

Introduction

Early modern society, drama and cultural history

We see nothing more frequently galls a Man, than baseness of Birth, when in Reputation or Honour; nor nothing more elevates him, than the empty Title of a **Gentleman**, which duely considered in its Rise, Progress, and End, is but a *Non ens*.

W. Ramesey, *The Gentlemans Companion* (1672)

If the research behind this book has a single intention it is to contribute towards the reassessment of one of the most important and persistent distinctions for early modern English society: its cleaving in two by the constant identification of a ‘gentle’ elite and, as a corollary, a ‘simple’ majority.¹ To those familiar with current historiography, this aim may appear out of step with the abiding concern to recover the histories of the marginalized and subordinated. Yet, for all its gains, this preoccupation has had unfortunate side-effects. Research on that oxymoronic subject, a ruling minority, goes largely unpursued because its modern relevance remains open to debate. Surely not another study of the gentry is the implied query, the tacit assumption that decades of political and then related social historiography have largely exhausted a narrow field of inquiry. Recent work has also reached the point where it denies the usefulness of viewing early modern society as divided in two, genteel and non-genteel or elite versus plebeian. Having completed this book I was not surprised to find a sophisticated collection of essays prefaced by the claim that it would put aside a ‘simple dichotomy’ riddled with problems.²

Yet however crude or ultimately untenable this dichotomy may have been, the fact remains that a genteel/non-genteel divide made a persistent if contingent difference in the lives of countless people who fell on either side for diverse reasons and with varied consequences. To give but a handful of random instances

¹ Use of the term ‘gentle’ itself implied another non-elite group, but occasionally contemporaries did explicitly juxtapose a second term for the ‘other’ group. Uses of ‘gentle’ and ‘simple’ may be found in ‘The Maids Call to the Batchelors’, in W. G. Day (ed.), *The Pepys Ballads* (Cambridge, 1987), vol. V, 194; Anon., *The Whitsun-tide Ramble* (?1720), 6.

² M. J. Braddick and J. Walter, ‘Introduction. Grids of Power: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Early Modern Society’, in M. J. Braddick and J. Walter (eds.), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society. Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001), 3.

2 Gentility and the Comic Theatre of Late Stuart London

here, consider that identification as ‘gentle’ or ‘simple’ could quite possibly determine privileges as a university student;³ capacity for government office;⁴ marriage prospects;⁵ course of debate in the House of Commons;⁶ tax liability;⁷ perception of professional skill;⁸ ability to serve on a jury;⁹ success in foreign diplomacy;¹⁰ severity of criminal prosecution and punishment;¹¹ interment.¹²

Readmitting the elite to our agenda does not need to be at the expense of the plebs, or to come at the price of reinstating the condescension of posterity. Far from it. In the same way that historians of gender are realizing they can no longer take the history of dead (white) males as written, but must interrogate masculinity if they are to understand the complexities of both femininity and questions of relative subordination, the first main premise of this study is that we

- ³ For example, Thomas Dixon to Sir Daniel Fleming, 24 July 1678, HMC, *Le Fleming* 25, 1 (1890), 147 (reports on the status of Fleming’s son and his lodgings at Queen’s College, Oxford). Daniel Woolf’s *The Social Circulation of the Past. English Historical Culture 1500–1730* (Oxford, 2003), 73–98, offers further treatment of this issue and other social privileges associated with genteel heredity.
- ⁴ Peter to Thomas Wentworth, 24 September 1714, in J. J. Cartwright (ed.), *The Wentworth Papers 1705–1739* (London, 1883), 422 (concerning the uncertain status of new appointments made by George I).
- ⁵ Robert to his merchant father Thomas Pitt, 30 December 1703, HMC, *Fortescue* 30, 1 (1892), 9ff. (on the possibility of his marriage: ‘alliance with the greatest families in England is as much to your credit’). See also several of the legal case-studies presented in L. Stone, *Uncertain Unions. Marriage in England 1660–1753* (Oxford, 1992); Stone, *Broken Lives. Separation and Divorce in England 1660–1857* (Oxford, 1993).
- ⁶ HMC, *Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont. Diary of Viscount Percival afterwards First Earl of Egmont. Volume I: 1730–1733* 63, 1 (1920), 65–77 (entry for 26 February 1730 reports socially invective Commons debate over the East India Company).
- ⁷ *Pepys*, 20 March 1667, vol. VIII, 120 (Pepys was rated as esquire for the poll tax); Rev. Robert Stubbes to Dr William Trumbull, ?May 1678, HMC, *Downshire* 75, 1 (1924), 11 (complains that gentlemen of the cloth are exempt from certain levy).
- ⁸ For example, in the early 1660s Lady Gardiner considered the reliability of an oculist and his treatment stemmed directly from the superior pedigree of the man. See M. M. Verney (ed.), *Memoirs of the Verney Family from the Restoration to the Revolution 1660 to 1696* (1899), vol. IV, 97.
- ⁹ Peter to Thomas Wentworth, 15 July 1731, in Cartwright, *Wentworth Papers*, 466 (reports delay in a trial while it was reckoned who were gentlemen and, therefore, able to constitute a special jury).
- ¹⁰ John Vanbrugh to his mother in London, 30 October 1691, HMC, *Finch* 71, 3 (1957), 294 (on the matter of his imprisonment in the Bastille he instructs her that a certain individual cannot help them because he is a ‘man of no birth’).
- ¹¹ For instance, Edmund Thaxter *et al.* to Lord Yarmouth, 29 September 1676, HMC, *Sixth Report* 5, 1 (1877), 380, report on a search of the Herald’s Office in order to establish whether a case against Bowers the coffee-man, who claims gentility, can proceed; when detained at Cork in the wake of the Rye House Plot, Elizabeth Freke recalled that she and her husband received consideration that was only proper on account of their higher status. See R. A. Anselment (ed.), *The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke 1671–1714* (Camden Society, London, fifth series, 2001) vol. XVIII, 50, 221 (entries for 29 July 1683); Dr Joseph Browne to Robert Harley, 30 May 1706 at 1 o’clock, HMC, *Portland* 29, 8 (1907), 229 (pleads that ‘your honour’s generosity will not let a gentleman suffer so much shame’ in the pillory).
- ¹² Anselment, *Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke*, 247–51 (in relation to the burial and memorials for both her grandson and her husband, 1706).

can better comprehend the experience of the socially marginalized if we know more of how they were dominated and why certain people came to presume power over others.

What follows has no immediate quarrel with the notion that early modern inequality was far more complex than a single cleft separating the haves from the have-nots. This is not as contradictory an assertion as it might appear. Although the present work concurs in seeing early modern social differentiation as elaborate, plural, contingent and processual, we have still to explain how and why premodern people expended so much energy trying to uphold a divide that was obvious, singular and unchanging. Granted this separation was persistently being undermined in both large and small ways, even to the point of near-collapse. Yet gentility (in company with its implied opposite) retained an enduring if not entirely consistent presence and we have a way still to run before we understand this distinction's meanings and their implications for contemporaries. While it is fashionable to read normative social distinctions against the grain, as evidence that the early modern majority lived largely opposed to them and their socio-cultural experience thereby refuses easy categorization, to concede the existence of the normative is itself tacit recognition that perennial efforts were also made to realize a simple, stable and definitive ordering of society. However partial their success these attempts had consequences, immediate or postponed, major and minor, for diverse aspects of early modern life.

The second working premise of *Gentility and the Comic Theatre* is that by studying London's comic stage of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it should be possible to recover significant aspects of the complex socio-cultural process that was gentility. In isolation, this suggestion may not seem particularly novel. For scholars of early modern theatre have long been aware of its social politics, even though they may disagree over its precise modulations and importance. However, the current study aims to address both audiences, social historians and drama critics alike. Situated at the intersection of two disciplines, this brief introduction of current thinking in social history for literary scholars, and of literary criticism for the historian, sometimes runs the risk of stating the obvious as it tries to reconcile not always mutual or familiar points of view. Fundamentally however, these disciplines share the endeavour of understanding the cultural, the networks of meaning shaping and shaped by past societies. In the course of this book we will find that the comic theatre was a prominent example of such a network for London society in the early modern period; that gentility gave particular meaning to power in this society and, conversely, to define gentility was itself a question of power.

Studies of England's gentry in the early modern period are subject to paradox. On the one hand, their authors are prone to confess that the identity of their subjects, the gentlemen and -women whose history they are telling, remains

4 Gentility and the Comic Theatre of Late Stuart London

inherently uncertain. On the other, they persist in the idea that it is possible to chart the fortunes of these people as a discrete social group over time. For instance, the introductory chapter to a perceptive synthesis of this research by Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes is in the curious position of ending with the statement: 'At the risk of tautology we therefore must conclude that the gentry were that body of men and women whose gentility was acknowledged by others.'¹³ The rest of their book is spotted with similar concessions, some drawn from contemporary texts. Yet as that study draws to a close we find 'gentility triumphant', a conclusion seconded by its definitive title of '*The Gentry . . .*'.¹⁴ Apparently we *are* meant to know precisely who the gentry were, what gentility comprised, after all. A similar tension can be seen in a concise survey of gentility across four centuries. Penelope Corfield concludes that the 'definition of gentility remained disputed . . . It signified not stasis but flexibility.'¹⁵ But this kind of conclusion is counter-intuitive, for it assumes an *a priori* stability against which flexibility can be gauged.¹⁶ It also suggests that our paradox is largely self-inflicted, the result of a not always rigorous conceptualization of the phenomenon under investigation. We need to ask anew: how are we to define gentility and who were the gentry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Problems with periodization, the incomplete conceptualization of the relationship of culture to social stratification, and underrecognition of the complexities of cultural change and transmission, all suggest that current historiography does not approach these questions with the rigour they deserve.

What was 'gentility'; what did it mean to be 'genteel' and 'generous', or to identify someone as a 'gentleman' or 'gentlewoman', and a member of the 'gentry'? What did these words signify? The answer often assumed by studies of 'the gentry' is that they comprised part of the 'language of social description' and so alluded to social structures.¹⁷ This is the first mis-step. The second is to reason from the first that it is the historian's task to excavate these structures, that with a little effort she or he can uncover the material, objective reality behind the façade of language. Arguably, the majority of studies of gentility in the early modern period are liable to this kind of reductionism. Furthermore, it remains a given that the language of gentility reflected a material, class position in the last instance. Although the gentry's class consciousness has long since been rejected as a remnant of 'vulgar' marxism, early modern gentlemen and gentlewomen

¹³ F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500–1700* (Stanford, 1994), 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 382; also G. E. Mingay, *The Gentry. The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* (London, 1976), cf. 53 and 57ff.

¹⁵ P. J. Corfield, 'The Rivals: Landed and Other Gentlemen', in N. Harte and R. Quinault (eds.), *Land and Society in Britain, 1700–1914. Essays in Honour of F. M. L. Thompson* (Manchester, 1996), 22–3.

¹⁶ See also, for instance, Mingay, *Gentry*, 10; Heal and Holmes, *Gentry*, 9, 11–12.

¹⁷ Corfield, 'The Rivals', 20.

still comprise a ghostly class-in-itself.¹⁸ Much as recent studies of England's gentry reject description of the gentry as a 'class', they cannot stop thinking of it as one. For example, Corfield diligently avoids any mention of class in her discussion of gentility until the final paragraphs, where it is suggested that gentility's malleability is indicative of the 'opacity of class definitions'.¹⁹ Her essay then comes full circle. Denials notwithstanding, materialist and positivist assumptions have driven the interpretation from the beginning. Those who owned a sizeable amount of land over a number of years, that is, a country estate inherited through several generations of the one family, were 'gentlemen'; 'gentlewomen' were their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. Collectively these people were the 'gentry' and gave expression to their common social position by way of their 'gentility', variously described by historians as their lifestyle, manners or culture.

It is this assumption that 'generous language' referred to England's larger landowners which permits contradictory claims that the 'definition of gentility' was contracting or expanding at different times and for various reasons.²⁰ The historiography for our chosen period is no exception, maintaining that gentility was undergoing substantial change. As just one example, Peter Borsay writes that

in mid-seventeenth-century Britain birth was probably still the principal factor in defining a gentleman, and the ownership of a rural estate the most common method of sustaining this honour. In the years after the Restoration this traditional model of gentility was seriously eroded. Though ancestry remained an important qualification and land a valuable support, the critical definition of a gentleman increasingly became a *cultural* one.²¹

And what was the main effect of this cultural shift which some have described as involving the advent of a 'cult of gentility'?²² The most obvious consequence, it has been argued, was the rise of individuals usually referred to by historians as the 'pseudo-gentry'.²³ In other words, a growing number of people claimed to be 'gentlemen' and 'gentlewomen' without fitting the established profile of ancient landownership. These 'pseudo-gentry' are usually characterized as having been urban in both their origin and their means of livelihood. And were it not for the so-called culture of gentility, a further assumption is that we should otherwise describe these 'pseudo'-gentlemen and gentlewomen as ambitious

¹⁸ See the first studies of the gentry produced by the new social history; a position summarized by Mingay, *Gentry*, 3.

¹⁹ Corfield, 'The Rivals', 23.

²⁰ I use the phrase 'generous language' as shorthand for the various cognates of gentility.

²¹ P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance. Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989), 226. *Emphasis added.*

²² L. Stone and J. C. F. Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), 410. *Emphasis added.*

²³ For this term see A. Everitt, 'Social Mobility in Early Modern England', *PP* 33 (1966), 56–73.

6 Gentry and the Comic Theatre of Late Stuart London

members of the upper-middling sort (or ‘class’). Lawrence and Jeanne Stone speak for many when they suggest that

what makes the rise of this middling sort so crucial is their attitude towards their social superiors. Instead of resenting them, they eagerly sought to imitate them, aspiring to gentility by copying the education, manners, and behaviour of the gentry . . . This attitude thus provided the glue which bound together the top half or more of the nation by means of an homogenized culture of gentility that left elite hegemony unaffected.²⁴

There are problems with this model of social development. Several important shades of grey in the social landscape have largely escaped comment, passed over in favour of black-and-white explanation. There are obvious discrepancies in the timing of the alleged transition from a ‘true’ to a ‘pseudonymous’ gentry, the reduction or ‘debasement of gentility’.²⁵ The reputed collapse in the integrity of a genteel social identity, as it came to be culturally defined, seems always to be on the agenda of early modern social change. Some see it as a notable feature of the Restoration era (1660–c. 1685);²⁶ others trace it to the early years of the eighteenth century or perhaps delay its onset until 1750 and beyond.²⁷ Still others have observed a similar phenomenon much sooner, by the opening decades of the seventeenth century.²⁸

It is even more difficult to explain the perceived nature of the change in question: the implicit but all too common notion that at some point, and quite suddenly, the social certainty of being one of the gentry gave way to cultural uncertainty over exactly who was, or was not, one of the elite. It is by no means clear to whom or what the concept of a ‘culture of gentility’ is meant to refer. For surely England’s gentlemen and -women had always had a culture: shared values, beliefs (including faith in their superiority) and the symbolic forms in which these found expression? How is it that at a particular point in the early modern chronology this culture assumes characteristics vaguely reminiscent

²⁴ Stone and Stone, *Open Elite*, 409. See also, for example, M. L. Bush, *The English Aristocracy. A Comparative Synthesis* (Manchester, 1984), 9, 76, 128–9; D. Castronovo, *The English Gentleman. Images and Ideals in Literature and Society* (New York, 1987), 14–19; J. Barry, ‘Introduction’, in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People. Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800* (London, 1994), 19; R. Grassby, *The Business Community in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1995), 117, 378–85, 390–1 (but cf. 118, 386–8, 391–3).

²⁵ P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People, England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), 66.

²⁶ J. S. Morrill, ‘The Northern Gentry and the Great Rebellion’, *Northern History* 15 (1979), 73; Heal and Holmes, *Gentry*, 7–8.

²⁷ Langford, *Polite*, 67–8; L. E. Klein, ‘Politeness for Plebes. Consumption and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England’, in A. Bermingham and J. Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800. Image, Object, Text* (London, 1995), 362; Klein, ‘The Political Significance of “Politeness” in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain’, in G. J. Schochet (ed.), *Politics, Politeness, and Patriotism. Papers Presented at the Folger Institute Seminar* (Washington, DC, 1993), 95–6.

²⁸ K. E. Wrightson, ‘Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England’, in P. J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991), 37–41.

of some portrayals of modern-day mass culture, inducing a numbing social consensus among its consumers? Broadly speaking, the answer would seem to lie in lingering traces of the *marxisant* notion of cultural superstructure as a function of distinct socio-structural groups (classes, once again).

Finally, and paradoxically, it is becoming clearer that distinctions between social groups were far more contingent than we once assumed. Indeed, there are grounds for arguing that historians have misused the very term ‘pseudo-gentry’.²⁹ Early modern Londoners appear never to have employed this compound word either in the sense or to the degree that modern historiography has. Instead they recognized that the language of gentility was itself contested. As Guy Miège conceded when trying to write his own definition of the term ‘gentleman’ in the 1690s: ‘But Use has so far stretched the Signification of this Word, both high and low.’³⁰

In sum, we need to understand more of how and why this ‘stretching’ was possible (bearing in mind that it might involve contraction as well as expansion). Evidently there was nothing ‘pseudo’ about it. If we continue to think of the gentry as an identifiable social group with a discrete culture then we end up playing a zero-sum game, recognizing that gentility was highly significant, full of meaning(s), for early modern people but largely meaningless to us. All are agreed that gentility was a definition; but of what and why? To use the words ‘gentleman’ or ‘gentlewoman’ was to make an identification, but of whom?

There is a way out of this conceptual cul-de-sac. We need to acknowledge that with the advent of history ‘from below’, studies of elites, social groups like England’s gentry, became unfashionable. To a large extent they remain so and, as a consequence, those studies which do emerge often fail to engage with the rethinking of the social which has been pursued predominantly with regard to the histories of subordinate, non-elite groups.³¹ In fact, the broader outlines of this reconsideration can help us to make better sense of the babble of voices disputing gentility in the early modern period; to escape the tautology and paradox which dogs much historiography. The reconsideration that follows will essentially contend that gentility *always* comprehended a cultural and political dynamic.

²⁹ In my research I happened across only one contemporary instance but with connotations quite unlike those implied by Everitt *et al.* See *Universal Spectator*, no. xxxviii (28 June 1729), [1], where the term is associated with gambling and con-men, not the prosperous urban upstart.

³⁰ G. Miège, *The New State of England* (1691, fourth edition 1702), part ii, 153–4.

³¹ In British history see the reconsideration, by Patrick Joyce, of those once confidently described as the ‘working class’ in his *Visions of the People. Industrial England and the Question of Class 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); Joyce, *Democratic Subjects. The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994). For a conceptually similar reassessment of the ‘middle class’, see D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class. The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995). A useful introduction to the wider issues involved may also be found in the opening chapter of Kathleen Wilson’s *The Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), which, as the title implies, aims to deconstruct the idea of ‘the people’.

8 Gentility and the Comic Theatre of Late Stuart London

A rhetorical disposition of power constantly in progress, gentility delineated society's most powerful grouping, thereby structuring and rationalizing social inequality.³²

Social structures (relationships of difference or inequality) are no longer considered immanent and impersonal sets of cast-iron roles lived out by human beings. Instead, they are deemed to be as much the product of cultural agency because individuals give meaning to material experiences in a ceaseless and dialectical process, a process which Anthony Giddens labels 'social structuration'.³³ As material experience is shaped by culture, so culture, as the giving of meaning, has a material presence. Therefore, inherited social roles structure life but the contingency of experience means that we typically cannot describe these roles as permanently structured, static and embedded within society. In other words, as people learn the social roles they are to play, certain conditions make for smaller improvisations within or even beyond what culture and history might otherwise seem to dictate. Improvisation makes for accretions of new meaning that eventually recast the role's subsequent performance.

This constant process may be described as subjective in three respects. First, if the structure of society is partly a matter of interpretation then people have multiple views of society ('where' or 'how' they and others fit; what roles they are to play) and these may change over time and place. Second, whilst these interpretations are necessarily varied, some become more persuasive or dominant. Differences of power are as much a matter of culture as they are of material experience. Third, both rulers and ruled are subject to, or constrained by, prevailing cultural conventions. This means that if certain individuals in early modern England were powerfully dominant as society's elite, possessing social prominence, political influence and sprawling acres, then they were equally powerful by way of their ability to impose a prevalent view of themselves as elites – gentility – on society at large. However, at the same time, they themselves had also to be seen to 'live out' or impersonate that identity in order for it to carry conviction. In sum, social history has taken a cultural or linguistic turn. There is a greater recognition that social structure and relationships, along with

³² What follows also finds itself in general sympathy with the positions taken by three recent studies. First, an excellent micro-history of the Phelps family, Tudor–Stuart claimants of gentility, by R. W. S. More, 'The Rewards of Virtue: Gentility in Early Modern England', unpublished PhD dissertation, Brown University (1998), 24–30, 79–80, 196. Second, a revisionist stance is evident in a study of gentility from the perspective of the Anglo-Atlantic world during the eighteenth century by M. J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman. Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (Charlottesville, 1998), 17, 34, 38, 70, 80, 170, 178 (cf. 6, 20, 75, 129). Third, and more generally, see D. M. Posner, *The Performance of Nobility in Early Modern European Literature* (Cambridge, 1999), 4, 15–18, 110–15, 207–10.

³³ A. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London, 1973, second edition 1981), *passim*.

the resulting identities and groups, are not simply inherent to a given society. They are not waiting somewhere 'out there' to be discovered by the historian, nor were they transparently described or perceived by contemporaries.³⁴ Rather they were inscribed by language, organized in discourse.

It was suggested above that 'gentility' and its various cognates were ultimately social signifiers, they limned a social distinction. The discourse of gentility comprehended the forging of an unequal relationship, apprehended a process of differentiation, or, in short, a creation and distribution of power in early modern society. Naming the 'gentleman' or 'gentlewoman' ineluctably identified those who were *not* 'gentlemen' and 'gentlewomen', split dominant from subordinate. Generous language constructed a differential network of power rather than simply commenting on or always reflecting independent, pre-existing differences. If gentility comprehended a process, the structuring of inequalities, then in an important sense it preceded 'the gentry' as early modern society's dominant social stratum. Individuals then lived out these linguistic strictures by (re)creating the distinctions achieved in discourse as 'structuring' experience, as a ceaseless dialectic of the discursive and the material. Gentility was a set of cultural claims about power in early modern society that sought to order this world in terms of itself.³⁵

With this recognition of the historical and cultural contingency of social stratification also comes the realization that it is multi-dimensional, for want of a better term. 'Social strata' are interpretations of power, power being simultaneously and recursively a combination of the economic (situations of exchange and ownership, or 'class' in a broadly Weberian sense), the political (in terms of institutional authority or 'command'), the social ('status') and the discursive.³⁶ Gentility was nothing more nor less than one construction, one gloss, on power. Like all such constructions, gentility tended to privilege one element of power

³⁴ What follows therefore finds itself in general agreement with the work of D. Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York, 1999), 1–58. However, it should be said that the current study conceives of power (the 'political') more broadly and places greater emphasis on the inscriptive rather than simply descriptive nature of social discourse. Accessible introductions to these much-debated developments and the issues involved include the discussions triggered in their respective journals by L. Stone, 'History and Post-Modernism', *PP* 134 (1991), 217–18; D. Mayfield and S. Thorne, 'Social History and Its Discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the Politics of Language', *Social History* 17, 2 (1992), 165–88. For a useful prospectus on the politics of social history, see K. E. Wrightson, 'The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England', in P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (London, 1996), 31–7.

³⁵ See G. Eley, 'Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later', in T. J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 218–20.

³⁶ Especially useful in my formulation have been M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power. Volume I: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge, 1986), 1–33; J. Scott, *Stratification and Power. Structures of Class, Status, and Command* (Cambridge, 1996).

10 Gentility and the Comic Theatre of Late Stuart London

but at the same time attempted to account for the others. The resulting social strata were comprehended, often by means of a moral vocabulary, as being natural, legitimate and self-sustaining rather than as cultural constructs dependent on language. However prominent, however important, gentility was but one understanding of power such that both its meaning and its priority might be overridden, even controverted, by rival figurations. Consequently, individuals inhabited multiple relationships of domination and subordination, plural but overlapping subject positions, at one and the same time. What follows will, therefore, comment on gentility's interfacing with constructions of gender and sexuality.

Looking more closely at gentility we can suggest that it privileged status, social power, which was defined in terms of blood lineage or one's belonging to a particular pedigree. Normatively, the individuals comprehended by generous terminology were being identified as the 'well-born' or 'well-descended';³⁷ of 'good' 'blood', 'birth', 'name', 'family' or 'descent';³⁸ of relatively higher 'degree',³⁹ 'quality',⁴⁰ and, rather oxymoronically, 'descent';⁴¹ or, more unusually, said to be of 'ancient blood', 'stock' or 'ancienity',⁴² when compared with the rest of society who were, relatedly and relatively, 'obscure' and 'meane';⁴³

- ³⁷ i. Sir Robert Southwell to the earl of Ormonde, 9 April 1681, HMC, *Ormonde* 36, 4 (1906), 586 (of the young Lord Courcy). ii. G. Mackenzie, *Moral Gallantry. A Discourse* (1685), 28 (trying to distinguish masters from servants).
- ³⁸ i. Southwell to Ormonde, 10 January 1681, HMC, *Ormonde* 36, 4 (1906), 583 (of a wife for Lord Courcy). ii. F. Tyrer and J. J. Bagley (trans. and ed.), *The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell of Little Crosby, Lancashire. Volume I: 1702–11* (Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, Liverpool, 1968), no. CX, 114 (entry for 9 July 1706, describing coach passengers). iii. Anselment, *Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke*, 50 (entry for 29 July 1683, see n.11 above). iv. *Evelyn*, 13 July 1675, vol. IV, 69 (of James Graham, soldier and politician). v. [E. Haywood], *Bath Intrigues in Four Letters to a Friend in London* (1725), 16 (on the perception of pedigree at this leisure resort); Dr William Denton to Sir Ralph Verney, 8 July 1682, HMC, *Seventh Report* 6, 1 (1879), 497 (reporting a duel).
- ³⁹ See, for example, J. Logan, *Analogia Honorum* (1677), part i, 155 (explaining the situation of well-born apprentices); P. Ayres, *Vox Clamantis* (1684), 20–1 (promoting temperance 'above the ordinary sort of people'); B. Smithurst, *Britain's Glory and England's Bravery* (1689), 83–4 (elaborating the place of gentlemen in the hierarchy of honour).
- ⁴⁰ For instance, ?John Heys to Roger Kenyon, 26 February 1695, HMC, *Kenyon* 35, 1 (1894), 377 (in relation to the appointment of some justices of the peace); *Spectator*, no. 219 (10 November 1711), vol. II, 352 (an essay by Addison on superiority).
- ⁴¹ H. Woolley, *The Gentlewomans Companion* (1673, third edition 1682), 134 (in the context of marrying properly).
- ⁴² i. J. Dare, *Counsellor Manners* (1673, second edition 1676), 3 (*italics reversed*; advice on behaviour). ii. *Evelyn*, 7 December 1680, vol. IV, 233 (of Lord Stafford currently on trial). iii. John Laws to the earl of Oxford, 14 June 1711, HMC, *Portland* 29, 5 (1899), 7 (on the latter's elevation to an earldom).
- ⁴³ i. A. Browning (with M. K. Geiter and W. A. Speck) (ed.), *Memoirs of Sir John Reresby. The Complete Text and a Selection from His Letters* (London, 1936, second edition 1991), 406 (of a former associate of the family). ii. *Evelyn*, 22 March 1675, vol. IV, 56 (commenting on the humble parentage of Sir William Petty).