

DECADENT ARISTOCRACIES
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

by

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PREVIEW

DISSERTATION TITLE

Decadent Aristocracies in Nineteenth
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Decadent Aristocracies in Nineteenth Century British Literature

Shaun T. Harris, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2004

Advisor: Linda Pratt

This dissertation proposes that a new class of "decadent aristocrats" emerges in the literature of the Victorian period. Using the theories of Michel Foucault's The Order of Things (1966), I argue that an epistemological shift occurs in England during the 1820s which results in transferring political, economic, and social hegemony away from the aristocracy towards the rising commercial and middle classes. No longer able to rely on the fiscal and marital practices which made them a ruling elite during the eighteenth century, the aristocracy further marginalizes itself as it unsuccessfully adapts to the new economy. The failures of these decadent aristocrats and their increasing awareness of their decadent class position inform and then define aspects of British literature as early as the 1840s.

Benjamin Disraeli's Coningsby (1844) chronicles the political fallout of the First Reform Bill to demonstrate that aristocrats no longer have the leadership skill or the "political will" to solve England's complex social problems. Lord Monmouth, the novel's leading aristocrat, proves his decadence by prioritizing his personal pleasures over his service to country, his social stewardship, and his grandson's aristocratic future. The narrator of Lord Alfred Tennyson's Maud (1855) is a psychological portrait of a decadent aristocrat whose father's financial misfortunes and death sever him physically and mentally from his class, his community, his lover, and his nation. In Idylls of the King, Tennyson transposes the decadence of Britain's aristocratic class into the narrative of Camelot's decline to make the larger cultural point that no aristocracy can rule effectively if individual members abandon or become diverted from the ideals and practices which made it a leadership class. Anthony Trollope's The Way We Live Now (1874-1875) shows the final capitulation of three aristocratic families who have lived decadently for three generations. The aristocrats in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) are so decadent culturally that they no longer identify themselves as part of

Britain's ruling elite; Lord Henry lives frivolously on the fringes of the "new social elite" while Dorian victimizes his fellow decadent aristocrats.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

1 Aristocratic Decline in Nineteenth Century Britain

Historians have conflicting views on the political and cultural strength of the aristocracy in nineteenth century England. Some historians see the British aristocracy as still constituting a formidable ruling order up until the 1880s. Supporting this view, David Cannadine says that "the members of the titled and genteel classes of Britain were still undeniably in charge and on top in the 1870s" (25). Richard Altick further observes that "the majority of posts in every cabinet down to 1874 were occupied by members of the nobility and the closely associated higher gentry" (23). Belying this certainty is F.M.L. Thompson's description of the various causes of aristocratic decline from 1830-1880 in English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century (1963), including middle-class encroachment, agricultural depression, declining land values, and reform legislation (269-291). Cannadine, though maintaining "the strength and resilience of their position during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century," still says the aristocracy's later decline is no "straightforward matter," that "they took an unconscionable time a-dying" and that they had several "troubled decades" before the 1880s, including the 1790s and the 1840s (25), all suggesting aristocratic decline in England began well before the 1880s.

Historians also disagree about the supposed causes of aristocratic decline. Altick identifies a combination of aristocratic malaise and middle-class ascendancy:

But in the nineteenth century the threat to their [aristocratic] domination which was posed by newly rich middle-class industrialists and financiers was accompanied by complaints that they had abdicated their social responsibilities. Carlyle, Mill, and Arnold, to name only three of their critics, attributed many of society's ills to the wastrel habits of the aristocracy (Carlyle's "idle, game-preserving dilettantes"; Arnold's "barbarians"). (21)

Thompson identifies a myriad of issues including the proliferation of titles begun under Pitt the Younger (1783-1801; 1804-1806) (9), declining finances among aristocrats (277), and poor political stewardship by aristocrats, especially on issues of reform. Although external forces influenced aristocratic decline, many of the items Thompson describes have their origins within the aristocracy itself: "It was one of the fortunate paradoxes of English politics that as often as

not an aristocratic individual presided over the demolition of aristocratic institutions, perhaps ensuring power for his own lifetime at the expense of the future of his order" (270).

Dating aristocratic decline in nineteenth century England also poses problems for historians. Most historians agree the 1880s witnessed dramatic declines in aristocratic culture and power. The time frame before the 1880s, though, is less certain. Cannadine alludes to the aforementioned "troubled decades" of the 1840s and the 1790s, but will not commit to a date. Altick cites the cultural criticism of Carlyle, Arnold, and Mill but cites no concrete dates for aristocratic decline. Thompson concludes that the non-specific origins of aristocratic decline is one of its defining features:

The quality of political leadership was one reason for the peaceful decline of landed power, and a most important one. It meant that there was a gradual long-drawn-out revolution, with no single episode, save perhaps Corn Law Repeal, which could be seized on convincingly as marking the point of no return. (272)

If forced to choose an approximate origin for aristocratic decline in the nineteenth century, some historians would choose the First Reform Bill of 1832 because, as Norman McCord describes it:

... the symbolic importance of the Great Reform Act was immense. The dominant aristocracy, still in control of the State, had acted, in some respects against its own sectional interests, to reform the Constitution by Act of Parliament, without revolution or civil war. ... In effect, the will of the majority of the electorate and the House of Commons, backed by public opinion, had forced the King and peers to acquiesce in measures they opposed. After these events, the relationship between the three elements of Parliament could never be the same again. (138)

Defining "Decadent Aristocracies"

These various studies of aristocratic decline leave many questions still open. Did the aristocracy in nineteenth century Britain decline to the point that it no longer resembled the aristocracy that reached its apex of power in eighteenth century Britain? Did the decline in aristocratic influence during the nineteenth century reach the point where the aristocracy in

Britain was no longer culturally relevant or dominant in defining the country's policies and politics, in serving as custodians for the nation's land and wealth, in being community and social leaders in the country as well as in the cities? Did competition from rising industrial and commercial classes and changing economic conditions make it more difficult for aristocrats to maintain their economic hegemony in nineteenth century Britain? Was the exclusivity of aristocratic privileges challenged by the rising "meritocracies" in Victorian England? Finally, did aristocrats begin to abandon the rituals of marriage, education, finance, and politics that made them culturally dominant in eighteenth century Britain?

The provisional answer to these questions is yes. The aristocracy in nineteenth century Britain did not resemble its eighteenth century counterpart in power, wealth, social prestige, or cultural relevance. Pressures from social reformers, technological innovations from the Industrial Revolution, and ideological tracts from great Victorian sages like Carlyle, Mill, and Ruskin either herald or demand changes in all aspects of British life. In this climate of sweeping cultural change that was the Victorian period, the aristocracy was unable to maintain its class role or cultural importance. Because the changes within the aristocracy between 1830 and 1880 were so dramatic, because the importance of the aristocracy was challenged simultaneously on so many different fronts, and ultimately because thematic attention to these challenges and changes became important in the literature of the time, it is useful to think of the aristocracy during this period as something else, as a culturally-distinct group with little resemblance to previous iterations of the aristocracy. This new class of "decadent" aristocrats would increasingly be at odds with its previous class values, particularly within families. Aristocratic fathers and grandfathers, who to a larger or lesser degree participated in their own cultural decline, resisted or found themselves unable to adapt to the new social, economic, and political climate of Victorian England. Not understanding the rules of the new economy, these aristocratic parents unrealistically believed the "old ideals" and the old cultural practices would continue to guarantee social hegemony for themselves and their children. The aristocratic children, raised with high expectations but outdated ideals, found themselves ill-equipped to succeed culturally, which simply perpetuated and accelerated the decadence of the aristocratic

classes. As the divergence between aristocratic ideals and aristocratic realities grew, an increasing sense of dissonance, social-anxiety, desperation, and defeatism began to dominate the psychological profile of decadent aristocrats.

Foucault's The Order of Things and Sudden Epistemological Shifts

Before attempting to define in historical terms why the late 1820s and early 1830s were ripe for changes in the British aristocracy, it may be useful to provide a theoretical foundation to explain how sudden cultural changes can occur. In the The Order of Things (1966), Michel Foucault attempts to explain how "the fundamental codes of a culture" (xx) can change dramatically and suddenly. This is precisely what Foucault says happened at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when, in a few short years, the study of "general grammar," "natural history," and "the analysis of wealth" were replaced by the non-contiguous study of "philology," "biology," and "political economy":

Philology, biology, and political economy were established, not in the places formerly occupied by *general grammar*, *natural history*, and the *analysis of wealth*, but in an area where those forms of knowledge did not exist, in the space they left blank, in the deep gaps that separated their broad theoretical segments and that were filled with the murmur of the ontological continuum. The object of knowledge in the nineteenth century is formed in the very place where the Classical plenitude of being has fallen silent (207).

Foucault describes this sudden transformation in several ways. According to one of his explanations, change occurs when new theories and ideas are introduced into an incompatible "space of analysis" (episteme), causing the dysfunction of the current order of things and the creation of a new "order of things" (episteme) with "new knowable objects." (251-252).

Foucault was interested not only in the suddenness of these epistemological shifts; he was also amazed at how completely these shifts were "distributed across the entire surface of knowledge" (217) into the various intellectual and cultural domains (xii).

Once established, the new episteme becomes the *a priori* upon which all discourses are based. This is true for the larger culture as well as for the individual living in the culture.

The fundamental codes of a culture - those governing its language, its schema of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices - establishes for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. (xx)

Foucault focuses on the impact these epistemological shifts have on the "science" and "scientists" in the various disciplines, but his theory can as easily be applied to members of a specific cultural group like the aristocracy because they too are part of the cultural fabric of the nation. If an epistemological shift did occur in Britain sometime during the 1820s and 1830s, these changes would (eventually) exert tremendous influence over all aristocrats. These changes likely would not be noticed at first, but the consequent cultural re-ordering could begin to assert its subtle influence on the aristocracy almost immediately, perhaps in a discontiguous conversation, a lost election, or a sudden friendship between an aristocrat and an industrialist at Eton. Over time, these changes would become more pronounced and more noticeable. Eventually individual aristocrats would find themselves, consciously or unconscious, either adapting or resisting these epistemological compulsions.

According to Foucault's theory, the emergence of a new episteme also meant the disappearance of the old episteme and the modes of study and knowledge derived from it. Using an example from economics, Foucault explains,

... if there were those who began to study the cost of production, and if the ideal and primitive barter situation was no longer employed as a means of analyzing the creation of value, it is because, at the archaeological level, exchange had been replaced as a fundamental figure in the space of knowledge by production, bringing into view on the one hand new knowable objects (such as capital) and prescribing, on the other, new concepts and new methods (such as the analysis of forms of production). (252)

In other words, "capital" makes no sense in an "exchange economy" of bartering, and the "analysis of production" could never have been predicted (or employed) in a "barter economy." Transposing this to the cultural analysis of the British aristocracy during the nineteenth century, there were no "decadent aristocrats" in the cultural economy of the eighteenth century because

the episteme at that time encouraged cultural dominance by the aristocracy. However, if it could be established that the episteme did shift in the late 1820s and early 1830s towards an economy that did not favor cultural dominance by the aristocracy, then the aristocratic class as it functioned culturally during the eighteenth century could no longer exist. Those "aristocrats" still supposing they were living according to the "cultural codes" prior to c. 1830 would be living discordantly within the "new cultural codes." These new "decadent aristocrats" attempt unsuccessfully to maintain their cultural hegemony and live according to the "aristocratic ideals" of the eighteenth century, in spite of drastic and observable economic and social changes which no longer presupposed (or needed) aristocrats.

Many of the most important Victorian writers address this sense of change in the cultural episteme of their time. Carlyle, Dickens, Mill, Arnold and Ruskin attempted to define the nature of their Victorian world, often weighing the values of their society, lamenting the decline of old values or embracing the arrival of new values. Collectively, the most common thread in their work was the recognition that radical change defined Victorian culture. According to Foucault, though, those living in the culture often do not have access to "the archaeological level of knowledge" (xiii), that level of knowledge that regulates, orders, and provides the possibility for all discourse at "the epistemological level of knowledge (or scientific consciousness)" (xiii). This is the case because there is a level to knowledge "that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse" (xi).

What was common to the natural history, the economics, and the grammar of the Classical period was certainly not present to the consciousness of the scientist; or that part of it that was conscious was superficial, limited, and almost fanciful ... ; but unknown to themselves, the naturalists, economists, and grammarians employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories. It is these rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, archaeological. (xi)

This quotation explains both Foucault's thesis and methodology. His thesis is that below the level of cultural consciousness are forces that regulate and define the culture. However, it is only by studying the "objects" of a culture that an approximate understanding of these "archaeological forces" can be understood. Using Foucault's methodology, I will attempt to prove the existence of a "decadent episteme" (at the archaeological level of knowledge) that makes possible (and in fact inevitable) a decadent aristocracy during the Victorian era. The "cultural objects" that I use are works of British literature that deal thematically with the aristocracy, specifically: Benjamin Disraeli's Coningsby (1844), Lord Alfred Tennyson's Maud (1855) and Idylls of the King (variously, 1859-1872), Anthony Trollope's The Way We Live Now (1874-75), and Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) and The Importance of Being Earnest (1895).

Let me make one final point about Foucault's explanation of the timing of the rupture between the Classical and the Modern episteme. At one point Foucault says that this change occurred "within a few years (around 1800)" (xii). When he is discussing the "two great discontinuities in the *episteme* of Western culture," he says that the "modern age" commences "at the beginning of the nineteenth century" (xxii). Later, he says that the study of general grammar, natural history, and wealth toppled into "non-knowledge" in "less than twenty years" (217). And while describing the "first phase" where the Classical episteme became a "superficial glitter above an abyss," he uses the dates "from 1775 to 1795" (250-251). All of this suggests that there is some imprecision in dating these epistemological shifts. Thus, the change from the episteme defining the "the eighteenth century aristocracy" to the episteme defining the "decadent aristocracy" cannot be tied down to exact dates. During this transitional period when the old episteme is only "superficially" present (251) and the new "threshold" of difference and order has not yet been established (xx), there is the possibility for much confusion. Dating epistemological shifts can also be problematic because there is a time gap between when the new episteme established itself and when evidence of the ordering principles of the new episteme began to appear in the "scientific theories" and the "philosophical interpretations" (xx). Therefore the rupture between the old and the decadent

epistemes in nineteenth century Britain may have occurred by the beginning of the 1830s (or earlier), but may not have found expression until the 1840s when Carlyle's Past and Present (1843) and Disraeli's Coningsby (1844) appeared.

Dating the Origins of Decadent Aristocracies in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Though the decadence of the aristocracy became more pronounced as the Victorian era progressed, the cultural conditions which produced the decadent aristocracy during the late 1820s and early 1830s were relatively clear. A variety of social and political changes surrounded the passage of the First Reform Bill in 1832. First, unrest from the rapidly growing working classes, a product of accelerated population growth, industrialization, and urbanization (Plowright 8-9) which led to increased pressures on the aristocratic leadership to maintain social order. The Luddite riots of 1811-1817 (9), the Corn Bill riots of March 1815 (13), the Peterloo incident of 1819, and the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820, where a group of radicals were purportedly planning to kill the entire Cabinet (McCord 20), were signs that the aristocracy would be increasingly challenged if social and economic conditions did not improve to more favorably benefit the working classes. The protests of the 1810's led, in part, to increased reform legislation in the 1820's, reforming everything from navigation laws (the 1823 Reciprocity of Duties Act), to jails (the 1823 and 1824 Gaols Acts), to trade unions (the 1824 repeal of the Combination Laws), to jury selection (the 1825 Juries Regulation Act), to police organization (the 1829 Metropolitan Police Act), to religious freedoms (the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act) (Plowright 40), signaling a complete re-organization of social structures, and by implication a re-organization of the social hierarchy in Britain.

Another sign of the changing composition of the aristocracy during the 1820's can be seen in the aristocratic membership of Lord Liverpool's ministry. Many of the aristocrats in Liverpool's cabinet were recent promotions to titled rank: "The Liverpool Cabinet was not an assembly of Britain's bluest blood, but predominantly a group of men whose eminence was either their own work or of recent making" (McCord 2). This stood in sharp contrast to the entailment systems of the eighteenth century where titles, wealth, and political position most often came from within a base of elite aristocratic families.

Almost all of the senior ministers were drawn from the aristocracy, though, unusually, a high proportion of them represented recent promotions to that category. Liverpool himself was a second-generation peer; his father had been born into a junior branch of an Oxfordshire gentry family, and had risen first as a Civil Servant and then as a prominent political figure. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, was only a second generation nobility, from an Irish family with a recent infusion of Indian wealth. The Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, was the son of a doctor and had entered politics as a friend of Pitt; his peerage only dated from 1805. Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, son of a Newcastle coal merchant, had in his youth eloped with the daughter of a wealthy tradesman, and subsequently made his way to high rank as a lawyer and politician. Wellington was a younger son of a minor Irish noble family (recent arrivals in the peerage of Ireland); his rise to personal pre-eminence and dukedom was largely his own work. George Canning, who became President of the Board of Control for India in 1816 and Foreign Secretary in 1822, owed his career to his own talents and timely help from an uncle who was a successful banker. (McCord 1-2)

The discontinuity of Liverpool's ministry with previous aristocratic ministries is exposed if one considers how many of these aristocrats "earned their titles" through industry or through politics. Liverpool's father advanced through the Civil Service and politics; Lord Castlereagh financed his rank and office through commerce; Lord Sidmouth was *the friend of an aristocrat*, not an aristocrat himself, before entering politics; Lord Eldon's rise to power from coal, then marriage, law, and finally politics resembled more aristocrats at the end of the nineteenth century than it did aristocrats during the eighteenth century, and so on. And if ever there was an aristocrat who symbolized in the national psychology of Britain how personal effort and achievement could translate into advancement in rank, that aristocrat would be the Duke of Wellington. The aristocratic title remained the same, but the cultural meaning of the title during the 1820s began to shift. In other words, as wealth came more from commerce than inheritance (or land) or as promotion (in rank or office) came more from personal achievements

than nepotism, the less the old structures of the aristocracy had cultural value or relevance.

This displacement of aristocratic heritage accelerated during Lord Liverpool's ministry.

Signs of change within the social hierarchy were also evident in the political stewardship of British aristocrats during the 1820's. The precipitous end of Lord Liverpool's record fifteen-year tenure as Prime Minister in 1827 ended almost 50 years of Tory rule, dating back to William Pitt the Younger. The rapid deterioration of Tory party leadership after Liverpool's death, evident in the rapid succession of three Tory Ministers (George Canning, Viscount Goderich, and the Duke of Wellington) in just under three years, shows just how fractured and divided the Tories had become. These divisions within the Tory aristocrats, though, were present much earlier in Liverpool's ministry. For instance, George Canning and the Duke of Wellington, two future Prime Ministers, had such strong personalities and divergent views that they ended up creating factions within the Tory party, weakening the influence of the Tory aristocrats. On the issue of Catholic Emancipation, Canning was for it and the Duke of Wellington was against it. In 1825, Canning (and Peel) threaten to resign over the issue, which in turn risked the stability of the Tory ministry and even made Liverpool consider retiring (McCord 41). In fact, Catholic Emancipation did not cause rifts in the Liverpool ministry earlier largely because Liverpool had decided in 1812 that "there would be no settled government policy on the Catholic issue" (McCord 32) and because Liverpool himself was an "amiable figurehead" whose "cool and balanced approach to human foibles" allowed him to conciliate strong personalities like Canning and Wellington (2-3). So Liverpool's "hold fast" approach to leadership only delayed the impending political fragmentation. This infighting became so pronounced when Canning becomes Prime Minister (April 10, 1827 - August 31, 1827) that Wellington (and seven others) promptly resigned (McCord 37), essentially ending any possibility that the Canning ministry would succeed. When Wellington was called to serve as Prime Minister (January 22, 1828 - November 22, 1830), past animosity with the Canningites causes "the left wing of the old Tory front" to leave the party (McCord 39), further dividing the Tory leadership. The role of Canning in addition to "Wellington's intransigence over reform" and the ensuing "alienation of moderate opinion ... was

widely believed to have sealed the fate of his Government" (McCord 44). It is first of all amazing that Canning, a non-aristocrat, was able to exert influence and challenge the leadership of the Duke of Wellington, arguably the most famous aristocrat in Britain at the time. Symptomatic of the changing role of aristocrats in the 1820s was the Duke's putting personal goals (and beliefs) before party goals and class goals. Although political disagreements were a mainstay of the aristocratic ministries during the eighteenth century, a "desire for stability, permanence, and continuity with the past" (Rosenheim 131), a united sense "of the necessity of supporting government," (131), and more solidarity among the landed interest (132) tended to "weaken and dissipate" political disagreements "by the middle of the eighteenth century" (153) in favor of "greater attentiveness to the national [interests]" (131):

Critics of particular ministries and policies [in the eighteenth century] were not critics of basic political structure; quite the contrary, they endorsed the structure and accused those in power of subverting the fundamentally sound constitution. (132)

The larger point here is that, in the eighteenth century, political disagreement was possible without risking the stability of the political structure or risking the positions of aristocrats within this political structure. The political quarrels about fundamentally moral and class-oriented issues such as Catholic Emancipation between the Duke of Wellington and Canning did endanger political stability and, as we shall see presently, did weaken the position of aristocrats within the political order.

A final point to support the plausibility that the 1820's and early 1830's marked a drastic change in the behavior and cultural relevance of the aristocracy can be seen in the immediate struggles between the Tories and the Whigs over the First Reform Bill in 1832. Here we see not just one Tory ministry or one individual aristocrat but the entire aristocratic leadership of Britain compromising the cultural importance of the aristocracy. For starters, the level of agitation and general unrest was again increasing as it had during the "public disorders between 1812 and 1821" (Plowright 2), but this time some Whigs actively supported agitations and felt the need to "conciliate that respectable element in society which they thought of as the middle class" (McCord 132). Where Whigs saw this strategy as a way to pacify moderates and

"isolate and weaken" the more "dangerous elements," Tories only saw "yielding to popular pressure" as a slippery slope that "could pave the way to the eventual loss of all the safeguards of order and property" (McCord 132). Either conclusion implies a weakening of aristocratic influence because both recognize the rising influence of other cultural groups.

Reaching an impasse, the Whigs eventually attempted to "coerce the Upper House with the use of the royal prerogative to create new peers" (133). On the surface this seems simply a matter of political leverage; because Lord Grey and the Whigs were in power, they could use the threat of dozens of new Whig peers to push the Tories into submission.

Faced with the unpalatable reality that to persist in frustrating the will of the House of Commons and the electorate could lead to the flooding of the House with new Whig peers, enough of the Tory majority yielded to see the Reform Bill pass its second reading in the Lords by 184 votes to 175 on 13 April. (McCord 135)

Although the Whigs preserved social stability, they did so ironically by threatening to weaken the aristocracy itself by increasing its numbers with appointments that would dilute aristocratic distinction and power. This strategy ignored almost two hundred years of measures to protect aristocratic privileges. According to Rosenheim, it was precisely an "anxiety and fear" about "the fragility of the social order on which their privileges rested" which informed the actions and group identity of the aristocracy during its cultural apex from 1650 - 1750 (2). Although the social and political circumstances surrounding the First Reform Bill were complex, the numerous signs of change, including the actions of many individual aristocrats, signaled that the future cultural and economic climate of the Victorian era would not be one where the aristocracy could rule uncontested, as it had during much of the eighteenth century.

Power and the Aristocracy: A (Brief) Historical Overview

To understand how changes in aristocratic behavior during the nineteenth century were a product of social and economic conditions, it is important to have a sense of how the aristocracy in Britain reacted to social and economic changes in previous centuries, especially during the eighteenth century because it marked aristocracy's social and political apex.

Furthermore, comparing the social and economic habits of nineteenth century aristocrats to eighteenth century aristocrats reveals abrupt changes in aristocratic identity and behavior.

Perhaps the first important expression of aristocratic power in Britain distinct from the king was the Magna Carta of 1215. The power derived from the Magna Carta by the barons was tenuous, however, because of the instability of the titled position of baron. One cause of this instability was the complex hereditary guidelines of land:

With minor exceptions the law governing the inheritance of a fief was simple and unambiguous: primogeniture among males, equal shares between females, a son always preferred to a daughter, a daughter to a brother or other collateral. For the fief to retain its coherence it was thus essential that its proprietor, if not childless, should have at least one son or, failing sons, not more than one daughter. Those were difficult conditions to fulfill (McFarlane 270).

The immediate result of this inheritance system was that the principal land holdings of a barony often left the immediate family: "In every twenty-five-year period throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a quarter of the noble families in the kingdom were on average faced by the sad prospect of losing their inheritance to others because their heirs were women" (270). What this situation poignantly highlights is that a title without a power base is almost useless. Because the possession of "landed wealth" was one of the primary prerequisites and expressions of aristocratic power in the fourteenth century - as it was still in the nineteenth century - this inheritance system effectively destabilized the power structure of the barons.

The power of the title of baron was further undermined by how the king summoned members to parliament and councils. Edward I, for example, did not in the least feel obliged to seek his members exclusively from the barony: "One has only to set the lists compiled by Dr. Sanders beside the surviving names of those summoned to parliaments and councils to realize how little even Edward I felt obliged or disposed to limit his choice to members of this 'honorial baronage'" (McFarlane 269). The king instead often made his choices from knights or other landholders without titles (269). Serving in parliament or on a king's councils was an

expression of immense power. Not to have this power exclusively tied to the barony weakened the title's status.

The lesson we learn from the fourteenth and fifteenth-century aristocracy is that for a title of nobility to have power, it must be inheritable and it must confer exclusive privileges. After all, if a titled personage learns that there are no distinct benefits from holding a title, the title holds little value or power. If a titled personage is not able to keep the power a title confers in the family, then there is little point in grooming ruling qualities in the younger generation through education and marriage. Many of the most recognizable features of the aristocracy, such as marriage rituals, refined manners, dress, Latin-based education, foreign travel-based education, training in statesmanship, rhetoric, law, and finance, served the primary function of insuring that the power and values conferred by titles were passed on from one generation to the next generation.

By the sixteenth century, the aristocracy had finally secured exclusive power and position within its ranks: "By the beginning of the sixteenth century a small and graded upper class of 'lords' numbering between fifty and sixty had emerged in possession of rank and privilege which marked them off from lesser men" (McFarlane 268). This included an expanded hierarchy of titles including dukedoms (1337), marquessates (1385), earldoms, viscounties (1440), and baronies by patent (1387), in order of status, power, and exclusivity. The dates designate the year the new titles came into existence (McFarlane 273).

The aristocracy, however, was not the only group with power during the sixteenth century. The landed gentry also emerged from the fourteenth century with some of the same prerogatives as their titled contemporaries, though often to a lesser degree (Rosenheim 1). The members of the gentry included knights, esquires, and, after, 1611 baronets, a "non-noble but hereditary title" (1). The gentry, in some aspects, form an analogous but competing group to the peerage. They also owned land; they also wielded political power; they also had country estates. In fact, as Rosenheim notes, "the increase in the size of England's landed class from the mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries, which outstripped total population growth and was vastly disproportionate among the untitled, contributed to some of this convergence [with

titled nobles]" (1). The landed gentry, then, posed a direct challenge to the privileges and exclusivity of the peerage.

To maintain power, titled nobles came into direct conflict with the landed gentry, attempting, by all means possible, to prevent encroachment on their power base. Another important challenge to the rank of the aristocracy during the sixteenth century came at the hands of James I, who, through "the inflation of honours' more than doubled the size of the titled nobility between the death of Elizabeth and the late 1620s" (Rosenheim 1). These two threats - the landed gentry and expansions within the peerage - led to cultural practices within the aristocracy centered around protecting and promoting its power.

Most scholars agree that the British aristocracy reached its zenith of power and stability between the years of 1660 and 1800. The thesis of James M. Rosenheim's 1998 study The Emergence of a Ruling Order: English Landed Society 1650-1750 is just one example:

The experience of landed life, already in 1650 significantly different from what it had been, continued to change through the next century, this book will argue, resulting in a more homogeneous and hence more hegemonic landed class than England had ever experienced - a true ruling order (2)

This picture of the eighteenth century is reinforced by F.M.L. Thompson's 1963 study English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century: "In any case the size of the English peerage remained roughly constant, at something under 200, from the Revolution until the advent of the Younger Pitt" (8), who took over the prime ministership in 1784 (1784-1801). Moreover, it was through two broad cultural practices, marriage rituals and financial stewardship, that the aristocracy was able to maintain its cultural position during much of the eighteenth century. And ultimately, it was a breakdown of marital rituals and financial stewardship that denoted the presence of a decadent aristocracy during the nineteenth century.

Rosenheim argues that marriage and education were the "solder" that "weld[ed] England's provincial elite into a composite ruling order" (13). Because marriage into a titled family was a primary path toward social elevation, it was also a path that needed to be carefully guarded from the encroachment of the unworthy. Access to titled power through marriage was

particularly alarming to the elite titled families because of the vast expansion of the untitled landed gentry:

The era of the gentry's great expansion stretched from the early sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries, altering the kingdom from one where many parishes lacked resident gentle families to a society where such families proliferated. The years of growth saw limited increase among England's few hundred magnate families, but the generality of gentry expanded to number from fifteen to twenty thousand around 1650 (Rosenheim 16).

One positive effect of this encroachment was a tendency for the titled nobility in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to search for marital partners from across Britain, instead of only from within one's own county. This produced, according to Rosenheim, a "cosmopolitan and more nationally oriented social group" (21) than had previously existed among the aristocracy.

The encroachment of the untitled gentry was not, however, the only challenge to the ranks of marriageable aristocrats. Some risks came from within their own ranks, including delayed marriages, a social preference for bachelorhood among titled males, and a propensity toward out-of-wedlock coupling and childbearing (22). These social patterns among titled males would have been sufficiently damaging to the aristocracy to constitute a state of decadence if countermeasures had not been established during the eighteenth century to combat these lapses. One such countermeasure included allowing children more voice in the choosing of partners:

Yet starting early in the seventeenth century, guided in some measure by affection, landed parents granted greater weight to their children's wishes regarding marriage partners. These particular desires continued to be subordinate to familial interests, but children exercised vetoes over objectionable proposals ever more commonly and with fewer repercussions or parental protests (Rosenheim 30).

It was hoped that marrying for "love" would break patterns of resistance to marriage and encourage legitimate heirs. One can also see here an empowering strategy. By allowing their