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British literature is rich in stories crafted around the problem of incest. Incest has long been seen as a universal, or near-universal, taboo, yet dynasties have been founded upon it—and have fallen because of it. This dissertation explores usage of the incest theme in the medieval and early modern literary periods, and into the mid-eighteenth century, a time which saw the emergence of a new form of literature named by one of its creators as Gothic. While incest remains firmly taboo across this long period of time, writers and storytellers appropriate it to reflect some of the anxieties attendant upon their times.

To understand the usefulness of incest in mirroring societal disarray across centuries, it is necessary to first understand the historical background of consanguineous relationships, a history which is full of ambiguities and contradictions. Thus incest seems a natural choice for John Gower, who relies on incest in his *Confessio Amantis*, and in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, where it is used to allegorize the misdeeds of tyrannical kings who fail to rule wisely, and lead themselves and their people to misery. Given the popularity of drama in the early modern period, it is through this genre that the usage of incest best reveals the anxieties of this age, anxieties which include not only tyrannical kings but also the risks of increasing female autonomy. Incest in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King, and No King* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* works to showcase the dangers of uncertainty when it comes to matters of inheritance, especially when the inheritance involves the throne.

Added to this is the fear that rising female agency might eventually succeed in completely undermining the patriarchal and monarchical social structures that were still believed by many to be divinely ordained. By the mid-eighteenth century, changes in economic and political systems appeared to threaten the institution of the family, and incest proved to be a useful metaphor for expressing these anxieties. I conclude that reading incest across four centuries of literary works reveals that while societal threats change over time, a common desire to preserve, uphold, and defend patriarchy remains.

READING INCEST: TYRANNY, SUBVERSION, AND THE  
PRESERVATION OF PATRIARCHY

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

to my family

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### READING INCEST: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Literary representations of incest reveal an astonishing variety of plotlines, characters, and morals. From comic to terrifying, the incest topos appears at the very instant of human (Western) consciousness, vanishing and reemerging as it travels across centuries, carrying with it the anxieties and complexities of the times. As Elizabeth Archibald writes, “Every society has taboos about incest, but they differ considerably, and so do literary representations of incest” (1). Because literature is not written in a vacuum, but is rather a product of its time, it is evident that usage of the incest theme shaped, and was shaped by, contemporaneous culture. Incest is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary simply as “unchaste”; however, volumes of clarifications, explanations, justifications, and especially legislations evolved over time in an attempt to proscribe precisely just what it did mean. Such efforts to make the definition absolute, however, only led to gaps through which incestuous behavior did enter societies. Sensing this weakness, kings, clerics, and simple folk skirted the laws, whether for power plays or true love, and communities found themselves in uneasy negotiations with sin and salvation, for such was the double message of incest narratives.

Because of the great attention given to defining, codifying, and prohibiting incest, it is clear that there was tremendous anxiety over it, rather than unquestioning acceptance

of it, despite its familiarity to virtually all western societies. Incest narratives both uphold and subvert; they instruct and deconstruct, entertain and warn. There has been much invaluable critical work done on incest in general and incest in narratives of specific literary periods, from ancient to modern. Otto Rank's 1912 *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation* is encyclopedic in its survey of the different formulations that incestuous relationships can take, specifically father-daughter, mother-son, and sibling incest, in addition to relationships between step-relatives and affines. Elizabeth Archibald is perhaps the name best known for her several works on medieval incest. *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval & Renaissance Themes & Variations* examines the transmission and reception of the *Historia Apollonii*, one of the most widely read tales of ancient Greece, medieval England, and early modern Europe. Her *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* notes and examines the prevalence and popularity of the incest motif in medieval tales. Karen Cherewatuk, in *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur* posits that adultery and incest on the part of the Pendrake men are symbolic of Arthur's failings and the consequent fall of his kingdom. For the early modern era, Richard McCabe's *Incest, Drama, and Nature's Law 1550-1700* surveys incest as a metaphor for the ambiguity and confusion that accompanies attempts at absolutely fixed meanings of authority, politics, and natural law. Maureen Quilligan's work, *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England*, is a study of how women, a minority in the ranks of early modern authors, used incest in their works as a form of empowerment. The theories of George Haggerty in his 1989 *Gothic Fiction, Gothic Form* and 2006 *Queer Gothic* focus the

scholarly view on the ways that the Gothic uses sexual matters to both uphold and subvert patriarchy. In her study of Gothic elements, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick concludes that the Gothic novel (almost) always includes the possibility of incest, a subject taken up by Ruth Perry in her essay “Incest as Meaning in the Gothic Novel” (1998) in which she argues that as the family unit became more “nuclear” in form sexual danger increased, with incest disruptive of family building and by extension, of societal growth.

These scholarly works do much to elucidate theories on the enduring popularity of incest in literary works of different eras. But I argue that reading incest is best done through a comprehensive approach; that is, by acknowledging the impact that the accumulation of earlier readings has on later ones. Reading incest in texts of any one era, along with their specific social and cultural contexts, impacts subsequent readings in part because of the malleability of the definition of the term. In comparing the six selected texts, it will quickly become apparent that incest is a useful literary tool for writers and dramatists to exploit the many different social tensions, problems, and anxieties of their ages. I trace these anxieties and their literary manifestations through the medieval and early modern eras, culminating with Gothic literature, with its conventions of reviving medieval institutions and appropriating medieval symbols and themes. The anxieties and contradictions of any one era often remain unresolved and are compounded as newly arising tensions emerge.

Before turning to the texts themselves, it is necessary to trace the development of the problem of incest. Incest tales, in some form, exist in all cultures. Medieval thought

about incest was influenced by the Greco-Roman heritage and by Biblical law; tales of incest are both explicit in and inferred from the Bible, yet a paradox may be seen at once. The book of Leviticus painstakingly enumerates the degrees to which sexual relationships were forbidden. This included relationships by marriage, yet Mosaic law stipulated that a man marry his dead brother's widow. Amnon was put to death for sleeping with his sister Tamar, yet no mention is made of punishment in the story of Lot's incestuous relations with his daughters. The two chapters of Leviticus dealing with incest have influenced Western law for centuries. Chapters 18 and 20 specify sexual relations forbidden to the Israelites if they wish to maintain the covenantal relationship with God: father, mother, father's wife, sister, half-sister, niece, granddaughter, step-sister, paternal aunt, maternal aunt, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, a woman and her daughter or granddaughter, a wife's sister, or a neighbor's wife.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the books of Genesis and Exodus relate several tales of sexual liaisons between close kin, by the patriarchs who founded a nation. One explanation for this inconsistency is that the rules changed to meet evolving needs; what was acceptable in an earlier age is no longer permissible. Carmichael believes that the verses in Leviticus were carefully ordered to address this problem: the lawgivers "formulated Biblical laws in response to biblical narratives" (Carmichael 9). Instead of a reaction to contemporaneous issues that arose, the lawgivers responded to problematic issues in history. Thus, the first prohibition in Leviticus 18—uncovering the nakedness of a father or a mother—is in response to the

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<sup>1</sup> See Calum M. Carmichael, *Law, Legend, and Incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18-20*, for an in-depth analysis. He argues that biblical interpreters throughout the centuries have been unaware of how the Levitical rules came to be formulated in the first place.

first issue recorded in Genesis, Ham's offense against Noah. The lawgiver mediated the issue by specifying a rule against each type of incestuous behavior as it arose in the Pentateuch.

From classical Greek sources came stories such as that of Semiramis and Cambyses, Ovid's incestuous Myrrha, Juvenal's *Satires*, and of course *Oedipus* (Carmichael 9.). The *Digest of Justinian* of 533 indicates that there was at that early date contrasting thought about the polluting effects of incest (Archibald 15). Natural law forbade it out of a sense of decency, or fear that such behavior would anger the gods, and then law legislated by church and court prohibited it for the well-being of society. Justinian added the "very significant innovation when he forbade marriage between children and their baptismal sponsors on the grounds that God had already intercourse between their souls" (Archibald 16). While medieval canon law later made great efforts to exhaustively define all possible permutations of incest, it did so against an already-established history of indeterminacy: that incest could occur between extended family, that there were different types of incest, that ignorance was an excuse for incest, and that some incestuous marriages could be tolerated (Archibald 17).

Thoughts on incest drew heavily on Judaic and Greco-Roman thought, but there was little input from the early Anglo-Saxon legal civil codes. King Aistulf in the mid-eighth century ordered an immediate end to any marriage prohibited under canon law, and under Aethelred's rule (c. 1000) incestuous relationships were prohibited on the authority of God's law, with threats about personal salvation. In these early years some Anglo-Saxon bishops, seeking clarification about the maze of rules, asked for

clarification. Pope Gregory II advised reducing the number of prohibited degrees for new converts, i.e. pagans and Germanic peoples who were unused to Christian practices in an attempt to encourage them to stay in the Christian faith (Archibald 34).

By the 1215 A.D., convening of the Lateran Council, the “official” definition of incest was sexual intercourse between people related to the 4<sup>th</sup> degree (parent, sibling, aunt, uncle, first cousin, second cousin, third cousin) (Donavin 9). This also applied to spiritual relationships; godparents, children of godparents, siblings of godparents and so forth, and extended even to relationships that had been terminated by death. The issue was addressed by removing the prohibitions beyond the fourth degree and recognizing that “human statutes change sometimes with the change of time, especially when urgent necessity or common interest demands it, since God himself has changed in the New Testament some things that He had decreed in the Old” (Medieval Sourcebook). St. Thomas Aquinas’s writings upheld the 1215 decision (*Summa Theologica* II-II, 154, 9), acknowledging St. Augustine’s view that that while tales of incest appear in the Bible, incestuous (sibling) marriages were necessary in the newly created world, but as soon as the population had grown sufficiently, the “natural revulsion” of people against incest compelled them to form relationships outside of their own immediate kin group (*City of God* 15.16). Fixing the law at the fourth degree, Aquinas felt, would prevent society from being overcome with the lechery that would occur if all people were available as sexual partners; would maintain appropriate levels of respect between family members; and would expand familial circles by forcing people to look outside of their own immediate groups. The prohibition prevents the degradation of human nature that would

supposedly occur by privileging bestiality over reason. The end result of this prohibition, then, is to prevent social chaos: without some limitation, human nature, gifted with reason, would fall into a state like that of a herd of animals, governed by animal instinct alone.

It is important to understand that before 1215 in general the Church had been concerned with consolidating and expanding its power, so that authority over many civil matters, including marriage, was gradually transferred to Church courts. The effect of this was that the Church had the prerogative to decide what constituted incest, and who could and could not marry. Struggles for primacy between Church and crown developed slowly and until they did, the law of the Church was the law of the land. Even clear definitions left room for ambiguity, however, as there were instances in which people did marry without knowing the degree of their relationship. And with the Church's increased interest in promoting the importance of the family unit, it was necessary to sometimes turn a blind eye to the law. This, then, is the background against which medieval writers undertook their storytelling; centuries of ambiguity over the definition, legality, and morality of incest, consideration of both pagan and Christian practices, and the divide between secular and church law, all setting the stage for the incest theme's development as a way to express the trials and anxieties of life.

A considerable number of medieval texts include an incest motif. Elizabeth Archibald has surveyed the variety of ways this motif was used by medieval writers and categorized many of them into type of incestuous relationship, e.g. father-daughter,

sibling, and mother-son.<sup>2</sup> She notes that incest “creates convoluted and ambiguous family relationships” (2) and finds that most incest stories do not fall into clear-cut categories. In other words, the borders confining families, definitions, and even literary groupings are rarely static. According to the ultimate medieval authority—the Bible—all people are products of the incestuous couplings of brothers and sisters; but as part of God’s design, why should it be prohibited? It was church fathers who interpreted the move away from incestuous brother-sister couplings as later revisions of the divine plan. Like the serpent in the Garden, the question of incest poses a problem for medieval thinkers: if all things come from an omnipotent God, how can evil exist? Yet medieval writers saw their societies beset by war, plague, royal ineptitude, and human cruelty.

The 1563 version of the English Book of Common Prayer reaffirmed the incest prohibition, incorporating a “Table of Kindred and Affinity” that listed sixty relationships for which marriage was forbidden, among them marriage with sisters- or brothers- in law; man and niece; and, man and aunt; cousin marriages were acceptable, though (McCabe 63).<sup>3</sup> Tudor matrimonial prospects were particularly vulnerable to the many possible contemporary interpretations of Biblical law, because the legitimacy of the succession to the throne depended upon it.

The legitimacy of Elizabeth I’s claims to the throne was troubled by Henry VIII’s marital machinations and the ambiguity of the definition of incest. Was his marriage to Katherine incestuous or not? According to Levitical law, it would have been; the Pope declared that it was not through a dispensation. The “implications for English history are

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<sup>2</sup> Archibald, Elizabeth. *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*.

<sup>3</sup> James I was the son of first cousins, so this was fortunate for his claim to the throne.

profound. . . . no less is threatened than the perpetual pollution of the royal line. Henceforth all English monarchs will be the offspring of incest [and] all that is ‘unnatural’ will be institutionalized within the monarchy” (McCabe 158). So while the monarch capitalized on this ambiguity to suit his own ends, detractors of the Tudor and Stuart dynasties could use that same ambiguity to bolster their objections.

The debate over what constituted incest continued throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries. Aphra Behn’s 1684 *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, in which a man begins an affair with his sister-in-law, was based on the legal case of Lord Grey and his sister-in-law, with whom he eloped (McCabe 283). McCabe notes too that the story works to create an “absolute prohibition of an incestuous heir, whose political ‘illegitimacy’ even the prospective parents are forced to concede” (*ibid.*). The Hardwicke Marriage Act of 1753 was intended to prevent marriages between people in disallowed relationships, but an emphasis on controlling female sexuality has been noted,<sup>4</sup> along with affirmation of primogeniture and the rights of (upper class) men to exchange their daughters through marriage. The concern with inheritance in literary works during this time period is telling. In the emerging modern culture, social and economic structures were shifting away from traditional forms, including traditional notions of the makeup of the family.

The continued existence of families and, by analogy, nations, depends upon how well relationships between them are defined and defended. Thus the debate is inherently political because it too depends on how the relationship between government and people

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, see Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987*.

is viewed by both. Incest in eighteenth century texts reflects the politics of nation and family and is ideal for explorations of themes that may be analogous to both, themes such as tyrannical kings and incestuous fathers, absent mothers, and all sorts of perversions of parental love.

This background information on the changing definitions of and societal thoughts about incest is necessary to my exploration of the changing uses of the incest theme in these representative texts. Medieval incest narratives both reflect and produce anxieties over the worries about preserving the social order, which was predicated on divine order. Was man under the jurisdiction of church law, or of civil law? The medieval years were filled with dualisms, including the idea of the king's two bodies, the relationship of the body to the material and spiritual worlds, and the proper place of man in both the divine order and the hierarchically structured secular world. In my second chapter, "Swiche Unkynde Abhominacions: Medieval Incest," I examine John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which is filled with tales of incest, and demonstrate how the tales work to produce an extended moral lesson for Amans, and a lesson for both commoner and king of the need for proper, balanced governance of self and kingdom. Another outcome of the 1215 Lateran Council was the requirement that every Christian make at least an annual confession to a priest who, like a physician, would "diligently search out the circumstances both of the sinner and the sin, that from these he may prudently understand what manner of advice he ought to offer him and what sort of remedy he ought to

apply.”<sup>5</sup> In his assiduous questioning of Amans, Genius proves a most thorough spiritual priest-physician. The tales analogize incest to tyranny, and prove that personal lives or social institutions built upon a foundation of incest tend not to stand, as shown in the story of Arthur in Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, which I compare to the *Confessio*. The subject of Gower’s great work—love—is made to serve as the locus of debates spiritual, philosophical, and practical. Love, in all its permutations, is perhaps the subject of greatest interest to medieval poets, troubadours, and clergy, and Gower and Malory were not, of course, the first to note that love was divided into the two realms of the spiritual and the carnal. St. Augustine posited two cities formed by these two types of love: the earthly city and the city of God, the heavenly city.<sup>6</sup> The medieval Western world, dominated as it was by the church, struggled to reconcile these two ideas of love, and the course of this struggle produced an astonishing variety of literary types such as conduct books, homilies, and consolatio. These works are attempts to come to an understanding of human nature—bestial and selfish, or reasonable and progressive.

Chapter III, “‘Incest is in Me’: Incest and Early Modern Drama,” begins with an examination of the role of incest in the Henrician affair. Tyrannical kings and the terror they unleash on their families and their lands are, emphatically, still of great concern, just as they were in the medieval era, but newly arising tensions arise to complicate this concern. The power of the king was sharply delineated by Henry’s manipulation of incest laws, and later again by Elizabeth’s mystique. Her refusal to marry utterly

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<sup>5</sup> The many diverse forms and philosophies of medieval confessions and penitential manuals are surveyed in Biller, Peter, and Minnis, A.J., *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*. Sins were classified according to the individual circumstances of the sinner and therefore began to be categorized according to professions and estates. 138

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 14.28. c. 400 A.D.

subverts both the social and the divine order, yet at the same time forges a powerful nation which survived shocking disruptions of traditional ideologies. Such violent upheavals of the social fabric and the attempts to patch it produced an enormous number of texts in the early modern period, primarily drama, that have as a central theme incest. I use Shakespeare's *Pericles, A King, and no King* by Beaumont and Fletcher, and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* to demonstrate how incest was used as a response to newly arising concerns. However, the medieval fear of tyrannical kings does not diminish and is instead augmented by these new fears. The incest theme transformed the medieval struggle between body and soul into an early modern struggle to fix the social order as ordained by God, without first resolving medieval worries about royal tyranny. Instead, tyranny is joined by uncertainty over the future of the monarchy and thus of patriarchy.

With its particularly violent plot, ominous setting, and corrupt aristocracy, *The Duchess of Malfi* seems a forerunner to Gothic tales. For Chapter IV, " 'Their Darkest and Most Threatening Form': Incest and the Gothic," it is significant that Gothic literature has a relationship with periods of social unrest; Gothic preoccupation with guilt, transgression, and vengeance reveals the same uncertainty over man's role in the world as in previous decades, but in stories slightly more terrifying. The symbolic and archetypal nature of Gothic imagery acts as an inversion of what is good and proper. Yet both tyrannical kings and threats to patriarchy remained, and were joined by fears of erosion of the institution that had thus far managed to remain more or less intact: the family. Through an examination of Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, and his play,

*The Mysterious Mother*, I conclude that the safety and stability of the family is less certain than it is as revealed in early modern drama and the poems of Gower and Malory.

## CHAPTER II

## ‘SWICHE UNKYNDE ABHOMINACIOUS’: MEDIEVAL INCEST

When called upon to tell his tale in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Man of Law protests that he is unable to find one that Chaucer has not already told, for “if he have noght seyde hem, leve brother, / In o book, he hath seyde hem in another” (MLT 51-2). Although he has written of Lucrece, Thisbee, Phyllis, Helen, Penelope, Dido, Ariadne, and many other women who suffered for love, the Man of Law praises Chaucer for not writing tales of incest:

But certainly no word ne writeth he  
 Of thilke wikke ensample of Canacee,  
 That loved hir owene brother sinfully—  
 Of swich cursed stories I sey fy! --  
 Or ellis of Tyro Appollonius,  
 How that the cursed kyng Antiochus  
 Birafte his doghter of hir maydenhede,  
 That is so horrible a tale for to rede  
 Whan he hir threw upon the pavement,  
 And therefore he, of ful avysement,  
 Wolde nevere write in none of his sermons  
 Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions (MLT 77-88)

These tales of “unkynde abhomynacions” are included in the *Confessio Amantis* of Chaucer’s contemporary, John Gower. Chaucer had previously commended *Troilus and Criseyde* to “moral Gower” (T&C 1856). Moreover, the Man of Law goes on to tell the

tale of Constance, also included in the *Confessio Amantis* and known from earlier versions as a tale of incest. The stories of Constance in both the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* focus on her steadfastness and her virtue, but the latent incestuous designs of the Sultaness and later Domilde lurk beneath the narrative and provide an explosive catalyst which propels Constance's saga, as we shall shortly see. It is therefore not clear what Chaucer's motive is in having the Man of Law criticize these two tales of incest from the *Confessio Amantis*; is the joke on the tale teller's moral ineptitude and his inability to tell a "thirty" or morally worthwhile tale? Or is it evidence of some disagreement between Chaucer and Gower? In any case, the Man of Law's comment is significant for a study of Gower's poem because it demonstrates that even at the time of its composition the tales of incest in the *Confessio Amantis* were remarkable.

Incest is a crucial concern in the *Confessio Amantis*. The eighth book, in which Genius educates Amans about lust, discusses the last of the seven deadly sins exclusively in terms of incest. It begins with a history of the broadening prohibitions against sexual relations with relatives from the time of Adam and Eve through the early Christian period to the middle ages. In this chronological account Gower traces the way that the sanctioning of sexual relations between brothers and sisters, necessary in the new creation, gives way to proscription as the world's population increased.<sup>1</sup> The whole of the eighth and final book culminates with the narrative of Apollonius of Tyre, one of the incest tales the Man of Law criticizes. But even before this final tale, the *Confessio Amantis* is saturated with references to incest both explicit and implicit. Gower dedicates

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter I.

a book to each of the seven deadly sins, and uses each sin as a way to question Amans about his moral condition. But the sin of incest crosses book (and sin) boundaries as no other of the seven sins does; Gower includes incest tales in five of the eight books of *Confessio Amantis*, implicitly linking this sin with almost all of the seven deadly sins.

Furthermore, I will examine why Gower presents incest as the quintessential form of lust and how incest relates to the other deadly sins. *Confessio Amantis* is structurally puzzling for, as many have noted<sup>2</sup>, its survey of the seven deadly sins, although derived from manuals for confession, violates the typical penitential model. The prologue surveys the corruption of the three estates in the present age and also the decay of society over time. Book five is a turning point in the work. After this, the link between incest and the education of Amans becomes clear, and is strengthened through book seven, which is a summary of Aristotle's education of Alexander. Finally, and most problematically, Amans's confession is to Genius, the priest of Venus, who educates Amans with 150 tales about love and vice (I.238-48) under the rubric of the seven deadly sins. The length and complexity of *Confessio Amantis* renders it a difficult work to analyze.

Although the seven sins form the framework for the entire work, incest appears in the majority of the individual books, as I have noted. But what *is* Gower's underlying purpose in selecting this specific topos? Are there many lessons for Amans to learn, or are the morals of all these incest stories really the same one? How can the ramifications of so specific a sin be applied in so universal a way? This chapter will work to uproot the

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<sup>2</sup> See Nicholson, Peter. *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis*; Yeager, R.F. *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion*; and Peck, Russell A., ed., *Confessio Amantis*.

ways that the “monstrous sin” of incest works to unify *Confessio Amantis*. The cumulative impact of so many incest tales is to showcase the detrimental effects, on king and kingdom, of the warped, wrong, selfish love that incest represents.

Like his contemporaries Chaucer and Langland, Gower begins his poem with a prologue. While Chaucer’s prologue introduces the reason for the tales and the characters who tell them, Gower’s prologue is more like Langland’s in that the state of society is surveyed and found wanting. The poet proclaims his intention to “go the middel weie / And wryte a bok between the tweie, / Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore” (Pr. 17-19). It is well known that there are at least two different versions of *Confessio Amantis*; in one, according to Macaulay, there is “a dedication to Richard II at the beginning and a form of conclusion in which mention is made of Chaucer, and the other [contains] a dedication to Henry of Lancaster and a conclusion in which Chaucer is not mentioned” (cxxxviii). In the earlier prologue is an admiring salutation to King Richard, along with a recounting of the meeting on the Thames. Peter Nicholson has undertaken to discover the date of this encounter, and can only conjecture that it was as early as 1385, which would mean a composition period of about five years (108). Gower openly declares his support of Richard, to whom “belangeth [his] ligeance [and] “hertes obeissance” (Pr. 25-6). Gower declares his intent to “write in such a maner wise, / Which may be wisdom to the wise / And pley to hem that lust to pleye” (Pr. 83-5). Nicholson has suggested that the rewriting of the dedication to Henry may have been that Gower sought a “dual patronage very early on, and that he must have given or had prepared for Henry a copy of the poem bearing the original dedication, just as we presume he did for

Richard” (111). The dedication of the first version reads, in part, that this is “a bok for king Richardes sake”<sup>3</sup>, which is changed to “a bok for Engelondes sake / The yer sextenthe of kyng Richard [22 June 1392 to 21 June 1393]” (24-25). Nicholson finds the inclusion of the exact date significant because it might mean that the rewriting of the dedication was not because of any political dissatisfaction with Richard, as there would not have been time for any to develop. On the other hand, the date may simply have been added years later to “predate” the poem in order to make the dedication to Henry stronger. If so, this could indicate that “the rewriting might very well have been tied up with the political events at the end of the decade” (111). Despite this difference in the versions of the prologue, the individual books and especially the tales themselves are essentially the same, as is the narrative frame of the seven deadly sins which Gower uses to build his case.

There is in *Confessio Amantis* the element of instruction manual for kings; tale upon tale relates the destructive nature of poor kingship. However, the poet must prudently fictionalize his tales lest by speaking too directly, he insult the king. Relating stories of kings in antiquity is a way to camouflage direct criticism of one’s own king while still imparting wisdom. Ferster has demonstrated that like Gower, Chaucer crafted his narratives carefully to offer such advice while avoiding offense. In the *Tale of Melibee*, Chaucer removed a quote because “he knew the tale could have political reverberations and wanted to control them: He left out the proverb in his French source

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<sup>3</sup> The first dedication in the Prologue was written by 1390; the revision was written c. 1392, which was the sixteenth century of Richard’s reign; Henry did not succeed to the throne until 1399. See Macaulay, *Works of John Gower*, (Oxford, 1901) for details on the revision. But having earlier composed *Mirour de l’Omme* and *Vox Clamantis*, by 1385 Gower was already a well-known poet. Furthermore, Chaucer’s dedication of *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1385) must have added to Gower’s fame.

on how troublesome it is to have a child as a king.”<sup>4</sup> This deletion shows that Chaucer knew the tale could be taken as a reference to Richard II’s accession to the throne when he was still a young boy” (93). The well-known *Regement of Princes* by Gower’s and Chaucer’s contemporary Hoccleve similarly encodes advice to the prince (Henry IV). For instance, on the subject of the king’s finances, Hoccleve relates the story of the Chaldean kings, who spent so much of the nation’s money that God sent a terrible wind which the people interpreted as a sign to justify their revolt (Ferster 142). Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, though not a collection of tales, continues the tradition of offering advice to the king in the next century. Writers of advice manuals and popular literature were thus able to comment on, criticize, and advise about issues impacting the land in relative safety.

Gower’s concern with temporal affairs was not first addressed in *Confessio Amantis*. Macaulay, in his introduction to Gower’s French works, says that “From a statement [of Gower’s] in Latin . . . we learn that the poet desired to rest his fame upon three principal works” (xi): *Speculum Meditantis* (*Mirour de l’Omme*), written in Anglo-Norman; *Vox Clamantis*, written in Latin; and the “bok for Engelondes sake,” *Confessio Amantis*. The concerns, political and societal, familiar from a study of the *Confessio* are echoed in the other two. In addition to advising kings, critiquing the condition of the three estates, and using exempla to illustrate the effects of sin, all three works employ the analogy of the microcosm: man is both a miniature world and a metaphor of the world and as disorders occur in the man, they occur in the wider world. Man as microcosm was

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<sup>4</sup> “Et Salemon dit, ‘Doulente la terre qui a a enfant a seigneur. . . .’ Renaud de Louens in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and G. Dempster, 581, ll.381-2.

an idea familiar to Gower's medieval audience. Humans exist in a realm between the heavenly and the bestial, or between the spiritual and physical. Like all creatures, man must fulfill the bodily needs of hunger and sexual drive but at the same time he alone has the faculty of reason, which makes him akin to God. In other words, man encapsulates the entire cosmos by containing both spirituality and materiality. This philosophy appears in the Prologue of *Confessio Amantis*:

Forthi Gregoire in his Moral  
 Seith that a man in special  
 The lasse world is properly;  
 And that he proeveth redely;  
 For man of Soule ersonable  
 Is to an Angel resemblable,  
 And lich to besste he hath fieling,  
 And lich to Trees he hath growinge;  
 The stones ben and so is he:  
 Thus of his propre qualite  
 The man, as telleth the clergie,  
 Is as a world in his partie  
 (Pr. 945-56)

The analogy of man as microcosm may be naturally expanded to incorporate other aspects of life; for example, husband is head of the family as Christ is head of the Church; king is head of the "family" of the nation as the pope is head of the Church and the clergy are Christ's representatives on earth. This analogy is adapted in early modern works as well as the Gothic works I will analyze in later chapters. Incest, then, can be harmful to the individual as represented by the king, or to the family, represented by the kingdom.

In the prologue Gower critiques the aristocracy and the clergy for neglecting their duties; as a consequence the commons also fail. The poet contrasts present-day England with the past, looking from his fallen world to an earlier time of peace and harmony:

If I schal drawe in to my mynde  
 The tyme passed, thanne I fynde  
 The world stod thanne in al his welthe  
 (93-95)

and, in contrast to this, in the present

the regnes ben divided,  
 In stede of love is hate guided,  
 The werre wol no pes purchase,  
 And lawe hath take hire double face,  
 So that justice out of the weie  
 With ryhtwisnesse is gon aweie (127-132)

There is a sense of decay over time, culminating in the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which also appeared in *Vox Clamantis*. The dream as interpreted by Daniel symbolizes the decay and collapse of the kingdom at which time God's own kingdom will arise, one "which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (King James Version, Daniel 2:44). The theme of decay is one which survives and intensifies in later literary works, and is symptomatic of the way that incest halts family- and nation-building.

The three estates rely on each other in a mutually supportive fashion, as in *Piers Plowman's* view of the medieval world: the knight's job is to protect the Church and

laboring-folk and Piers, in return, will plow for him. The church provides for those who can not help themselves. The critique of the three estates—all of society—builds the case that when people do not fulfill the duties of their stations in life, the land becomes divided; people forget that they are part of a divinely ordered plan; and this forgetfulness leads them to turn away from their God-given reason, the thing that separates them from the beasts, and they sin. Sin is the “moder of divisoun” (Pr. 1030) and without good kingly, clerical, or inner guidance people disintegrate into “disjunctive fragments” (Peck 13). Fallen England is rife with wars and dissension, and only a strong, righteous, and reasonable king might set the example for men to achieve peace so that the “world may stonde appesed” (191) and be reconciled with God. The poet offers a prayer that the aristocracy—the “pouer / Of hem that ben the worldes guides / That hate breke nought thassise / Of love, which is al the chief / To kepe a regne out of mischief” (Pr. 144-150). The ruling class, it is implied, has forgotten its role as head of the nation. Importantly, the motivation of each estate is love, modeled after divine love. As God gave kings the right and responsibility to rule, their role was to act as his agent on earth, caring for his subjects as God cared for his children. But Gower’s poet laments the loss of this guiding love; could this be a reason for the sense of urgency in the second dedication to Henry? Having expounded on the failings of the three estates, the final section of the Prologue concludes that

And then men sen, thurgh lacke of love  
 Where as the lond divided is,  
 It mot algate fare amis:  
 And now to loke on every side,  
 A man may se the world divide

The werres ben so general  
 Among the cristene overal,  
 That every man now secheth wreche,  
 And yet these clerkes alday preche  
 And sein, good dede may non be  
 Which stant nocht upon charite: Pr. 891-902

The root of all man's woes is thus identified as lack of love; the microcosm can be torn apart when any one of the estates shirks its responsibilities, as the poet has demonstrated that they have done.

The solution is moderate, appropriate, sound love; the Prologue ends with a wish that God provide a king that could weave a song of harmony like Arion did on his harp.<sup>5</sup> With the king leading the nation in concord the lion and the hart, the sheep and the wolf, and the hare and the hound (Pr. 1059-61) live in peace, and

Als wel the lord as the schepherde,  
 He broghte hem alle in good acord;  
 So that the comun with the lord,  
 And lord with the comun also,  
 He sette in love bothe tuo  
 And putte away malencolie.  
 Pr. 1063-9

Most importantly, this kind of love can pacify the wildest beasts—a theme that will become increasingly apparent as the *Confessio Amantis* progresses.

After the Prologue's lament for the social division of England, book one seems to go in an entirely new direction by turning to the individual and personal with the

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<sup>5</sup> Arion was famous for his musical/poetic compositions, so harmonious that fighting ceased and storms calmed. He is often depicted riding a dolphin because of the myth that dolphins rescued him from the sea after he was kidnapped by pirates.

introduction of Amans, the unsuccessful lover who must be instructed by Genius. The ambiguity of English word *love* is crucial to Amans' education because he fails to understand its three possible meanings: lust or cupiditas, lawful romantic love expressed in marriage, and spiritual love or charity. Gower prepares us for this ambiguity when, despite his celebration of love as the source of social harmony in the prologue, he also foreshadows that the rest of the poem will modulate between love as "vertu" and as "vice" (Pr. 79-80). It is this second sense of love, which may be either virtuous or vicious, that Gower focuses on in book one and the subsequent books of the *Confessio Amantis*.

Love, then, in all its forms and perversions—Godly, kingly, parental, impersonal, lustful, and most of all incestuous—will become the controlling concern of the poem. Love in *Confessio Amantis* bears careful scrutiny, for ambiguity haunts the meaning of the term. D.W. Robertson, in his examination of the medieval mind-set, identifies a dichotomy:

[Charity is] the New Law which Christ brought so that mankind might be saved. Under the Old Law. . . salvation was not possible. . . . The opposite of charity is cupidity [named for the pagan, incestuous god of love], the love of one's self or of any other creature—man, woman, child, or inanimate object—for the sake of the creature rather than for the sake of God. Just as charity is the source of all virtues, cupidity is the source of all vices, and is responsible for the discontents of civilization. The two loves, both of which inflame, and both of which make one humble, are accompanied by two fears. Charity, like wisdom, begins with the fear of the Lord; and the fear of earthly misfortune leads to cupidity and ultimately to despair and damnation. . . .charity builds the city of Jerusalem, and cupidity builds the city of Babylon. . . . This opposition between the two loves, or the two cities, is fundamental to an understanding of medieval Christianity (Robertson 5).

This formulation of the different types of love was advanced by early church fathers, perhaps most famously by St. Augustine. In *De Trinitate Cristiana* the difference between charity and cupidity is likened to the difference between desire and love: it is desire when the creature is loved for itself, and such love corrupts the lover. But if that love is “referred” to the Creator, then it is not desire, or cupidity, but rather love, or charity (*de Trinitate Cristiana* VIII). The topic is again taken up in *The City of God*:

For it is quite possible for both to exist in one man. And this co-existence is good for a man, to the end that this love which conduces to our living well may grow, and the other, which leads us to evil may decrease, until our whole life be perfectly healed and transmuted into good. For if we were beasts, we should love the fleshly and sensual life, and this would be our sufficient good; and when it was well with us in respect of it, we should seek nothing beyond. . . . But we are men, created in the image of our Creator, whose eternity is true, and whose truth is eternal, whose love is eternal and true, and who Himself is the eternal, true, and adorable.

*City of God* XI.28

The idea of *kynde* is presented. *Kynde*,<sup>6</sup> like *love*, is a word with several different meanings and one which Gower and other medieval poets use in different ways. *Kynde* may be taken to mean natural, or of natural law, which is the divinely ordained order that binds the universe in harmony. This love begins with God and flows to all living things, and all things contribute to harmony by maintaining their places in the divinely decreed order. it is “sufficient[ly] good” that beasts should love the fleshly and sensual life, as is appropriate for them, but with the gift of reason man can transcend the bestial, as Amans

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<sup>6</sup> According to the OED, the definitions of *kynde*, or *kind*, include the following: To act according to one's nature; to do what is natural to one; Nature in general, or in the abstract, regarded as the established order or regular course of things; A race, or a natural group of animals or plants having a common origin (OED “kind”).”

learns. Augustine takes up the idea again in *De Doctrina Cristiana* III.16:

I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor in subordination to God; by lust I mean that affection of the mind which aims at enjoying one's self and one's neighbor, and other corporeal things, without reference to God. Again, what lust, when unsubdued, does towards corrupting, one's own soul and body, is called vice; but what it does to injure another is called crime. And these are the two classes into which all sins may be divided. . . . Now in proportion as the dominion of lust is pulled down, in the same proportion is that of charity built up.

Straddling the category between the heavenly and the animalistic, man has the characteristics of both—a carnal self that seeks its own pleasure and a spiritual self that seeks the good of others and the will of God. The carnal will Augustine called cupiditas, or cupidity, and the spiritual will he called caritas, or charity. But caritas is more than selfless love; it is the will to be like God and to be united with God. It is, in simple terms, the will to God, while cupidity is the will to flesh (Robertson 27-9). In medieval literature love was of one of three kinds, lustful, lawful, or spiritual. Marriage, a model of the relationship between God and man, could mediate the difference because a man could love a woman for her beauty (cupidity) and also for her spiritual qualities (charity). And in the microcosm of a feudal society, love supposedly linked God to man through the hierarchy of the three estates (charity).

In books one through eight of the *Confessio Amantis* Genius uses exempla to instruct Amans about the three different meanings of love. Amans represents the microcosm; he exemplifies the division of sin that plagues society and the possibility for eventual reunification. The ambiguity of the term *love* is key to an understanding of

Gower's use of the incest theme. As my forthcoming discussion of the tales will show, incest exemplifies cupidity in all its facets: it is improper self-love rather than proper love of God; an abandonment of reason and self-rule; and willful desire for personal fulfillment rather than an unselfish concern for others. The limits of this work precludes an examination of all 150-plus tales, but the selected "incest tales" will demonstrate that love is the key to unity, harmony, and right reason in both the kingdom and the individual.

Tales in the first four books are of advice to kings, of love gone wrong, and of incestuous desire that is averted or displaced, with varying degrees of severity. In book five may be noticed a turn, as if the poet pauses for a discourse on the ill effects of covetousness on a king, and then plunges ahead with stories of increasing violence and horror. Book eight contains the tale of Apollonius, with its two pairs of father-daughter couples; one father follows the path of sin and destruction, but the other is able to overcome temptation and emerge as a model of a king who brings peace to his land—the wished-for new Arion. And upon hearing all these tales, Amans finds his eyes opened and his reason restored so that he finally recovers from the wound inflicted by Cupid and is made whole once more. His redemption is effected by love.

Turning from the Prologue to the discussion of the tales in the eight books highlights a critical concern about the *Confessio Amantis*—the seeming lack of connection between the two. As we have seen from the foregoing discussion, part of the reason for this is because *love* has different meanings. However, this ambiguity also helps to explain how Amans' education, through the tales themselves, relates to the instruction

of the king, whose primary duty is to succor his people through the right sort of love. A pattern begins to emerge that links the Prologue to the rest of *Confessio Amantis* structurally while the problem of what constitutes *love* unifies it thematically: The organization of tales in the books echoes the structure of the Prologue<sup>7</sup>, for the tales are told in an order of sins with least harmful effects to those with the most harmful. In addition, in the Prologue, the single books, and the work as a whole, there is a line of rising intensity, a climactic interruption by a tale of some distress, and then a remediating turn so that Prologue and book and poem end on a hopeful note. An in-depth look at Book one will demonstrate the pattern.

Book one, dedicated to pride and its five branches—Hypocrisy, Murmur and Complaint, Presumption, Boasting, and Vainglory—contains much in the way of advice to the king: a king should avoid hypocrisy (the Tale of Mundus and Paulina), be true to his word (The Tale of Florent), should retain the dignity of his office (The Trump of Death), and avoid vainglory (Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment). The argument seems clear: a good king, with right governance, can unify people through appropriate and *kynde* love. These cautionary tales exemplify the ways that a right-thinking king should behave, bringing peace rather than discord to his people. In querying Amans, Genius begins with the misuse of the senses, and relates the Tale of Acteon, taken from Ovid, to illustrate unwise use of the eyes,<sup>8</sup> because

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<sup>7</sup> Baker and Peck note the pattern of increasing intensity of the sin of incest throughout the books; I find that this pattern commences even in the Prologue.

<sup>8</sup> Peck notes the classical idea of the eye as the “most important sense for human revelation. . . the principal sense organ for guiding reason. Augustine’s three steps toward virtue (*visio*, *contemplation*, *actio*) mark also the three steps toward sin. In both instances the process begins with the eye’s response to beauty or the desirable, which in turn stimulates the will and desire” (313 fn775). Plato explains “why the eye is

For so wys man was nevere non,  
 Bot if he wel his yhe kepe  
 And take of fol delit no kepe,  
 That he with lust nys ofte nome,  
 Thurgh strengthe of love and overcome.  
 (I.440-444)

Acteon happens upon the goddess Diana while she is bathing, and watches her—a natural enough reaction for a man. Diana is enraged at this breach of her privacy and turns him into a stag whereupon his own hounds tear him to pieces. The damage done was not to Diana, Acteon’s victim, but to Acteon himself because his misuse of his eyes turned him into a beast. The next tale, of the Gorgon Medusa, conversely tells how Perseus heeded Athena’s warning to avoid looking at the three sisters (who shared a single eye between them, limiting their own ability to see clearly) and was able to slay them. Acteon reacted to the sight of a lovely woman in a *kynde* way, indulging his desire, with disastrous results. Perseus listened to the advice of Athena and lived.

Two more tales are related as admonishment to guard the ears, too, and next in Gower’s order is a tale warning against hypocrisy. The Tale of Mundus<sup>9</sup> and Paulina shares a similarity with the account of Uther Pendragon’s adulterous deception and seduction of his knight’s wife in *Morte d’Arthur*, which is taken up later in this chapter. Adulterous but not incestuous in itself, that story is connected with the incest that will eventually undermine Arthur’s kingdom. Duke Mundus, lusting after another man’s wife, Paulina, tried to seduce her but ever virtuous, she rebuffed him. Mundus then

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man’s principal sense organ and the ear next in importance. . . Plato ignores the other three senses entirely as agencies for illuminating the soul . . . this also explains why Genius exorcizes only these two of the Lover’s five senses. They are the doors to his soul, which Genius hope to restore” (309 fn 304).

<sup>9</sup> Peck notes the pun on the use of Mundus as a name because of its two meanings: 1) pure and 2) worldly (32).

bribed two priests to convince Paulina that Anubis desired her to visit the temple to be rewarded by him for her purity and faith, and under this guise Mundus slept with her.

When the ruse was discovered the priests were executed,

Bot of the Duk was other wise:  
 For he with love was bestad,  
 His dom was noght so harde lad;  
 For Love put reson aweie  
 And can noght se the rihte weie.  
 And be this cause he was respited,  
 So that the deth him was acquitted,  
 Bot for al that he was exiled,  
 For he his love hath so beguiled,  
 That he schal nevere come ayein (I.1048-1057)

The Duke was excused, in part, for his actions because he was ‘beguiled’ by love and thus not completely responsible for his actions, but the priests were held to a higher standard and executed because they acted in full knowledge that they were deceiving an innocent woman. Paulina was horrified

And seide, "Helas, wifhode is lore  
 In me, which whilom was honeste,  
 I am non other than a beste,  
 Now I defouled am of tuo." (I.974-7)

Though she recognized the bestiality of the act, she herself was perceived as untainted because she acted with pure motives based on reason. Like Diana, she lost none of her virtue through the actions of the lustful man.

Again, the poet arranges the tales so that the magnitude of the crimes increases as the book continues. Arrogant Capaneus was struck by a thunderbolt when he paraded

about in his fine gear before his troops. Narcissus died for his unrequited love of his own reflection. The Tale of Albinus and Rosamond takes a gruesome turn in which she is tricked into drinking a toast from a goblet made of the skull of her own father. It is in the tale of Nebuchadnezzar that book begins its turn toward hopefulness as it did in the Prologue. The king again called upon Daniel to interpret a dream but did not listen to his interpretation which warned him against hubris,

And thus was he from his kingdom  
 Into the wilde Forest drawe,  
 Wher that the myhti goddes lawe  
 Thurgh his pouer dede him transforme  
 Fro man into a bestes forme;  
 And lich an Oxe under the fot  
 He graseth, as he nedes mot,  
 To geten him his lives fode. (I. 2970-5)

It is the clearest possible analogy: pride, which is love displaced from God onto self, leads man into bestiality and away from the angelic, and had the king listened to advice from his wise counselors, he would have been saved. But all is not lost for the king. After a period of seven years as a beast he is, through God's mercy, transformed back into human form, regains his kingship, and learns humility, and becomes a good king. Humility is the antidote for pride. This theme is expounded most fully in the last tale of the book, and it is here that the first hint of incest—though only potential incest—appears, and the book completes its movement from mild sin to gruesome sin to redemption through *right* love.

*The Tale of Three Questions*, according to Georgiana Donavin, exemplifies how “transcendence of incestuous longing results in personal and social harmony” (51). It is a

story of incest implied, averted. King Alphonse, who fancied himself the wisest man in the land, had the habit of posing riddles to his men, which they could never answer. However, one day his man Petro knew the answer to a riddle, responding at once. The king grew envious and thought he would match wits with the knight. He issued a challenge: if Petro could not answer the tripartite riddle within three weeks, then he would lose his head. Petro realizes he can not answer the questions.<sup>10</sup> Lamenting, he retreats into his garden. His daughter Petronelle comes to him alone and pleads to know the source of his unhappiness. But her language is like that of a lover:

For I have ofte herd you seid  
 That ye such trust have on me leid  
 That to my soster ne my brother,  
 In al this world ne to non other  
 ye dorste tell a private  
 So wel, my fader, as to me

(I. 3153-8)

Donavin notes the setting in the garden, reminiscent of how Amor in the *Roman de la Rose* sought the Rose privately in her garden, and of Eden, in which Adam and Eve were enclosed in their own private space, intimate and exclusive (54). And as we have seen, the Bible itself relates the story of Lot and his daughters. Furthermore, Petronelle's entrance into the garden is prefigured with a description of her unsurpassing beauty and

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<sup>10</sup> The questions are: 1) What in this world least needs the work of men, yet men still work on it most of all? 2) What has the highest worth, but has the lowest price? 3) What is of highest cost yet is perceived as valueless and thrown away? (3100-3108). The answers are a) The earth, because even though man cultivates it, the earth can still produce living things without his help; b) Humility, which has greatest worth and costs least to maintain, and 3) Pride, which costs the most and has the least worth.

thus her sexual desirability. Her words are those of a wife seeking to comfort her husband rather than a daughter's.

The scene is potentially incestuous because of the intimacy between father and daughter. That Petro does not act sinfully is due to his daughter's great humility, which is of course the answer to the sin of Pride. In this instance Gower uses the incest theme as a means to demonstrate God's mercy, emphasizing again the difference between the charity and cupidity. Alphonse loves knowledge for the selfish reason that it brings him fame and is unable to appreciate knowledge for its ability to lead him to a more genuinely pious life. Similarly Petronelle, who in genuine humility offers to answer the king in her father's place, succeeds in stopping the incestuous threat from advancing only because she represents charity, responding to the riddle in unselfish honesty.

Now an interesting exchange takes place. The king is first astonished at Petronelle's beauty and love for her father, and further amazed at her answers to the three questions:

The king, which reson understood  
 And hath al herd how sche hath said,  
 Was inly glad and so wel paid  
 That al his wraththe is overgo  
 . . .  
 And if thou were of such lignage,  
 That thou to me were of parage,  
 And that thi fader were a Pier,  
 As he is now a Bachilier,  
 So seker as I have a lif,  
 Thou scholdest thanne be my wif (I. 3322-40)

Again, her response impassions him, and Alphonse rewards her father with an earldom, thus making him a “Pier.” Alphonse immediately marries Petronelle. Whereas the dialogue between father and daughter signaled the possibility of incest, Petronelle’s marriage to the king occurs only after the transformation of Petro into a peer. In effect, Petronelle marries a father substitute. The narrative comes close to an incestuous relationship but instead sin is averted. Petronelle has shown by her actions and words the intimate and loving relationship with her father, and that she is incapable of the gross sin of incest because of her innate virtue.

As in the triumph of patriarchy in the later *Tale of Apollonius*, medieval marriage involved the exchange of women, which was fundamental to making alliances between different houses and in keeping peace. The ritual of marriage involved the giving away of the bride, the gift to her of a ring or some coins, and the “kneeling of the bride before the man who became her new master” (Drury 5), the final signal that she had been given to the power of another male. In the feudal relationship the king was considered the head of the land just as a husband was considered the head of his own household, both of these modeling the ideal relationship between God and man. And a good king, or a good husband, is one who is able to control his desires, focusing on the good of his family instead of gratifying his own wishes. The endowment of Petronelle with matchless humility and goodness is important in demonstrating that this story models charity and a spiritual way of life. The threat of incest is stopped only by her goodness. Petronelle is a new Mary, having “personified and advocated humility . . . not only similar to Mary in character but in her ultimate reward; she is worthy to be exalted by King Alphonse as

Mary was worthy to be chosen by God” (Donavin 57). Incest implied and averted in this tale is used to exemplify proper kingly behavior, and all is well at the end of the tale and at the end of the book. Amans learns that humility is the answer to pride.

*The Tale of Three Questions* portrays the “ineffable desire between a father and daughter which is channeled toward Christian devotion” (Donavin 5), as does the *Tale of Constance* in book two, the theme of which is envy. This tale repeats the pattern of movement from sin to horror to redemption. With the blessings of her father and the Pope, Constance agrees to leave her home to marry the Sultan,<sup>11</sup> the “greteste of Barbarie” (II.599), in exchange for his conversion from Islam to Christianity. The journey ends in horror when the wedding guests, Constance’s retinue, and the bridegroom himself are slain by order of the Sultan’s mother, who began to feel that losing her son to marriage meant losing all her “joies here” and that her own estate would be “lased” (II. 647-8). The envy felt by the Sultan’s mother over Constance’s place beside her son is unnatural, *unkynde*; as Donavin argues, she “explodes in a murderous rage and commits the sort of violence which we have seen Gower repeatedly connect with incest” (45). It is an example of the monstrous appetite linked to incest as seen in the stories about Orestes, Philomela, and Canace and Machaire in later books. Physical incest is implied in her towering jealousy and in her wish to be the woman at his son’s side. That she is queen of a non-Christian, barbarian nation barely lessens the horror of a mother murdering her son; it is unnatural, against nature’s law and man’s. When death comes at the hand of a mother who uses and consumes the body of her son for her selfish purposes, it is bestial

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<sup>11</sup> In the Man of Law’s Tale, Chaucer identifies this man as the Sultan of Syria and her father is specifically identified as the Emperor of Rome.

in the most extreme sense. When Constance alone is left alive, the “olde fend, this Sarazine,” (II. 705) ordered her daughter-in-law thrown in a ship, unmanned by “vitailed” for five years so that the wind could drive the ship where it would, upon the “wawes wilde” (II. 709-13). Through Providence Constance<sup>12</sup> survives and is washed upon the shore of Northumberland. King Allee falls in love with and marries her, and they have a son, Morris. This second king’s mother, also motivated by “thwarted incestuous desire” (Donavin 57) for her son, plots to get rid of Constance. The mothers of both of Constance’s husbands, notes Donavin, must be “widows in order for their sons to have succeeded to power in their kingdoms, and both appear possessive of their son’s sexuality in the absence of the father” (46). The second mother-in-law also manipulates events so that Constance is once again set upon the wave along with Morris.

Here, Constance demonstrates her *kynde* nature. In despair, she lies on the deck of the ship until she realizes that if she dies her infant son will starve to death, and she rises to find miraculous provision. The incestuous parent, Constance’s first mother-in-law the Sultanes, murdered her child in contrast to Constance who nourishes her son with her own body. After three years the ship comes ashore in Spain and the wicked man who found her became intent on raping her. Providence intervened, caused the man to

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<sup>12</sup> The plot of the castaway queen has been identified by Otto Rank, Marijane Osborn, and others as being “traceable back to the beginnings of our era” (Osborn x). The Middle English tale *Emare*; Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, an analog to Gower’s tale of Constance; *La Belle Helen*; *La Manekine*; *Le Bon Florence of Rome*; *Vita Offae Primi*; and *Apollonius of Tyre* are only part of the group of stories sometimes grouped under the label of ‘Constance’ tales because they share the plot of a lone woman cast upon the sea. A subgroup of these involves the mutilation of the queen, often by the cutting off of her hand or hands. Archibald notes that there may be an “enigmatic” link between incest and mutilation (Flight 262); such mutilation is a physical division within the body of the woman.

drown, and set the ship adrift again, this time for twelve years. Finally Constance is reunited with her husband who does not know he has a son. Allee spotted the boy sitting beside his mother;

For nature as in resemblance  
Of face hem liketh so to clothe,  
That thei were of a suite bothe.  
...  
This child he loveth kindly  
And yit he wot no cause why. (II. 1376-82)

Like his wife, Allee is subject to the tide of *kynde*. In a reasonable king, the natural affinity between parent and child overcomes doubt and murderous envy.

Peter Nicholson argues that the Constance tale offers charity as an answer to the sin of Envy because charity is a love that “gives, shares, and seeks no advantage from others, whatever Fortune brings” (178). Like Petronelle, Constance represents the positive benefits of charity as an antidote to wrong, self-serving, incestuous love. And indeed Constance does exhibit charity throughout her ordeal. Through her, a “barbarian” nation is brought to Christianity, and the “Souldan” put his own house, and kingdom, in an order pleasing to God. It is Constance’s virtue that causes both the death of the wicked and the regeneration of Christianity. Constance’s evangelism, first toward the heathens in “Barbarie” and then in pagan Northumberland, have the effect of converting entire nations to Christianity.

Through her long ordeal Constance retains her humanity, her reason, and her *kyndne* love, charity in the face of monstrous cupidity. Genius reminds Amans that charity is the best cure for envy as he reminded him that humility is the antidote for pride

in the first book, and relates the final story of book two. *The Tale of Constantine and Sylvester* shows how a king can learn the lesson of charity like the *Tale of Nebuchadnezzar's Punishment* in book one demonstrated how that king learned pity. Constantine, emperor of Rome, was afflicted with leprosy. His physicians advised him that a cure might be had if he would bathe in the blood of infants. However, when they are brought to the palace to be slaughtered, Constantine is overcome with pity at the sight of the weeping mothers and rescinds the order, deciding to place his fate in the hands of God. Much like Nebuchadnezzar, Constantine had to spend a period of time in deformity and turmoil, somehow less than human. But God's grace provided a remedy: for Nebuchadnezzar it was rescue from the animalistic state, and for Constantine it was freedom from his affliction. The emperor sought the advice of Pope Sylvester, who baptized him in the basin that was meant to collect the blood of the innocent children, and the leprous scales fell from his body. For Constance and Constantine, charity answers envy, saves the body and the soul, demonstrating that Christianity can save the entire world.

I have noted that the tales increase in horror and severity, and by the third book, incest makes an overt appearance and triggers a series of tragedies. Nevertheless the book follows the established pattern and ends on a positive note. Taken from Ovid's *Heroides*, Gower's story of Canace and Machaire appears in the book on wrath. Ovid's version consists solely of the letter Canace writes to Machaire to relate what happened to her. Gower expands upon this by making the letter only a part of the story and placing its writing at the very end of the tale, and thus of Canace's life, further increasing the pathos.

Chaucer's *Man of Law*, as we have noted, primly implies in the Prologue that since Gower not only tells the "abominable" tale of the incestuous Canace but also treats her sympathetically, he is perhaps less disapprobatory than he should be. Gower's version is a story of mutual affection rather than force, as the siblings have been raised in close quarters:

Be daie bothe and ek be nyhte,  
 Whil thei be yonge, of comun wone  
 In chambre thei togedre wone, (III.148-50)

The two have no complicity in the way they were raised, and for this there is evidence of their innocence. In the innocence of youth, they have not yet learned self-restraint or self-control:

Whan thei were in a privé place,  
 Cupide bad hem ferst to kesse,  
 . . .  
 Nature tok hem into lore  
 And tawht hem so, that overmore  
 Sche hath hem in such wise daunted,  
 That thei were, as who seith, enchanted (III.159-78)

Canace and her brother Machaire grow older and approach sexual awakening, "whan kynde assaileth the corage" (153). Sexual attraction between young man and young woman is an instinctive, untaught reaction, ordained by Nature; because Canace and Machaire are constantly in the company of each other, and because they reach the age of sexual awakening, attraction and physical desire are the natural consequences. Genius's

benign, sympathetic interpretation of the incest depends upon the understanding of *kynde* as a natural, and therefore acceptable, human reaction.

At the same time the fact that Canace and Machaire are brother and sister makes sexual intercourse *unkynde*. Incest is a sin against *kynde* in the obvious sense that it is against *kin*, and simultaneously against the laws of nature—nature which has been formulated to benefit man and his divine gift of reason. Genius's use of the term *unkynde* indicates that although he acknowledges the natural attraction that occurs as a matter of course between male and female, he also recognizes that the consummation of such sexual attraction is prohibited between siblings. Canace and Machaire's actions are under the control of Cupid and Nature instead of their own reason.

Even more horrifying, though, is the unkyndness of Eolus' response; it is both cruel and unnatural for a father to murder his own child. When Canace becomes pregnant she fears her father's anger as does Machaire, who flees. And when King Eolus does uncover the story his rage is immense. Eolus acts against *kynde* when his rage blinds him to the ties of kinship and leads him to murder his own child. Canace pleads for mercy and swoons at the feet of her father. He spares her no sympathy and instead sends Canace a sharpened sword upon which she impales herself. As she lies bleeding and dying, her son falls from her arms, bathed in her blood. The next few lines are found only in Gower's tale, and the horror that they produce emphasize the horror of unnatural, *unkynde* rage:

Sche fell doun ded fro ther sche stod.  
The child lay bathende in hire blod  
Out rolled fro the moder barm,

And for the blod was hot and warm,  
He basketh him aboute thrinne. (III.311-15)

The image of the innocent child playing in his mother's blood is made terrible by the fact that it seems natural for an infant to splash his arms and legs in the warm pool, but very unnatural that it is her very blood that covers him. A similar scene must have presented itself during childbirth: the child, covered in the blood of the mother, takes his first breath and lives, but here, he is present at the moment of her death. Despite this pitiful scene Eolus orders the son to be taken and abandoned in the forest to be devoured by beasts. The child, like the young lovers, is a symbol of the monstrous and the innocent at the same time.

The emphasis in this tale is not on the incest but on the detrimental effects of wrath. King Eolus

wolde nocht his herte change  
To be benigne and favorable  
To love, bot unmerciable  
Betwen the waxe of wod and wroth (III. 214-8)

A king who allows his reason and his mercy to be overcome by wrath is a king to be feared by all his subjects. If the king is the father of his people, his family can be seen as the microcosm of his kingdom and all his children are imperiled. Incest is used to demonstrate this, but perhaps not in the expected way. This king is a tyrant indeed, but not one who commits incest himself; instead, the theme is used to highlight the other failing of the king—his “sin against nature as well as reason” (Baker 288). Genius is “curiously sympathetic” (*ibid.*) to the youthful, perhaps natural, indiscretion of Canace

and Machaire, and at the same time he denounces Eolus's unreasonable wrath. There is an echo here of the earlier tale of Mundus, who was partially excused for his actions because he was overcome by lust and unable to control himself. Canace was judged (by Genius, at least) sympathetically because she also did only what was natural. Reason, God-given, is meant to be used to temper all violent swings of human emotion and for effective self-rule, and Genius is affronted by Eolus's disregard as he was by the knowing violation of Paulina's trust by the priests. Genius counsels Amans that "wrath is a more heinous sin than lust because it violates the law of *kynde*. . . . Genius's argument, of course, conforms to the medieval hierarchy of the Deadly Sins; lust is the least reprehensible because the most natural" (*ibid.*). Thus sibling incest highlights division of man from the angelic part of himself in this tale because Eolus has lost his capacity to moderate his wrath, and he acts in a most *unkynde* fashion.

The story of Orestes contrasts the tale of Canace. Orestes' mother Climestre murdered his father Agamemnon upon his return from the Trojan War,<sup>13</sup> unbeknownst to Orestes, as he was raised by another family. When as an adult he hears this story he vows vengeance. Climestre married another man, incestuous Egiste who slept with his daughter, forsaking her for Orestes' mother. Orestes finds his mother and kills her according to his vow. He brought her before the city council and publicly accused her:

O cruel beste unkind,  
 How mihtest thou thin herter finde  
 For eny lust of loves drawhte,

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<sup>13</sup> According to Homer, Climestra (Clytemnestra) killed Agamemnon in retribution for his having sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia to the gods in exchange for winds to get them home from becalmed seas; Agamemnon also brought home with him a concubine, Cassandra.

That thou accordest to the slawhte  
 Of him which was thin oghne lord?  
 . . .  
 Unkindely for thou hast wrought,  
 Unkindeliche it schal be boght.  
 The sone schal the moder sle (III.2055-69)

His mother is executed as Orestes has vowed: her breasts torn off, and she is drawn and quartered (III.2070-8). The story of Canace is reversed because in this case the child kills the parent. However, both deal with *unkynde* murder that severs the most intensely primal bond. Orestes' logic is complex but rational and as with Canace, Genius is sympathetic to his plight. The murder of Climestre can be excused because the proper punishment for murder is death. But is it ever right to kill one's parent (or child)? Indeed, is there ever a case in which murder is justified? Genius relates three times when it is allowed: 1) to punish traitors and robbers, 2) to support law and common rights, and 3) to defend one's country (III.2210-40). Amans begins to realize the difficulties that a king must face in judging the merits of an issue. Peck notes that

this diatribe against war, so timely in the late 1380s as Richard attempts to maintain peace with France, is the first major political digression that Gower has allowed his impersonations. . . . Genius acknowledges that nature opposes war: War burns churches, slays priests, is an excuse for rape of wives and maidens, and a distraction from law and God. The motives behind war are evil, and its effects horrendous: conscience is suspended, as war becomes a raw excuse for plunder. (30)

This tale completes the pattern of reversal by contrasting the two cases: killing a close family member for wrath (Eolus and Canace) and for justice (Orestes and Climestre). One is unacceptable for a good king, and one is not only acceptable but even required.

To finish the turn in the narrative toward the hopeful, the book concludes with the *Tale of Telaphus and Teucer*. Achilles' son Telephus intervenes on behalf of Teucer, who is about to be killed by Achilles. Telephus remembered a time when Teucer had shown mercy to him and Achilles relents. The history in this book of family members killing each other is diverted and a different course is begun. The sanctity of the family unit is upheld and harmony is restored, but only when the king answers wrath with mercy.

In the first three books Gower followed the described pattern, but the trend is interrupted with the fourth book. This is a book of stories of transformations organized under the sin of sloth. The tale of Iphis and Ianthe begins with the threat of King Ligdus to his wife that if she bore a daughter instead of a son, the child would be slain. A daughter was born and Isis, goddess of motherhood, appeared with a solution; her mother must keep the child, name it Iphis, and raise it as a boy. At the age of ten Iphis was betrothed to Ianthe, a duke's daughter, and the two played together as children,

. . . ofte abedde  
 These children leien, sche and sche,  
 Whiche of on age bothe be.  
 So that withinne time of yeeres,  
 Togedre as thei ben pleiefieres,  
 Liggende abedde upon a nyht,  
 Nature, which doth every wiht  
 Upon hire lawe forto muse,  
 Constreigneth hem, so that thei use  
 Thing which to hem was al unknowe;  
 Wherof Cupide thilke throwe  
 Tok pite for the grete love,  
 And let do sette kinde above,  
 So that hir lawe mai ben used,  
 And thei upon here lust excused. (IV.478-92)

The attraction they held for each other was a result of their close proximity and their youthful innocence, exactly as it had been for Canace and Machaire. This time, though Cupid was touched by their love and intervened. Iphis was transformed into a man and the two married. The potential murder of this daughter was overcome by nature with the aid of Cupid, who hates the unnatural. Other stories of transformation in the book include the tale of Phyllis, who was transformed into a tree when she hanged herself in despair over her lover's failure to return to her; Rosiphilee, whose attitude was changed for the better after she heard a tale about a love affair that was ruined because of the lady's hesitation; and Io, turned by Juno into a cow as punishment for infidelity. Genius imparts a history of alchemy, the most transformative and sought-after skill of the time. Sloth implies slowness, laziness, hesitation; Genius's pupil must change his pace to allow his ardor to cool while hearing these stories of change. Even if he does not yet realize it he, too, is changing. And in the fifth book, on avarice, the story of King Midas demonstrates the transformation of his beloved daughter into a golden statue because of his overwhelming, selfish, unreasonable thirst for gold, and the story of Midas concludes the warnings against avarice before it turns to a history of religion.

It has been suggested that in book five is the turning point in the *Confessio Amantis*. Amans has heard Ovidian tales involving pagan characters, then tales of transformations, and now he must slow down to consider the nature of religion. This presents a problem for Genius, because he is a priest concerned with saving the soul of his pupil, yet he is a priest of Venus. He omits the telling of tales about her, prompting Amans to ask why. He replies that he has “. . . left it for shame / Be cause I am here

oghne prest” (V.1382-3). Genius feels shame because he serves the goddess of love, whose ‘religion’ is founded upon incest: Venus and her son Cupid share an incestuous relationship and Venus herself is a product of brother-sister incest. Incest is the foundation of this relationship and thus of the entire court of love, and by extension, of all courtly lovers in her realm. Certainly the dozens of tales of such lovers Genius has relayed to Amans has exemplified for him some of the problems of Venus’s court. Incest haunts the tales Amans has heard of original sin, monstrous, transformative unbridled passion, vanity and pride, and tyranny. And there are also tales of incest as an agent of salvation—that show it is possible to receive forgiveness for any sin, even incest. Genius is preparing to move his dazed pupil into the next phase of his education. He has explained how the love of Venus’s court is misguided and should be rejected by Amans. After a discussion of idol-worship, Genius turns to Christianity to show “true” religion, in contrast to the pagan system of Venus. Reluctantly, after a further three books, Amans understands that he should repudiate the religion of Venus because he is no longer capable of the natural, kindly procreation which justifies sexual intercourse; he is too old for such a lawful love. By appealing to Venus, Amans is appealing to the wrong moral authority. He prays to her for help, but he is asking the wrong boon of the wrong deity, demonstrating just how lost he had been. This is an important milestone for Amans to have reached and by the end of the poem he has come to realize how to heal himself.

Genius justifies his reasons for relating the history of religions by explaining that before Christ came people looked on the planets (of which Venus is one), the

constellations, and the elements as controllers of the world. The problem, Genius says, is that worshipping created things takes away the honor due to the Creator (V.775-80) and “helle is the penance” (V.784) for disbelievers. For instance, the Egyptians, Greeks, and idol worshipers who were once venerated have fallen out of favor. In Greek mythology, Zeus, father of the gods, married his sister Hera, while in Egypt the children of brother-sister gods, Isis and Osiris, married. Norse legends too record cases of incest among royalty. These gods were generated through incestuous acts and as Gower has shown over and over, incest is connected with devastation and failure. The dynasties of these pagan gods will not survive. Nevertheless, these tales of pagans do relay some moral teachings, as Amans has seen. A history of the Jews follows; this account includes the fall of Lucifer and of Adam so that when Genius turns to the Christians he can emphasize that this is the true religion, the one that has redeemed mankind. For pagan and Christian, the “admixture of superstition, piety, and greed among the foolish pagans, with their belief in the incestuous promiscuity and bestiality of the gods, or among Christians who abuse God's sufferance thinking to make themselves more rich, it is no less bitter” (Peck 52). Genius turns then to the theme of the book, the sin of avarice, illustrating the lesson with tale after tale and ending with one of extreme brutality.

At the end of book five the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomena is one in which incest is again associated with violence and destruction. To confirm that the turning point of the poem occurs in book five, incest is now harshly condemned, in contrast to the sympathetic treatment of Canace in an earlier book. Tereus forces himself on his sister-in-law, a relationship that falls into those proscribed by canon law as

incestuous. When she vows to tell her story he cuts out her tongue whereupon she weaves her story into a tapestry and sends it to her sister, Procne. In retaliation and rage Procne kills Tereus's son and feed the boy to him. In close proximity to this tale is the story of Jason and his wife Medea, who slays their sons in front of his eyes when he abandons her for Creusa. The murder of a child is metaphorically incestuous as the parent devours his offspring, *unkyndely* murdering himself. Incest is figured as symptomatic of an "unrestrained or monstrous appetite" (McAvoy and Walters 29). In the incest tales in *Confessio Amantis*, incest represents monstrous appetite: the monstrous mother, such as the Sultaness who murders rather than nurtures her son because she is enraged over being replaced in her son's life; the narcissistic self-love of Eolus who, in his rage over losing control over his daughter's body—and sexuality—consumed her through death; and the unnatural (and fearsome) female sexual desire as seen through the actions of Sultaness, Domilde, and Medea. Parent-child incest is a form of unnatural consumption, and these tales are linked to the father-daughter incest in the *Tale of Apollonius* in book eight, in which the riddle posed by Antiochus includes the phrase "I ete / And have it noht forbore" the body of the mother. It also begins the trend of tales notable for their overt incestuous content. Whereas earlier incest tales were those of incest implied or averted, the later tales are usually of incest committed, and linked to incest is violence and destruction.

The tales of avarice in the fifth book are followed in the sixth by tales of gluttony as if to underscore the idea that unnatural desire and monstrous appetite are symptomatic of improper behavior by man or king. Self-control and self-government are imperatives

for good rule. Book six relates the history of Nectanebus, who resorted to sorcery, as happened in the *Tale of Mundus and Paulina*, to trick the queen into believing that the god Amon wished to conceive a child by her. The result of this union is Alexander the Great, and the seventh book is dedicated Aristotle's instruction of the young king.

Amans should learn that education and accepting sound advice is a key component to a well-governed individual or king. Upon hearing this Amans vows to "eschue" sorcerie (VI.2405) and follow the path of education and philosophy. Importantly for the following and final Book, book seven is concerned with

the nature of fate, the proper use of knowledge, the linked questions of knowing oneself and knowing the nature of, and the duties owed, to God. . . .where the tales at the end of Book Six illustrate the consequences of a lack of understanding, Book Seven fills with what the characters in Book Six are missing. . . . Alexander had two teachers. The first, Nectanebus, is a model of wisdom gone wrong while the second, Aristotle, provides the wisdom that 'doth gret profit' (VI.6423). Book Seven has] the goal of grounding all ethical teaching, including that on ethics in love, in the purposes of the Creator. (Nicholson 335-6)

By the end of book seven, the poet has established a pattern of moving from tales of least severity to highest with a remediating turn that allows for a hopeful ending; he has interrupted the pattern with tales of transformations, a history of the religions of the world, and a discourse on the education of a king. Amans is well prepared for the final part of his confession. The last of the seven deadly sins, lechery, is addressed in this final book. But as a priest of Venus, in whose court lechery is counted a virtue, Genius faces the difficulty of counseling Amans against it.

Book eight performs multiple tasks. It concludes the task of Genius, sees the conciliation of Amans and his return to mental health, and concludes the poem with an

epilogue that acts as a prayer for Britain.<sup>14</sup> It is also a history of incest. Genius gives an account of the Creation and the Fall and in doing so tells explains why the first ‘marriages’ were incestuous, and why this was acceptable then and not now.<sup>15</sup> Amans denies ever feeling incestuous desires:

Mi fader, nay, god wot the sothe,  
 Mi feire is noight of such a bothe,  
 So wylde a man yit was I nevere,  
 That of mi ken or lief or levere  
 Me liste love in such a wise (VIII.169-73)

The short tales in book eight of Caligula, who “of his oghne Sostres thre / Berefte the virginite” (VIII. 136-7) and Amon, who slept with his sister Tamar, end with their destruction. Caligula lost his empire and his life through the ire of God, and Amon’s incest led to his death at the hand of his brother Absolom. These *unkynde* sins are mitigated in *kynde* fashion: the punishment fits the crime, in reasonable fashion, and incest is, simply, a destructive and harmful act. Amon and Caligula do not have youth and innocence as do Canace and Machaire. As mature, experienced men they would be expected to have already learned self-governance and because they have not, they are destroyed. The message is clear: little sympathy may be extended to those who consciously and deliberately act in *unkynde* ways, and *kynde* is an outcome of the process of reason. How safe can Rome be when there is such a ruler as Caligula? The third

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<sup>14</sup> As there are at least two versions of the Prologue, so are there two conclusions to the poem. In the 1390 version that was dedicated to Richard, the poet prays that Richard will rule with universal justice. In the later version, dedicated to Henry, the prayer is dedicated to the welfare of England with the hope that Henry and all men will practice good self-government so that the nation will find peace in a shared vision of righteousness.

<sup>15</sup> I have detailed this account in my Introduction. Also see pp. 44-5.

Roman emperor was reported to be “noble and moderate” (Stein 44) for the first few years of his reign but thereafter the reports focus on his tyranny, proof that he willfully overthrew his restraint and good governance in order to indulge his selfish desires.

*The Tale of Apollonius* contrasts two father-daughter pairs, one of which is destroyed and one of which returns home in triumph to reclaim his kingdom, an analogy to the hoped-for result of Genius’s lengthy teaching of Amans. The incest in this tale begins when King Antiochus’s wife dies. He seduces his daughter.<sup>16</sup> The tale gives a heartwrenching account of the daughter’s agony:

His doghter, which was piereles  
 Of beaute, duelte aboute him stille.  
 Bot whanne a man hath welthe at wille,  
 The fleissh is frele and falleth ofte,  
 And that this maide tendre and softe,  
 Which in hire fadres chambres duelte,  
 Withinne a time wiste and felte:  
 For likinge and concupiscence  
 Withoute insihte of conscience  
 The fader so with lustes blente,  
 That he caste al his hole entente  
 His oghne doghter forto spille.  
 This king hath leisir at his wille  
 With strengthe, and whanne he time sih,  
 This yonge maiden he forlih:  
 And sche was tendre and full of drede,  
 Sche couthe noght hir Maidenhede  
 Defende, and thus sche hath forlore  
 The flour which she hath longe bore.  
 It helpeth noght althogh sche wepe,  
 For thei that scholde hir bodi kepe

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<sup>16</sup> Some versions of the tale imply that the relationship is consensual while some, including Gower, figure it as a rape. By modern standards, of course, there is no difference. However, father and daughter are both killed by a bolt of lightning. That she shares her father’s fate may imply some degree of culpability.

Of wommen were absent as thanne;  
 And thus this maiden goth to manne,  
 The wylde fader thus devoureth  
 His oghne fleissh, which non socoureth,  
 And that was cause of mochel care. (VIII.286-311)

The girl's nurse shares her grief but can only advise her to let her father have his way, for there was no higher justice to which they might appeal. To keep her for himself, Antiochus creates a riddle that her suitors must answer:<sup>17</sup>

With felonie I am upbore,  
 I ete and have it nocht forbore  
 Mi modres fleissh, whos housebonde  
 Mi fader forto seche I fonde,  
 Which is the Sone ek of my wif (VIII. 405-9)

Antiochus himself verbalizes the cannibalistic, unnatural consumption of his daughter's body. Suitors faced death upon giving a wrong answer; the heads of the unfortunate suitors were displayed at the castle gate, and few were brave enough to accuse the king of incest. Apollonius, hearing of her great beauty, came to hear the riddle and spoke to the king privately, indicating that he knew the answer. Genius thus sees the unnamed daughter as deserving of the same fate as her father despite the fact that the relationship was not mutually agreeable.

Apollonius, realizing that any answer he gives would lead to his death, flees to Tarsus, shares his grain with the starving Tarsians, and moves on to establish a home in Pentapolis, and married the daughter of King Arcestrates. When they hear of the death of Antiochus and his daughter, they set off to claim the throne. Apollonius's wife,

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<sup>17</sup> There is a marked similarity between this story and Marie de France's lai of *Les Deux Amants*.

pregnant, gives birth on board to a daughter whom he names Thaise, dies, and is buried at sea. The coffin washes up on the shore of Ephesus, where a doctor examines the body and realizes that she is not dead but only in a coma. He revives her and she becomes a priestess of Diana. Apollonius takes his newborn daughter to Tarsus to be fostered by Strangulio and his wife, who also had a daughter. As the two girls grew up Thaise surpassed the other girl in loveliness and accomplishment and her mother grew jealous. Fearing that her daughter would be overlooked she ordered her servant to kill Thaise, but before he could do so a pirate ship landed and kidnapped her, selling her to a brothel. She manages to keep her virginity and her virtue and enchants the local prince. Now Apollonius returns to retrieve Thaise but is told she is dead. In despair he sets sail and lands at Mytilene, where Thaise has ended up. They meet and he is drawn to the beautiful young girl. Apollonius's virtue is tested when he meets and is drawn to the lovely girl on Mytilene. Thaise is called upon to try to cheer up the unhappy Apollonius and enters the ship's hold in which he lies, telling him stories and playing her harp. He makes no reply,

And in the derke forth sche goth,  
 Til sche him toucheth, and he wroth,  
 And after hire with his hond  
 He smot.           (VIII. 1691-4)

The blow that he strikes indicates a natural repulsion against any improper physical contact. Yet they immediately feel an affinity for each other; here, *kynde* is at work. The two feel the bonds of kinship, though they do not consciously know it yet, and this bond unconsciously causes Apollonius to reject her potentially sexually charged touch. They

speak at length and discover their relationship. She marries the prince and they sail to Ephesus where Apollonius discovers his wife, miraculously alive. Apollonius takes his place on the throne of Cyrene and begets a son.

Like the tale of Constance, this story involves a tale within a tale. The incest of Antiochus and his daughter is shocking, and their story ends in a suitably startling manner, but the story continues. Archibald points out that there is a third model of father-daughter relations—that of Arcestrates and his daughter, Apollonius’s wife. Antiochus was a “bad father and a bad king; Arcestrates is a good father and a good king. How will Apollonius measure up?” (94). Archibald suggests that his long sojourn demonstrates his virtue. When he loses his wife, he “abandons his role as king” (*ibid.*) and leaves his daughter behind as well. He has thus removed himself from the potential temptation of his daughter as Antiochus did not. When Apollonius has reunited with his wife and fathered a son, it may be seen as “a welcome return to the normal patriarchal procedure of the exchange of women; the king marries his heiress daughter to a suitable prince, who becomes king in his turn. The triumph of patriarchy in this story by the birth of a son and heir . . . solves the . . . incest problem” (Archibald 95). Their true identities become known, Apollonius regains his wife and, having proven his virtue, is able to regain his kingship.

The father-daughter pairs in the *Tale of Apollonius* demonstrate two models of self-governance, and by extenuation two models of kingship. Tyrannical Antiochus brings fear and destruction, discord and division, to his family and his kingdom. Apollonius, on the other hand, exhibits self-governance that leads to peace and happiness

to his family and nation. Apollonius does not lose his reason to wrath or grief as he patiently endures years of separation between himself and his wife and daughter, and their reunion and reunification into a family unit is the reward for his propriety. The division of Antiochus from his reason and governance brings about his ruin and the loss of his family and his kingdom. Conversely, the trials of Apollonius could not cause him to lose his reason, and through him his family and his kingdom prosper.

Gower's eighth book, on the sin of lechery, prepares the way at last for Amans's reintegration into a unified, undivided, and reasonable man. It accomplishes this in part by focusing on the varied ways that lechery, the *unkynde* aspect of love known as cupidity, causes division within the self. The book begins with the beginnings of all things: the story of Adam and Eve and the peopling of the newly formed earth. Cain and Abel married their sisters Calmana and Delbora; "Thus was mankinde to beginne; / Forthi that time it was no Sinne / The Soster forto take hire brother, / Whan that ther was of chois non other" (VIII. 66-9). Once again, in the second age of man, the age of Noah, brothers married sisters by necessity and the earth was repopulated. In these times, *kynde* caused men and women, even if they be siblings, to reach for each other, much as Canace and Machaire had. By the time of Abraham there were enough people that siblings need not marry, and much later, by order of the Pope, marriages within the fourth degree were prohibited. Man had grown in reason, away from his animalistic beginnings, and learned self-governance and to continue the practices of the pagan would mean loss of hard-won progress toward fuller humanity, closer to the divine. The short story of Lot and his daughters, in contrast to the *Tale of Apollonius*, is a matter-of-fact narrative of early

Biblical incest, mostly unjudged by Genius. According to the story in Genesis, Lot and his family were warned by an angel to leave the city to avoid its complete destruction. The daughters evidently believed that it was up to them to bear children to preserve Lot's family line when they seduced their father. But instead of punishment by lightning bolt or the destruction of their family line, they bore sons who became founders of the nations of Moab and Ammon, perhaps an implication of divine pleasure rather than condemnation.

The first part of the final book is dedicated almost exclusively to tales of incest, and following that, at last, is the moment of Amans's awakening. He has been guilty of such things as vanity and foolishness, of lacking propriety and dignity, and worst of all, he has shared one of the traits of the incestuous kings: he did not practice good self-governance. He allowed his lustful, inappropriate desire for a lady to overcome his reason and he languished in lovesickness, unable to heal himself. *The Tale of Apollonius* ends with things being set aright. Having resisted the temptation to commit incest as Antiochus did not, as Eolus did not, and as so many of the others did not, he is worthy of the restoration of his family and his kingdom. Similarly Amans did not cross the line into tyranny and through the intercession of the priest, he is coached and coaxed back to health and reason. At the conclusion of the tale Genius begins his final appeal to Amans. Amans continues to protest that he can find no solace from the wound of love. He proposes to write a letter to Venus, making one final plea, and is amazed to see the goddess herself appear to him in answer. When in the prologue Venus asked for his name, he could only answer that he was "a caitiff." But at the end of the last book he is

able, clear-eyed, to answer her: “John Gower” (VIII. 2321). Not only can he answer with reason, he can at last hear her when she tells him that he is too old to be engaged in the pursuit of courtly love. Realization of the truth dawns upon him;

A cold me cawhte sodeinly,  
 For sorwe that myn herte made  
 Mi dedly face pale and fade  
 Becam, and swoune I fell to grounde.  
 And as I lay the same stounde,  
 Ne fully quik ne fully ded

(VIII.2446-2451)

Echoing the Christian theme of redemption through confession and repentance, this death scene is followed by Aman’s rebirth; like Apollonius he was tested, and both resisted the slide into depravity. Both had their kingdoms restored to them; Apollonius reclaimed the throne of Pentapolis and Amans was restored to his reason and his self-awareness.

Through his new eyes he can see himself without distortion—gray hair, tired eyes, and paunch. He knows that Venus is correct when she tells him that he is no longer fit to serve in her court. The fiery dart is removed; Amans asks for absolution from his sins and Venus gives him a soothing balm, placing “A peire of Bedes blak as Sable” (VIII. 2904) about his neck. He will now serve in the court of charitable love.

After eight books it becomes clear that most of the *Confessio Amantis* is dedicated to teaching Amans, the Everyman of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, the responsibility of the individual to pursue reason over sensuality and the supremacy of the spirit over the flesh. In other words, he should strive to live in the spiritual world rather than the secular one and pursue charity instead of cupidity. He must be master of his own *self*, or else he becomes slave to his desires. The poem is also an exposition on the education and duties

of a king and the function of law and justice, which can occur only when the king has mastered self-governance.

In *Confessio Amantis*, Gower employs the incest theme to demonstrate that division is the source of mankind's earthly woes, and this division stems from lack or proper love on the part of king and man. The problem of division begins in the individual with his turning away from reason, the paramount characteristic that elevates man from beast and brings him closer to the divine. Individuals who have lost their reason thus have no moral mirror by which to see themselves and the effects, usually detrimental, of their actions. As "senne of his condicioun / Is moder of divisioun" (Pr. 1029-1030)<sup>18</sup>, the framing device of the seven deadly sins provides a multitude of exempla through which Genius might instruct Amans. Of the eight books in *Confessio Amantis*, five contain incest tales.

Genius diligently directs Amans to examine his behavior so that he can gain mastery over his "self," and the kingdom within, and the royal readers of *Confessio Amantis* are advised of the horrors that await them and their nation if they do not practice similar restraint. Tales of incest abound in *Confessio Amantis*; they are made by Genius to demonstrate that division, in all its many permutations, is the cause of sin, of poor governance, of civil war, and of man's estrangement from God. A wise king will

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<sup>18</sup> Gower brings forth this theme from his *Mirour de l'homme*. Sin is described here too as the cause of all evils, and participates in an incestuous relationship with her father, Satan. Sin then gives birth to their child, Death. See Yeager, R.F., "John Gower's French" in Echard, Sian, [A Companion to Gower](#), 137-151. Milton later configures Sin's genealogy in similar fashion in Book 2 of "Paradise Lost."

consider the advice offered by Genius and stringently control his passions. Incest is used to emblemize the confusion, strife, and disorder caused by self-love, a decay manifesting itself not only in the individual but also in the political and social division of civil war and the corruption of church and crown. A sinful man, having lost his access to his reason, becomes susceptible to pride, envy, wrath, avarice, gluttony, and incest, and the effects of his irrationality disrupt families, nations, and all the world. Lack of proper, *kynde* love leads then to division and fragmentation.

Division, fragmentation, and *unkynde* love are prominent themes in another book that enjoyed great popularity. Approximately eighty years after Gower completed *Confessio Amantis*, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* began to circulate. While Gower's book includes some tales of incest averted, the incest committed by Arthur permeates the whole of Malory's. Arthur is known to literary history as one of England's greatest kings, and the chivalric values of his court continue to inspire people to the present time. Genius imparted lesson upon lesson to teach Amans how to redeem himself from the grip of *unkynde* love but Arthur, mentored by Merlin, has no benevolent teacher to guide him away from destructive behavior. Arthur does not learn to control his passions, and he subsequently dooms himself, his court, and his family line. As in *Confessio Amantis*, the incest motif in *Le Morte d'Arthur* teaches medieval listeners that even this sin can be forgiven by a merciful God when the sinner confesses and repents.

The ambiguity of the definition of *love* complicates *Confessio Amantis*, but it is chivalry that adds complexity to *Le Morte d'Arthur*; in both, incest exemplifies the divisive, destructive nature of wrong love, or cupidity, within individual, king, and

country. But the incest—the worst form of cupidity—that precipitated the fall of Camelot was committed by the king who became known to legend as the best and most chivalrous of all Christian kings. Nevertheless, in the end this good king failed, and the failure can be traced back to incest. Arthur is more like Gower’s tyrannical kings, with their undisciplined, dangerous passions, than the “moost renommed Crysten kyng, first and chyef of the thre best Crysten, and worthy” (Malory 3) of all Britain.

The excess of passion in *Confessio Amantis* results from the loss of self-control by the characters in the tales, a point Gower drives home repeatedly through the organizational frame of the seven deadly sins. Malory, like Gower, differentiates true love and lechery—cupidity and charity:

Therefore, lyke as winter resure dothe allway arace and deface grene summer, so faryth hit by unstable love in man and woman, for in many persones there ys no stabilite: for we may se all day, for a little blaste of wyntres rasure, anone we shall deface and lay aparte trew love, for lytyll or nowght, that coste mucche thyng. Thys ys no wysdome nother no stabylite, but hit ys fyeblynes of nature and grete disworshyp . . . But nowadays men can nat love sevennyght but they muste have all their desires. That love may nat endure by reson, for where they beythe sone accorded and hasty, heete sone keelyth. And right so faryth the love nowadays, sone hote sone colde. There ys no stabylyte. But the olde love was nat so. For men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwixte them, and than was love trouthe and faythefulnes. (648)

True love is slow and lasting, while lechery is quick and hot and burns itself out quickly. Yet the passage seems to praise true love as virtuous even if adulterous; it is hasty ‘love’ that is disparaged. The knightly lover should keep the “middle way; that is, love moderately because moderate love increases the honor of the knight and of his lady”

(Cherewatuk 221). And this is not the first time, of course, that the middle way has been counseled. It is what Gower's poet proposed as the best way for him to begin his book.

Like in *Confessio Amantis* hasty love, or lust, is identified with violence and destruction—and often this lust is incestuous, as in the case of Gower's Antiochus. But Arthur and his knights are concerned with honor and chivalry. The litmus test for Gower as to the ethics of his characters' actions is love—*kynde* or *unkynde*. For Malory, it is honor. Adulterous love might indeed be honorable, if it is true instead of lustful; killing a man to prevent the rape of a virgin is honorable, but killing from selfish motives is not. When the knights, Arthur included, meet a lady and begin a love affair with her, they are acting according to *kynde*, for the knights cannot help falling in love with the virtuous ladies.

Malory, in taking as his subject the exploits of King Arthur and his knights, shapes his narrative around the chivalric code, but chivalry itself is intrinsically problematic and divisive. The chivalric lover must bear allegiance to his spiritual master, God; his earthly master, the feudal lord; and to the mistress of the heart, his virtuous lady. The tenets of the chivalric code are not wholly in the realm of charity nor are they exclusively cupidinous, for it seems that even the best of knights could be the strictest adherents to the chivalric code while committing sexual misdeeds, even incest, in Arthur's case. While uniting the knights as a brotherhood, the chivalric code also created the possibility of conflicting loyalties, and Arthur and his knights lived in a border area between charity and cupidity.

As chivalry is a controlling theme in Malory's book, and incest an element subversive to that theme, a brief diversion into the nature of medieval chivalry is in order (Hodges 38-71). Chivalry was a function of knighthood in medieval society. Gower's prologue catalogues the shortcomings of the three estates—knights, clergy, and commons—and the estates system is also prominent in the structure of the prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*. Though the boundaries between the estates were stretched by the late fifteenth century, the system itself was still entrenched in medieval culture, a culture in which each person has a particular station, ordained by God, and a task relevant to that station. Consider Chaucer's Knight, who

. . . loved chivalrie,  
 Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisie.  
 Full worthy was he in his lordes were,  
 and therto hadde he ridden, no man ferre,  
 As wel in cristendom as in hetheness,  
 And evere honoured for his worthynesse (GP 45-50)

Chivalry may be defined as a collection of ideals, sometimes competing, that guided the knight's actions: loyalty, duty, courage, virtue, prowess, mercy, protection of women, faithfulness to God and church, and most of all honor saturate the chivalric code.

Malory's publisher, Caxton, brought out one of the many conduct manuals on chivalry circulating at the same time as *Le Morte d'Arthur*,<sup>19</sup> indicating the degree to which chivalry was esteemed by his audience. The word "code" is not used lightly, for chivalry and its component courtesy were meant to control behavior and allow the ruling class to

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<sup>19</sup> *Le Morte d'Arthur* was published in 1485, and *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* in 1484, translated from Ramon Lull's thirteenth century treatise on knighthood and courtesy.

be benevolent and virtuous, patterned on divine governing and ordering, and passed down to knights and finally to the commons so that the land would live in harmony.

Benson argues that 15<sup>th</sup> century chivalry deals with the “possible more often than the marvelous, and frequently employs realistic details of action, manners, and speech. The heroes engage in deeds greater than real men could have performed and to that extent they do share with the old romances a sense of the unobtainable. To a surprising degree fifteenth-century romance is a realistic genre, elevated in style but often mimetically true to the aristocratic life of the time” (139). Malory’s matter-of-fact tone when relating the tales accords with Benson’s claim, but there are certainly many incidents of the fantastic in Malory’s “hole booke,” and Archibald and Edwards see Arthur’s story as an exception to Benson’s categorization of 15<sup>th</sup> century chivalric stories as more realistic than supernatural (142). Arthur’s right to the throne is verified only by his ability to pull Excalibur from the stone, which was put there by enchantment. Magical shields, Merlin’s entrapment under a stone, and the mysterious Questing Beast are all marvels, and decidedly unrealistic. In fact, Arthur’s kingdom can not stand once Merlin disappears. Merlin’s magic is necessary for Arthur’s conception, for his prescience, and for his ability to explicate the meanings of dreams and omens. Nonetheless, to create the perfect chivalrous king, Malory must rely more upon recognizable occurrences than purely supernatural ones, for his Arthur is above all a “Crysten” and good king yet a flawed one, because incest and sorcery undermine Arthur’s reign.

In her unpublished dissertation Karen Cherewatuk examines medieval manuals on chivalry and finds that in *Morte d’Arthur*, the tales demonstrate the

conflicting demands of love and honor: Love that encourages a knight's prowess and increases his honor is commendable; any excess of passion that hinders the knight's quest for honor must be controlled by marriage. . . . Even more critical of the Round Table is the tale of the Sangreal, in which Malory upholds the traditional union of Christianity and chivalry and finds Lancelot, the best knight in the world, lacking in fortitude and stability. (208)

Honor, then, is the appropriate path for a knight; similarly, the *Confessio Amantis* tales related by Genius exemplify the proper response of the king, i.e. humility as an answer to pride and charity as the answer to envy. Cherevatuk's assessment addresses the same excess of passion shared by the characters in Gower's tales.

Helen Cooper finds that fifteenth-century romance often pursues "a fantasy of high chivalry that disguise[s] the moribundity of its underlying ideology" (143). In contrast to the fond remembrance of chivalry the way it used to be, contemporaneous events must certainly have shaken the beliefs of those who lived through them. The Hundred Years' War, which so concerned Gower, has been tagged as particularly ferocious war of a type previously unseen in England;

the honest yeoman of Edward III's time had evolved into a professional soldier of fortune, and had been demoralized by the prolonged and dismal Hundred Years' War, at the close of which many thousands of ruffians, whose occupation had gone, had been let loose in England. At the same time the power of feudalism had become concentrated in the hands of a few great lords, who were wealthy enough and powerful enough to become king-makers. The disbanded mercenaries enlisted indifferently on either side, corrupting the ordinary feudal tenantry with the evil habits of the French wars, and pillaged the countryside, with accompaniments of murder and violence, wherever they went. ("Roses, Wars")

It may be that 15<sup>th</sup> century Englishmen found similarities between their time and this earlier unsettled time. The Hundred Years' War ended it 1453, but the Wars of the

Roses followed soon after. Generations of Englishmen were embroiled in war and strife. Malory's book glorifies chivalry during a period of time in which values such as honor, virtue, and mercy were often ignored, yet its popularity suggests that many Englishmen enjoyed such tales, perhaps nostalgically longing for a return to order.<sup>20</sup> Cooper notes that the fall of Camelot comes about because of the splitting of the kingdom into viciously hostile magnate affinities in a manner analogous to [Malory's] own age of the Wars of the Roses" (826), a splitting which may be traced to the incestuous conception of Mordred.

Malory's decision to make Mordred Arthur's son has implications for the trajectory of the tales. Cooper finds that Malory's sources do not agree on Mordred's relation to Arthur; in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the accounts of Geoffrey of Monmouth Mordred is his nephew, son of Anna (Malory changes her name to Morgause) and King Lot. The *Brut* and *Suite du Merlin* likewise identify Mordred as Arthur's nephew. It is in the French Vulgate cycle that Anna is identified as Mordred's mother (Cooper 826). Malory's decision to "override," in Cooper's terms, the larger historical tradition that names Mordred as his nephew means that he shapes the story to emphasize the incest. Cooper terms Malory's book a "counter-romance," the antithesis of romance's happy ending, as Gower demonstrated repeatedly. Cooper says that

the prose romances differ from the stanzaic ones not just in medium but in structure and content, to the point where they demand a rethinking of our concept of the genre . . . the choice of prose over verse for stories of disaster, even when they also recount chivalric and amatory material, and the selection of such

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<sup>20</sup> Caxton's first edition was published in 1485 and reprinted five times, followed by at least 4 other editions by other publishers up until 1634. See Archibald and Edwards, *A Companion to Malory*, xiii, 241.

material for adaptation or translation into English prose, show that shift in the centre of gravity away from the comforting ideologies of the verse romances, with their calamities avoided or redeemed and political and familial order restored, to narratives that precisely deny those comforts. (820-22)

Felicity Riddy agrees that the form Malory chose for his book highlights his concern with the incest which tore the kingdom apart. While the first seven books are linked to each other, however tenuously, by their “juxtaposition in a single volume, [the continuity] is spatial as well as temporal” (882). But the final two books deconstruct the unity of the text and of the Round Table, and the last book contains the betrayal by Mordred and the realization by Arthur and Lancelot that the “noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys broken for ever” (654). The *Morte d'Arthur* begins ignobly, with sexual transgression and deception on the part of Arthur's father, leaving Arthur as the unrecognized son of a disguised Uther's adultery, spotting the Pendragon reputation, and questioning the generic conventions of romance.

When Arthur was crowned king, his most immediate task was to bring order to his land, which had devolved into confusion and turmoil during the time after Uther's death. Many of the knights and kings resented Arthur and demanded from Merlin to know “For what cause is that boye Arthur made your kynge?” (11). But Arthur's actions are less like the most renowned Christian king than they are like those of Gower's wrathful kings. The wars Arthur fought to consolidate his kingdom were finally ended by Merlin, who chided Arthur for excessive slaughter: “Hast thou nat done inow? Of three score thousande thys day hast thou leffte on lyve but fyftene thousand! Therefore hit ys tyme to sey ‘Who!’ for God ys wroth with the for thou woll never have done!”

(24). Arthur is overcome by wrath which, as Genius taught Amans, “Wol as an angri beste loure, / And no man wot the cause why” (*Confessio Amantis* III.30-31). And Arthur in a murderous rout sounds much like Genius’s description of Eolus, who “Between the wawe of wod and wroth” (*Confessio Amantis* III.217) condemned his daughter. In this state, Arthur’s inner—and physical—sight is compromised, for he does not recognize Merlin in disguise, though his companions Ulfius and Brastius do at once.

Metaphorical blindness has been connected by Gower to those kings who lost their reason, blinded by selfish, usually *unkynde*, sometimes incestuous desires. It is significant that Arthur’s lapse is recounted at this juncture in the story. The very next line in the book relates the coming of the earl Sanam and his daughter Lyonors, a “passing fayre damsel” (26), upon whom Arthur immediately “sette hys love gretly” (*ibid.*). It is reported that Lyonors bore Arthur’s child, Borre, who became a knight of the Round Table. But word reached Arthur that King Ryens was making war on King Lodegraunce, “for the whyche kyng Arthure was wroth, for he loved hym well and hated kyng Royns, for allwayes he was ayenst hym” (27). After Lodegraunce was rescued, Arthur’s eyes fell upon Guenevere, and he at once loved her and married her. Twice, in short succession, Arthur’s wrath is followed by his love for a beautiful woman. His sight and his reason show signs of instability.

Malory’s next tale contains the incest which eclipses the marvels of all the other adventures of the Round Table knights. Its proximity to the tales of conjoined love and wrath links it to the blindness and loss of reason that Gower, too, often associated with incest. King Lot sent his wife Morgause to court to spy on Arthur; with her came her

four sons, Gawain, Gaheris, Agravaine, and Gareth. She was a “passing fayre lady” wherefore “the kynge caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her” (27). The logic is interesting; because she is fair, *therefore* Arthur engages in sexual relations with her. Arthur “begate upon hir sir Mordred. And she was syster on the modirs side Igraine unto Arthure . . . Than the kynge dremed a mervaylous dreme whereof he was sore adrad. (But all thys tyme kynge Arthur knew nat [that] kynge Lottis wyff was his sister)” (28). The narrative seems to shield Arthur from criticism over sleeping with his sister. There is an implication that because he did not know, the incest was not accounted dishonorable. But no comment is made on the fact that sister or not, she is another man’s wife, and Arthur a married man. His dread over the dream, which was of griffins and serpents that burnt and killed all the people in the land, is an implicit warning about his dishonorable behavior, yet he put it out of his mind as he gathered his knights to go hunting.

Arthur pushed his horse so hard on the hunt that the animal “lost his brethe and felle downe dede” (28). The intensity of the hunt reflects the effort Arthur made to put the thoughts of the dream out of his mind. While waiting for a new horse, Arthur sat down and “felle downe in grete thought” (28). Suddenly he hears a strange sound and sees

the strangeste beste that ever he saw of herde of. So thys beste wente to the welle and dranke, and the noyse was in the bestes bealy [lyke unto the questing of thirty coupyl houndes, but alle the whyle the beest dranke there was no noyse in the bestes bealy]. And therewith the beeste departed with a grete noyse, whereof the kynge had grete mervayle. And so he was in a grete thought, and therewith he felle on slepe (*ibid.*).

Again, the timing of this encounter is significant. Arthur attempts to repress thoughts of his terrible dream, but even the sight of the strange beast cannot keep him from slipping back into a dream-state, as if he needs to finish processing the message. But the appearance of the Questing Beast is related to the dream.

Though Malory omits the story of the Beast's origins from his likely sources, the Post-Vulgate Cycle and the *Suite de Merlin*, in those it is made clear that the beast was born as the result of thwarted sibling incest—and diabolical intervention (Hanks 196). A princess fell in love with her brother, entreating him to lie with her, but, horrified, he rejects her. Perhaps Amans would have recognized this as an example of the correct response to such a situation. The princess was prevented from committing suicide in her despair by Satan, who appears to her in the person of a handsome young man, and offers to help her if she will promise to obey him. On his advice she tells her father that her brother has raped her and the boy is sentenced to be eaten by wild dogs. He goes to his death maintaining his innocence, but prophesies that God will avenge him and that his sister will bear a monster with yelping hounds in its belly. This monster-child, the Questing Beast itself, is the product of “two things that were never intended by God to be mixed” (Hanks 196.) and is easily read as a warning against the horrors of incestuous unions. The Beast wanders all through the Arthurian landscape, forever hunted by Pellinor, who appears to tell Arthur that his family has been charged with the task of following and destroying the creature as their knightly quest. The fact that Pellinor and his family never achieve this quest is certainly symbolic of the fact that the sin of incest

can not be ameliorated, at least not without the confession and repentance that Arthur neglects to offer.

The Beast may be interpreted as symbolic of the pagan, and of incest. It is a divided creature, a hybrid of serpent and leopard;<sup>21</sup> leopards are themselves a result of an unnatural union of lion and panther. The Beast is unnatural, *unkynde*; it is something that nature never intended. The queching noise that emits from its belly is disturbing, as it sounds like an internal war which threatens to tear the animal apart from the inside—civil war in a microcosm. Notably, the queching noise stops while the animal drinks water, something evidently as natural for beasts as for man, suggesting a similarity between man and beast. That these events appear so very close together in the text is indicative of the ill effects upon the whole land of a ruler whose kingdom is founded upon magic and sexual transgression, including incest; all are symptomatic of the king's inability to rule his passions wisely.

When Arthur's horse is brought to him by a yeoman, Pellinor takes it to replace his own horse. Strangely, Arthur is unable to prevent this. He, as any knight, is at a great disadvantage without a horse. He is impotent, unable to do anything other than sit passively and doze off in the sunlight, as an old man might do. While waiting for his yeoman to fetch yet another horse, Merlin passes by, this time in the form of a boy. Despite his earlier encounter with a disguised Merlin and the details the boy relates, Arthur does not recognize the wizard and "he was wrothe with the chylde" (29). Merlin, appearing as an old man, passed Arthur soon after that. "The chylde tolde you trouthe,"

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<sup>21</sup> It is so described in the Post-Vulgate cycle.

said the old man, “and more he wolde a tolde you an ye wolde a suffirde hym, but ye have done a thyng late that God ys displeasid with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hire ye have got a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme” (29). Again Arthur must ask the stranger his name, for he is still blind to the truth. And when the new horse arrives, he rides with Merlin to demand an explanation of Igraine, realizes that she is his mother, and embraces her. No attempt to address the incest that prompted the prophetic dream is made, and it seems as if this continues to metaphorically emasculate Arthur as he next loses his sword, even more crippling than the loss of horses. It is up to Merlin to help Arthur to obtain the sword Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. Merlin asked “ ‘Whethir lyke ye better the swerde othir the scawberde?’ ‘I lyke bettir the swerde,’ sayde Arthure. ‘Ye are the more unwise, for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde, for whyles ye have the scawberde upon you ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded. Therefore kepe well the scawberde allweyes with you’ ” (36). Rearmed, Arthur next makes an astoundingly un-chivalric decision.

Especially troubling for a Christian king whose chivalric code demands that he succor widows and orphans is the incident of the May-day children. At the end of Book I Arthur, Herod-like, “lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes; for Merlyon tolde kynge Arthure that he sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be borne on May-day” (37). The May-day children were put into a “shyppe to the se and some were four wekis olde and som lesse” (37). One of these was Mordred, sent by Morgause. The ship drove ashore and wrecked and all were

killed save Mordred, who was found and fostered by a good man until he reached the age of fourteen. The May-day story is troubling for a number of reasons. It is sometimes difficult to reconcile the actions of the Arthur celebrated in English history as a just and virtuous king with a man who would murder children. Though this is archetypal in nature, aspects of the story do not fit into traditional plots; J.D. Bruce notes that the first of May is a birthday of great auspice and one that is often assigned to a hero figure (233), though Mordred is clearly an anti-hero. The story of the infant cast to sea at birth often foretells his heroic nature, as is the case with Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, and Gregory. Of course, Mordred is much more like Judas, the anti-hero cast upon the sea but saved to fulfill his own destiny.<sup>22</sup> Otto Rank's study of *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend* accounts the motif of the child exposed to sea as symbolic of birth, with the parent pulling the child from the womb of the ship floating in the water. But every time a boy is born the father, subconsciously aware of his son's infantile yet still incestuous sexual desire toward his mother, sees him as a potential threat (214-7), and the cycle repeats. Arthur's lords and barons were "displeased" over the loss of their children, but they "putte the wyght on Merlion more than on Arthure. So what for drede and for love, they helde their pece" (37). Fear of Arthur's wrath clearly outweighs love—his for the children of his land, and the parents for their children, and by the end of the book Arthur's kingdom has failed. But as Cherewatuk notes, although Arthur is capable of vengeance,

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<sup>22</sup> According to Jacobus de Voraigne's *Golden Legend*, Judas's mother dreamed that she would bear a child that would be the ruin of all their people, so she placed him in a basket and set it adrift. He was rescued by the Queen of Scarioth, who presented him as her own and raised him. Later, after unknowing incest with his own mother, Judas meets Jesus and does fulfill this prophecy.

he elsewhere displays the characteristics of a good king; he places the common good before his private desires; he upholds the law and acts as an impartial judge, even toward his wife; he loves his knights and regrets having to choose among them (236).

Gower's readers would have recognized the wrath and the incest as symptoms of the unrestrained passion, poor self-governance, and *unkynde* love that crippled so many of the kings in *Confessio Amantis*.

Arthur's intention in slaughtering the children was to make sure that he destroyed his own son. As the riddle of *Apollonius of Tyre* indicates, incest is a sort of cannibalistic self-consumption, as the incestuous parent consumes or otherwise uses his child to strengthen his own body. The paramount duty of a king is to produce a legitimate heir; it is even more true for a queen. In this both Arthur and his queen fail, she from barrenness and he because his heir apparent is the result of incest. Arthur is able to father children—one out of wedlock and one the product of incest—but unable to produce a legitimate heir for his kingdom. It seems likely that Guenevere's barrenness is a function of the narrative, providing an emphasis on the patrilineage that was so important to medieval European societies. Because it has been proven that Arthur can father children, the burden of failure falls to Guenevere, who not only has relations with her husband but with Lancelot too and gets pregnant by neither. Barrenness is sometimes seen as a (fortunate) result of incest; other times, incest is feared to produce deformed children, or monsters, as in the case of the Questing Beast. If the idea of Guenevere bearing Lancelot's bastard child, making Arthur a cuckold, is so untenable that she must remain barren, she nevertheless does manage to provide Arthur with a Round Table full of

surrogate son-knights. Cherewatuk posits that the Table—Guenevere’s dowry—and the knights she brings with her symbolize her womb and its fruit,<sup>23</sup> even to the roundness of the Table mimicking the shape of the pregnant body. This is reinforced by the fact that the Table once belonged to Uther, as Arthur remarks to Merlin: “I love Gwennyvere, the kynges doughtir of Lodegrean, of the londe of Camelerde, the whyche holdyth in his house the Table Rounde that ye tolde me he had hit of my fadir Uther” (21).

Symbolically, then, Uther’s property—and fifty of his men—do get transferred to his son through Guenevere. Arthur’s—and Uther’s—genetic makeup is bypassed, and in the end Mordred is destroyed and the kingdom passes to another man, demonstrating how incest disrupts patriliney.

Arthur and the Round Table knights go on to many adventures before the end comes, during which time he met Lancelot, the knight of most ‘worshyp’ in the land. Lancelot embodies the intrinsically divisive nature of chivalry, and the tension between the charity and cupidity. Even Lancelot is not strong enough to overcome his natural inclination toward adulterous love. Even while on a quest to find the holiest item of all time, his thoughts were on Guenevere. His entire life has been devoted to gathering reputation and fame; yet at the same time he is betraying the fundamental oath of chivalry, honor, by sleeping with the wife of his king, subjecting her to charges of treason, punishable by death. Archibald and Edwards argue that Lancelot will remain “peerless throughout Malory’s tales, except for the *Tale of the Sankgreal* where spiritual values replace earthly chivalry, and Lancelot’s illegitimate son Galahad become the best

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<sup>23</sup> See Cherewatuk 32-6.

knight” (149). Yet it is not enough to overcome Lancelot’s human nature. Even after the adventure of the Grail, Lancelot,

as the booke seyth, . . . began to resorte unto queen Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promise and the perfeccion that he made in the queste; for, as the booke seyth, had nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys mindis so sette inwardly to the queen as he was in semynge outewarde to God, there had no knight passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. But ever his thoughtis prevly were on the queen, and so they loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehand, and had many such prevy draughtis togydir that many in the courte spake of hit (588).

According to chivalric values his love might be construed as virtuous it falls into the realm of *kynde*, the natural reaction of a healthy man and woman who are attracted to each other, but it is at the same time *unkynde* because it breaks the bonds of the relationship between king and knight—a relationship semi-fraternal as brothers in arms and paternal as king is the head of the kingdom. The betrayal of Arthur by Guenevere and Lancelot provides an opportunity for Mordred to strike against his father.

Mordred and Agravaine set a trap for Lancelot and Guenevere and catch them in a compromising situation. Lancelot escapes, Arthur sentences Guenevere to death at the stake, and Lancelot duly rescues her. The two flee to Lancelot’s castle in France. Arthur and his knights follow, and Mordred capitalizes on Arthur’s vulnerabilty which is compounded by division among his subjects; many of the knights had become incensed at the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere and Arthur’s inability to control his wife. In the disarray “much peple drew unto [Mordred]” (679) and many began to speak against the king, much to the poet’s dismay:

Lo ye all Englysshemen, se ye hat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kynge and nobelyst knight of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes, and by hym they all were upholdyn, and yet might nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with hym. Lo thus was the olde custom. Alas! Thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no thyng please no terme. (1129.5-14)

Thus knight and commoner—two of the three estates—share blame for the fall, in a form of estates criticism like that found in *Confessio Amantis* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The disloyalty of Arthur’s knights and his people make it difficult and eventually impossible for him to keep his kingdom intact.

After a long, fruitless siege of the castle in France, a papal bull arrives, ordering Arthur to take Guenevere back and to make peace with Lancelot. Arthur returns to England, and Lancelot brings Guenevere back as promised. But Arthur, egged on by an enraged Gawain, who lost all four of his brothers fighting Lancelot, followed Lancelot back to France to take revenge, leaving Mordred in charge of his kingdom and his wife. After several weeks Arthur heard that Mordred had counterfeited a letter declaring Arthur dead. Mordred crowned himself king and made plans to marry Guenevere. Arthur and his loyal knights hurried to England and the final battle began. Gawain, weakened by his fights with Lancelot, is killed.

Malory gives to this tale the title “The Day of Destiny.” It is an apt title, for Merlins’ long-ago prophesy is fulfilled. Mordred was the result of the thing which displeased God—Arthur’s unrepented incest. Arthur committed this sin unknowingly, but Mordred would do so with fully comprehended malicious intent; in fact, he would compound and double the sin of incest, passing on his father’s legacy in this fashion.

Mordred would have married his father's wife who, had she not been barren, might have produced another monster-child of incest. On the eve of the meeting of Arthur and Mordred, Arthur had a visitation from Gawain's ghost:

So upon Trynyte Sunday at nyght kyng Arthure dremed a wondirfull dreame, and in hys dreame hym semed that he saw upon a chafflet a chayre, and the chayre was fast to a whele, and thereuppin sate kyng Arthure in the richest clothe of golde that might be made. And the kyng thought there was undir hym, farre from hym, an hydeous depe blak water, and therein was all maner of serpentis and wormes and wylde bestis fowle and orryble. And suddeynly the kyng thought that the whyle turned up-so-downe, and he felle among the serpents, and every beste toke hym by a lymme. And than the kyng cryed as he lay in hys bed, 'Helpe! Helpe!' . . . So the kyng semed veryly that there cam sir Gawayne unto hym. . . [Gawain said, "I come] for to warne you of youre dethe: for an ye fight as to-morne with Sir Mordred, as ye bothe have assigned, boute ye nat ye shall be slayne. . . God hate sente me to you of Hys speciall grace to gyff you warnyng that in no wyse ye do batayle as to-morne, but that ye take a trefyse for a moneth-day (684).

The battlefield scene is tragic as scores of knights fall in the fighting, and especially poignant as the 'trefyse' was broken by mistake when a soldier drew his sword to kill a snake. Interpreting this as a hostile act, the soldiers set upon each other. Arthur and Mordred slay each other and Arthur is borne away to Avalon to the sound of ladies and queens shrieking and weeping.

Elizabeth Edwards notes that the tragic tone of *Le Morte d'Arthur* may be due to a pagan, secular view of tragedy as the fall from greatness brought about by the hero's flaws, or by a Christian hero who is overcome by sin yet may still have hope of divine grace, with proper confession and penitence.<sup>24</sup> Is Arthur to be a king upholding the old, pagan values embodied in Merlin's magic, or one who rules by divine right, as

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<sup>24</sup> See Archibald and Edwards, eds. *A Companion to Malory*. 155-6.

demonstrated to all present on that Christmas night in the “grettist chirch of London” (7) when he was crowned? The parallels linking Arthur to Christianity are unmistakable as are the references to pagan practices. It is Merlin the wizard who advises the Archbishop of Canterbury to issue the command for “all the lordes and gentilmen of arms” (7) to appear in the church, effectively sanctifying the proceedings. It is true that medieval sin could be classified and ranked, and that some sins were worse than others, but this Christian king neglects the thing that ameliorates all sin: confession and repentance. As has been demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the incest theme is often used in tales to teach medieval listeners that even this worst sin of all can be forgiven by a merciful God, with confession and repentance as prerequisites.

When Guenevere learned of Arthur’s death, she

lete make herself a nunne, and wered whyght clothys and blak, and grete penaunce she toke upon her, as ever ded synfull woman in thys londe. And never creature coude make her myry, but ever she lyved in fastynge, prayers, and almesdedis, that all maner of people mervayled how virtuously she was changed. (718)

After Lancelot learned of Arthur’s death, and that of all the other knights, he went to seek out Guenevere at the convent, who swooned thrice to see him. Now Guenevere at last takes the necessary action. Addressing herself to her ladies and Lancelot, publicly instead of behind closed bedroom doors, she takes responsibility for her actions, confessing that

thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste nobelest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne. Therefore, sir Launcelot, wyte thou well I am sette in suche a plyght to gete my soul hele. And yet I trust, thorow Goddis

grace and thorrow Hys Passion of Hys woundis wyde, that aftir my deth I may have a sight of the blyssed face of Cryste Jesu, and on Doomesday to sytte on Hys ryght side; for as synfull as ever I was, now are seyntes in hevyn. (720)

Guenevere understands what is needed to finally end the cycle of death and destruction. She joins Constance and Petronelle from *Confessio Amantis* in offering humility as an answer to sins such as pride and envy. It is not earthly love but confession and repentance that heals the division. Like Amans, she finally understood that her proper place was in the court of charitable love rather than that of courtly love. Lancelot and many of the Round Table knights followed her into religious orders; after Constantine was chosen king, he wished the remnants of the Round Table to join him, but they would not. The knights “drew them to theyr contreyes. And there they al lyved in their contreyes as holy men” (717). Virtually all of the knights and kings of Arthur’s time have either died or joined monasteries, putting an end to the court of chivalric love in England.

The rules of chivalry dictate that knights live honorably above all else; this means avoiding excess of passion and following a “middle way” of reason and charitable love. *Le Morte d’Arthur* chronicles the rise and the fall of the fellowship of Camelot, but there is considerable excess of passion among many of the knights and the king himself. Malory is careful to leave open the possibility that England has not seen the end of Arthur. But Arthur’s rejection of the world at the end of the book is, like Guenevere’s, a renunciation of the cupiditous and a turn to the charitable. After great misery and only at the end of his life does the king learn the lesson taught by Genius to Amans. The division, decline, and fall that concludes *Le Morte d’Arthur* is a result of the internal

corruption that plagues the Pendragon line. It is incest which will precipitate the fall of the “moost renommed Crysten kyng, fyrst and chyef of the thre bes Crysten, and worthy, Kyng Arthur” (3); Arthur’s act of incest produced Mordred and Mordred betrays and kills his king and father-uncle, brings civil war to the land, and commits both adultery and incest with Guenevere. Arthur’s incest brings about the fall of the great fellowship of chivalric knights. It is the configuring of incest as representative of the loss of self-governance that allows unkynde, selfish, cupiditous love to overwhelm Arthur’s better nature. He is lost to himself much as Amans was.

On the way to losing his reason and even his self-identity, Amans is unable to distinguish between charity, the love for others that flows from God to the king and thus into his land, and cupiditas, selfish love that cares only for the pleasing oneself. Genius spends considerable time tutoring his pupil on the absolute danger of arrogant, wrong love. Incest threads its way throughout the poem, showing up in the worst tales of wrong love and is consistently configured as the ultimate form of the tyranny which is so dangerous to the king—and to his people. Malory’s King Arthur suffers from the same malady as Gower’s incestuous kings: he does not guard against sliding into self-love and by privileging his wants over the common good, leads his knights and his land into chaos and destruction. Arthur’s tyranny bring about the very thing that Gower warned against—division, decline, and destruction of the kingdom and of the individual. It is incest which dooms Arthur, his knights, his family, and his kingdom. The tales told by Gower and Malory demonstrated the need to guard against tyranny. The family, with the father at the head, can be analogized to the king as head of the family of the nation, and if

the head of the family, or nation, loses his reason and descends into irrationality, then all people suffer.

### CHAPTER III

#### ‘INCEST IS IN ME’: INCEST AND EARLY MODERN DRAMA

Incest is certainly a familiar trope in medieval tales; writers often appropriated pre-Christian tales to highlight the dangers of poor self-governance. Incest is formulated as the ultimate expression of the destructive effects of loss of self-control, as passion overcomes reason and the human slides toward the bestial. Perilous for the individual, it is disastrous in a king, as he puts an entire nation at risk. This chapter will interrogate the changes in usage of the incest motif from the medieval period into the early modern age by examining three specific works. As English society consciously moved against Catholicism as a method of understanding the world, it might be expected that interest in old-fashioned tales of such “unkynde abhominaciouns” would fade from popularity and usefulness, but instead it mushroomed and found expression on the stage.

As Gower and Malory knew, medieval Englishmen were no strangers to dynastic shifts. The several dedications of *Confessio Amantis* reveal one such shift from Richard II to Henry IV, as well as awareness of the prudence of avoiding any outright critique of the king. Malory’s knights of Camelot experienced the armed conflict and intermittent battles that mirrored the rivalry between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians which culminated in the rise of the Tudor line when Henry Tudor won the crown from Richard III on Bosworth Field in 1485, effectively ending the Wars of the Roses and establishing peace.

Henry Tudor's first order of business after Bosworth Field was to strengthen his somewhat tenuous claim to the throne. Royal genealogists quickly established a line of descent from Arthur of Camelot, and Henry capitalized on this by naming his first son after the legendary king. The Round Table of Camelot was purported to have been housed in his own Winchester Castle, the painting in the center of the table of a king bearing a striking resemblance to Henry (Boehrer ix). The connection between Arthur and Henry VII was thus strengthened as Henry began to establish both a personal and national identity. His connection to the legendary Arthur was perhaps a strategy to demonstrate his right to rule through his descent from a famous and well-loved legendary king.

That the Tudor house sought to legitimize itself through Arthur of Camelot, whose reign ended in large part because of incest, seems to have been unremarkable at the time but is of course the ultimate irony when considering the part that incest played in Henry VIII's rule. The new Arthur, Henry VII's heir, married Catherine of Aragon and died childless, at which time she was married to Arthur's brother Henry (VIII) in order to maintain the alliance with Spain. After twenty years of marriage to Catherine, Henry, desperate for a male heir, declared that his conscience had suddenly awakened him to the sin—incest—that he had committed by marrying his brother's wife. Citing Levitical law, "And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless" (Lev. 18:16), he determined that this illegitimate marriage was the reason for his lack of a son. Catherine refuted this claim for many reasons, one of which that there had been a child: Mary. Furthermore, when Henry

wished to rid himself of Anne Boleyn, he used incest doubly, arguing that because he had previously had a sexual (adulterous) relationship with Mary Boleyn, his marriage was invalid because it created a consanguineous relationship; the list of crimes of which Anne was accused at her trial included a sexual relationship with her brother George.<sup>1</sup> As has been noted, the definition of incest—the degree of consanguinity that constitutes sin, if not crime—had been a matter of interpretation for centuries, with a certain degree of elasticity which made exploitation an easy political and ecclesiastical ploy. Henry VIII capitalized on this elasticity to perpetuate the dynasty created by his father Henry Tudor, appropriating incest for his own ends, an action that was perhaps not without precedence: “Where interest of rank or property steps in,” says Firth, “the incest prohibition is likely to melt away” (qtd in Whigham 168). The obvious first result of Henry’s charge of incest to dissolve two marriages was to increase the ambiguity of essential tenets of national identity, such as the absolute assurance that England and its kings were participating in divine order.

Drawing an imaginary line between “medieval and “early modern” is an imprecise discipline, but it is true that both medieval and early modern representations of incest, as recorded in the texts under examination, reflect concurrent societal concerns. What may be gleaned from this examination is insight into what those concerns were. In the medieval era Malory and Gower included incest themes in their work to reflect concerns about the morality of the individual and the king; an inability of govern oneself indicates, in the monarch, an inability to govern the nation. Their works offer criticism of

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<sup>1</sup> Anne was accused of treason and witchcraft in addition to incest, and of plotting regicide. See Weir for a detailed report of the arrest, trial, and execution of Anne Boleyn.

the incestuous king because incest is a form of tyranny, one which actual kings must avoid for the sake of the nation. Incest abounds in early modern texts, too, building on earlier fears of tyrannical kings with concerns over the stability of the current social structure—monarchy and patriarchy. I have briefly sketched an outline of the state of the English monarchy during the long transition between these ages, and the extent to which incest regulations—and the overlooking of such regulations—played a part in shaping the dynamics of kingship. But what else might account for the differences in representations of incest from the medieval works of Gower and Malory to those found in early modern drama? An examination of three plays will help to root out some of the concerns of Elizabethan and Jacobean England as they are expressed through works with an incest theme.

Shakespeare's *Pericles* (c. 1607), Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King, and No King* (1619), and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1613) demonstrate the expected attention to the policies and politics of Elizabeth and James, but other concerns of the dominant social class can be glimpsed: fear of tyranny, of atavism, of increasing female agency, and of attack and destruction from below. Reading incest across time periods reveals that the medieval worries expressed through incest in Gower's and Malory's works—the problem of poor self-governance in individual and in king—continued to cause anxiety for the next two centuries until they were compounded by the emergence of new concerns. I argue that incest in early modern plotlines continues to reflect fears over tyrannical kings, but also begins to reflect a conservative desire to maintain existing social and class structures, and the need to defend them against erosion from emerging

societal forces. The plays focus on the challenges of increasing female agency to patriarchy and of upward class mobility to the nobility and potentially to the monarchy, and these newer threats prove to be a more pronounced concern, as evidenced by the treatment of the female and lower class characters in the end of the plays, than the tyrannical male characters in Gower and Malory. The censure of Antiochus's daughter in *Pericles*, the marriage of Panthea in *A King, and No King*, and the gruesome fate of the Duchess of Malfi provide three examples of the ways that the threat of increasing female agency are dealt with, with *The Duchess of Malfi* also presenting a resolution of the problem of the pretensions of the lower class to rise above their stations. These three works seem to question new, 'modern' attitudes toward the roles of women and the lower classes, but the resolutions of the plays leave no doubt as to what those roles should—must—be.

It will be noted that these three early modern plays were first performed near the time or soon after James' succession to the throne in 1603. James, an absolutist monarch, outlined his political philosophy in a speech to Parliament on March 21, 1610:

The estate of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods. . . . Kings are justly called gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth. . . . Kings are also compared to fathers of families; for a king is truly *parens patriae*, the politic father of his people. And lastly, kings are compared to the head of this microcosm of the body of man (James I, qtd. in Lively 39).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> King James's speech to Parliament, 21 March, 1610.

Gower's *Genius* noted Pope Gregory's analogy of man as microcosm, a world contained within the individual, but James places himself at the head of a political body. In *Confessio Amantis* and *Morte d'Arthur*, incest is used to criticize the tyrannical king, dividing individual man from his reason with dangerous effect, and James' statement of his absolutist philosophy may seem to stray toward a declaration of tyrannical intentions. The appearance of incest in the plotlines of Jacobean plays I will discuss begs the question of whether this may be a subversive critique of this philosophy. For James, the natural order demanded that the chain of authority extend from God, and through the king to men—and from men to women. Boehrer finds that the sin of incest in some early modern plays “allows the dramatist to trace the roots of unnatural tyranny to the covert abuses of domestic politics” (119). In an echo of James' theory of absolute monarchy, the kings created by some playwrights claimed authority by “controlling the boundaries of the family . . . [and fashioning] the personal and familial identities that figured in an emerging national identity. . . . incest is a recurring theme of English politics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a result, when the theater staged familial power, incest was frequently on stage as well” (Barnes 39). But incest is perhaps the ultimate subversive act, in a physical sense and as represented in early drama and literature. The dramatic works under consideration here, and others, ultimately configure incest as a tool of patriarchal control, and of quashing challenges to the established social order. This is a form of tyranny victimizing (or almost doing so) the female characters, or the subservient. Presenting incest as a representation of the dangers to those in and out of positions of power appears to demonstrate it to be subversive of absolute patriarchy both

in the family and on a national level, though the plot resolution often reverses this expectation. It is perhaps not surprising that of all the works produced by Renaissance playwrights, 80 contain an incest theme (Wilkinson 5).

One of these works with the most obvious reliance on incest in its plot is Shakespeare's *Pericles*. The story of Apollonius was well known, having been transmitted from classical tales from as early as the fifth century BCE (Archibald 4).<sup>3</sup> Gower's "Tale of Apollonius" was one of Shakespeare's primary sources, Gower having translated it from the Latin for the *Confessio Amantis* (Archibald 14). In fact, a character named Gower acts as the Chorus in Shakespeare's play, directing its interpretation much as Chaucer had the Man of Law comment on the impropriety of the same tale in the *Confessio Amantis*. The two texts are unequivocal in their critiques of the incestuous, tyrannical king. The plot of the traditional story is retained in *Pericles* and is anchored in father-daughter incest, but a comparison of Gower's tale to Shakespeare's play indicates a greater degree of antagonism toward the daughter in the early modern text.

In *Confessio Amantis*, the pathos of the daughter's anguish and suffering demonstrates her horror over her father's actions:

Bot sche, which hath ben overlad  
Of that sche myhte noght be wreke,  
For schame couthe unethes speke;  
And evere wissheth after deth,  
(*Confessio Amantis* VIII.322-47)

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<sup>3</sup> Archibald's study, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations*, studies the "literary transmission, reception, and taste" surrounding the long history of the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyre* and includes most, if not all, of the known translations of the story. They range from (oral) Greek, Syrian, Norse, Provençal, Bohemian, Icelandic and Roman, among others.

But Shakespeare has Gower introduce the play with an immediate condemnation of the girl: “Bad child; worse father! to entice his own / To evil should be done by none:” (Prol. 29-30). Though the multiple versions of this tale that Shakespeare used as his sources may account for some of this discrepancy between the two accounts of the unnamed daughter, Gower the Chorus treats her with notably less sympathy than Gower the poet had, and with a great deal less sympathy than was accorded to incestuous Canace. Gower ameliorated the incest on the part of these young female characters in the *Confessio Amantis* through the notion of *kynde* which put the burden of guilt on the fathers. Although sexual attraction is natural, the adult father should be able to restrain his passion, be it either sexual desire or anger, through reason; his use of coercion against his young and helpless daughter renders him the culpable partner, according to Gower. But Shakespeare’s Gower seems to discount this notion.

Gower’s *Tale of Apollonius* in *Confessio Amantis* describes the daughter of the incestuous King Antiochus with the words “pierless of beauty,” “tendre and soft,” and “tendre and ful of drede.” He relates that she “couthe not hir maidenhede defende,” (*Confessio Amantis* VII.286- 301) implying at least an attempt at such a defense. The girl makes much mention of her disgrace while the father’s own shame is entirely absent. As further evidence of the father’s tyranny, the only advice the girl’s nurse can offer is to let the king do as he wishes because “whan thing is do / there is no bote, / So suffren thei that suffer mote” (VIII.339-40). This daughter is clearly an innocent victim whom Gower’s readers were surely moved to pity. But in the intervening centuries the girl’s

reputation shifted such that viewers of Shakespeare's play are guided to her implicit complicity.

Like her counterpart in Gower, Antiochus' daughter in Shakespeare's *Pericles* does nothing to merit the appellations "bad child" and "sinful dame" but she bears the blame with and suffers the same punishment as her father. This condemnation may imply a reading of her sufferance of the incestuous relationship as eventual acceptance and enjoyment, making her death by lightning bolt more satisfying to Renaissance audiences. Maureen Quilligan reminds us that according to Renaissance sensibilities, it would have been assumed that the guilt was, in fact, shared between the two (215) and indeed, the daughter is made by Shakespeare to seem to be complicit in the incestuous relationship. Quilligan likens this identification of father and daughter to the story of Cordelia in *King Lear*; this daughter also shares the same fate as her father though she is kind and virtuous even in the face of Lear's latent incestuous patterns of thought and behavior. The close proximity in dates of composition of *Pericles* (1607-8) to *King Lear* (1604-5) gives this reading "authority" and "may grant insight into conventional Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural responses to the daughter's guilt and its appropriate punishment in a case of flagrant incest" (*ibid.*).

Another notable difference between the two versions is the encounter between Apollonius/Pericles and Marina. In Gower's version *kynde* continues to work on the characters; when Marina is sent for to entertain the woebegone stranger and cheer him with her cleverness, riddle-telling, and singing she obeys:

And in the derke forthe sche goth,  
 Til sche him toucheth, and he wroth,  
 And after hire with his honde  
 He smot: and thus whan sche him fond  
 Desesed, courtaisly sche saide,  
 “Avoi, mi lord, I am a maide,  
 And if ye wiste what I am,  
 And out of what lignage I cam,  
 Ye wolde noght be so salvage.”  
 . . .  
 And yit the fader ate last  
 His herte upon this maide caste,  
 That he hire loveth kindley,  
 And yit he wiste nevere why. (*Confessio Amantis* VIII.1691-1708)

Instinctively Apollonius feels an attraction for the girl and loves her, but, importantly, he is naturally repelled by the possibility of any physical, sexual contact. This repulsion demonstrates his innate decency and propriety, characteristics of a good king. The scene is greatly abridged in *Pericles*:

I am a maid,  
 My lord, that ne'er before invited eyes,  
 . . .  
 My derivation was from ancestors  
 Who stood equivalent with mighty kings:  
 . . .  
 (PERICLES) My fortunes--parentage--good parentage--  
 To equal mine!--was it not thus? what say you?  
 (MARINA) *I said, my lord, if you did know my parentage,*  
*You would not do me violence.* (*Pericles* V.1.85-101 italics mine)

Marina speaks as if she had suffered a physical attack, but violence had not been threatened here, nor had there been any physical contact between them. Recognition

comes not from an instinctive application of *kynde* but instead from Marina's resemblance to her mother and especially through her telling of riddles.

Archibald notes that "the ability to solve riddles has always been the supreme sign of royalty—incest not only the first sin, but also the first riddle" (24). Riddles are ways to teach and to demonstrate education: they may also disguise a potentially dangerous commentary or critique, as in the opening riddle scene common to all redactions of the Apollonius story. Riddles "have a fundamental association with incest and endogamy" (Archibald 24); the prototypical incest tale, *Oedipus Rex*, is the prime example of this. But there is a significant difference in the story of the riddle between Gower's version and Shakespeare's. Gower portrays the incest as the father's rape of his daughter but Shakespeare implies the daughter's willing participation. Gower's Antiochus speaks the riddle to Apollonius:

With felonie I am upbore,  
I ete and have it noight forbore  
Mi modres fleissh, whos housebonde  
Mi fader forto seche I fonde,  
Which is the Sone ek of my wif      (*Confessio Amantis* VIII.405-409)

Though Antiochus is speaking, he does so in the persona of the daughter. In Shakespeare's play, Pericles himself reads the riddle, again crafted in the "I" of the daughter's voice:

I am no viper, yet I feed  
On mother's flesh which did me breed.  
I sought a husband, in which labour  
I found that kindness in a father:  
He's father, son, and husband mild;

I mother, wife, and yet his child. (I.I.113-117).

This is in opposition to the account in *Confessio Amantis*, where it is “the wyld fader” who “thus devoureth / His oghne fleissh” (VIII.309-10). Shakespeare’s usage of the word ‘kindness’ brings to mind Gower’s concept of *kynde* and furthermore implies that the ‘labour’ was pleasurable to the girl. Instinctively recoiling from the incest he perceives, Pericles immediately rejects his initial feelings for the girl, demonstrating that he is a good king in control of his emotions. In other words, he learned what Antiochus did not: that tyranny is destructive to self, family, and nation.

The subtle difference in the presentation of the daughter in Shakespeare’s play seems to reflect early modern concern over growing female agency<sup>4</sup>. Marina is associated with tempest and ‘death,’ and her beauty and virtue make Marina a threat in Dionyza’s mind to her own daughter. Marina refuses to accept her fate when she is taken to a brothel, rejecting life as sexual receptacle. Furthermore, she teaches—not usually the purview of the female. She has wisdom not usually associated with female characters in early drama. She is sent to Pericles/Apollonius to cheer him, and in Shakespeare’s play the danger she presents is clear. Pericles looks at her with admiration, comparing her to his wife and flattering her almost as if he were beginning a courtship. In the long years of his exile he has never been tempted by another woman, but this young girl is attractive. He tells her that she looks “Like one I lov’d indeed” (5.1.125). Incest is a threat here, as it seems possible that he is attracted to Marina. Of course, Pericles, through his innate

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Tosi’s recent publication, “After Elizabeth: Representations of Female Rule in Massinger’s Tragicomedies,” discusses the representations of female power in Massinger’s tragicomedies.

virtue, resists and is made whole in both mind and identity, as he is rewarded by reunion with his wife and return to his throne. But even this may be considered subversive of patriarchy because this happens through the agency of a woman; the male cannot accomplish it without her.

In the play, Pericles addresses Antiochus on the moral responsibility of kings: “Kings are earth’s gods, in vice their law’s their will; / And if Jove stray, who dares say Jove doth ill?” (I.1.104-5). The power of the king, in accord with James I’s declaration, is absolute. Antiochus obeys his will in committing incest even though it is morally wrong. When Pericles discovers the sin, he must flee because there is no legal recourse to stop Antiochus. Pericles, in contrast to the tyrannical Antiochus, is the good king. In both versions, this good king gives his own grain to the starving people of Tarsus; he speaks humbly to the lowly fisherman who rescued him from the shipwreck, rewards those who help him, and takes care to see his daughter properly settled in a suitable marriage that is to her liking. Contrasting the good behavior of Pericles/Apollonius to the selfish, incestuous, perverted behavior of Antiochus allows Pericles/Apollonius to serve as a mirror for future good monarchs.

As time passes in the play we see that this character is also a model father, which is crucial to being a good king. His virtue, demonstrated through his rejection of incest and of the tyranny which would have served to excuse it, is rewarded by his reunion with his daughter and his wife and his restoration to his throne. He gains a son through the marriage of Marina to the right man, signaling “a return to patriliney and normalcy” (Archibald 18), as does Apollonius in Gower’s tale. As soon as Apollonius discovers his

daughter's identity, he gives her in marriage to Athenagoras—even before they set sail and he is reunited with his wife, thus preventing any possibility of incestuous desire on his part. By the end of the play society is set aright—and it is done so through a (male) king who acts as father to his nation as well as his daughter, trumping the destructive effects of Antiochus' incest. In the early modern period, according to Archibald, incest can represent a “disruption of domestic and social order . . . In the ending the reunion of the spouses with representatives of both the older and the younger generation, and the presence of the protagonist's son [son-in-law] mark the end of the disruption associated with incest, and a return to the accepted (patriarchal) social norms” (Archibald 59). That it is a man—specifically, a father, or patriarch—who, at least superficially, restores order and overcomes disruptive female sexuality signals the ‘rightness’ of patriarchy. These two small but critical differences in the versions of the tale point the way to a possible understanding of the anxieties over changing social and class—and gender—structures in the early modern period.

The double threats to the established patriarchal order of tyranny and female agency finds expression in other plays as well. First performed a dozen years after *Pericles*, Beaumont and Fletcher's tragicomic *A King, and No King* depends on its audience's fear of incest, whether subliminal or overt, for much of its dramatic power. *Pericles'* concern over tyrannical kings is echoed in the impending tragedy building in *A King, and No King*, which reflects concern about the potential tyranny of patriarchy and absolute monarchy. The plot appears poised to deliver a spectacle of rape, murder, and suicide, the result of the king's sexual obsession, loss of self-control and reason, and

willingness to sacrifice the lives of others to get what he wants. Only at the last minute does the plot veer from this path. The comic ending and happy resolution is made possible by the absolute suppression of female sexuality and the reaffirmation of patriarchy. In brief, the storyline is that Arbaces, king of Iberia, has won his battle against Tigranes, king of Armenia. Because the defeated Tigranes was still a noble character, and to encourage peace between the lands, Arbaces declares that he will give his beautiful sister Panthea in marriage to Tigranes. When the company returns to Iberia, Panthea approaches her brother, whom she has not seen for a dozen years, to welcome him home. He does not recognize her as an adult, immediately falls in love with her, and begins to deny privately and publicly that she is his sister. Inwardly, though, he feels the guilt of incest, which causes his emotions to wax to extremes. He orders Panthea imprisoned yet hears her admit that she loves him, too. Finally his lust threatens to overwhelm him and he vows to rape Panthea and kill himself.

Arbaces' angst builds for most of the play. He struggles between good and evil as he tries to avoid temptation, vacillating between his unnatural desire for his sister and his fear of the consequences of committing incest. But it is not only for himself that he is afraid, because he knows that acting on his desire would damn Panthea, too. Finally, though, even with the full knowledge of right and wrong, he is unable to refrain from committing the sin. Arbaces is "beset with personal ambition, yet frustrated by it; he is also filled with thoughts of self-deification. With these qualities, Arbaces is behaving very much like James" (Wilkinson 357). On his return home from long wars Arbaces displays his foe and prisoner, Tigranes, to his people and tell them that this capture has

made them safe. His speech to his people is paternal: “. . . when there is / A want of any thing, let it be known / To me, and I will be a Father to you” (II.868-70).

Arbaces, as brother and king, exercises his patriarchal authority over Panthea, deciding to offer her to Tigranes, but before he himself saw her. As absolute monarch and guardian of his sister he will brook no resistance to his will.

*Arbaces:* My sister take [the news of her betrothal] ill?

*Gobrius:* Not very ill.

Something unkindly she does take it Sir to have  
Her Husband chosen to her hands.

*Arbaces:* Why Gobrias let her, I must have her know, my will and not her own  
Must govern her: what will she marry with some slave at home?

. . .  
'Tis fit. I will not hear her say, she's loth. (III.1.1-22)

Arbaces claims for himself absolute control of his sister's sexuality. In her discussion of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Jankowski notes that the “nature of Renaissance dynastic marriage served almost totally to objectify the woman. She became an object of commerce who—passed from father to husband—sealed a bargain of greater or lesser economic significance” (228). Panthea too becomes an object of trade, with her brother following the same pattern as Duke Ferdinand in Webster's play. The tyrant does not think twice about using females or subordinates to advance his own desires.

Arbaces' passion for Panthea, conceived almost at his first sight of her, leads him dangerously close to the loss of his reason. To be ruled by desire and passion is to reject God-given reason and its corollary, self-control. If the psychomachic struggles end badly and the body wins out over the mind, then the person who houses both becomes more beast than human, having lost the divine gift of reason that separates man from beast.

Rejection of God and divine order relegates the offender to a bestial status. Arbaces himself personifies the “mungrell” mixture of two incompatible aspects—body and soul—of the human condition which are always warring.

At first Arbaces attempts to deal with this passion in a semi-logical, if nonsensical, way. Because knowledge of Panthea’s beauty and desirability first strike him by the eyes, he fashions himself as blind to her presence. Following are several instances of his willful unseeing:

*Gobrias.* Why does not your majesty speak?

*Arbaces.* To whom?

*Gobrias.* To the princess.

. . .

*Arbaces.* You mean this lady. Lift her from the earth:

Why do you let her kneel so long?—Alas!

Madam, your beauty uses to command,

And not to beg. . . . But where's my sister?

I bade, she should be brought.

. . .

*Gobrias.* Do you not see her there?

*Arbaces.* Where?

*Gobrias.* There.

*Arbaces.* There? where ?

. . . Why, do you mock me? I can see

No other here, but that petitioning lady.

*Gobrias.* Sir, it is she.

*Arbaces.* 'Tis false.

. . .

*Gobrias.* That lady, sir:

She is your sister; and she is your sister

That loves you so; 'tis she for whom I weep,

To see you use her thus.

. . .

*Arbaces.* Away! No more of this!

Here I pronounce him traitor,

The direct plotter of my death, that names

Or thinks her for my sister: 'Tis a lie,

The most malicious of the world, invented  
 To mad your king. (III.1.227-51)

Arbaces instinctively and immediately knows that unless he can parry the threat posed by his longing for this sister he will have no chance of a relationship with her; he chooses the tactic of denial. By his refusal to see Panthea as his sister and instead to see her as only a lovely woman, he tries to deny the risk of incest. But this mighty struggle takes its toll on him. Mardonius is right to wonder when he asks in an aside, “What, is he mad?”

Madness, the ultimate uncertainty and breach of good governance, imperils not only Arbaces but his people. Like Gower’s King Eolus, who ordered the death of daughter and grandson in a fit of mad rage, Arbaces would kill the innocent Panthea as his reason becomes unhinged. He is in danger of losing his reason because of his unresolvable internal conflict over his desire for his sister. The plot also disallows the possibility of any good resulting from a female on the throne; through his madness Arbaces enacts resistance to fears of atavism that plagued the dominant social class of the early modern age (Whigham 168) by giving thought to the fantasy of rape and death that is growing within his mind. Too, the dysfunction of the family may symbolize civil war, or fear of the destruction from within, for civil war and madness certainly threaten the status quo.

Arbaces’ growing sense of his own madness begins with a feeling of physical illness. His human reason is in danger of overthrow by the passion which reduces him to an almost sub-human creature driven solely by a lust that he can no longer keep under control. It is the same problem that most of Gower’s incestuous characters felt. Panthea

is as an “ungodly sickness” and “naught to [him] but a disease / Continual torment without hope of ease” hints at his growing loss of self-control and his approach toward bestiality. “Incest is in me,” he laments, and prays that the incest will leave his body. The observant Mardonius records the vacillations of the king: “he is vainglorious and humble, and angry and patient, and merry and dull, and joyful and sorrowful, in extremities and in an hour” (I.1. 84-6) and he is “strangely altered” (III.3.1). Arbaces’ growing madness is based in part on the frustration over what he perceives as the arbitrary nature of how his relationship with Panthea is defined. If he must accept that this woman is in reality his sister, then he will simply call upon his authority to undo that reality:

Shee is no kinne to me, nor shall shee be;  
 If shee were any, I create her none,  
 And which of you can question this? My power  
 Is like the sea, that is to be obey’d  
 And not disputed with (III.1.161-5)

Absolute monarch that he is, he wishes to define reality for himself instead of accepting a definition not of his own making and certainly not to his liking.

When it seems that this tactic will not work, his transformation begins. He undergoes violent sudden change and begins to question his identity: “Am I what I was / What art thou dost creep into my breast / And dar’st not see my face?” (III.1.78-80). Arbaces makes several statements that indicate precisely what it is he is transforming into:

I were much better be a king of beasts  
Than such a people. (I.1.233-4)

...

I will live in woods and trees (I.1.256-7)

...

He that undertakes my cure must first  
O'erthrow divinity, all moral laws,  
And leave mankind as unconfin'd as beasts,  
Allowing them to do all actions  
As freely as they drink when they desire. (III.1.196-200)

Finally, he is unable to withstand the onslaught of passion and its destructive nature and the beast is poised to emerge. He plans to rape Panthea and then kill both her and himself. It is at this point that the mechanism of tragicomedie—the abrupt and surprising detour in the plotline from certain tragedy to conservative comedy—serves to save the hapless king and the play itself from sorrow.

A comic—and conservative—ending ensues when Arbaces' true identity is revealed. At the last moment Arbaces and Panthea learn that they are in fact not brother and sister though they had been raised as such, and incest is averted. Arbaces is really the son of another man and Panthea is the true queen of Iberia. So Arbaces is not the rightful king, but when he marries Panthea he once again becomes king. Panthea's queenship is quashed with astounding speed. She does what Elizabeth I did not; she immediately marries a suitable man and relinquishes the throne, an extremely conservative and perhaps satisfying action. In this way the comic ending of the play reaffirms that when existing patriarchal order is defended, society functions smoothly. The comic ending subdues the threat of female agency and Panthea plays her part by confirming, through her words and her actions, that she *should* be ruled rather than

exercise her own agency. Though she is the legitimate sovereign, Panthea at once marries Arbaces, steps aside, and Iberia gains a king instead of a queen. The implication is that it is only natural that everyone in Iberia wants a king—not a queen—as it follows divine order. Arbaces never rejects his feelings for Panthea; instead, she is transformed into a suitable partner through an unexpected revelation. Arbaces would have chosen sin and damnation had not the comic turn saved him from tragedy. Arbaces, and by extension all Iberia, lingered in disorder and near-madness until this order was restored. Shared political power cannot exist; there must be one sovereign in absolute control, and it should be a king instead of a queen. In this way the concerns of the dominant social class over the role of women are put to rest by reasserting patriarchy, while the growing sense of tragedy is a mechanism to explore the disaster that might befall a land under the rule of a tyrannical king.

The play approaches a criticism of the tyranny of absolute monarchy through the threat of incest. Boehrer condenses the impact of the plot of *A King, and No King* thus: Arane wishes to abide by the laws of patriarchy but is unable to conceive a child, leading her to concoct the infant-switch scheme. Then after the deed is done she does have a child, but it is a daughter instead of a son. At the beginning of the play Arbaces rules, which is a case of misdirected inheritance and a violation of primogeniture. But Arbaces' deference to Panthea as the proper ruler—a woman—violates patriarchy. Added to these problems is the evidently incestuous attachment between the two. In the end, these “three wrongs make a right,” which culminates in the “bliss of royal wedded love,” as God intended.

*A King, and No King* is also a tale which “symbolically defends [the existing] order against the combined threats of female sovereignty, misdirected inheritance, and endogamous sexual union” (Boehrer 101-2). Through Arbaces’ desire for his sister there is a “scenario for testing the logical corollary of absolutist theory which proposes that for a ruler, desire is its own legitimating principle” (Boehrer). This is, of course, the very definition of tyranny, and theatergoers know what happens to tyrants: they are destroyed, as Antiochus was in *Pericles*. But a female sovereign—female power in general—is likewise undesirable. The play does test various situations that England has found or might find itself in, and concludes that the only viable way for the nation to prosper is to return to the established norms of patriarchy and fixed social estates and gender roles.

In this play the issue of incest is explored in safety, undoubtedly a relief to audiences struggling with the indeterminacy of the definition of incest still. In this tragicomedy, a plot is set in motion that seems surely headed for death, destruction, and darkness. Only at the last minute does the plot veer sharply to a comic, romantic, and happy ending that serves to reassure its audience that the existing social system works for all. The uncertainty of tragicomedy is like the uncertainty of an audience as it struggles to find its way, and the lesson learned at the end is that the old way of patriarchy puts things back in order. Incest is a direct affront to divine order which in turn meant a challenge to society, for marriage is protected by social structures because it is, microcosmically, a reflection of divine order<sup>5</sup>. Once the baby-switch is revealed, the

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of early modern statutes governing incest, see my Introduction.

potential problem of having a female as monarch is quickly converted in a conservative expression of the upholding of the established, God-approved social order—patriarchy.

The upholding of patriarchy is again reaffirmed in John Webster's 1612 revenge tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, but with a very different outcome. The old order is not restored in a happy ending. In fact, to those who desire to maintain traditional social order, the outcome is the worst possible—the son of a lowly steward sits on the throne. Other revenge tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* also include the conventions of madness, violence, and murder, but *The Duchess of Malfi* is distinctive because of a peculiar manifestation of lunacy. In this play, Gower's worst fears come to fruition; the beast breaks through the restraints of reason and self-control and emerges to bring disaster to the entire court. Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedy is informed by the plays of Seneca—bloody revenge, ghostly visitations, mutilation, insanity real or feigned, a play-within-a-play, and violent deaths—in the way that much medieval literature is informed by Ovid and other classical authors. The desire for revenge sometimes begins to seem like a semi-religious quest that must be accomplished at any cost, even the death of the avenger. The avenger may be motivated to act by the injustice of the crime committed against him. This injustice, unaddressed, may drive him to the brink of insanity, as in *Hamlet*, where the ghost of the murdered king commands the prince to "Revenge [my] foul and most unnatural murder" (*Hamlet* I.5.30). But the introduction of mad, perverted sexual desire in *The Duchess of Malfi* adds a new and sinister element to the mix.

One of the prevalent themes in *Confessio Amantis*, which appears in *A King, and No King*, is the need for proper, moderated governance, both of the self and of the nation. Amans repeatedly hears lessons on what happens when a man acts unreasonably and by analogy when a king governs selfishly, as when he gives in to incestuous desires. It is true that in both *A King, and No King* and *The Duchess of Malfi* the actual incestuous act is averted. In the former, Arbaces had become overwhelmed by his passion, to the point of committing the sin knowing full well that the object of his lust was his sister. The plot allowed the last-minute save and restored him to his better reason. In the latter Ferdinand was also “saved” from sexual intercourse with the Duchess but through his will she died (“to die” being a well-known euphemism for sexual climax). He may not have engaged in intercourse with her but he possessed her body in the only way that his warped psyche could allow and following this, his inhuman, bestial nature emerged.

*The Duchess of Malfi* gains its dramatic strength from the horrific treatment of the title lady by her brothers. As fear of women’s power rose, so did the methods used to control them become more forceful. Though misogyny in literary works is ever present, Eileen Allman argues that Jacobean revenge tragedy is a vehicle for misogyny because men need to control women in order to exert dominance over other men. In a revenge tragedy, control over women and the resulting ill treatment of them is

the flower of male rivalry. When a man is defeated by another man, he is both unmanned and feminized; that is, he is stripped of cultural signs of dominance and forced to assume those of submission. . . . For the loser, then, femaleness is not a separate and distinct sex but a denial of maleness. . . that can easily be displaced onto women in the form of misogyny. . . . Degendering authority means deauthorizing maleness, severing the automatic connection between dominance and maleness not only in the tyrant but also in the subject. (19-20)

The plots of these three plays move toward “degendering of authority” by including the possibility that their women may not be controlled but may instead gain control, leading to chaos. In Webster’s play, though there is an implication that the Duchess may have deserved her fate for marrying outside her class and for disobeying male authority (her brothers)<sup>6</sup>, this reason for Ferdinand’s disapproval is complicated by his unacknowledged sexual desire for his sister. Presumably, the usual reason for a brother’s interest in his sister’s choice of husband is control of the widow’s estate. Presciently, her brother issues an ominous warning:

CARDINAL.

You may flatter yourself,  
And take your own choice; privately be married  
Under the eaves of night---

FERDINAND.                   Think 't the best voyage  
That e'er you made; like the irregular crab,  
Which, though 't goes backward, thinks that it goes right  
Because it goes its own way: but observe,  
Such weddings may more properly be said  
To be executed than celebrated.   (I.II)

Accosted by her brothers, who are intent on her remaining unmarried, the Duchess assures them that she shall never marry. She defies convention, however, by choosing her own course of action and by her duplicity. Her attitude is in opposition to Panthea’s. That lady’s sole purpose seems to have been to not only accede to the conventional societal desire to see women married to suitable men, but also to display happiness and

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<sup>6</sup> William Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure* (1567) is known to be Webster’s source for *The Duchess of Malfi*.

satisfaction with this situation. Indeed, the Duchess aggressively pursues her steward and initiates the marriage, usually the prerogative of the groom. Nor does the Duchess waste a moment in wedding Antonio.

After repeating her vow that she will never marry, she returns to her apartment, where Antonio is at that moment waiting for her. She installs her lady, Cariola, behind the arras, and propositions Antonio:

DUCHESS. Fie, fie, what 's all this?  
 One of your eyes is blood-shot; use my ring to 't.  
 They say 'tis very sovereign. 'Twas my wedding-ring,  
 And I did vow never to part with it  
 But to my second husband.  
 ANTONIO. You have parted with it now.  
 . . .  
 DUCHESS. Yes, to help your eye-sight.  
 ANTONIO. You have made me stark blind.  
 DUCHESS. How?  
 ANTONIO. There a saucy and ambitious devil  
 Is dancing in this circle.  
 DUCHESS. Remove him.  
 ANTONIO. How?  
 DUCHESS. There needs small conjuration, when your finger  
 May do it: thus. Is it fit?  
 [She puts the ring upon his finger]: he kneels. (I.II)

Is it fit? The ring itself may fit upon Antonio's finger, but her actions are most definitely unfit in the eyes of her brothers. To those seeking to maintain existing social and class structures, the actions of Antonio and the Duchess might provoke great anxiety. First, the widowed Duchess violates degree by marrying beneath her station. Lying to her brothers, she seeks personal happiness and satisfaction, choosing her second husband for herself instead of allowing her hand to be "properly" disposed by them. By the end of the

play, the Duchess will have been executed for just such a private marriage. Her assumption of authority over herself does de-authorize maleness; she defies the traditional role and is punished for it.

While modern audiences might cheer at the Duchess' assertion of her right to happiness and self-agency, earlier audiences would have accepted the need to get her (and her estate) under the control of a man. But not just any man will do; by marrying a steward, the Duchess absolutely plays to the fears of the dominant social class of degradation from below. Antonio, a member of a "new class of instrumental men, functional descendants of fifteenth-century retainers who fought the Wars of the Roses for their masters" (Whigham 175), was neither noble nor common, but sharing aristocratic power can serve only to weaken the hegemony of the nobility. It is this that must be halted at any cost, because the (aristocratic) family must be preserved. The Duchess therefore breached "civil, spiritual and natural laws; in this way, Jacobean audiences would have disapproved of her hasty marriage to Antonio" (Wilkinson 234).

In kingly (male) fashion, still certain in her own agency, the Duchess dismisses Antonio's concerns about Ferdinand and the Cardinal:

ANTONIO. But for your brothers?

DUCHESS. Do not think of them:

All discord without this circumference

Is only to be pitied, and not fear'd:

Yet, should they know it, time will easily

Scatter the tempest.

ANTONIO. These words should be mine,  
And all the parts you have spoke, if some part of it  
Would not have savour'd flattery. (I.II)

In fact, the Duchess has crossed the line in marrying outside of her social class. She has also crossed gender boundaries, making decisions for herself, disobeying her brothers, and taking on the male role in her courtship of Antonio. And if she takes on the male role, it begs the question of what position this forces Antonio into; his declaration that the Duchess's words of bravado and courage "should have been mine" indicates his awareness of the imbalance of power between them. As a Duchess, she has the right to command her steward but as a woman her next order to Antonio is imperious (masculine) rather than womanly:

DUCHESS. Kneel.

[Cariola comes from behind the arras.]

ANTONIO. Ha!

DUCHESS. Be not amaz'd; this woman 's of my counsel:

I have heard lawyers say, a contract in a chamber

*Per verba de presenti* is absolute marriage.

[She and ANTONIO kneel.]

...

DUCHESS. We now are man and wife, and 'tis the church

That must but echo this.--Maid, stand apart:

I now am blind.

ANTONIO. What 's your conceit in this?

DUCHESS. I would have you lead your fortune by the hand

Unto your marriage-bed:

...

CARIOLA. Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman

Reign most in her, I know not; but it shows

A fearful madness. I owe her much of pity. (I.II)

This appropriation of power from traditional, patriarchal authority to female agency is an example of the monstrous female that was certain to heighten fears of the power of a queen, unrestrained by male control.

As we have seen, the Duchess uses her ring to “cure” Antonio’s bloodshot eye. Soon after their *per verba de presenti* marriage, she declares herself to be blind. And indeed in the play there are many references to blindness. Often, blindness demonstrates the failure of a character to understand the true nature of self and world and deprives him of the spiritual perception necessary for a moral, whole life. The loss of sight relates to the ability to “see” in a deeper sense. Cariola, metaphorically and temporarily blinded by her position behind the arras, regains her sight and sees clearly enough to introduce the warning about madness that will overwhelm the action of the play. The madness of Ferdinand comes about through his inability to see and acknowledge his unlawful, incestuous desire for his sister. Like Amans, Ferdinand is unable to *see* his sins; there is no counterpart to Genius to come to the aid of the Duke and redeem him from his sinfulness. Arbaces’ inability to see his sister is, also like Ferdinand, willed by his own construction of authority and belief in absolute monarchy. Both men have a flawed vision of these women who occupy so much of their thoughts, thoughts which grow to sexual obsession, a sure symptom of unreason and improper self-governance. Ferdinand’s loss of reason blinds him to his position as the Duchess’s brother and as the ruler of a duchy for which he bears a moral responsibility. Blindness, like madness, prevents the right rule of the king; it serves as yet another tool for poets and playwrights to disquiet their audiences, audiences which may have already begun to feel anxiety over the slippage of traditional, conservative social and class structures. Ferdinand can no longer see like a man, for his true nature emerges as his reason slips further. His refusal to see is epitomized in one of the most famous lines of the play: “Cover her face; mine

eyes dazzle; she died young” (IV.II). His vision of himself and his feelings toward the Duchess are flawed and warped; his blindness to his deeds proves an inadequate shield to his actions, for the repression of his guilt manifests itself in other ways.

Ferdinand’s progression into madness is foreshadowed by the many immediate references to inhuman things. Bosola compares the brothers to a “plum tree . . . rich and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them” (I.I) He would “hang on their ears like a horseleech, till I were full, and then drop off” (I.I). Bosola wants to improve his own situation by parasitically draining the Cardinal and the Duke: others thrive in this way, so “why not I in these dog-days?” (I.I). Dog days are the hottest days of the summer and believed to be an evil time “when the seas boiled, wine turned sour, dogs grew mad, and all creatures became languid, causing to man burning fevers, hysterics, and phrensies”<sup>7</sup>. Considering Ferdinand’s affliction at the end of the play, the reference to dogs is especially telling. And the Cardinal is “a melancholy churchman. / The spring in his face is nothing but the engend’ring of toads” (I.II) Delio, hearing these descriptions, realizes about the Duke that “the law to him / is like a foul, black cobweb to a spider” (I.II). Not only does the animal imagery increase, it also becomes more lowly forms of animal life; spiders and toads are loathsome to many people.

As Ferdinand becomes increasingly mad, he orders Bosola to spy on the Duchess in his absence:

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<sup>7</sup> See Brady’s *Clavis Calendarium*, 1813.

BOSOLA.           It seems you would create me  
 One of your familiars.  
 FERDINAND.       Familiar! What 's that?  
 BOSOLA. Why, a very quaint invisible devil in flesh,--  
 An intelligencer. (I.II)

This casts Ferdinand into the role of witch. When he learns from Bosola's letter that his sister is pregnant, and still ignorant of her marriage to Antonio, his madness increases. He refers to the letter as a "mandrake root"<sup>8</sup> . . . [he has] grown mad with it" (II.II). The weight of animal and insect imagery and growing signs of madness evolve into a spectacular manifestation of lycanthropy. Having obtained a secret key to his sister's bedroom, Ferdinand steals in secretly when she is alone and lamenting to herself:

DUCHESS. For know, whether I am doom'd to live or die,  
 I can do both like a prince.  
 FERDINAND. Die, then, quickly!  
 Giving her a poniard.       (III.II)

This is almost a scene of rape: a woman alone, an unseen man entering her private quarters, the phallic dagger, and, again, the quick "death" suggesting sexual climax work together to give the scene a highly sexual charge. That the assailant is her brother reflects his internal debasement; as Duke, he represents the ruling class, suggesting its degradation. There is a parallel between this play and Gower's tale of Canace; her father the king offered her a dagger with the implication that she should use it on herself as punishment for her relationship with her brother. As here, the focus of that tale is on the

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<sup>8</sup> Mandrake, a member of the nightshade family and thus hallucinogenic, has a root system that sometimes resembles a human torso. According to legend, when the root is dug up it screams and kills everyone who hears it. Its association with madness is likely due to its psychotropic properties.

king's unreasonable and mad-making wrath. Ferdinand's actions towards his sister are wildly out of bounds. Like Eolus, he has lost his self-governance and acts with inappropriate rage. Both men rage because females whom they considered under their control decided upon their own sexual activities, and both, in the eyes of their father/brother, with unsuitable men.

Ferdinand accuses his sister of unchaste behavior to which she replies that she is married. His retort, "The howling of a wolf / Is music to thee, screech-owl" (III.III), emphasizes his growing bestiality. In speaking with his sister he uses the term "cubs" to refer to her children. Parted from Antonio, the Duchess is imprisoned in her palace. Ferdinand comes to her prison chamber with an order that no torch be lit so that he need "never to see her more" (IV.I). His blindness is willful and complete. In the darkness he gives her a severed hand with her ring on it, leading her to believe that Antonio is dead along with her children. Next he imports madmen from an asylum to "sing and dance, / And act their gambols to the full o' th' moon" (IV.II). The madman's song is similarly full of beasts:

O, let us howl some heavy note,  
 Some deadly dogged howl,  
 Sounding as from the threatening throat  
 Of beasts and fatal fowl!  
 As ravens, screech-owls, bulls, and bears,  
 We 'll bell, and bawl our parts,  
 Till irksome noise have cloy'd your ears  
 And corrosiv'd your hearts.  
 At last, whenas our choir wants breath,  
 Our bodies being blest,  
 We 'll sing, like swans, to welcome death,  
 And die in love and rest. (IV.III)

But as Ferdinand's outrages increase, the Duchess's mind grows stronger. Ferdinand wishes to drive her mad but instead completes his own transformation. He is shown the bodies of the dead, and Bosola demands to see some pity for the innocent children:

FERDINAND. The death  
 Of young wolves is never to be pitied.  
 BOSOLA. Fix your eye here.  
 FERDINAND. Constantly.  
 BOSOLA. Do you not weep?  
 Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out.  
 The element of water moistens the earth,  
 But blood flies upwards and bedews the heavens.  
 FERDINAND. Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young. (IV.II)

Ferdinand's eyes "dazzle" at the sight of the Duchess, according to Eileen Allman, because he "assumed that once she was dead and unable to cling stubbornly to her independent existence, she would be safe to look at," but instead "his reducing her to a body, and finally to a lifeless body, proves his own destruction" (154). Seeing her dead pushes him into the darkness of lycanthropy. His repeated efforts at blinding himself to reality unmoors him from reason; he suddenly appears unaware of and amazed at what has happened and threatens to kill Bosola in revenge:

BOSOLA. The office of justice is perverted quite  
 When one thief hangs another. Who shall dare  
 To reveal this?  
 FERDINAND. O, I'll tell thee;  
 The wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up,  
 Not to devour the corpse, but to discover  
 The horrid murder. (IV.II)

The mental burden of incestuous desire and murder prove too much for his psyche. The wolf counters the blind man with the compulsion to shed light on what has happened by digging up the corpse that the man would have kept buried. By preferring blindness and animalism, Ferdinand is surely losing his touch with reality and with his own human nature; he manifests beastly, primal urges and is lost to reason. The horrific plot of this play is more violent and gruesome than *A King, and No King*, in which events resolve themselves into a restoration of traditional social values. Ferdinand's madness results in destruction of his family and the lineage of the ruling class in Amalfi; the heir to the throne is the son of Antonio, not the son of an aristocrat, and this ruling family is no more. The shock value of the bloody events may serve to inflame the fears of those in the audience who fear the very encroachment of lower classes into the upper classes that they have just witnessed, and the lesson is clear—defenses around existing social structures must be strengthened.

The Duchess's murder "exploit[s] the age-old association between eros and thanatos, coupling, and killing" (McCabe 253). Freud speculated that this is "part of a fundamental need in all organic life, which was to return to an earlier condition, and ultimately to the original inanimate state which corresponds to *homeostasis*, the complete absence of tension in the organism. The erotic impulse therefore contains within it the desire for a kind of homeostatic death for, in seeking sexual union with the other, it represents an attempt to return to a primordial genderless state"<sup>9</sup> (Panagopoulos 138). This association may also explain the metaphor of climax as death, and the symbolism of

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<sup>9</sup> See Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. 1930. NY: W.W. Norton, 1989.

knife as phallus. Eros (Cupid) is famously portrayed as being blind and is sometimes accompanied by his brother, Anteros, whose task it was to seek revenge for unrequited love (Eros). His sister is forbidden to the Duke as a sexual partner but the attraction remains, causing a psychomachic struggle that leads to madness. He internalizes the incest taboo. Unable to couple with her, he seeks revenge by wishing to obliterate her. Jankowski finds that the phallic poniard given to the Duchess by her brother is a “technique of asserting his power over his sister by symbolically dismembering her body . . . Ferdinand’s implication that all a woman can enjoy of a man is his tongue/penis [which] suggests that all *she* is a mouth//vagina, a container for these objects. . . . The boundaries of the Duchess’s two bodies are indistinct and perpetually slipping” (229). The fact of the Duchess’s female-ness confuses her role as monarch and her actions as a sovereign, as does the conflict between the “conflicting claims of the Duchess’s bodies natural and politic” (Jankowski 223).

Frank Whigham conceives Ferdinand as a “threatened aristocrat, frightened by the contamination of his ascriptive social rank and obsessively preoccupied with its defense” (169). Try as he might, he is unable to control the boundaries of the Duchess’s “two bodies” or the boundaries around his own identity. This led to “friction between the dominant social order and the emergent pressures toward social change” (167) and fears of a “gradual contamination of the ruling elite by contamination from below” (*ibid.*). Men such as Antonio and Bosola, notes Whigham, are part of a new class of royal administrators that began to rise in the social hierarchy during the reigns of Henry VIII, Elizabeth, and James. Ferdinand perceives a threat that may mean the end of his own

carefully constructed identity. His sister's body becomes the nexus of his raging uncertainty, but the actual danger comes from another direction: from below. Ferdinand is unable to control his sister—hence, all women. Women, even royal women, are conceived as inferior to men as are people like Antonio and Julia, yet they pose such a threat to the aristocracy that Ferdinand retreats into madness; furthermore, if the king is unable to control mere women, it bodes ill for his ability to control men.

The three plays examined in this chapter reveal some of the specific concerns of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, a time which it may be said began in incest as did the Arthurian age that was so inspirational to Henry Tudor did. Incest disrupts family and societal structures, to be sure, but it begins in the early modern era to represent other tensions as well. Shakespeare's *Pericles* (C. 1607), Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King* (1619), and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (C. 1613) reflect the anxieties attendant to fear of regression and insidious threats from the very people that nobility relied on to attend them and make their world possible.

Incest in early modern plotlines reflects a conservative desire to maintain existing social and class structures and to defend them against erosion from emerging—and base—societal forces. The overarching conclusion to be drawn from consideration of what these threats may mean in the early modern era is that patriarchy must be supported and upheld. But only a patriarchy free from the tyranny and unsound judgment which ushers in chaos and suffering can allow the land to prosper, demonstrated by the contrasting portrayals of the good king and the bad king in *Pericles*. Patriarchy is also threatened by increasing female agency, which Arbaces deals with along with the threat

posed by his slide into unreason and tyranny. Antiochus proved to be a tyrannical king and Arbaces seemed to be following in those footsteps, but a comic twist in the end of the plot provided an end to both that threat and the threat posed by the possibility of a female ruler. To these fears is added another in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Duchess's brother becomes not only tyrannical but murderously demented by his apprehension over the uncontrolled sexuality of his sister and the power she wields. He also fears the rapid and easy entry of the serving class—a steward—into the nobility, entry that is directly attributable to the Duchess's usurpation of male power and privilege. Incestuous, transgressive desires threaten entire kingdoms and nations, and the only way to meet the threat is by a reassertion of patriarchy.

## CHAPTER IV

‘THEIR DARKEST AND MOST THREATENING FORM’:

## INCEST AND THE GOTHIC

*As the moon was now at its height, [Manfred] read in the countenances of this unhappy company the event he dreaded. What! is she dead? cried he in wild confusion—A clap of thunder at that instant shook the castle to its foundations; the earth rocked, and the clank of more than mortal armour was heard behind. Frederic and Jerome thought the last day was at hand. The latter, forcing Theodore along with them, rushed into the court. The moment Theodore appeared, the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly toward heaven. . .*

*(Castle of Otranto 112-3)*

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Threats to virtuous young ladies; confused identities; supernatural visions; storms mimicking human passions; wavering moonlight; collapsing castle walls; and perverted, incestuous sexual menace: all hallmarks of the new literary form arising in England in the mid-eighteenth century. The conventions which began to be associated with Gothic literature of flawed, deluded, and often mad characters; elevated, archaic language; and emotional instability seem to belong to a wild, disordered, and barbaric past. The past encroached, in many Gothic tales, on modern life that was supposedly based on philosophical and scientific advancements rather than tradition or superstition.

Though “Gothic” began to be applied to literature with certain characteristics and conventions, it cannot be precisely defined. It crosses boundaries both literary and social

and, as Kenneth Graham notes, is “an inevitable result of the revolutionary shocks which all of Europe was feeling in the late eighteenth century. [The Marquis de] Sade reminds us that the Gothic novel is a product of a revolutionary age” (260). Readers found that the Gothic novel “voiced a protest against the excess of rationalism and realism in the early eighteenth century” (Scarborough 6), reacting to the cultural transformations of the previous centuries in light of even more changes. The popularity of the Gothic form may have been because its response to the pervading cultural anxieties of the period was easily recognizable by such a wide range of readers. Ironically, too, the rising readership of novels “exacerbated the neoclassical fear that all romances and novels could produce antisocial effects and lead to social disintegration” (Botting 46). In the preface to the second edition Walpole defines his work as “an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern” (xxx), a union of two seemingly unmixable things.<sup>1</sup> Hogle notes that

the Gothic has frequently displayed generic instability, a visible and unresolved conflict between retrograde and progressive discourses, from aristocratic and middle-class ideologies to alchemy and modern science . . . that prevents its monsters and ghosts from reconciling their tensions between death-seeking and life-affirming tendencies. (29-30)

Often, incest is used to do the same things; in literary works it can represent confusion, ambiguity, and transgression, in much the same way that the Gothic conventions do. The

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<sup>1</sup> Compare this to the description of tragicomedy as a “mungrell mixture” of two competing and seemingly incompatible varieties of drama a monster wholly unknown to antiquity. . . .to join these two Copies of Nature together [is] monstrous and shocking” (Maguire 1). The idea of monstrosity and the unnatural, of the mingling of things which ought to be kept separate, belongs also to the definition of incest.

monster which lurks in the castle might easily be compared to the raging, incestuous father, unrecognizable and terrifying in his excess of passion.

Horace Walpole is widely regarded as having created the first Gothic novel with his 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*; in fact, the title page of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition amends the name of the book to *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story*. Walpole is likewise credited with the first Gothic drama, *The Mysterious Mother* (1768). His works began the first wave of the form, and dozens more Gothic novels—and plays—followed, including works by Matthew Lewis (1796), Ann Radcliffe (1797), Sophia Lee (1783), and Charlotte Dacre (1806). In a way Walpole acts as his own critic through his explication of plot, character, and motivation in his preface to the second edition. Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe acknowledge the importance of *The Castle of Otranto* to their own works. Edith Birkhead's 1921 *The Tale of Terror* and Montague Summers's 1938 *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* were among the first to identify and survey works identified as Gothic. As a literary form, Gothic was not always looked upon favorably and it was not until the late twentieth century that it began to be studied in a serious fashion by literary critics. David Punter's 1980 *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* often serves for scholars as a useful introduction to Gothic themes, reading early Gothic works through the lens of psychoanalytic criticism; in doing so, he finds that the works reflect the deep social anxieties of their times. *The Castle of Otranto*, for example, captures the tension aroused in Englishmen as the nation moves out of the traditional past, often reluctantly, and into a new and unfamiliar world. Fred Botting agrees in his critical survey, *Gothic* (1996), that “*The*

*Castle of Otranto* displays the tensions and contradictions traversing eighteenth century society's representations of itself" (53). The theories of George Haggerty in his 1989 *Gothic Fiction, Gothic Form* and 2006 *Queer Gothic* focus the scholarly view on the ways that the Gothic uses sexual matters to both uphold and subvert patriarchy. In her study of Gothic elements, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick concludes that the Gothic novel (almost) always includes the possibility of incest, a subject taken up by Ruth Perry in her essay "Incest as Meaning in the Gothic Novel" (1998) in which she argues that as the family unit became more "nuclear" sexual danger increased, with incest disruptive of family building and by extension, of societal growth

This is but a short survey of the work of critics of Gothic literature. They agree on the use of incest as symptomatic of larger social problems of the age in which the work was produced. I suggest that reading incest in Walpole's Gothic novel and play is best done with an understanding of its long history of usage. The ways incest is used in literature, like its definition, is adaptive. If incest in medieval texts serves to question morality and in the early modern time questions the nature of kingship as well as addressing the problem of enlarging and upwardly mobile non-aristocratic classes, then incest in Walpole's works is a family affair, and anxieties over the stability of the family are evident. Incest in *Confessio Amantis* and *Morte d'Arthur* works to demonstrate the destructive effects of a tyrannical king on his people. The king, as leader of the family of his kingdom, can be analogized to the patriarch of the nuclear family. Just as tyranny in the king is disastrous to his people, tyranny in the patriarch is calamitous to his wife and

children and all who live in his house. In these medieval works incest is configured as the ultimate expression of tyranny. In early modern drama which includes an incest theme, the tyranny of the patriarch is often compounded by his attempts to resist the encroachment of ‘others’—those of a lower class, outsiders, and especially women—into his sphere of existence. These fears are calmed by marriage (in *A King, and No King*) or by death (in *The Duchess of Malfi*); the female is dealt with, one way or another, and the king resists the allure of the incestuous daughter and the power of tyranny (in *Pericles*), proving his worth as a just king. In Walpole’s works, I argue, the use of incest continues to echo these concerns, but it also reflects new anxieties over the perceived decay of the family unit and, by extension, the individual’s place in the world.

Briefly, *The Castle of Otranto* is about Manfred, lord of Otranto, his wife Hippolita, son Conrad and daughter Matilda. It begins on the wedding day of Conrad to the princess Isabella. Before the wedding a giant helmet falls onto Conrad and kills him. Manfred is grief-stricken but also becomes highly agitated because of an ancient curse, that “the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it” (Walpole 1). Manfred believes that the death of his son signals the destruction of his line and in his growing madness vows to divorce his wife and marry Isabella himself in order to have a male heir. Isabella flees into the forest, meets a young man named Theodore, who helps her, and hides in a monastery. Manfred pursues them and although he cannot harm Isabella in sanctuary, he captures and orders the death of Theodore. As Theodore removes his shirt Friar Jerome recognizes a birthmark and realizes that Theodore is actually his own son. Before

Theodore is killed a group of knights led by Isabella's father, Frederic, arrives. In the fighting Theodore wounds Frederic. The group moves to the castle to discuss their differences and Frederic falls in love with Matilda. Frederic and Manfred begin to work out a deal in which they will marry each other's daughters. Later, still in the grips of madness, Manfred hears a noise and assumes it is Isabella and Theodore. He bursts in on them and in a jealous rage fatally stabs the girl, not realizing that it was in fact his own daughter. In the end it is revealed that Theodore is the true heir of Otranto, and he marries Isabella. Manfred and his wife take religious vows and spend the rest of their lives in seclusion.

Manfred is the embodiment of medieval tyranny. His rule began ignobly, with his usurpation of the throne from its rightful owner, and his growing obsession with producing an heir to keep it motivates his actions. His reason is undermined by his uncontrolled will to maintain control. But *The Mysterious Mother* takes the notion of tyranny one step further, fusing it to the problem of uncontrolled female agency. The play begins on the night of her husband's death, when the Countess of Narbonne goes into her son Edmund's room to chastise him for flirting with the maids at such a time. He is, in fact, expecting one of those young ladies to slip into his room and in the darkness doesn't realize it is his mother. She, however, is so grief-stricken and sees such a resemblance to her husband in her son, that she seduces him. He still believes it is the maid and has no idea his lover was his mother. The next day she sends him out of the castle as punishment for not having properly mourned his father. The Countess finds herself pregnant and passes off the child, a girl named Adeliza, as an orphan that she has

taken under her wing. When Edmund returns he falls in love with Adeliza, not knowing she is the Countess' daughter and thus his own daughter and sister. They marry and at that point the guilt-ridden Countess reveals the secret she has kept for all those years, and a spectacularly violent ending ensues.

*The Castle of Otranto* focuses on patriarchal authority, which appears at first to be subverted by female resistance, highlighting anxiety over the stability and harmony within the household and family. The events in the plot reflect the challenges by others—women and ‘peasants’—to aristocratic and patriarchal attempts to maintain not only authority but also property. Manfred understands that women are necessary for him to maintain ownership of Otranto for himself and his heirs, and to continue his family line, and he marshals the power of his castle to control the women. As he exclaims at the beginning of the tale, his “fate depends on having sons” (Walpole 9), which need drives his increasingly obsessive and threatening actions. Having failed to produce a living heir, when the sickly Conrad dies on his wedding day, Manfred tyrannically orders his wife sent away to a convent—another place of female enclosure—so that he can get another son. By any standard marriage to Isabella is overtly incestuous in nature; she is a daughter-figure to Manfred, a double of Matilda. Not only would Isabella have been his daughter-in-law, throughout the story he referred to himself as her guardian and father. Isabella recognizes the wrongness of this at once:

Dry your tears, young lady—you have lost your bridegroom—yes, cruel fate, and I have lost the hopes of my race! [said Manfred]. . . . I hope in a few years to have reason to rejoice at the death of Conrad. Words cannot paint the astonishment of Isabella. . . .she replied, Good my lord, do not doubt my tenderness . . . wherever fate shall dispose of me, I shall always cherish his

memory, and regard your highness and the virtuous Hippolita as my parents. Curse on Hippolita! cried Manfred; forget her from this moment on, as I do. . . . she must be a stranger to you, as she must be to me:--in short, Isabella, since I cannot give you my son, I offer you myself. --Heavens! cried Isabella, waking from her delusion, what do I hear! You, my lord! You! My father-in-law! . . . She shrieked, and started from him. (Walpole 24-5)

Isabella first appeals to Hippolita for aid, but she instead encourages Isabella to accept Manfred's proposal; the parental bond between Isabella and both of Conrad's parents is destroyed.

Manfred further destabilizes his own family by disregarding the fact that he is already married and deciding to divorce Hippolita on the grounds that the union is incestuous because the two are related "within the forbidden degrees" (Walpole 66).

Manfred tells Friar Jerome that

It is some time that I have had scruples on the legality of our union: Hippolita is related to me in the fourth degree—It is true, we had a dispensation; but I have been informed that she had also been contracted to another. This it is that sits heavy at my heart: this state of unlawful wedlock I impute the visitation that has fallen on me in the death of Conrad!  
(Walpole 49)

Blinded by hubris, Manfred appears not to notice or care that this argument for the dissolution of his marriage is designed to allow him to enter into another incestuous union with Isabella. MacAndrew notes that "in *The Castle of Otranto* the relationships, as we have seen, are all of parents and children—the dire effect on the children when parents are evil and the beneficial effects when they are good. The threat of real incest is the precipitating force for the action" (69). If Manfred's argument seems familiar, it is because it is almost identical to the situation in which Henry VIII found himself as he

sought to divorce Katherine of Aragon, his brother's widow, after twenty years of marriage in order to marry Anne Boleyn—another incestuous relationship, as he had previously had a sexual relationship with her sister.

Further complicating the plot is the bargain struck between Manfred and Frederick, Isabella's father; they agree to exchange daughters for the purpose of marriage, though this too is thwarted by Isabella's resistance to *both* of her fathers. Isabella's only remaining choice is to flee to the sanctuary of a convent, choosing a completely asexual existence rather than an incestuous, and certainly distasteful, relationship. This moment of Manfred's rejection of Hippolita is accompanied by his rejection of his daughter, too, which completes the decimation of his family. Manfred must have the power to exchange his women for, as described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property" (26) is a bulwark of patriarchy.<sup>2</sup> The failure of Manfred to maintain control of his women is due to his wrong, incestuous desires, and leads to the dismantling of his power.

While Gothic novel and drama share many of the same conventions and the same thematic concerns, the drama "arises to resolve different problems than the Gothic novel, for it takes place in a different institutional context—that of the theater—and its rather rapid rise and fall occur within a specific historical period defined by particular ideological pressures" (Cox 7-8)—pressure which traditional dramatic forms could no longer effectively translate.<sup>3</sup> Recognized as the first Gothic novelist, Walpole is also the

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<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick follows Claude Levi-Strauss's theory of society-building: "The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, where each owes and receives."

<sup>3</sup> Cox also feels that the design of the physical theater, the building itself, had changed in ways that were slightly less suitable for traditional dramatic forms such as tragedy and comedy (8).

first Gothic playwright, publishing his play in 1768.<sup>4</sup> Certainly earlier dramatic works contained precursors of Gothic elements, particularly in their violent plots, eerie settings, and concern with transgressions, but twentieth-century critics have generally noted a distinct Gothic dramatic canon. In 1947 Bertrand Evans published *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley*, the first major work to define the texts and key issues that constituted Gothic drama. Evans relates that later playwrights such as Byron credited Walpole as the “father of the first romance” (Cox 119).<sup>5</sup>

Evans notes an explosion of Gothic drama up until the 1790s, an era filled with paradigm-changing ideas. Since the medieval period England had undergone many such shifts, including two major ones: the Catholic church as the center of everyday life had been dismantled, climaxing in the break with Rome and centuries of Catholic-Protestant struggles, and the divine right of kings to rule had been challenged. These institutions adapted and recovered, and seemingly the only institution to remain intact was the family—but in many Gothic works it is the idea of the family unit that is challenged and interrogated. At the same time some “potentially radical questions about the treatment of women are raised . . . [Gothic plays] continue and extend Gothic conventions but do so within a changed literary and ideological movement” (Cox 5).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fifty copies of *The Mysterious Mother* were published privately and the play was never performed (Cox 12).

<sup>5</sup> Forty years later Frederick S. Frank published *The First Gothics: A Critical Guide to the English Gothic Novel* (1987), and in 2006 reissued Evans’s study, in which he identified the starting point of Gothic drama as *The Mysterious Mother* (Cox 120).

<sup>6</sup> The popularity of Gothic novels and drama waned until the late Victorian era when, perhaps aroused by scientific advances which once again questioned man’s nature and the opposition of faith and reason, it reemerged with such novels as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *Dracula* (1897).

Both Manfred and the Countess preside over a castle filled with horrible secrets. Evans says that in Walpole's drama, the castle is there to help set the melancholy mood, not as a place of horrors (268), in contrast to Otranto's castle which is a place of entrapment, terror, and incestuous threat. When considering the castle, the genres reveal different aspects of the story. The novel relies on fast-paced action, a complex plot, and physical confinement, as well as the threat of physical sexuality, to create a feeling of shock in the reader. The format of the play places the castle in the background. Most of the action takes place near the castle walls rather than inside, and what did happen inside—the incest—happened in the past. The problem now is the guilt that consumes the Countess, and her psychological state is privileged in the play in large part by the inclusion of the castle.

The family units in Walpole's two works are housed in castles. The castle plays such a prominent role in *The Mysterious Mother* and *The Castle of Otranto*, and in many other Gothic works, that it almost becomes a character itself. It is a physical reminder of the past; in Walpole's two stories it is the past that intrudes on present-day action. In the novel the focus is on the family and the dangers and problems that eventually cause the undoing of the patriarch. The plot relies on fast-paced action, a complex plot, and physical confinement along with the threat of physical sexuality, to shock the reader. But in *The Mysterious Mother*, the genre of drama allows for the privileging of the psychological state of the characters, and thus focuses on the individual. The castle looms in the background as the site of an earlier horrific event. Both Manfred and the Countess preside over castles filled with horrible secrets. Evans says that in the drama,

the castle is there primarily to set the melancholy mood and to be a symbol visible to the audience of the influence that past guilt can exert on the present (268). Thus the ‘character’ of the castle has a dual nature, one that fits the ambiguity associated with the Gothic—and with incest.

Kilgour’s description of the castle paints it as a place both dangerous and symbolic of more than just the residence of a family. The castle “bears the whole weight of the ages of man’s drift away from an ideal state; and it becomes a lasting representation of the torments of the subconscious pressing upon the conscious mind and making a prison of the self” (48-49). Furthermore, Freudian ideas now familiar to today’s readers make it easy to see the symbolism of the castle as representative of the human psyche. Atmospheres of suspense and mystery, stairways and passages leading to unknown places, and mazes of hallways within the castle may easily be recognized as the works of dreams and the subconscious. Subterranean passages are often the most forbidding, as things that are the most dangerous are usually buried deepest. Escape is difficult, and if the walls are breached, the outside environment is equally forbidding.

The castle analogizes the body on many levels. It may represent the body of society, with a ruling lord responsible for the well (or ill) being of his people; the patriarch as head of his household; or the subconscious of which the individual is, or should be, master. Furthermore, while the castle may represent the power of the patriarch, it may also symbolize the female body. Patriarchy’s “rules” regarding the “family, marriage, the proper relation of man to woman, of legitimate succession, and so on, are also the ruling principles of the human activities we think of as historical: politics

and economics” (Williams 29). The failure of Walpole’s patriarchs to maintain proper order threatens not only familial but societal structure if, as I have argued, the family is one of the last bulwarks of social organization standing unchanged, after Catholicism and the monarchy.

At the same time that the castle serves as a potent symbol of the power of the patriarch, the castle symbolizes the female body. According to Heiland, the castle is a place containing “cavity/womb-like spaces . . . meant only for breeding” (73) and is like a female body whose “parts are defended, penetrated, and entrapped” (75). Heiland notes sexual tension in this imagery as males with large swords penetrate the walls of the castle (83) and as, except in the unfortunate Manfred’s case, heirs emerge after a successful penetration. Part of the control of women involves regulating access to the female body, for penetration of the female body—or by analogy, the castle—by an unapproved man may result in impurities in the blood line. Patriarchy depends upon, in part, regulation of access to the female, who can produce heirs legitimate or illegitimate. Certainly Manfred is aware of this, as he himself is a usurper of Otranto, and because he is enraged at the peasant Theodore’s attention to the woman that he himself desires. Female sexuality is often figured in literary works as a fearsome thing, hence the desire for control. Apart from the potentially disastrous results of unauthorized breeding, the patriarch also fears monstrous, devouring female desire. This fear may be articulated in the scene in *The Castle of Otranto* in which Frederic arrives to fetch his daughter Isabella. He leads a team of men, his party well-endowed and well-supplied, with ‘an hundred gentlemen bearing an enormous sword” (65). The castle walls cannot withstand such penetrating

strength, and the men enter the body of the castle. The refusal of Isabella (and all women) to obey is in this way dangerous. The giant sword symbolizes the castrating power that women, through encouraging the interference of other men, wield. But the phallic blade is used to threaten women as well. Manfred's murder of Matilda, which ironically occurs after the agreement between Manfred and Frederic had been made and Manfred might have legally possessed Isabella, displays the tragic results of inflamed passions. Hearing a noise in the dark of night, in his jealous lunacy, Manfred believes it is Isabella in a rendezvous with Theodore:

Manfred, whose spirits were inflamed, . . . hastened secretly to the great church . . . The first sounds he could distinguish were—Does it, alas, depend on me? Manfred will never permit our union.—No, this shall prevent it! cried the tyrant, drawing his dagger, and plunging it over her shoulder into the bosom of the person that spoke—Ah me, I am slain! cried Matilda . . . (108)

The phallic qualities of Manfred's penetrating blade may symbolize the desire for sexual possession of his daughter. As I noted in earlier chapters, this tale of symbolic and incestuous rape has been told before. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, that lady's brother threatened her with his father's poniard in sublimation of his own sexual desire toward her, and in Gower's telling of the "Tale of Canace" the enraged father threatened her with a dagger by which she did kill herself (32). There is a difference, though, in the impact of these scenes. Gower uses his tale to demonstrate the destructive impact on self and society when a king loses control of his reason—all suffer. The Duchess's brother demonstrates the anxiety over the debasement of the aristocratic and royal classes in the early modern period. Manfred's murder of his own daughter shows his psychological

instability, brought on by his fear of losing control of his family and thus his power. All of these male perpetrators have lost their reason and gone mad because of their reactions to their daughters' sexuality. David B. Morris's essay on "Gothic Sublimity" argues that the murder of Matilda is an act of "Gothic repetition" supporting the significance of the sins of the father as perpetuating through generations: "Matilda and Isabella—despite their opposite temperaments—are doubles or mirror images, and Manfred's pursuit of Isabella is not simply an expression of unrequited desire but the reenactment of an ancient pattern" (305) of inappropriate, *unkynde* love.

*Unkynde* love is taken to an extreme in *The Mysterious Mother*. Gower's Genius may well understand the Countess's desire for her son, the image of her dead husband. It is a case of a natural attraction, one unregulated by societal rules and customs. But such incestuous desire enacted will halt all family building and by analogy, nation-building. Structures such as political organizations and family castles will cease to function. Here, the castle represents the fortress of the mind—a stronghold in which secrets can be kept and guarded—and thus symbolizes the state of mind of the Duchess.

As the play opens, the castle is in the background, and it is clear that something is amiss:

Florian (on his approach to the castle):  
 What awful silence! How these antique towers  
 And vacant courts dull the suspended soul  
 Til expectation wears the cast of fear  
 . . .  
 I met a peasant, and inquir'd my way:  
 The carle, not rude of speech, but like the tenant  
 Of some night-haunted ruin, bore an aspect  
 Of horror, worn to habitude. He bade

God bless me; and pass'd on. I urged him farther:  
 Good master, cried he, go not to the castle;  
 There sorrow ever dwells, and moping misery. (I. 1. 1-21)

The castle is a place of silence and emptiness, resembling a graveyard. Not only does the churl wear an aspect of horror, but it has been worn to “habitude.” The despair in Narbonne is longstanding. Though suitably grand, the castle is nonetheless a home, a supposed haven from the threats of the outside world. In Narbonne and in Otranto, though, the home is paradoxically a place of danger. Instead of a male authority figure menacing a vulnerable woman, in *The Mysterious Mother* the mother, supposed source of protection for her children, presents a danger to her son and thus to future generations, and to society as a whole. This is a clear example of contemporaneous anxieties over the perception attack on the family. Women in power destroy not only social institutions such as patriarchy and monarchy, they destroy the family itself and by implication the entire social fabric.

The comparison of castle to the Countess’ psychological state may be expanded to analogize the castle to the female body, as it did in *The Castle of Otranto*. Heiland’s description of the interior of the castle, noted earlier, relates that it is “womb-like . . . meant for breeding” (73). But in Castle Narbonne the Countess’s maternal function, and the safety of the home, are perverted. Because of the incest and her resulting guilt, the Countess fails in her role in many different ways. She is unavailable to Edmund as a mother and he is banished from home. She did not protect the “body” of the castle—nor her own body—from defilement, allowing not only unauthorized but also incestuous sexual activity to bring both to ruin. This home is unable to contain dangerous female

sexuality, for the Count had been dead not even a full day when the incest occurred. The absence of the (male) ruler leads to disaster, and the rule of a woman, even over her own home, quickly has devastating results. It is a clear indictment of female agency and an implication that without the guiding hand of the patriarch, the family—and by logical extension the existing social order—quickly falls apart.

The Countess, though genuinely pious and outwardly a paragon of virtue, is an example of the monstrous female who consumes her own offspring. She is deceptively dangerous because her role should be to produce and nurture new life, rather than destroy it. Because of her incestuous consumption of her son's body the new life she produces stands outside of any socially acceptable variation of aristocratic lineage. And as she begets children of incest, so might her daughters do the same. Her children will be monstrous, as she is. Cohen notes that “the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between two forms, that threatens to smash distinctions” (274), and the blurring of boundaries is a thing feared for centuries. Many of Gower's tales indicated concern about the distinction between man and beast; Malory's *Questing Beast*, also a product of incest, is the product of “two things that were never intended by God to be mixed” (Hanks 196). The idea appears in *The Duchess of Malfi*, as Ferdinand is horrified by the thought of his sister marrying outside her social class, destroying the boundary between nobility and serving class. This too threatens to create something new and fearful—something monstrous. Nobility and commoner, in a hierarchy based on natural order, were never intended to be mixed, either. Incestuous plot designs such as Manfred's pursuit of Isabella in *The Castle of Otranto* are frightening enough even if they are more

familiar. It is more usual for the tyrannical male to threaten boundaries, rather than the mother, supposed representative of virtue and of safety in the family. In doing so she both threatens patriarchal structure with sexual misbehavior and subverts the maternal role, too. Castle Narbonne is barren and ominous, symbolizing the absence of the mother because of her sin. The Countess has put the castle at tremendous risk, as it symbolizes both her body and her function.

Castle as body and castle as symbol of social order are threatened by sudden, unpredictable storms of uncontrolled emotion. In many Gothic works the castle, seat of the family and symbol of patriarchal authority, is presented as decaying and vulnerable to natural (sometimes supernatural) depredations such as raging storms and deadly lightning. The walls crumble and the gates fail. Botting notes that “Gothic terrors activate a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable and overwhelming power which threatens not only the loss of sanity, honour, property, or social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of those terms” (77). In *Otranto* the castle is shaken when Manfred views the body of the daughter he killed and a clap of thunder shakes the land violently. The walls fall down, though the castle stands, and a supernatural appearance of the ghost of Alfonso, “dilated to an immense magnitude” (112), appears and intones “Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso!” (*ibid.*). It is as if a spell is broken, for Manfred regains his sanity, confesses his original usurpation of *Otranto*, abdicates, and retires to religious orders. In fact, it is the curse that Manfred sought so long to suppress that is lifted: “That the castle and lordship of *Otranto* should pass from the present family whenever the real owner should be grown too large

to inhabit it” (17). *The Castle of Otranto* relies, if lightly, on supernatural and natural occurrences; nature works to restore (divine) order.

Conrad’s death seems supernaturally orchestrated to bring about the return of Otranto to its rightful owner. He was killed by a gigantic helmet—a literal symbol of the head of the family—that fell on him. The helmet, observed one wedding guest, was “exactly like that on the figure in black marble of Alfonso the Good, one of their former princes, in the church of St. Nicholas” (20), imparting the suggestion of supernatural intervention, as does the brief glimpse of St. Nicholas at the end of the story when the ghost of Alfonso appeared to Manfred. Conrad is symbolically killed by the head of the family and Manfred’s pursuit of the boy’s bride-to-be seems an attempt to replace his dead son. In his incestuous desire for Isabella, Manfred symbolically wishes to become Conrad, which not only transgresses boundaries but subverts family growth and solidarity. In his desire to continue the family line he is aligning himself with the past, with the actions of his father and grandfather; he decides to trade future for past. That the past intrudes upon the present is a well-known Gothic convention, but here it may be seen working to demolish the present and, potentially, the future. Manfred’s past, from two generations back at least, will indeed be the reason he loses Otranto and with it, his family, power, and identity.

Castle Narbonne is less beset by the supernatural than by the superstitious. Evans notes that “there is no actual visitation of the supernatural. . . but [it] is nevertheless conspicuous in narrative passages” (38) in the play. In showcasing the psychological state of the Countess, Walpole had no need for the supernatural to create a

sensation of horror in the audience; the “horrid subject” was quite enough to arouse strong feelings of shock and distaste in the audience.<sup>7</sup> Though some of the orphans that the Countess supports with her alms profess that they are afraid of the ghost of the Count, which they believe haunts the church, no ghost is present in the play. Ironically, it is Friar Martin who calms their fears with kind word. An orphan girl cries,

Oh! father, but I dare not pass without you  
By the church-porch. They say the Count sits there,  
With clotted locks, and eyes like burning stars.  
Indeed I dare not go.

(II. 2. 221-4)

Martin replies that the ghost will not harm innocent children. And later, as Edmund, Martin, and Florian are huddled together against a sudden storm, Martin lets show some of his superstitious fear: “Will this [violent storm of thunder and lightning] convince thee?” (II.2.244). As a priest Martin should have no superstitious fear of bad weather and should not think of connecting it to ill omens. The fact that he does indicates the degree to which he is out of touch with his (supposed) religious vocation. Edmund reminds the two that this is simply a storm, a natural and not supernatural phenomenon. Shortly thereafter, the frightened children return and report that

Some daemon rides in th’ air. . . .  
I wink’d, and saw the light’ning  
Burst on the monument [a statue of the dead Count]. The shield of arms

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<sup>7</sup> *The Mysterious Mother* was never performed, in part because Walpole continued to believe his play too disgusting for representation: “From the time that I first undertook the foregoing scenes, I never flattered myself that they would be proper to appear on the stage. The subject is so horrid, that I thought it would shock, rather than give satisfaction to an audience. . . The subject is truly more horrid than even that of Oedipus.”

Author’s postscript, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Shiver'd to splinters. 'Ere I could repeat  
 An Ave-Mary, down with hideous crash  
 The cross came tumbling—then I fled— (II.2. 268-276).

This provokes an extreme reaction from Martin, who declares that this must be “unholy ground” (II.2. 277). He turns on Florian, blaming him for bringing some curse upon the castle:

The seasons change their course; th' afflicted hind  
 Bewails is blasted harvest. Meteors ride  
 The troubled sky, and chafe the darken'd sun.  
 . . . Sixteen fatal year  
 Has Narbonne's province groan'd beneath the hand  
 Of desolation—for what crimes we know not!  
 To edge suspended vengeance art thou come? (II.2.282-291)

Martin's instinct, when confronted with the unknown, is to retreat into irrational, backward fears. But the storms certainly serve to symbolize the Countess's growing mental distress. Bad weather outside the castle wall threatens to weaken the defenses just like the storms of emotion surrounding Edmund's return begin to chip away at the Countess's carefully barricaded mental fortitude. As Walpole highlights the psychological state of the Countess, he similarly reveals much about Martin's interior feelings as well. Martin's guilt and innate superstition allow him to read portents into what is simply an unseasonable, though violent, storm. However, in order to feel guilt, it is necessary to have a moral compass; Martin's possession of one is contrasted with Benedict, who has no conscience.

Benedict was planned by Walpole to “divide the indignation of the audience, and to intercept some of it from the Countess” (Walpole's epilogue). He has been called a

foil to the Countess, with her true piety, because of his lack of goodness. Iago-like, he nurtures a secret and peculiar resentment that grows monstrous. He resents the Countess in part because she gives her money to lepers and orphans rather than to him, and in part because he senses a secret that she refuses to divulge to him—he “has more than once imputed blood” to the Countess. He believes that all good Catholics should fully submit, their wills and their money, to church (his) authority, yet a mere woman refuses to do so. He has fantasized to Martin about “what if” her son were dead, and her “ward” Adeliza sent to a convent, and concluded that she would have no other wish for the disposal of her property than to give it to the church. In part to prod her for more information on her secret and in part simply to torture her mentally, albeit subtly, Benedict deliberately and slyly encourages her fears and her guilt. He wonders if she is guilty of the murder of the maid Beatrice, who disappeared at the same time that Edmund was exiled, but senses something else.

The something else is only revealed at the end of the play: incest. The storms, the fits of melancholy from the Countess, the mystery over her determination to stay away from her son, Benedict’s growing rage—the tension in the plot has risen high, and only something spectacular can dispel it. Benedict sees his opportunity. Edmund had fallen in love with Adeliza, and Benedict lied to the Countess, telling her that Florian wished to wed Adeliza, at the same time telling Edmund and Adeliza that the Countess wished them to marry. Benedict

. . . mumbled o’er the spell that binds them fast  
 Like an invenom’d robe, to scorch each other  
 With mutual ruin—Thus am I reveng’d

Proud dame of Narbonne, lo! A bare foot monk  
 Thus pays thy scorn, thus vindicates his altars.  
 (V.1.12-16)

Cox says that Walpole's purpose is to demonstrate Catholicism as hypocritical; the play "takes a number of rather standard cheap shots at priests and the Catholic Church in general. . . priests are seen to pursue their 'saintly' life for money" (128) and, as we have seen, Benedict "preys upon the Countess's moody religiosity" (*ibid.*) to suit his own purpose. Cox notes that rather than suggesting the world is disquieted by the act of incest, the play suggests instead that the act of incest is symptomatic of a broken world. Furthermore, the play poses the possibility, or more accurately, the lack thereof, that religion, of any denomination, is able to organize a world that allows incest and other atrocities to occur, despite the church's aim to structure or reinforce the lives of its congregation in accordance with the teachings of the church, rather than beyond them (127). That incest is conflated with false religion is symptomatic of a time in which there is perhaps less certainty in matters of faith. Organized (Catholic) religion has failed the Countess in her hour of need, and patriarchy has failed to contain female sexuality, with devastating results. In a moment reminiscent of the medieval idea of *kynde*, Edmund defends himself against his mother's accusation of improper conduct on the night of his father's death. He suggests that it is 'natural' to seek love from a willing and beautiful girl:

. . . Dost thou  
 Hold love a crime so irremissible?  
 Wouldst thou have turn'd thee from a willing girl, [the maid Beatrice]  
 To sing a requiem to thy father's soul? (II.2.29-32).

And when he knelt, weeping, to ask his mother's forgiveness, he took her hand, but she "snatch'd it back with horror" (II.2.47) in a repudiation of the physical attraction she had felt for her son. The medieval idea of *kynde*, of human action, freed from the constraints of reason, based upon what is normal and natural to do, survives into the eighteenth century, but adapts to the time. Cox finds that in the play, religion acts to regulate sexuality. Morality is imposed on natural desires that may be "true to nature but frowned on by society" (144). *Kynde* had been used by Gower and other earlier writers to try to explain incestuous attraction as one of "like calls to like." In other words, it is not shocking to discover that a father is attracted to his daughter, or a brother to his sister. Of course, when the attraction is physically acted upon, that is a cause for shock and moral outrage. The Countess gave in to a '*kynde*' attraction to her son, who looked so much like his father, and who lived after his father died. It is a gender reversal of the many medieval tales in which the father became attracted to his daughter only after the mother died. By this definition it is easy to see why Edmund was immediately attracted to his sister-daughter. She is familiar and indeed, she reminds him of his mother, who withdrew her love from him years ago.

As the play opens, Edmund has returned home to claim his inheritance and ownership of the castle, continuing the patriarchal line of succession. However, incest has trumped the line. Incest blocks the ability of Edmund to continue the family line, as his wife is in fact his sister and daughter. By the end of the play the castle and its associated wealth is subsumed by the church and the family is no more. In contrast, in *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred's incestuous intent blocks the inheritance of the castle by

the wrong party and ends up restoring it to the rightful owner. And it is discovered in the last pages of the novel that Otranto is Theodore's by way of his mother's inheritance and not by his father's, which disrupts and undermines the idea of patriarchal supremacy and adds to the destabilization of the family. The true wealth and power comes through matriarchy, not patriarchy, but Manfred and his father before him ignored and suppressed this fact for decades so that they could consolidate and power for themselves. Thus in Walpole's novel matriarchy restores order while in his drama it destroys order—but both instances serve to promote the idea that patriarchy is the only viable way for a society to succeed. The threat to the family in the novel comes from Manfred's loss of self-control, a theme that we have seen at work before. Like Gower's King Eolus who killed his young daughter out of unchecked rage, Manfred's ego overpowers his reason. Both fathers are consumed with a sense of their own self-importance. Manfred's sole desire is to retain his castle, his lordship, and his power; his passion is excited primarily by his obsession with the family curse which predicts that his line will lose dominion over Otranto. Manfred came into possession of Otranto as a result of his grandfather's usurpation of the rightful owner. Walpole is at pains to explain to his reader in the preface to the first edition that he wishes the 'author' of the tale had "grounded his plan on a more useful moral than this; that *the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation*" (Walpole 7).

By the end of *The Mysterious Mother*, Adeliza is sent to a convent, Edmund leaves Narbonne to seek his death in war, and the unfortunate Countess stabbed herself with Edmund's knife. As in Gower's tale of Canace and the *Duchess of Malfi*, and in *The*

*Castle of Otranto*, the knife is configured as phallic symbol and so the story ends as it began, with the Countess engaging (symbolically) in *unkynde* love with her son. Only after the wedding ceremony was complete did the Countess relay the entire story of her incestuous seduction of Edmund years ago. When Edmund and Adeliza realize that they are husband and wife and brother and sister, she faints while Edmund pulls out his dagger and points it at his mother. When he hesitates she impales herself. Consideration of the knife as phallic symbol reveals a similarity in the end of the story to the beginning; in both, it was the Countess who initiated the fatal penetrations. In *The Castle of Otranto* Manfred regained his reason when he looked at the body of his dead daughter; in *The Mysterious Mother* the Countess regains her sense, also, at the extreme moment: “Not a word,” she says, “Can ‘scape me, but will do the work of thunder, / and blast these moments I regain from madness!” (V.5.350). She likens the storms of emotion to a thunderclap which tells the end of her life, her castle, her body—and her family.

In the end ownership of the castle went to the Church. The fact that the Countess’ property ends up in the hands of the church, and those of the unscrupulous and hypocritical Benedict, may raise the question of whether or not Walpole is voicing an opinion in the debate between Catholicism as part of a decaying, superstitious past and Protestantism as rational and progressive. Benedict’s speech notes a contrast between organized religion and true Christianity through the character of the Countess:

This woman was not cast in human mould.  
 Ten such would foil a council, would unbuild  
 Our Roman church—In her devotion’s real.  
 Our beads, our hymns, our saints, amuse her not:  
 Nay, not confession, not repeating o’er

Her darling sins, has any charms for her.  
 I have mark'd her praying: not one wand'ring thought  
 Seems to steal meaning from her words.—She prays  
 Because she feels, and feels, because a sinner.  
 (I.3.152-160)

Benedict, though acknowledging the Countess' inner strength and true character, and despite his vocation, resents her and plots her downfall. As a representative of the church, he is scheming, manipulative, and self-serving. His superficial belief system is marked in the fact that he can even conceive of beliefs, hymns, and saints as sources of amusement instead of matters of salvation. He recognizes in her what he lacks in himself. By lying about the marriage of Adeliza and Florian, he caused the fatal confrontation at the end of the play—and gained the estate as he had planned all along. Benedict recognizes and fears the power of true piety to “unbuild” the entire Church. This may explain his determination to destroy her. She embodies both true devotion and incredible sinfulness. These two parts of her, genuine maternal love and weakness in controlling her physical passions, war with each other. While Edmund was absent she could control her emotions and tried to do good, as several of the characters acknowledged. But Benedict's scheme led to a frenzy of emotion, perhaps even fits of madness, as her worst fears were realized. She dies and her family and property are dispersed; the sins of the mother do not pass to future generations because her sins destroy her son.

*The Mysterious Mother* and *The Castle of Otranto* have at the center of their plots fear of the disruption of the social order. The anxieties found in works known as Gothic spring from fears and uncertainties arising from instabilities in personal, social, religious,

and political realities during the mid-eighteenth century—in other words, all of the things that gave structure to everyday life. Incest in Walpole's works reflects anxiety about the perceived decay of the family unit and by extension the individual's place in the world, anxiety which is exacerbated by the accumulation of centuries of meaning that became attached to the use of an incest theme in literary works.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

*Then had I never come to shed  
My father's blood nor climbed my mother's bed;  
The monstrous offspring of a womb defiled,  
Co-mate of him who gendered me, and child.  
Was ever man before afflicted thus,  
Like Oedipus.*

--Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*: c.430 B.C.E

*"But then—what is wrong with incest, with or without pregnancy?"  
"Aside from moral considerations, you mean? The moral consideration is that it's a  
horrifying thought, and it's a horrifying thought because it always has been. Biologically  
speaking, I'd say there's nothing wrong with it. Nothing."*

--Theodore Sturgeon, *"If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?": 1967*

These two quotes suggest that even after the passage of millennia and many radical changes in social mores, incest remains a 'horrifying thought,' and continues as a cultural taboo in most of the western world. The story of Oedipus is a story of the moral blindness and willful selfishness that leads to the downfall of king and commoner. Gower's incestuous kings commit a multitude of sins, including adultery, murder, and total disregard for the wellbeing of their people. Like Amans, Gower's readers are taught the value of good governance in a king, and by extension the value of good governance in the self. When reason and moral vision fail, the result is

destruction and disaster. One of the problems facing Amans is his inability to distinguish between the two types of love: charity and cupiditas. Charity is selfless, motivated by desire for the welfare of others; cupiditas, named after the pagan god of love, is selfish and inward-looking, willing to sacrifice others for the sake of self. Amans realizes that he has been serving in the court of Venus (and Cupid) and like the good kings he has heard of, he must leave that behind and take his place in the court of charitable love as befits a man of his age and wisdom. Throughout the eight books of the poem, incest is consistently configured as the ultimate form of the tyranny which arises from self-love instead of charitable love.

Though Malory enthusiastically presents Arthur as England's greatest, most chivalrous king, the tales themselves include episodes of tyranny. Uther used enchantment to seduce the wife of one of his knights; Arthur makes the decision to slaughter the May Day children; and Mordred seizes his father's crown and queen for himself. These acts of tyranny bring about the very thing that Gower warned against—division, decline, and destruction of the kingdom and of the individual. The fellowship is ruined by the internal corruption of the Pendragon line, for ultimately it is Arthur's incest—his mindless gratification of a sexual urge—which causes the sad downfall of his family and kingdom. The tales told by Gower and Malory demonstrated the need to guard against tyranny. The family, with the father at the head, can be analogized to the king as head of the family of the nation. If the head of the family, or nation, loses his reason and descends into irrationality, then all people suffer.

Early modern theatergoers had reason to fear their tyrannical kings. Henry VIII brought turmoil to the nation because of his willful seizure of power and the split from the Catholic church. He used the indeterminacy of the social and legal definition of incest to suit his needs, having married his brother's wife though this was clearly recognizable as incestuous and then divorcing her for the same reason. But the enthronement of Elizabeth provided fresh anxieties. The three early modern plays under discussion enact a new fear, that of increasing female agency, while retaining the old fear of tyranny. In all three, incest incurs metaphorical blindness and madness. Losing one's reason is the first step of turning away from the human and turning toward the bestial. Lack of self-control allows the king to gratify his urges and wishes without considering the welfare of others, and without reason as a guide the danger to the family and nation is clear.

The comparison of the medieval and early modern variations of *Tale of Apollonius* reveals a decidedly more antagonistic attitude toward the daughters—both the daughter of Antiochus and Marina—in the later version. Then, the dizzying speed with which Panthea is revealed to be the true heir to the throne in *A King, and No King* and is just as quickly unthroned provides explicit disapproval of the notion of a female ruler. And when Malfi's Duchess attempts to exercise her autonomy, she is violently cut down. Acting on her desire to marry the man of her choice proves untenable both for the fact that it is she instead of a male guardian who makes the decision, and also because the man of her choice is beneath her socially. A world in which women seize power and inferiors might climb the social ranks is not allowed to stand. Incest appears poised to

subvert both patriarchy and monarchy, but the final resolutions of the plays reaffirm male dominance.

A line of continuity in the usage of the incest theme from medieval works into early modern works begins to emerge. The damage to self and society from incest is augmented by early modern anxieties over keeping women and inferiors in their proper places. And decades later Manfred, the tyrant of *The Castle of Otranto*, rivals any described by Gower. The concern in this tale is for the fate of the family. The death of his son proved to be the catalyst for his own descent into madness. Like Henry VIII, Manfred developed the impulse to divorce his wife of twenty-plus years in order to marry another, younger woman whom he hoped could provide a male heir—but this female is clearly out of bounds for him. His relationship to her is that of a father-in-law, incestuous by moral and legal standards. Manfred's overriding concern is not primarily sexual; instead, his desire is to keep and control his property. But Manfred needs a female body for this task, and the females under his control fare poorly, with wife Hippolita cast aside, Isabella traded to Manfred by her own father, and Matilda slain. Without a female, Manfred loses his castle, possessions, and power. While this appears to be subversive of patriarchy, the end of the story finds the castle restored to its rightful (male) owner. Likewise, the concern in *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysterious Mother* is the fate of the family. The patriarch fears loss of control over what has been, for centuries, his domain—his property, his wife and children, and all who live in his house. *The Mysterious Mother* proves the horrors of a family without a father to take control. Under the Countess's rule one calamity is compounded by another; the mother proves to be both

incestuous and monstrous. Her family is dispersed and her property descends to the church. The early modern anxieties over the role of the family join earlier anxieties.

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that for the centuries between the emergence of *Confessio Amantis* and *The Mysterious Mother*, patriarchy will be upheld by any means necessary. Reading incest illuminates that while the concern for preserving patriarchy remains the same, it is the threats to patriarchy which change. Patriarchy is depicted in part in the argument for the divine right of kings to rule over their people, an idea that is rooted in Biblical narratives. By the fourteenth century the idea of divine right began to be questioned, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century many began to chafe at James's insistence on this right to rule absolutely, finally rejecting it with the beheading of Charles I. By the 1760s Gothic narratives such as Walpole's then reiterated the analogies of man as microcosm and earthly kingdom as model of the heavenly kingdom, kingdoms which thrive only when a virtuous king is on the throne. And though incest questions, subverts, and undermines existing power structures, for these four centuries, patriarchy is established and confirmed repeatedly.

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