Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England

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At the heart of this book is a surprisingly straightforward methodology: an examination of responses given by witnesses in church court cases to two questions designed to probe their reliability: what were they 'worth'? (that is, the value of their moveable goods with all their debts paid); and how did they maintain themselves? This focus yields an enormous dataset of 13,686 witness statements from between 1550 and 1728, taken from the ecclesiastical courts of seven dioceses across England, as well as two archdeaconsries and the Cambridge University courts. It is truly remarkable – and testament to the considerable analytical prowess, intellectual ambition, and scope of historical understanding of the author – that the answers to these two relatively simple questions are marshalled to produce profound insights into so many of the fundamentals of early modern society. We are afforded unprecedented access to how the social hierarchy was understood 'from below', especially by that elusive but significant social group between the will-writing middle sorts and those in receipt of formal poor relief, and perhaps even more ground breaking, how it was perceived by women. Never before has the social structure of early modern England – in both its hard materialist form and in terms of contemporary perceptions – been reconstructed in such detail, and with due attention given to the important intersection of the factors wealth, gender, age, and regional variation. There are, moreover, important findings for historians of work – especially relating to the significance of married women's work and to the relationship of occupational descriptors to everyday working life. Then, perhaps most significant of all, is the book's profound engagement with the question of historical change. The process of social polarisation looms large, and the myriad purported 'revolutions' of the late 17th and early 18th centuries – industrious, consumer, financial – are each assessed and nuanced in the light of this substantial body of new evidence. In short, this is a very impressive and very important book, and should be read by pretty much anyone with an interest in the early modern period.

This all hinges, however, on the extent to which the answers that witnesses were giving in their statements were more than just 'ciphers of legal procedure' (p. 25), formulaic responses largely determined by the demands and structures of the courts. Were they, rather, expressive of languages and markers of self- and social-description that were recognised and deployed more generally – a window into the functioning of a culture and not just of the courts? And were they a reliable guide to people's actual levels of wealth and patterns of work? Shepard is sanguine on these questions, highlighting the pervasive legalism and litigation
of early modern society to make the point that appearing as a witness was 'likely to have informed processes of identity-making' and did not occur in isolation from wider contexts of social interaction. Indeed, the assessments of worth witnesses were asked to make – of themselves and other witnesses – were also central to decisions about the extension of credit outside of the courts, a fact highlighting their broader social significance and limiting the scope with which witnesses might fabricate responses: one's worth was something widely known in local society. There is also enough individuality in the responses of witnesses to 'inspire confidence that the level of scribal intervention was limited' (p. 26). Accepting the link between witnesses' responses to the courts and wider structures of wealth and thought is the cornerstone upon which rests all the arguments that follow, but it seems to me a solid foundation: there is little reason to think that what witnesses said was significantly detached from reality in a way that would render the analysis here problematic.

After discussing these issues, and the scope of the book and its arguments in an introductory chapter, 'Self and society in early modern England', part one then focuses on responses to the first question: what were witnesses worth? The question was asked on the basis that those of small means would be susceptible to bribery or influence and their testimony would therefore be unreliable. Chapter two – 'Calculating credit' – shows that the most common way of responding to this question was to assign a cash value to one's moveable goods, which served as a common scale for assessing differences in wealth between individuals. This suggests that for most people 'social identity in early modern England was rooted in possession of moveable estate' (p. 35) – and thus less closely tied to the ownership of land than top-down models of the social order have encouraged us to think. Moreover, the value of one's moveable estate was, Shepard argues, the principle determinant of how much credit an individual might expect to secure – goods could be seized as payment of a debt, and as such they acted as the material basis on which credit was extended. It's a significant claim. Craig Muldrew's hugely influential work on early modern England's pervasive credit economy has encouraged us to think that credit was extended on the basis of ethical judgements about the character and behaviour of an individual – that one's social and economic reputation were inseparable. Shepard argues here that one's 'creditworthiness' also had an important basis in material possessions – that 'the brokerage of credit had a very hard material edge' that we have tended to overlook (p. 36). As such, contemporaries were just as adept at and concerned with assessing each other's goods as behaviour, and there existed a 'culture of appraisal' that was reflected in the fact that witnesses were routinely able to comment in detail and with accuracy on the possessions of their neighbours – a process that women, who were responsible for the management and procurement of household goods, were at the centre of.

When these monetary evaluations of worth are collated by social/occupational status and gender, and compared over time, the result is table 2.7 (pp. 69–70), which is likely to take its place as a staple Powerpoint slide for lectures on the social order of early modern England for years to come. It shows the average worth of members of key social and gender groups (gentlemen, yeomen, labourers, singlewomen, widows etc), allowing us to see the relative prosperity of each, but also how this changed over time. In some respects the results are unsurprising: they reveal a clear polarisation in wealth occurring in the century after 1550, whereby a relatively flat socio-economic hierarchy (Gentlemen with a mean wealth of £25 at the start of the period; Yeomen £10; Husbandmen £8, Craftsmen £8; Labourers £2) became dramatically elongated by 1650 (Gentlemen £180; Yeomen £143; Husbandmen £30; Craftsmen £30; Labourers £5). What is novel is the unprecedented level of detail this gives us about who the 'winners' and 'losers' of social polarisation were, and the sheer extent to which yeomen farmers were the most dramatic of the former: whereas in 1550 there had been little to separate the average wealth of the yeomen from that of the husbandman and the craftsman, by 1650 the median wealth of yeomen was ten times that of these other social/occupational groups. That a process of social polarisation occurred in this century is probably one of the least contested historical narratives on the books: Shepard's findings here seem to put it beyond any doubt, and even suggest 'it may have been far more pronounced than previously estimated' (p. 68). There is also plenty of further analysis here of the finer gradations of change experienced within and between different social, age and gender groupings that repays careful reading, and which will serve as a reference guide for historians looking to place the subjects of their own research within the social hierarchy of early modern England at
Chapter three – ‘Quantifying status’ – serves to reassure us that the cash values supplied by witnesses were relatively accurate, demonstrating that they were rarely disputed by opposing parties in a case; that they stand up reasonably well to examination via record linkage; and that they were often made with reference to significant and widely recognised benchmarks of social status that were used as qualifications for office-holding, or taxation, or in legislative measures (e.g. 40s, £5, £10 etc). Statements of worth were indicative then of a broader framework for understanding the gradations of social structure, and the chapter also charts how these benchmarks shifted over time with the result that ‘the threshold between [being considered as] having something and having nothing became higher and apparently more rigid’ (p. 113). Chapter four, ‘Demarcating poverty’, highlights the fact that fine gradations in wealth at the lower end of the scale remained highly significant to those at the sharp end, even if yeomen and the gentry were increasingly coming to see their inferiors as an undifferentiated group of have-nots. From a legal perspective those whose stated worth was 'little or nothing' were all open to suspicion as witnesses as they had few goods of their own with which to secure credit and a subsequent degree of economic independence. But these witnesses themselves stressed that there were fine lines to be drawn between those who received alms, those who worked for wages, and those who could claim to be free of debt. All might have lacked a valuable stock of moveable goods, but witnesses' efforts to draw such distinctions suggest that being 'poor' was associated as much with forms of dependence as with material hardship, and that degrees of dependence mattered to those involved in such relationships. This was not, Shepard points out, a particularly fertile conceptual space within which poorer groups and individuals could stake out a positive and edifying sense of identity, and whilst the church courts represented a remarkably inclusive public arena, it was nonetheless a steeply hierarchical one.

Part two of the book turns to responses to the second question of how witnesses maintained themselves. Answers tended to fall into one of three main categories: the statement of an occupational title; reference to a particular work task; or the invocation of a more general concept – the most common of which was 'living by labour'. Chapter five, 'Maintaining oneself', concerns itself principally with those answers that invoked more general concepts (labour; 'own means'; service; dependent on others; etc), in the process calling for and adopting a 'structure-oriented' approach to early modern work – focused on the social relations of work – to complement recent advances made by adopting a 'verb-oriented' approach focused on tasks (p. 152). Crucial here is the finding that 'living by labour' was generally used to denote working for others, and not simply manual work. It was a form of maintenance invoked by both genders, and unlike service it was not restricted to any one life-cycle stage. Those engaged in it emphasised their 'industry' and their 'painstaking' in an attempt to assert their 'honesty', but living by labour was nonetheless associated with poverty and dependency, and again provided only a narrow space within which to articulate a positive identity. Chapter six – 'Depending on others' – poses the question of whether all of this negative emphasis on forms of dependence is suggestive of a deeply individualistic society rather than a communalist one. The answer is that some forms of dependence were looked upon more favourably than others. Charity was deemed a Christian duty, but even those deemed to be undoubtedly deserving recipients of it were discredited as witnesses due to their dependency on it. Credit relations, on the other hand, were a cut above, as these were a form of reciprocal relation and engagement in them was an indicator of some degree of social standing in your community (and at the very least a modest collection of moveable goods). Parental dependence might be taken as an indicator of higher social status and evidence of potential future wealth, whereas those dependent on labour or service were likely to find their experiences of dependency mapped onto later life. Marriage, on the other hand, should not be taken by historians as a relation of dependence that curtailed women's active participation in their own maintenance. Shepard argues strongly here, by drawing on witness testimonies given by wives, that married women played a full and active part in household economies to the extent that marriage was invariably an economic partnership. Whilst husbands rarely mentioned any form of dependency on the contributions of their wives when asked how they maintained themselves, it is clear enough that their work was vital, something Shepard suggests we might appreciate more fully if we understand that the term 'wife' had connotations of being a quasi-occupational descriptor, not just a statement...
Chapter seven – 'Making a living' – compares the occupational titles given by witnesses in response to the maintenance question or in the 'additions' (i.e. the biographical information recorded about a witness at the beginning of their testimony) with other information given in their responses relating to specific work tasks undertaken. There is considerable discrepancy in many instances between given occupations and the types of work people actually did. Sometimes this was because individuals were engaged in by-employments, which could be part of a precarious economy of makeshifts but in many cases were lucrative activities that brought prosperity. At other times the discrepancy could be the result of life-cycle changes, with men in old age still using an occupational title that did not reflect more recent shifts in the work they were able to undertake. Women very rarely used occupational titles: only servant, spinster, midwife and mantua-maker appeared with any regularity. All of this contributes to recent critiques of occupational labels as indicators of who did what in the early modern English economy: for men they conceal the vagaries and piecemeal nature of working life; and their lack of attribution to women can suggest a level of economic inactivity that contrasts dramatically with the evidence of women's work revealed by a 'verb-oriented' approach, something else Shepard uses in this chapter. What seems less clear is why, therefore, such labels were so prevalent in languages of self-description in this period: had they endured from an earlier age of more stable working roles, or were/are they just a convenient heuristic device for making sense of complex realities? If occupational labels were failing to reflect changes in this society, Shepard argues that the pattern of responses to our two questions were more responsive: by the later 17th century a shift was underway whereby less emphasis was being put on the worth question – what you had – and more weight was accorded to the question of maintenance – what you did. It was a change that reflected a growing commercialisation in society, whereby 'producing and exchanging goods were becoming as important as owning them' (p. 273).

This theme is taken up in part three, in which chapter eight, 'Refashioning credibility', argues that the shifting of importance away from the worth question and onto the maintenance one reveals a profound transformation in the 'calculus of esteem and the operation of credit' in the late 17th century (p. 277). Contrary to the conventional narrative, Shepard argues that the advance of commercialism and changes in financial structures at this time did not lead to credit relations becoming more impersonal and contractual. Rather, as the flow of goods and the opportunities for making money through investments of various kinds became more prevalent features of the economic landscape, one's stock of moveable goods diminished in usefulness as a basis for judgements about an individual's wealth (the destruction of property in the civil war had also reduced people's faith in goods as a secure form of wealth, and the growing appetite of the state for taxing its subjects meant the old 'culture of appraisal' was undermined by a reluctance to fully disclose one's 'worth'). Individuals began to answer the questions by making greater reference to incomes, investments and skilled occupations rather than the goods they owned, and doing the right sorts of things became more important than owning them. If anything, then, the material basis of credit was being eroded, as an individual's wealth became more intangible and difficult to classify – as a result credit relations were becoming more based on an individual's behaviour, not less. It was in this context that conspicuous consumption – the purchase of new novelty goods – proliferated, as creditworthiness became more closely linked with the outward display of wealth as the old 'worth' system in which status and credit were grounded in your stock of valuable and enduring moveable goods gave way.

Across these eight chapters (and a conclusion that restates the principal arguments) there is a rich diet of empirical findings and historiographical interventions for the reader to digest. Even in a relatively extended review such as this one I have not been able to summarise all of the key points (there is also, for instance, an important argument developed across these chapters about the character of England's supposed 'industrious revolution'). As such, its implications may take some time to sink in, but its legacy will be enduring and profound. It provides us with an unparalleled reconstruction of the early modern social order, both material and conceptual, and one sensitive to gradations of wealth, status, age, gender, and – albeit to a lesser extent – regional variations, which will be an invaluable point of reference for all scholars of this period. Furthermore, it is not simply a snapshot of the social order, but an ambitious attempt to both chart and
explain its development across two centuries. The resultant accounts of change follow broad contours that are largely familiar – social polarisation in the years 1550–1650; a series of transformative 'revolutions' in the following century – but the empirical evidence deployed here does much to nuance and deepen our understandings of such changes, especially in terms of their impact across the social scale and their experience by the labouring classes and by both women and men. One might wonder, though, whether the story of change presented towards the end of the book has quite the same social and geographical relevance as the insights presented in chapters one to seven. The author is careful to acknowledge the growing prevalence of London in the dataset for the latter part of the period covered and to add this as a caveat, but there is a sense that our focus is dragged, as we move through time, inexorably towards the higher end of the increasingly elongated social scale – towards the world view of the 'winners' and away from that of the 'losers' of social polarisation. Of course, if we accept the argument that the early modern period experienced a shift from a flatter social structure with a more homogeneous culture of worth and appraisal towards a more unequal and variegated society, we might reasonably assume that conceptions of credibility became more socially bounded and that it would be increasingly difficult to identify a widespread and shared way of conceiving of status and credit. If so, it seems to me at least that the 'refashioning of credibility' outlined in chapter eight tells us less about how the social order was understood 'from below' than the insights of earlier chapters – though these processes of change undoubtedly did impact upon such understandings.

The arguments made here about late-17th century changes place the book at the forefront of a broader historiographical trend: the recent attempt by historians we might loosely label as 'Wrightsonians' (i.e. those who undertook PhDs with, or have been heavily influenced by the work of, Keith Wrightson) to bridge a historiographical gap between 'Tawney's Century' (or should that perhaps be 'Wrightson's Century?') of c.1550–1650, and the 'long eighteenth century', in particular by thinking about how the processes occurring in the former (not least social polarisation) helped to shape the emergence of the 'polite and commercial' society of the latter. Arguably, this book shares some of the limitations of this wider endeavour – a tendency, for instance, to treat the year 1550 as somewhat of a 'year zero' and to leave aside the issue of how changes in the early modern period were connected to what went before. A relatively Anglocentric approach to thinking about processes of change is another feature of these works – although admittedly a comparative approach would be difficult for Shepard without appropriate studies to draw upon. It would be unfair to lay either of these charges against this book with much conviction: it would be unreasonable to ask for yet more angles to be covered by what is already a study of impressive scope. Even in other works these limitations do not detract significantly from what is an exciting project, not least because it grasps the nettle of thinking about the kind of processes of macro-historical change that historians have largely shied away from in the past two decades. Shepard tackles these issues with surety, showing that thorough empirical research and attempts to outline narratives of historical change can be skilfully combined by approaches other than those focused on 'big data' – the very best historians can do this without sacrificing sensitivity to the human experiences at the centre of historical change. This hugely impressive book provides ample evidence that Shepard is indeed one of those.

Notes


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