves nothing, except that he ought to choose a different occupation. The text's refusal to allow this constancy to prove his worthiness reflects the Confessio's larger refusal to acknowledge noble qualities in those not of high birth: only those who already possess nobility and an appropriate social position can prove their worthiness and thereby gain nobility through the means provided in medieval romance.

The Tale of the False Bachelor exemplifies the Confessio's refusal to legitimate the scenarios which facilitate significant status changes in Middle English romance. The knight in the Tale of the False Bachelor wins a bride of high lineage quite handily. The false bachelor, however, does not win his lofty prize through the usual means

by which characters in medieval romance win their spouses. Instead, he acquires "nobility" through duplicity, wedding a Soldan's daughter through the guise of "nobility" won through lying, theft, and betrayal, rather than actually proving his internal merit and thereby earning his position honestly. The prince who is usurped by the knight provides a stark contrast, for this character successfully performs the series of tropes typically required by one of romance's most common scenarios for mediating status inconsistencies: he leaves his birthplace, enjoys an extended adolescence by seeking adventures, and performs a host of noble feats in arms. The prince in the Tale of the False Bachelor thereby proves himself both noble and worthy of an equally high-ranking bride. Again, Gower ensures that the character who proves himself inwardly noble is of noble birth, a requirement which the medieval romance tradition is much more willing to forgo. The juxtaposition between the noble prince and the deceitful knight foregrounds the Confessio's refusal to validate the possibility that a character who is not born noble could ever possess nobility. This impossibility, by extension, points to a further impossibility in the Confessio--the mediation of significant status inconsistency. The knight in the Tale of the False Bachelor is the only character in the entire poem who enjoys any degree of social mobility[43]--and he gains mobility through deceit. By including in the huge compilation of amorous tales only one character who gains social mobility

and by having that improvement in status won through duplicity, Gower refuses to reinforce tales which locate internal merit in those of middle-to-low births. This refusal, in turn, is a decided rejection of the narratives from romance which mediate significant disparities in status. When placed in a larger context of cultural narratives, these deviations from the romance tradition translate into Gower's refusal to endorse social fictions which mask inconsistencies in status when those inconsistencies include significant variations in socio-economic positions.

Narratives which facilitate substantial alterations in rank are not only an impossibility in this text, but the Confessio makes it clear what it means to violate the social order in this way. The character of Nebuchadnezzar exemplifies what "presuming" to rise above one's rank, for example, means. Gower's discussion of Nebuchadnezzar's Punishment in Book One (Pride) recounts how Nebuchadnezzar, the powerful monarch, grows so proud that he fancies himself a god on earth. Believing himself to be better than he actually is, he disavows his own mortality and refuses to acknowledge his heavenly superior. Because of his proud defiance, Nebuchadnezzar is severely punished until he humbles himself in submission to his divine ruler. This is a tale about what it means to step out of one's place in the hierarchy. According to the logic of the tale, by violating one's place in the hierarchy, one becomes a beast: a person who forgets

his/her "rightful" position is false to nature or acting like a beast. A person only emerges from beastliness by recognizing his/her proper position, by showing the prerequisite deference to superiors, and by realizing that it is unnatural to desire to be better than one is. Because this is an _exemplum_ illustrating the vice of Pride, trespassing boundaries in the hierarchy is not only arrogant, according to the logic of the tale, but it may endanger one's soul. The conflation between transgressing rank and risking eternal damnation not only results from this tale being an _exemplum_ about the deadliest of the seven sins, but this equation is also implied through Nebuchadnezzar's punishment. His violation of the order is an affront to God himself and God punishes his subject accordingly. This punishment acts as an implicit threat to readers: "violate the divinely ordained social order, and you are committing a sin, perhaps even endangering your soul."

Rather than violate the social order--and hence be proud, sinful, and (possibly) damned--Gower offers an alternative. This solution looms large in _Nebuchadnezzar's Dream_. The image has hierarchy inscribed upon its body, in that its sections are comprised of a gradation of metals, arranged with the most impressive metal (gold) at the head, the next valuable metal (silver) beneath, and so forth. Given that Gower draws analogies between the social body and the individual body, as the discussion of the Prologue demonstrates, the differentiation of metals becomes a metaphor for the status

hierarchy. In this status hierarchy, the higher portions of the social body are made of superior metal, while lower portions are made of weaker matter. John Fisher recalls Jean Gerson's interpretation of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Gerson gives the image an explicitly political signification by combining the Platonic figure of golden leaders, silver auxiliaries, and iron and brass artisans and husbandmen with the iconology of the social body. The golden head symbolizes the king; the silver breast and arms signify knights; the brass stomach stands for merchants; the iron legs and clay feet represent laborers. Fisher argues that Gower used this political dimension in the construction of his statue, both in the Vox and in the Confessio (186-187).

McKeon's discussion of the tradition of the Hesiodic allegory of metals is extremely helpful for adding an extra dimension to this statue. In the Republic, McKeon explains, Plato provides a highly self-conscious example of a myth of social lineage. After formulating what a model commonwealth might look like, Socrates decides that the republic will function most effectively if a "natural" division of labor is allowed to flourish. Each person should do what he is most "naturally" suited for. Socrates then describes a caste system, which he legitimates by providing a myth of autochthonous origins. At the heart of this myth is a Hesiodic allegory of metals. The several natural castes are determined by the sort of metal--gold, silver, iron, or brass--that the

gods have mixed in their respective memberships. McKeon explains that this myth claims that one gains virtue by excelling at the occupation for which one has a natural aptitude--an occupation which corresponds neatly to those available to members of their respective castes. This cultural narrative thereby becomes a social fiction used to justify an existing social stratification, a version of which was quite common in medieval political theory (136-137).

The statue in the Confessio thus acts as an argument (one of several in the poem[44]) against any form of status inconsistency. It is an argument--based on essentialism--for staying in one's place, an argument similar to the Prologue's comments regarding members of the social body. People lower on the socio-economic scale are made of poorer metal, while those higher up are made of superior substances. The social hierarchy, including the unequal distribution of wealth and power, reflect this state of being. This order is ordained by God and nature alike. Basically, the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream acts as an argument for aristocratic ideology in its most reductive form--the all-prevailing importance of birth and bloodline, with no status inconsistencies, no leeway, no exceptions in the "natural" order allowed. Not only is there no narrative space for significant status inconsistencies in this looming image, in the tale of Nebuchadnezzar's Punishment, or in any other tales in the Confessio, but as Nebuchadnezzar's Dream and

Nebuchadnezzar's Punishment indicate, Gower provides threatening cultural narratives about the consequences of transgressing the social order. For individuals, like Nebuchadnezzar, by violating the social order, a person risks being punished, incurring the wrath of God, and possibly damning his/her soul. On a wider scale, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar's statue, violations of the social order could result in the threat discussed earlier, namely the demise of England.

iii. Foreclosing Routes Used to Mediate Status Inconsistencies

Not only is the category of status inconsistencies restricted to all but the few possessing nobility at birth, but the Confessio further reduces the possibility of mediating status inconsistencies by all but foreclosing the most common methods of reconciling these gaps. Routes which typically ennoble characters in late medieval romance are negated in the Confessio. For example, Gower nearly forecloses love's potential to transform in any productive way. McKeon explains that late medieval romance grants love a tremendous amount of transformative power, making it one of the primary conduits of status reconciliation. McKeon adds that love is an ambivalent force, possessing the power to transform either upward or downward, with the pejorative transformation typically occurring only briefly, before the ultimate ennobling (143-148). In the Confessio, love remains a powerful transformative

force; however, it typically transforms for the worst. Amans demonstrates this unfortunate transformative power most readily, for in his amorous pursuits, he abandons reason and becomes foolish. This foolishness is continually foregrounded through his inability to interpret the tales "intelligently" or to learn anything over the course of the poem because his wits are dulled by love. Once Amans abandons love, his reason returns, and he no longer plays the fool.

Amans' case is not unique according to the logic of the Confessio. As Genius explains, love typically transforms men into lesser beings. In his discussion of drunkenness at the beginning of Book Four (Gluttony), for example, Genius explains that there was never a drunk man who lost half as much wit through drink as men--who when "of love adoted,/ And so bewhaped and assoted"--lose through love. Lovers' thoughts grow so drunk with amorous inclinations that they forget reason (VI.76-87). In response, Amans admits that he is one of those men intoxicated by love: "Bot I am overcome so,/ And torned fro miself so clene,/ That ofte I wot noght what I mene" (VI.118-120). Amans explains that he is so drunk with musings of love, that his wit fails and his brain is overturned, and thus his manner is so misturned that he forgets everything and stands like a "mased man" (VI.128-132). The effects of love explained here are not the ennobling ones found in romance, but for Amans and for lovers in general, love turns men into fools.

Love also transforms men into thieves. In the discussion of covetousness in Book V (Avarice), Genius explains that covetousness has two companions, Stealth and Michery, who take their prey in secret where none may see. In daylight, covetousness picks pockets and cuts purse strings. Like a hound, covetousness slips into the fold, takes what he wants, then, after wiping his mouth on the grass, feigns cheer the next day as he sleeps (V.6476-6542). There are lovers, too, who practice stealth, seeking ways to steal kisses. Amans says he is no thief but admits that at night, while others sleep, he wishes he were a magician so that he might transform himself and fly into his beloved's chamber to steal something of love (V.6543-6700). Following this exchange, Genius tells the Tale of Leucothoe in which Phebus is so smitten with love for the maidenly Leucothoe that he slips into Leucothoe's chamber and rapes her. When her father discovers the deed, he dares not quarrel with Phebus, but commands his daughter to be buried alive (V.6784-6806). The Tale of Hercules and Faunus follows, in which Faunus unsuccessfully attempts to rape Eolen (V.6807-6960). Throughout Book V, Genius provides more tales of rape and attempted rape. Genius discusses the vice of Robbery with Amans, explaining that there are lovers, who, if they find a woman alone, will force themselves on her. To illustrate his point, Genius provides the Tale of Neptune and Cornix, where Neptune attempts to assault Cornix, but she prays to Pallis, who helps her escape in the form of a crow

from Neptune. The <u>Tale of Calistona</u> follows, a tale which features a woman who has decided to remain a maiden and to dwell with Diana's nymphs. One day Jupiter comes suddenly upon her and steals her virginity. When her womb later swells, Diana and the nymphs cast her out into the forest (V.6225-6337). There are numerous other narratives which include rapes as well: <u>The Marriage of Prithous</u>, <u>Apollonius of Tyre</u>, <u>The Tale of Galba and Vitellus</u>, <u>The Tale of Argus and Mercury</u>, and so forth. The plethora of rape narratives in the <u>Confessio</u> reflect how love in the <u>Confessio</u> is rarely an ennobling force; love is recurrently represented as being deceptive, predatory, thievish, and bestial. Rather than transporting the lover to greater heights, love typically turns the lover into everything from a blundering fool to a beast who would rape. By recurrently representing love as a conduit to foolishness and/or bestiality, the <u>Confessio</u> almost entirely forecloses the possibility of love's ability to transform upward and thereby closes off one of the most common routes by which English romance explains in a compelling way status disparities.

The <u>Confessio</u> further forecloses the possibility of mediating significant status inconsistency through its proposed merit/reward system. There are an extremely limited number of tales involving lovers who, neither foolish nor predatory, remain faithful to love. In these tales, love retains some of its positive transformative power, with

characters being rewarded for constancy. These rewards, however, are typically deferred until the "afterlife." This deferral is apparent in the handful of tales where the gods reward mortals for devotion to love by metamorphosing those characters upon "death" into other life forms. In the <u>Tale of Ceix and Alceone</u>, for example, Alceone patiently awaits her husband's return. Discovering his corpse adrift in the sea, Alceone leaps into the deep water, careless of death. Pitying the couple, the gods change them into birds (IV.2927-3123). The <u>Tale of Acis and Galatea</u> tells of Poliphemus' love for Galatea, but how she (who loved another) rejects him. Hoping to grieve her in her love, Poliphemus slays Galatea's beloved Acis. Galatea flees to the sea, where Neptune takes her into his charge. Meanwhile, the gods transform Acis into a spring with fresh streams, as he had been fresh in love (II.97-200). In the <u>Tale of Demophon and Phyllis</u>, a suitor pledges his troth to queen Phyllis, and she indulges his desires. Demophon leaves, promising to return in a month. When the appointed day arrives, Demophon fails to appear and Phyllis hangs herself. Out of pity, the gods shape her into a tree (IV.731-886). As these <u>exempla</u> indicate, in the rare cases where faithful service to love is rewarded, the reward is usually deferred until the "afterlife," rather than involving any material reward in this life.[45] The possibility of earning nobility through faithful love service and thereby rising in status is negated by the promise of reward at death instead. This

possibility is not only negated by the timing of these rewards, but by the forms that gifts take. Faithful service ultimately facilitates metamorphoses into birds, springs, trees, and other forms of animal, vegetable, and mineral life. It is impossible to talk about the material gains and improvement in status because these transformations are removed from worldly economics and are working in an entirely different symbolic economy. By relocating merit and reward in such different terms, Gower again forecloses the possibilities offered in romance for negotiating substantial status inconsistencies.

iv. <u>The Significance of Gower's Alterations to the Romance Tradition</u>

How are Gower's alterations to the romance tradition significant? How is Gower's refusal to mediate substantial status discrepancies and his foreclosure of the typical routes used to facilitate these discrepancies related to the production of consent? There are no doubt numerous answers to these questions. One such answer involves an inherent contradiction within romance's mediation of large disparities in status, a contradiction mentioned briefly earlier. On the one hand, the fiction of earning nobility through deeds and love and thereby earning one's social position helps cover over contradictions in a patrilineal system of inheritance, where recruitment from below is one recurrent means by which

patrilineal inheritance compensates for the impossibility of sustaining a continual male lineage. In this respect, the fiction of earned nobility supports aristocratic ideology by explaining structural flaws in a complex and ideologically compelling way. On the other hand, the fiction of earned nobility simultaneously challenges aristocratic ideology by foregrounding the possibility that nobility may not be entirely coincident with high birth and therefore ordained by God and nature; it is possible to acquire nobility.

It is important to think of the relation between this possibility and medieval readers. Typically, readers of late Middle English romance would have had before them a recurrent paradigm which validated the possibility of social mobility. Instead of concentrating on the larger purpose of the tale, readers could have focused on the smaller fiction--one which demonstrated that it was possible to climb the socio-economic ladder--and used this narrative as an exemplum for their own lives. This is not to claim that there is an unproblematic relation between the audience and the text, where the audience learns from the stories that it reads. This is a much more sophisticated idea of mediation, one that involves a mutual relationship between the audience and text, where the text both simultaneously reflects and constructs the reader. Romance tales which include a character's social climbing naturalize the possibility of improving one's rank and make such improvement seem like a viable option.

By always revealing a high birth and by mediating status within extremely limited perameters, Gower tries to help reconstruct the ways in which audience members think of themselves, their relation to their own positions in the status hierarchy, and their relation to others. Gower attempts to revise how his audience might conceive of social mobility by replacing romance narratives about social mobility with tales about punishment for violating rank and with tales of the threat to society that such transgression entails. Mobility in the Confessio is no longer a praiseworthy phenomenon; and rather than an endeavor which earns rewards, it is a sin against the divinely ordained natural order. This revisionism seems particularly important in terms of the demographics of Gower's audience. As discussed earlier, Gower envisions his audience as including not only aristocrats and members of the clergy, but occupants of the middle ranks of secular society as well. Many members of these middle ranks were the ones who were upwardly mobile. As explained in the earlier historical discussion, many of the wealthier merchants in late fourteenth-century England, for example, were accumulating sufficient amounts of wealth to purchase land and to rise into the aristocracy. Many of the less wealthy merchants improved the social standing of their children by sending their sons to university to be lawyers and by marrying their daughters into the gentry. These men and their children were some of the important exceptions in the replication of

the status hierarchy that romance narratives tried to explain in a convincing manner. Gower's revisionism of romance narratives, in part, addresses this group of readers, suggesting a message not unlike the following one: If you transgress the social order, you may be punished for violating God's will; think of the possible consequences to society as well. By exorcising social mobility from the narratives and by replacing these narratives with tales of woe for violating the natural order, Gower attempts to impress upon the "middling sorts" in his audience that they ought to remain in the socio-economic positions that they currently occupy.

When Gower wrote the Confessio, the fundamental contradiction between aristocratic ideology and the subsidiary fiction of earned nobility was foregrounded in a dramatic way. As explained in the earlier historical discussion, one of the primary reasons for the strain on aristocratic ideology was the excessive reliance on methods of patriline repair. Exceptions had become so important for the maintenance of the status hierarchy that their obvious presence partially demystified the narrative of aristocratic ideology, a narrative which played an important role in maintaining the status hierarchy. The exception which involved social mobility was particularly damaging to the reproduction of social relations because it foregrounded how positions were not inherent at birth, decreed by God and nature alike, but that social positions were acquired. It was not entirely clear how

these social positions were acquired, either, so that the arbitrariness of socio-economic position was becoming visible. Because of the heavy reliance on patriline repair, the fiction of mediating status inconsistency through mobility was obviously acquiring a significant degree of hegemony when Gower was writing. The tales in the Confessio are a response to this increasing hegemony, for they attempt to shut down the possibility of mobility, offered in the medieval romance tradition, as a legitimate means of mediating variations in status. The Confessio attempts to foreclose the possibility of mobility by reducing the exception category as a whole. By refusing to facilitate significant changes in status and by foreclosing the routes by which romance mediates inconsistencies, the Confessio encourages readers to see exceptions in the reproduction of the status hierarchy as virtually impossible to obtain. By extension, the Confessio attempts to dissuade those readers from who occupy middling socio-economic positions from aspiring to greater heights by implying that only the truly exceptional attain such positions.

Gower's drastic reduction of the category of those who could possess the "cor noble" attempts to modify the ways in which the audience thinks of itself in other ways as well. By providing numerous tales which reconfirm the relation between internal merit and high birth and by simultaneously eliminating those which contain the possibility for someone

not born of nobility to have such outstanding internal qualities, Gower coaxes the nobility to consider themselves worthy recipients of their socio-economic positions. Likewise, he encourages the nobility to consider the lower classes suited to occupy the positions which they inhabit. These distinctions would help shape how the nobility thought of itself in relation to other groups and thereby help structure social relations. Gower's revisions also attempt to construct the way that readers who occupy the middle rungs of the socio-economic ladder think of themselves. This group of readers, who also see the nobility of the elite reconfirmed repeatedly throughout the text (but not the potential nobility of middling sorts), are encouraged to think of their social betters as worthy of the status that they enjoy because of their inherent superiority. By the same token, readers who occupy the middle ranks are encouraged to think of themselves as less worthy so that the same messages provided in the Prologue are delivered more subtly: recognize the superiority of those above; they're wiser and they know what is in the best interests of all; be humble and submissive; bow to the head of the social body; and abandon divisiveness.

The reward system which Gower constructs is another example of an attempt to produce consent for the social order. In the rare cases that his narratives applaud faithful devotion to love, they do so by rewarding constancy not with improvements in status and with the accompanying material

goods promised by romance, but with some reward bestowed by the gods upon death. This deferral of rewards into the afterlife attempts to reproduce social relations in that it recalls a Christian system of reward and punishment upon death. In doing so, the Confessio participates in the effective strategy of encouraging members of the social arrangement to patiently endure their lots in life, with the promise of riches in heaven.

The shape that these rewards take is even more important than when they are bestowed. By transforming faithful lovers into birds, springs, trees and other forms of animal, vegetable, and mineral life, the Confessio relocates the reward system in an entirely different economy than the economy of romance. Medieval romance narratives are grounded in the material economies of the culture which produced those tales, but in the Confessio, it no longer makes sense to think in material terms; instead, reward adopts an other-worldly quality. By shifting away from romance's materialism into a very different register, the Confessio forecloses discussions of material conditions. Not only does it no longer make sense to discuss monetary gains, but the terms necessary for such a discussion--including wealth, title, property--are strikingly absent, thereby thwarting any discussion of material conditions. This other-worldliness of the reward system is part of the larger mystification strategy of the Confessio. The tales do not discuss such petty matters as the unequal

distribution of wealth and access to power. Rather, the tales concern themselves with higher matters--with nothing short of Truth. As Gower announces in the Prologue, these tales recount the wisdom of old and are written for the wise man (Prol.66-72); they draw upon the texts of the great auctors and therefore represent the highest knowledge known to man. Given such a lofty subject, there is no room for discussions of how one acquires privileged positions or why some people enjoy the material goods which accompany those positions, while other people do not. Instead, these tales provide a vocabulary and a conceptual framework for thinking only in terms of transcendental notions of Right and Wrong.

This disavowal of politics is a very helpful strategy for producing consent for hegemony. By revising the terms of reward in medieval romance, Gower inserts his poetry into the categories in which his audience thinks and begins to modify them. He attempts to shift his audience's thoughts away from such issues as the acquisition of socio-economic positions and questions of whether or not one deserves the position one has, to issues which camouflage class antagonisms. He redirects attention towards categories like Right and Wrong, as well as towards beauty, poetry, and Truth. By redirecting the audience's attention in this way, Gower attempts to reconstruct readers' interests. Their interests lie not in discussing crass materialist concerns and in fighting against social injustice, but in the investigation of loftier matters.

The contemplation of loftier matters helps thwart the articulation of class antagonisms, for rather than expending energy changing the socio-economic structure, audience members who occupy the middle ranks of society can see themselves united with the aristocracy in pursuit of the finer things in life.

CONCLUSION

After Gower's historical context, economic position, and political agenda have been restored, it becomes clear that the most common epithet assigned to the poet--"moral Gower"--is problematic at best. The _Confessio_ is not a moral guide to living. Rather, it is an important cultural document which records the anxiety of a member of the dominant group in England shortly after the Peasants' Revolt, in the midst of a legitimation crisis. The _Confessio_ represents an attempt to safeguard against further unrest by attempting to produce consent for the reproduction of social relations and thereby safeguard the unequal distribution of power and wealth, a system of which "moral Gower" is a beneficiary.

NOTES

1. Several medievalists have argued versions of this position. This position is argued the most explicitly and the most extensively in the following critical works: George C. Coffman, "John Gower in his Most Significant Role," in _Elizabethan Studies and Other Essays in Honor of George F. Reynolds_ (Boulder: University of Colorado Studies, 1945); John Fisher, _John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer_ (New York: New York University Press, 1964); Russell Peck, _Kingship & Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis_ (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978); and Elizabeth Porter, "Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm," in _Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments_ (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983).

2. For his most detailed discussion of hegemony, consent, and historical blocs, see Antonio Gramsci's chapter entitled "The Modern Prince" in _Selections from the Prison Notebooks_, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1987). For a brief explanation of the term "hegemony," refer to _The Dictionary of Marxist Thought_, edited by Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 229-231.

3. This argument about Thatcherism and hegemony appears in

Stuart Hall, <u>The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the</u> <u>Crisis of the Left</u> (London: Verso, 1990).

4. Louis Althusser makes this argument in his essay entitled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in <u>Lenin and</u> <u>Philosophy</u>, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

5. See Richard Halpern, <u>The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation</u> (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 85-100, for an excellent discussion of how discourses of capacity and hard work permeated Tudor schooling manuals and practices.

6. In his notes to <u>The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740</u> (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 458, Michael McKeon cites the following texts, where medievalists have argued that it is plausible to see the social purpose of medieval romance as the mediation and explanation of status inconsistencies within the system of patrilineal inheritance in the Middle Ages: F. L. Ganshof, <u>Feudalism</u>, translated by Philip Grierson, 3rd English edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 139-140; David Herlihy, "Three Patterns of Social Mobility in Medieval History," <u>Journal of</u> <u>Interdisciplinary History</u>, 3 (1973), 625, 626, 632; R. Howard Bloch, <u>Medieval French Literature and Law</u> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 98-99; Georges Duby,

"Northwest France: The 'Young' in Twelfth-Century Aristocratic Society," in Social Historians in Contemporary France: Essays from Annales (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 87-99; George Duby, Medieval Marraige: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 14; Herbert Moller, "The Social Causation of the Courtly Love Complex," Comparative Studies in Society and History 1 (1959), 146-157; and Lionel Rothkrug, "Popular Religion and Holy Shrines: Their Influence on the Origins of the German Reformation and Their Role in German Cultural Development," in Religion and the People, 800-1700, edited by James Obelkevich (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 26, 57.

7. See Rodney Hilton's chapter entitled "Was There a General Crisis of Feudalism?" in Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985).

8. R. B. Dobson, "The Risings in York, Beverley and Scarborough, 1380-1381" in The English Rising of 1381, edited by R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

9. A. F. Butcher, "English Urban Society and the Revolt of 1381" in The English Rising of 1381.

10. Alan Harding, "The Revolt against the Justices" in The English Rising of 1381.

11. It is important to distinguish between the ruling burgesses of towns such as Bury St. Edmunds and the interests of the ruling group which Gower is supporting. A developed merchant class existed in late medieval England in approximately thirty of the larger towns, both ports and important regional centers of trade (Christopher Dyer, Standards of living in the later Middle Ages: Social change in England c. 1200-1520 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 23-25). In the towns with developed merchant classes, the wealthiest merchants usually held the balance of power by occupying the town's leading offices. These merchants were not part of the aristocracy, but had typically accumulated sufficient wealth to purchase land and to acquire powerful political positions. The interests of these merchants as a group may or may not have coincided with those of the aristocracy in fourteenth-century England, depending upon the specific issue and the historical moment. Therefore, when this thesis refers to interests of the ruling, dominant group as the interests threatened by the legitimation crisis and, by extension, as the interests which Gower supports, it is important to emphasize that this group is the aristocracy, not the newly wealthy merchants which were the burgesses of certain industrialized urban areas.

For an excellent discussion of distinctions among various positions in the status hierarchy, see the first chapter, "Late Medieval Society," of Christopher Dyer's <u>Standards of living in the later Middle Ages: Social change in England c. 1200-1520</u>. As an example of a medieval town whose leaders were wealthy merchants, see Robert S. Gottfried's extensive study of the politics of Bury St. Edmunds in the Middle Ages, <u>Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290-1539</u> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). This study provides a detailed profile of the mercantile oligarchy in Bury in the Middle Ages and an in-depth examination of the interests that this specific group promoted.

12. Rodney Hilton, "Social Concepts in the English Rising of 1381" in <u>Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism</u>.

13. J. L. Bolton, "Crisis and Change in the Agrarian Economy" in <u>The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500</u> (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1980).

14. Interestingly, the statute undercuts its attempt to legislate aristocratic ideology through the categories that it constructs, for inherited positions are continually linked with "earned" ones (such as successful merchants) because the categories are based upon a person's total property, goods, and annual income. See Frances Elizabeth Baldwin's <u>Sumptuary</u>

Legislation and Personal Regulation in England (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1926), 47-51, for a detailed summary of the ordinance of 1361.

15. This discussion of fourteenth-century English sumptuary legislation is based on the first chapter of Frances Elizabeth Baldwin's Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England.

16. For examples of satires regarding dress, see "Satirical Songs and Poems on Costume," in Early English Poetry, Ballads and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages, edited by F. W. Fairholt, Vol. XXVII (London: Richards, 1849). See also Richard the Redeless, in The vision of William concerning Piers Plowman in three parallel texts: together with Richard the Redeless, edited by Walter W. Skeat, vols. 1-2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886).

17. Michael McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740, 150-151; Roger Virgoe, Private Life in the Fifteenth Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 20; Karen Newman, "Dressing Up: Sartorial Extravagance in Early Modern London" in Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Richard Halpern, The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation, 38-45. Baldwin, Newman, and

Halpern also explain that one of the other most significant goals of sumptuary legislation was to regulate purchasing so as to promote home industry, for example, by specifying the types of fabrics that one should purchase.

18. For an excellent discussion of the effective workings of ideology, see Louis Althusser's important essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in Lenin and Philosophy.

19. See, for example, "Satirical Songs and Poems on Costume," Early English Poetry, Ballads and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages, Vol. XXVII, edited by F. W. Fairholt.

20. For a discussion of Clement Paston's successful social climbing, see Roger Virgoe's Private Life in the Fifteenth Century, 36-40.

21. See chapters 7-10 of J. L. Bolton's The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500 for details about the increase in social mobility in England at the end of the fourteenth century. In addition, refer to Rolf Berndt, "The Period of the Final Decline of French in Medieval England (Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries)," Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik 20 (1972), 341-369.

22. The assumptions surrounding authorship and agency in this

paper are based on a Foucaldian notion of the author, as articulated in Michel Foucault's influential essay, "What Is an Author?" in <u>The Foucault Reader</u>, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

23. There is little consensus among historians about literacy in medieval England not only because there is a dearth of material which provides information about the topic, but also because there is very little agreement about how to interpret the information that does exist. One of the most fundamental disagreements revolves around the issue of what would actually indicate that a person was literate. For example, David Cressy, in <u>Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), discusses his findings on literacy with the assumption that a person's ability to sign his/her name indicated literacy. Keith Thomas believes that Cressy's criterion for literacy is too simplistic and voices his objections in "The Meaning of Literacy," <u>The Written Word</u>, edited by Gerd Baumann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Thomas argues that there were so many different <u>types</u> of literacy that it is crucial to identify a <u>level</u> of literacy, as opposed to simply using the reductive categories of literate and illiterate. Margaret Spufford also dissents from Cressy's analysis in "First steps in literacy: the reading and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-century spiritual

autobiographers," <u>Social History</u> 4 (1979), 407-435. Spufford argues that people typically learned to read before learning to write so that, because of the dearth of information about reading practices, Cressy's figures grossly underestimate the portion of the English population which could read at any given time prior to the eighteenth century, when education practices were more thoroughly documented.

24. In Gower's England, French was decidedly maintained by the wealthiest ranks of the feudal aristocracy, consisting of the king himself and his chief magnates, the lay lords or barons, and the great ecclesiastical landlords or prelates, the archbishops, bishops and the superiors of the more important convents. French was also maintained by knights and esquires who were most closely associated with the upper strata of the ruling class: namely, those who were in attendance upon royal family members or other great lords; those who exercised important police, judicial, and administrative functions as Crown officials,; and those who served as stewards of a lord's household, or of his estate, or held similar offices. For further details, see Rolf Berndt, "The Period of the Final Decline of French in Medieval England (Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries)," 358-363.

25. These claims are based upon Rolf Berndt's famous study entitled "The Period of the Final Decline of French in

Medieval England (Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries)."

26. All references to and citations from the <u>Confessio Amantis</u> are from <u>The English Works of John Gower</u>, edited by G. C. Macaulay, The Early English Text Society, vols. 81 and 82 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900).

27. In the preamble preceding his tale, the Man of Law (proudly?) displays his knowledge of poetry. This display consists primarily of a catalogue of Chaucer's works. However, the Man of Law cannot accurately recall which tales are included in <u>The Legend of Good Women</u>, for he lists some which do not appear in that collection, while omitting others which do appear in that text.

28. For discussions of the relationship between burgeoning mercantilism and literacy, see the following: Rolf Berndt, "The Period of the Final Decline of French in Medieval England (Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries)"; Nicholas Orme, "Education and society" in <u>English Schools in the Middle Ages</u> (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973), especially 36-43; and Bolton, "Freedom Versus Restriction: Town and Countryside in the Later Middle Ages" in <u>The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500</u>.

29. This discussion of literacy is derived from Nicholas

Orme's discussion of literacy among merchants, craftsmen, and artisans in the late fourteenth century in "Education and society" in <u>English Schools in the Middle Ages</u>.

30. Margaret Aston's <u>Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion</u> (London: The Hambledon Press, 1984) is a study of the intersections of Lollardy and literacy in fourteenth-and fifteenth-century England. The chapter entitled "Lollardy and Literacy" specifically addresses the ways in which literacy in England increased through Lollard efforts. For further discussions of the intersections between literacy and Lollardy, see Anne Hudson's "Lollardy: The English Heresy?" in <u>Lollards and their Books</u> (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985) and "Lollard Education" in <u>Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History</u> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

31. Manuscript illuminations provide clues to medieval reading practices. In the frontispiece to a fifteenth-century manuscript of <u>Troilus and Criseyde</u>, for example, Chaucer is depicted reading aloud to an assembled audience at the court of Richard II.

32. As Margaret Aston explains in "Lollardy and Literacy" in her book <u>Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion</u>, silent reading was not how people in late

fourteenth-century England typically interacted with a text. She provides an excellent discussion of various forms that reading groups took in late fourteenth-century England.

33. There are 49 extant manuscripts of the Confessio Amantis in English, vastly more than the extant copies of the Vox (which survives in 11 manuscripts) and the Mirour (which survives in a single manuscript). The Confessio was also translated into Portuguese and Spanish for continental use. John Fisher provides a list of surviving Gower manuscripts in the Appendix of John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer, 303-307. Fisher also discusses at length (116-134) the differences among the three different versions of the Confessio.

34. See Jonathan Dollimore's introduction to Political Shakespeare: New essays in cultural materialism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) for an extremely helpful discussion of ideology's erasure of the inevitable presence of dissent, contradiction, and struggle in society. Dollimore's introduction provides helpful background reading for those unfamiliar with the methodological assumptions used in the section of this thesis entitled "The Prologue and Common Profit."

35. The prologue is full of biblical language, symbols, and

tales. Nebuchadnezzar's dream is the most overt example of a biblical tale. References to the Tower of Babel also appear (Prol.1019-1031), along with allusions to the fall from grace (Prol.970-1005) and the state of existence in hell (Prol.1045-1046). The section on the church (Prol.193-498) is full of biblical references, including allusions to St. Peter's boat (Prol.234-239), Christ's desire for peace (Prol.243-46), St. Gregory the Great (Prol.284-290), and Moses (Prol.306).

36. For a discussion of intersections between the Confessio Amantis and penitential manuals, see Chapter Two in Joseph Augustine McNally, The "Exemplum" in John Gower's "Confessio Amantis" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982).

37. One could object that this account of Gower's prophetic stance conflates "three different Gowers": Gower the poet, Gower the persona in the Prologue, and Amans. It is important to emphasize that these distinctions are a product of formalist literary analysis, and this thesis is not working with formalist methodology. The assumptions surrounding authorship are based on a Foucauldian notion of the author, as articulated in his influential essay "What is An Author?". Foucault's article is part of a much larger movement in literary analysis which recognizes that earlier formalist assumptions regarding authorship are fraught with a plethora

of problems. One such assumption that this group of literary critics debunks is that an author has mastery over his/her characters and his/her texts and hence that the author is decidedly separable from his/her characters. The author not only lacks such mastery and therefore speaks through his/her characters, regardless of his/her own volition, but the separation between an author and his/her characters becomes a mute point when the text is read from an ideological point of view as a cultural document.

38. Gower produced a forty-seven-line poem celebrating the wool trade, a poem which includes the following lines:

> O wool, noble lady,
>
> you are the goddess of merchants, . . .
>
> for the merchants of all lands,
>
> in time of peace, in time of war,
>
> come seeking you with a passion . . . .
>
> You are born in England.
>
> (quoted in Fisher, 98)

39. See "Economic Ideas" in J. L. Bolton's The Medieval English Economy: 1150-1500 for further details about these petitions to parliament and for a good discussion of some of the ways in which nationalism and burgeoning trade intersected in late fourteenth- century England.

40. See Rolf Berndt's article, "The Period of the Final Decline of French in Medieval England (Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Century," for a discussion of the ways in which the rise of the vernacular is bound up with increasing nationalism.

41. Chaucer apparently recognized that the Florent tradition was related to aristocratic ideology because, unlike Gower's rendition and unlike Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle, Chaucer's loathly lady provides an extensive monologue about gentilesse and whether it is an earned or inherited attribute.

42. This intersection between the discourses of romantic love and spirituality operates throughout Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love, where the mystic's visions of Jesus are often conveyed in erotic terms. St. Catherine of Siena's visions include a similar eroticization of her encounter with divinity. This eroticism often takes the shape of a conjugal union, as reflected in perhaps her most memorable metaphor where she weds Christ, using his foreskin for a wedding band. Margery Kempe's visions also include wedding Christ and loving him as a wife ought to love a husband, including kissing his entire body. (See The Book of Margery Kempe, edited by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen. The Early English Text Society, vol. 212. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940], 90.) As Caroline Walker Bynum

explains in <u>Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women</u> (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), 246-259, such eroticism was common in women's spirituality in the Middle Ages.

43. There are two tales in the <u>Confessio</u> which appear to condone the romance tradition's mediation of significant status inconsistency: <u>The Three Questions</u> and the <u>Tale of Adrian and Bardus</u>. <u>The Three Questions</u> is working within this tradition, for the maid proves her nobility through her intellectual display, a display which permits her to improve her father's position in the status hierarchy and to win the hand of a king in marriage. Interestingly, the three questions which she answers all revolve around cost and inherent value. By answering these questions, she negotiates the gap between her own inherent value and "market price." She gains outward nobility as well, for over the course of her intellectual display, she takes on a pleasing appearance so that the king ultimately sees grace in her face. While the tale mediates significant status inconsistency, the larger context and various moments in the tale severely undercut the propriety of such social climbing. Regarding the context, the maid's mobility is condemned by virtue of being an exemplum regarding pride. Plus, it follows Nebuchadnezzar's tale, a tale about forgetting one's place and being punished for it. The tale itself condemns the maid's mobility in that a diatribe about

Satan's pride immediately precedes her request for her father's knighthood and because the maiden's name is Peronelle, a name for a peacock.

The Tale of Adrian and Bardus (V.4937-5162) may appear to be a tale about social mobility, but the economy of service and reward set up in the tale makes it clear that this tale operates in a set of feudal relations. The narrative warns those in positions of power to properly fulfill the feudal contract through rewards and generous gift-giving. Be generous with gifts, the tale cautions, so that underlings do not become disgruntled and undermine those who rule, a threat made against the background of the recent Peasants' Revolt.

44. Another example of the Confessio's insistence on this caste system is found in the section on gentilesse. In Book Four (Sloth), Amans asks Genius to explain the term "gentilesse." Many men set merit upon the descent of riches through lineage, Genius responds, but there is no merit in riches and all men come from the same lineage because all are descendants of Adam and Eve. Furthermore, both rich and poor alike are subject to death. This part of Genius' response gives the illusion of being truly democratic and in fact was used in Gower's time as an argument against the status hierarchy. John Ball, for example, used this very argument during his participation in the English Rising of 1381 (McKeon, 147 and Bolton, 216). The rest of Genius' response,

however, makes it clear that this illusion of democracy is
only an illusion. The ensuing discussion provides hierarchies
ad infinitum: hierarchies of knowledge; hierarchies of
occupations; the order of the planets; discussions of alchemy
and its foundational notion of a chain of being; and so forth.
At one point, Genius explains that true gentilesse grows out
of the soul and depends upon knowing virtue from vice. This
formulation sounds not unlike romance's formulation of the
"cor gentil," where a character (even though not born noble)
can prove that s/he has <u>true</u> nobility, which reflects one's
behavior, something which is not necessarily coincident with
birth. Gower, however, again disappoints any expectation that
he may be suggesting that someone could actually have nobility
despite birthplace, for following Genius' reference to true
gentilesse being dependent on knowing virtue from vice, Genius
adds the following detail:

> Bot who that wole in his degre
>
> Travaile so as it belongeth,
>
> It happeth ofte that he fongeth
>
> Worschipe and ese bothe tuo.

(IV.2292-2295)

This quotation foregrounds that Gower is offering an argument
about remaining within one's socio-economic position and about
working hard within that position: this is a version of the
caste system, where one gains virtue by excelling at the
occupation for which one has a natural aptitude--an occupation

which neatly corresponds to those available to members of their respective castes.

45. A tale involving a sex change is one of the rare instances where the Confessio is willing to reward faithful service to love during a character's lifetime. In the Tale of Iphis, King Ligdus tells his wife that if her child which is about to be delivered is a daughter, it must be killed. A daughter is born, and Isis, the goddess of childbirth, bids the Queen to raise her child as a boy. When the child is ten years old, he is betrothed to Iante. Cupid pities them for the love they share and changes Iphis into a man (IV.451-505). This tale rewards faithful love, but the reward system here operates in a different economy than the material economics of medieval romance. Iphis is not rewarded with wealth and a higher rank, but with a sex change, thereby shifting the reward/merit system into an arena removed from material conditions.

WORKS CITED

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State
    Appartuses. "In Lenin and Philosophy, translated by Ben
    Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

Aston, Margaret. Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy
    in Late Medieval Religion. London: Hambledon Press,
    1984.

Baldwin, Frances Elizabeth. Sumptuary Legislation and
    Personal Regulation in England. Baltimore: The John
    Hopkins Press, 1926.

Berndt, Rolf. "The Period of the Final Decline of French in
    Medieval England (Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth
    Centuries)." Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und
    Amerikanistik 20 (1972): 341-369.

Bloch, R. Howard. Medieval French Literature and Law.
    Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Bolton, J. L. The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500.
    London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1980.

Bottomore, Tom et al. <u>A Dictionary of Marxist Thought</u>. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991.

Butcher, A. F. "English Urban Society and the Revolt of 1381. "In <u>The English Rising of 1381</u>, edited by R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. <u>Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women</u>. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987.

Coffman, George R. "John Gower in his Most Significant Role."In <u>Elizabethan Studies and Other Essays in Honor of George F. Reynolds</u>. Boulder: University of Colorado, 1945.

Cressy, David. <u>Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England</u>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Dobson, R. B. "The Risings in York, Beverley and Scarborough." In <u>The English Rising of 1381</u>, edited by R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Dollimore, Jonathan. "Introduction: Shakespeare, cultural materialism and the new historicism." In <u>Political Shakespeare: New Essays in cultural materialism</u>, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Duby, Georges. <u>Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France</u>. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Duby, Georges. "Northwest France: The 'Young' in Twelfth-Century Aristocratic Society." In <u>Social Historians in Contemporary France: Essays from Annales</u>. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972.

Dyer, Christopher. <u>Standards of living in the later Middle Ages: Social change in England c. 1200-1520</u>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Fairholt, F. W., ed. "Satirical Songs and Poems on Costume." In <u>Early English Poetry, Ballads and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages</u>, Vol. XXVII. London: Richards, 1849.

Fisher, John H. <u>John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer</u>. New York: New York University Press, 1964.

Foucault, Michel. "What is An Author?" In <u>The Foucault Reader</u>, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Ganshof, F. L. <u>Feudalism</u>, translated by Philip Grierson. 3rd English Edition. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964.

Gies, Frances and Joseph Gies. "The Aristocratic Lineage: Perils of Primogeniture." Chap. 9 in <u>Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages</u>. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987.

Gottfried, Robert S. <u>Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290-1539</u>. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Gower, John. <u>Confessio Amantis</u>. In <u>The English Works of John Gower</u>, edited by G. C. Macaulay. The Early English Text Society, vols. 81 and 82. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900.

------. <u>Vox Clamantis</u>, edited and translated by Eric W. Stockton. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962.

Gramsci, Antonio. <u>Selections from the Prison Notebooks</u>,
    edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey
    Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1987.

Hall, Stuart. <u>The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the
    Crisis of the Left</u>. London: Verso, 1990.

Halpern, Richard. <u>The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation</u>.
    Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Harding, Alan. "The Revolt against the Justices." In <u>The
    English Rising of 1381</u>, edited by R. H. Hilton and T. H
Aston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Herlihy, David. "Three Patterns of Social Mobility in
    Medieval History." <u>Journal of Interdisciplinary History</u>
    3 (1973): 620-637.

Hilton, Rodney. <u>Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism</u>.
    London: The Hambledon Press, 1985.

Hilton, R. H. and T. H. Aston, eds. <u>The English Rising of
    1381</u>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Hudson, Anne. "Lollard Education." Chap. 4 in <u>Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History</u>. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Hudson, Anne. "Lollardy: The English Heresy?" Chap. 9 in <u>Lollards and their Books</u>. London: The Hambledon Press, 1985.

Kempe, Margery. <u>The Book of Margery Kempe</u>, edited by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen. The Early English Text Society, vol. 212. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.

McKeon, Michael. <u>The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740</u>. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987.

McNally, Joseph Augustine. <u>The "Exemplum" in John Gower's "Confessio Amantis"</u>. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982.

Moller, Herbert. "The Social Causation of the Courtly Love Complex." <u>Comparative Studies in Society and History</u> 1 (1959): 146-157.

Newman, Karen. "Dressing Up: Satorial Extravagance in Early Modern London." Chap. 7 in _Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama_. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Orme, Nicholas. _English Schools in the Middle Ages_. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973.

Peck, Russell. _Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis_. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

Porter, Elizabeth. "Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm." In _Gower's_ Confessio Amantis_: Responses and Reassessments_, edited by A. J. Minnis. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983.

Rothkrug, Lionel. "Popular Religion and Holy Shrines: Their Influence on the Origins of the German Reformation and Their Role in German Cultural Development." In _Religion and the People, 800-1700_, edited by James Obelkevich. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979.

Skeat, Walter W, ed. <u>Richard the Redeless</u>. In <u>The vision of
    William concerning Piers Plowman in three parallel
    texts: together with Richard the Redeless</u>. Vols. 1-2.
    Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886.

Spufford, Margaret. "First steps in literacy: the reading
    and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-
    century spiritual autobiographers." <u>Social History</u> 4
    (1979): 407-435.

Thomas, Keith. "The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern
    England." In <u>The Written Word: Literacy in Transition</u>,
    edited by Gerd Baumann. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

Virgoe, Roger, ed. <u>Private Life in the Fifteenth Century:
    Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family</u>. New York:
    Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989.