

An Overview of Early Modern England

Before we begin, the two terms in the above chapter title require definition. First, why “**early modern**” as opposed to “**Renaissance**”? Literary scholars and historians have come to prefer the former term because it is more capacious. “Renaissance,” with its emphasis on the rebirth of classical learning and culture, necessarily privileges high culture, whereas there is increasing attention to non-elite cultural products and history, which “early modern” can encompass.¹ Second, “early modern” has the advantage of greater accuracy, because the world we live in at the start of the twenty-first century – the “modern” world – has its beginnings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This period witnessed the rise of the nation state, the transformation of government into a professional bureaucracy, the establishment of the modern economy, including empires, world trade and stock markets, and the development of science. This period also witnessed less happy events, such as wars of religion, a revolution, the execution of a

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king, and regular outbreaks of the plague. Nearly all (the exception being disease) were greatly enabled by one invention: **the printing press**, brought into England in the late fifteenth century by William Caxton (c. 1414–92), who became England’s first printer and book retailer. The early version of modernity, including the adoption of new technologies of communication (the printed word), can be traced back to the Tudor–Stuart era, and so literary scholars and historians have tended toward replacing “Renaissance” with “early modern.”

Second, what do we mean when we talk about “**England**”? The island of Britain (largest of the British Isles) contains two kingdoms and one principality. First, there is the kingdom of **England**, which takes up roughly three fourths of the island. The most fertile and wealthiest part of the country is in the southeast, not coincidentally the part closest to Europe, and includes London, Oxford, and Cambridge. The principality of **Wales**, located on the western part of the island, joined England under King Edward I (1239–1307), but Wales retained its own language and identity throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To the far north (beyond Cumberland and Northumberland), lies **Scotland**, independent of the English crown since the Treaty of Edinburgh of 1328, and sometimes England’s friend, sometimes England’s enemy. Despite the efforts of King James (1566–1625), the sixth king of Scotland and the first of that name to rule England, Scotland would remain its own entity until the Act of Union in 1707. The fourth component is **Ireland**, once called the graveyard of English reputations, and colonized by England since Norman times. By 1485, direct English authority was restricted to a small area around Dublin, known as “**the Pale**.” Rebellions against English rule, sparked by resentment against the English presence, Tudor and Stuart attempts to impose Protestantism on the Catholic population, and the second-class status of the native Irish, were brutally repressed. “England” in the Tudor–Stuart era was neither homogeneous nor entirely harmonious, but rather a patchwork of restive, independent and semi-independent political and ethnic identities.

Population Size, Family Life, and Life Expectancy

England's population steadily grew over the course of the Tudor–Stuart era. In 1485, approximately 2.2 million people lived in England and Wales. By 1660, that number had risen to 5.5 million. Progress, however, was not steady. Outbreaks of the plague and bad harvests, especially the disastrous years 1594–97, significantly increased mortality and halted growth. Overall, the population increased, as did the size of the cities, especially London, which rose from approximately 40,000 inhabitants in 1500 to over 200,000 by 1600. By the end of the seventeenth century, London's population may have reached 600,000. By way of contrast, the next largest cities were Norwich (15,000), and York and Bristol (12,000 each). While London would grow to be the largest city in Europe, most people lived in rural England.

People got married in this period later than we commonly think. Childhood marriage very occasionally happened at the highest levels of the aristocracy, and even there, only rarely. **Robert Cecil, Lord Burghley**, Elizabeth I's right-hand man, refused a possible suitor – the son of an earl, no less – for his daughter because

I have determined (notwithstanding I have been very honourably offered matches) not to treat of marrying of her, if I may live so long, until she be above fifteen or sixteen; and if I were of more likelihood myself to live longer than I look to do, she should not, with my liking, be married before she were near eighteen or twenty.²

Burghley's preferences are backed up by archival evidence. Studies of parish records show that the average age for marriage among non-aristocratic couples was 25 for the period 1550–99, rising to 26 between 1600 and 1650.³ But while the period's literature abounds in close relations between parents and children, family life in the early modern period was fundamentally different than today. Childhood as we know it did not exist, and most adolescents, rich or poor, were sent to live, work, and serve in other households. The identification with the household exhibited by Capulet's servants ("The

quarrel is between our masters, and us their men" [*Romeo and Juliet* 1.1.20]) would have been very familiar to Shakespeare's audience.⁴

The life expectancy for England's growing population varied, as one might expect, according to the wealth of the population, members of the elite enjoying a better chance at survival than those who lived in more crowded, less healthy circumstances. But even in the best of circumstances, childbirth, infancy, and childhood were fraught with danger. The chances of mothers dying in childbirth were just under 10 deaths per 1000 births, jumping upward to 16 per 1000 in the later seventeenth century (nobody quite knows why). But rates in London were 30 to 50% higher than in rural England (again, nobody is quite sure why, but crowded and unsanitary conditions in the city likely played a part). By way of contrast, the rate of maternal mortality in the industrialized West today is six to eight maternal deaths per 100,000 births. What this means is that "most people approaching a child-birth of their own or within their immediate family would have known someone who had died in child-birth within very recent memory."⁵ Women necessarily looked forward to birth with trepidation, but also piety. In a diary entry from 1689, one Mrs. Witton recorded that she considered pregnancy "a means to keep me on my watch and so make me ready for life or death."⁶ Mortality rates for infants and children were also by modern standards appallingly high – approximately 20%.

However, once one reached adulthood, the chances were relatively good for survival until one's fifties or sixties. Shakespeare, for example, died at age 52; Michael Drayton at 68; and John Milton at 66. There are rare cases of people reaching their eighties and nineties. **Jane Shore**, for example, who was **Edward IV's** mistress and featured prominently in **Thomas More's** history of Richard III (also mentioned in Shakespeare's *Richard III*), lived to the ripe age of 82, and the political philosopher, **Thomas Hobbes**, author of *Leviathan* (1651), lived to 91! But one needs the qualification of "relatively" because of the omnipresent threat of death from one of the many outbreaks of bubonic plague, or "the black death" (which was transmitted by rats) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or such diseases as dysentery, known at the time as "the bloody flux," which killed **Henry V**.

Printing, Scribal Circulation, and Literacy

The latter years of **Edward IV's** rule witnessed one of the most consequential developments ever in Western culture: the invention of the printing press and its importation into England. **Johannes Gutenberg** (c. 1398–1468) combined movable type, oil-based ink, and the use of a screw press to create the printing press, and the technology spread very rapidly, with presses set up in Cologne (1466), Rome (1467), Venice (1469), Paris (1470), and Cracow (1473). **William Caxton** (c. 1415–92) brought the printing press to England in 1475 or 1476, and the first book he published was *The History of Troy* (c. 1476). Caxton's second great contribution was to focus on works by native English writers, including John Lydgate and Geoffrey Chaucer (his edition of *The Canterbury Tales* appeared in 1477). One cannot overestimate the importance of the print revolution. Books and the ideas contained within them (sometimes revolutionary ideas) started to become widely available, and, while universal literacy was a long way off, the printing press enabled the steady spread of reading from the monastic and aristocratic elites down the social ladder, with corrosive effects on the hegemony of ideas.

Even as print came to serve the interests of authority, it equally came to serve the interests of those who would resist that authority, allowing dissident ideas to circulate and coalesce, in many cases allowing new communities to form through the lineaments of a book trade.⁷

Printing, it has been rightly said, made possible the Protestant Reformation by allowing a much larger distribution of the Bible than was previously possible. Every literate person could now access the central texts of Christianity, which in turn further encouraged the spread of literacy. The printing press would also play a shaping role in the dissemination of radical ideas during the 1640s and 1650s.

The authorities were quite aware of the power of the press, and in 1538 Henry VIII instituted press licensing as a way of trying to suppress debate on doctrinal matters. Except for a brief period during

Edward VI's reign, when licensing was suspended, all books in the Tudor–Stuart era needed to be submitted to the government for approval. But it would be a mistake to think that Tudor–Stuart press censorship was unified and monolithic, equivalent to censorship in contemporary tyrannies. Censorship “proceeded ad hoc rather than by unifying principle,” and while one can find occasional spectacular instances of censorship, such as Elizabeth I's 1589 order for the destruction of the Marprelate tracts and the Archbishop of Canterbury's 1599 banning of satires, epigrams, unlicensed histories and plays, overall authors and printers seem to have been granted an amazing amount of latitude.⁸ Nor was it hard to evade the censors. **Thomas Deloney's** proto-novels of the late 1590s, such as *Jack of Newbury*, were likely published without a license, yet were so popular that the initial editions were literally read out of existence, and Elizabeth's government could never shut down the Marprelate press.

The invention and subsequent growth of the book trade in England, however, did not mean that **scribal circulation**, meaning writing fiction and poetry by hand and then circulating the manuscript among a small group, some of whom might make further copies for themselves or others, came to halt. Quite the opposite. Throughout the early modern period, manuscript transmission and circulation thrived, and we know (or suspect) that some of the most important pieces of early modern literature, such as Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt and John Donne, and William Shakespeare's sonnets, began life in manuscript and only later appeared in print. Sometimes class would play a role in preferring manuscript to print (publishing a book for cash might seem below a gentleman's dignity), but sometimes “scribal circulation might also be chosen for the speed with which texts could be put into circulation.”⁹ It was quicker to copy an important speech in Parliament, for example, than wait for the cumbersome process of print publication. Scribal and print circulation, in other words, happily co-existed in the early modern period.

The existence of words on the page of course assumes the ability to decipher them, and while it is superficially evident that literacy

increased as the years went by, — historians agree that the Tudor–Stuart era was an age of “increasing literacy, education, and book ownership”¹⁰ — determining the precise level of literacy in the early modern period faces serious difficulties. First, the term resists easy definition: does “literate” mean reading *and* writing? Or reading alone? Also, literacy rates (however defined) varied according to geography and one’s place on the social ladder. London was more literate than the provinces, and the aristocracy was almost universally literate, whereas not everyone among the middle and lower rungs of society could read, although those numbers continued to rise, especially after the midpoint of the sixteenth century. While more non-aristocratic men could read than women, non-aristocratic female literacy was far from uncommon. In Thomas Dekker’s wonderful play, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), Hammon, a suitor, presents Jane, the wife of a shoemaker, a letter containing the names of everyone who has died fighting in France (her husband was pressed into service at the play’s start). He asks her, “Cannot you read?”, and when Jane replies “I can,” he gives her the letter (sc.12.88–91).¹¹ While Hammon does not think that female literacy can be assumed, neither is he particularly shocked or surprised by Jane’s positive response, and as further evidence, many books of various sorts, ranging from devotional works to a compendium of laws pertaining to women, were published explicitly aimed at a female audience.

Literacy became more widespread in part because schooling became more widespread. While Oxford and Cambridge remained the two sources of higher education, and the various Inns of Court provided legal training (although many attended without either graduating or becoming lawyers), the sixteenth century witnessed a significant increase in parish or “petty” (meaning small, not petulant) schools that were often run by highly educated teachers, thanks to the numbers of Oxford and Cambridge graduates who could not find other employment. Children also often arrived at these schools already knowing how to read. In addition, many, including girls, were taught by private tutors in the home, and that is how women were educated. While women were banned from careers and college

degrees, extremely learned women were far from uncommon in early modern England. **Elizabeth I**, fluent in several modern and ancient languages and a more than competent poet, represents perhaps the best example, but far from the only one.

Religion

Despite the common perception that the so-called “Middle Ages” were religious and the Renaissance secular, the early modern period was an intensely religious as well as secular period. There was no separation between church and state as there is in the contemporary United States of America (John Milton, in *A Treatise of Civil Power* [1659], would be among the first to argue for this concept), and from Henry VIII onward, England’s monarch was at least in title also the head of the Anglican Church. However, to say that there was little agreement about doctrine is a vast understatement. In addition to the division between English Protestants and English Catholics, also called **recusants**, Protestantism itself, both inside and outside of England, was from the start riven by divisions and furious controversies. Adding to this combustible mix is the fact that in the early modern era, politics and religion are only artificially separable, and people fully realized that seemingly arid debates about church government had very serious political consequences. Faced with arguments against bishops, **King James VI/I** responded, “If bishops were put out of power, I know what would come of my supremacy. No bishop, no king.”¹² The God-centric focus of early modern culture is also evident from the huge number of sermons and devotional manuals crowding early modern bookshops. Indeed, the period’s runaway bestseller was the metrical translation of the psalms by Sternhold and Hopkins (more than 200 editions between 1550 and 1640). Religion and religious controversies also permeated the literature of the period (e.g., John Bale’s *King Johan* [1538], Edmund Spenser’s epic, *The Faerie Queene* [1590; 1596]; and George Herbert’s *The Temple* [1633]), and we will deal extensively with this topic in subsequent chapters.

And yet, there are other sides to this story. While from 1558 onward, church attendance was mandatory, that did not mean that everyone was equally pious, and there are many instances of people taking religion less than seriously. The 1572 *Admonition to Parliament*, for example, criticizes those who come to church only to socialize: “The people some standing, some walking, some talking some reading, some praying by themselves, attend not to the minister.”¹³ The *Second Admonition* complained that there is “no such praying as should touch the heart”; instead, you have people going through the motions:

One he kneeleth on his knees, and this way he looketh, and that way he looketh, another he kneeleth himself asleep, another kneeleth with such devotion that he is so far in talk that he forgetteth to arise till his knee ache, or his talk endeth, or service is done [A]nother hath so little feeling of the common prayer that he bringeth a book of his own, and though he sit when they sit, stand when they stand, kneel when they kneel, he may pause sometime also, but most of all he intendeth his own book. Is this praying?¹⁴

Some had serious doubts about religion and the nature, even the existence, of God. “Of this sort of murmurers,” one divine wrote in 1592, “there are too many at this day among us, who in the time of scarcity ... do more like Pagans than Christians begin to murmur against God These murmurers by their grudging seek to make a trial whether God be among them or no”¹⁵ This skepticism found its way into the period’s literature (e.g., the anonymous play, *Selimus, Emperor of the Turks* [1594]; Shakespeare’s *King Lear* [1605]; Milton’s *Paradise Lost* [1667; second edition 1674]; and *Samson Agonistes* [1671]).

Government: Absolutism versus the Ancient Constitution

Turning to the question of secular government, early modern England was ruled by a monarch and parliament – the important exception being the **Interregnum**, the period in between the execution of

Charles I in 1649 and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Parliament itself is divided into two parts, the **House of Lords**, consisting of nobles and bishops, and the **House of Commons**, comprising 296 elected members. Then as today, laws are made by the monarch signing off on legislation created by both houses. By the Elizabethan era, the **House of Commons** had developed a strong sense of its own identity and insisted, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, on its own “liberties” or privileges, including freedom of speech. However, the relative importance of the English parliament was contested just as the relative powers of the Crown were contested. The overall question concerned what sort of monarchy most effectively served early modern government: **absolutism** or **constitutionalist** or **mixed monarchy**.

Under absolutism, sometimes called “**the divine right of kings**,” the monarch is not accountable to anyone other than God, his or her commands are to be obeyed without reservation, and rebellion is never, under any circumstances, justified or allowed. One finds this doctrine stated explicitly in *An Homily against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* (1570):

As in reading of the Holy Scriptures we shall find in very many and almost infinite places, as well of the Old Testament as of the New, that Kings and princes, as well the evil as the good, do reign by God’s ordinance, and that subjects are bound to obey them; that God does give princes wisdom, great power and authority; that God defends them against their enemies and destroys their enemies horribly; that the anger and displeasure of the prince is as the roaring of a lion, and the very messenger of death; and that the subject that provokes him to displeasure sings against his own soul.¹⁶

The Stuart kings, **James VI/I** and his son **Charles I** (1600–49), especially championed this political philosophy. In *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598; rpt. 1603, 1616), James asserted that the people should consider the monarch:

God’s lieutenant in earth, obeying his commands in all things, except directly against God, as the commands of God’s minister,

acknowledging him a Judge set by God over them, having power to judge them, but to be judged only by God, whom to only he must give [ac]count of his judgment; fearing him as their judge, loving him as their father, praying for him as their protector, for his continuance, if he be good, for his amendment if he be wicked, following and obeying his lawful commands, eschewing and flying his fury in his unlawful, without resistance, but by sobs and tears to God¹⁷

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare's John of Gaunt refuses to take any action against the king who probably had his brother murdered because he endorses absolutism: "God's is the quarrel, for God's substitute, / His deputy anointed in His sight, / Hath caus'd his death, the which if wrongfully, / Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift / An angry arm against His minister" (1.1.37–41).

However, it would be a great mistake to assume that these views, while widespread, reflected unanimously shared assumptions about English politics. Far from an absolute monarchy, England enjoyed a mixed or constitutionalist monarchy that was shaped by **the Ancient Constitution**, a phrase that started circulating in the seventeenth century to connote the unwritten rules governing the relative powers of the monarch and the people, as represented by parliament. According to this theory of government, the monarch is subject to the law, not above the law, and the monarch cannot unilaterally make law. Rather, laws are made by the monarch in concert with parliament (hence the term "mixed"), and both parliament and individual subjects have "ancient liberties," to use a frequently invoked phrase, that cannot be infringed.

The primary exponent of **the Ancient Constitution** is the fifteenth-century jurist and chief justice, **Sir John Fortescue** (1395–1477). In his influential and frequently reprinted book, *In Praise of the Laws of England*, Fortescue distinguishes between "royal" government, by which he means absolutism, and "political" government, meaning, constitutionalism. In England, he declares, the king

is not able to change laws of his kingdom at pleasure, for he rules his people with a government not only royal but also political. If he were to rule over them with a power only royal, he would be able to change

An Overview of Early Modern England

the laws of his realm and also impose on them tallages [taxes] and other burdens without consulting them; this is the sort of dominion which the civil laws indicate when they state that "What pleased the prince has the force of law." But it is far otherwise with the king ruling his people politically, because he himself is not able to change the laws without the assent of his subjects nor to burden an unwilling people with strange impositions, so that, ruled by laws that they themselves desire, they freely enjoy their goods, and are despoiled neither by their own king nor any other.¹⁸

Fortescue is very aware of absolutism, and he rejects it without qualification:

among the civil laws there is a famous sentence, maxim or rule, which runs like this, "What pleased the prince has the force of law." The laws of England do not sanction any such maxim, since the king of that land rules his people not only royally but also politically, and so he is bound by oath at his coronation to the observance of his law.¹⁹

To return to Shakespeare, Henry Bolingbroke justifies his returning from exile after he hears that Richard II has confiscated his inheritance: "I am a subject," Henry exclaims, "And I challenge law" (2.3.133–4).

The difference between **absolutism** and **the Ancient Constitution** can be seen in the opposite interpretations King James and Fortescue make of the body politic metaphor, which compares the state to the various parts of the human body. The question is: what part, if any, dominates? In his first speech to parliament after becoming king of England, James invoked corporeal imagery to describe the relationship between the monarch and his subjects:

I am Head and governor of all the people in my dominion who are my natural vassals and subjects, considering them in numbers and distinct ranks; So if we will take the whole people as one body and mass, then as the head is ordained for the body and not the body for the head, so must a righteous king know himself to be ordained for his people, and not his people for him.²⁰

Fortescue also employs the body politic metaphor, but whereas James argues that the head is the indisputable ruler of the body, Fortescue construes the metaphor in the opposite direction:

And just as the head of the physical body is unable to change its sinews, or to deny its members proper strength and due nourishment of blood, so a king who is head of the body politic is unable to change the laws of that body, or to deprive that same people of their own substance uninvited or against their wills.²¹

While many in early modern England adhered to the absolutist or divine right theory of kingship, many others did not, and often those people were in positions of significant authority. They were part of the mainstream establishment, not marginal figures with little to no actual influence. For example, after King James finished his speech, the Speaker of the House, Sir Edward Phelips, delivered a polite but pointed rebuttal of his new monarch:

And as, by the disbranching of any one particular from the natural body, the perfection of the whole is dissolved; so, by the dismembering from the politic body of any one of the four politic parts, the glory of the whole is disrooted. This politic head now is ... Your most honoured and best deserving Self; this body politic now is, and still desire to be, your loyal and faithful subjects; this politic life now is, and so well deserves to be, your Highness's common and positive laws; this politic soul now is, and so of necessity must be, your absolute justice in the true distribution of the same. And as the natural head of the one ... cannot be supported without his natural body, nor the natural body without his natural life, nor the natural life breathe without the soul; no more can the politic head of the other (although the supreme and commanding part) stand secure without his subjects²²

Whereas James regards the head, i.e. the monarchy, as supreme, Phelips sees law, monarchy, subjects, and justice as inter-related and inter-dependent, all equally important, all equally essential, none predominating.

Nor was Phelips alone is regarding absolutism with deep suspicion. **Sir Thomas Smith** (1513–77), for example, in *De Republica Anglorum: The Manner of Government or Policy of the Realm of England* (1579), granted that in times of war the monarch could act without restraint, but “in time of peace, [absolute administration] is very dangerous, as well to him that doth use it, and much more to the people upon whom it is used.”²³ Power, Smith writes, does not inhere in the monarch; rather, “The most high and absolute power of the realm of England is in the Parliament,”²⁴ and Smith was no wild-eyed, bearded radical: he was Queen Elizabeth I’s ambassador to France when he wrote this book. Even so, absolutism certainly had its adherents, and a great deal of the political history of early modern England consists of the “endless tugging,” as **John Milton** (1608–74) termed it in *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), between absolutism and the Ancient Constitution.²⁵

At times, however, the “tugging” went considerably beyond squabbles in Parliament or litigation, which raises the question of whether rebellion was ever justified. As we have seen, according to absolutist thinking, the answer is an unqualified no. But the reality is more complicated. During the 1550s, a group of Protestant exiles wrote a series of books proposing that it is entirely lawful to depose, as **John Ponet** (1514–56) writes in *A Short Treatise of Politic Power*, “an evil governor and a tyrant.”²⁶ However, while resistance theorists framed their works in the context of the Catholic Mary Tudor’s persecution of Protestants, the concept of monarchic accountability is very much part of English political history, as obedience to the crown was always conditional upon the monarch respecting the people’s liberties and the rule of law. In 1399, for example, Richard II was deposed (an event we will return to in the next chapter) not through armed revolution but by an act of Parliament, and one of the articles proving that he was “worthy to be deposed” claimed that Richard “said that the laws of the realm were in his head, and sometime in his breast, by reason of which fantastical opinion, he destroyed noble men and impoverished the poor commons.”²⁷ The

lawyer and antiquarian, John Selden (1584–1654), also agreed that deposition, even rebellion, has always been an option, if an unofficial one, in English history. In answer to the question, “What law is there to take up arms against the prince in case he breaks his Covenant?” Selden replied: “Though there be no written law for it, yet there is custom, which is the best law of the kingdom; for in England they have always done it.”²⁸ Indeed, between 1327 and 1485, there were no fewer than five depositions of English monarchs.

This “tugging” between the monarch’s authority and the “ancient rights and liberties,” to use a commonly invoked phrase, of parliament’s authority equally describes other aspects of English life. Cities, towns and ports also had their “ancient liberties.” **Magna Carta** (1215), for example, included a provision reconfirming all of London’s “old liberties” as well as those held by “all other cities, boroughs, towns, and ... ports.”²⁹ So did the church, both before and after the Reformation. While in 1485, England belonged to the Catholic – meaning “universal” – Church, that institution also constituted a separate site of authority in early modern England, as recognized by the coronation oath. In addition to swearing to uphold the laws of England, the monarch also pledged to “keep and maintain the right and liberties of the Holy Church of old time granted by the righteous Christian kings of England.”³⁰

Consequently, England’s political and religious structure does not consist of a single line of authority, but rather, of various competing and overlapping sites of authority. Royal, parliamentary, civic, and religious authorities all vied for prominence, a situation that will get even more complicated after Henry VIII split off from Rome in 1533 to create the Church of England. This event ushered in the English Reformation, when the supposed unity of the Catholic Church will fracture into any number of competing versions of Christianity. Not only does one have the main division in England between **Catholicism** and **Protestantism**, but Protestantism itself will continuously subdivide (much more on this in subsequent chapters).

Social Organization

The same complexity and tension applies to England's social organization. On the one hand, the hierarchy of the Church and absolutism seems to have found its analogue in the ladder of English society, at least, according to the official versions of the social order. According to the "Homily on Obedience" (1547):

Almighty God hath created and appointed all things in heaven, earth and waters in a most excellent and perfect order. In heaven he hath appointed distinct orders and states of archangels and angels. On earth he hath assigned kings, princes, with other governors under them, all in good and necessary order Every degree of people in their vocation, calling and office, hath appointed to them their duty and order. Some are in high degree, some in low; some kings and princes; some inferior and subjects, priests and laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor, and every one have need of other so that in all things is to be lauded and praised the goodly order of God, without the which, no house, no city, no commonwealth, can continue and endure, for where there is no right order, there reigneth all abuse, carnal liberty, enormity, sin, and Babylonical confusion.³¹

God is to creation, in other words, as monarch is to subject, male to female, aristocrat to subject, those of high degree to low, and parent to child. While the overall picture is of an organic, interdependent society ("every one have need of other"), yet it is a society based on deference: subjects defer to the monarch, children defer to parents, and women defer to men. This order is divinely ordained, and therefore, stable.

The sixteenth-century historian, **William Harrison** (1535–93), also reproduces the official view of England's social order. The land is governed by "three sorts of persons."³² First, "the prince, monarch, and head governor, which is called the King or (if the crown fall to the woman) the Queen"; second, "the gentlemen," or what we would call the aristocracy; and third, "the yeomanry," or wealthy, landed citizens who do not belong to the aristocracy.³³ At the very

bottom one finds “the fourth and last sort of people,” as Harrison calls them, who consist of “day laborers, poor husbandmen, and some retailers [traders] (which have no free land,) copyholders, and all artificers, as tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, brickmakers, masons etc.”³⁴ These people “have neither voice nor authority in the commonwealth, but are to be ruled and not to rule other.”³⁵ Those at the top of the hierarchy, the landowners with most of the wealth and power, constituted approximately one half of one percent of England’s population.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that this vision of a stable, hierarchical society in which everyone accepts the place God gave them enjoyed universal and unquestioned acceptance. Despite the assertion in the Homily on Obedience that each “have need of other,” the massive inequality between the “fourth sort” and those with land and power did not go unnoticed or unchallenged, and periodically, fury against the “haves” would explode. “[L]et the rich churls pay, for they may well,” cried the poor Londoners in 1522 after Henry VIII imposed yet more taxes to subsidize his French wars.³⁶ In 1595, enraged by the indifference of the wealthy to the suffering of the poor on account of the disastrous harvests, an anonymous liber in Norfolk threatened that “some barbarous and unmerciful soldier shall lay open your hedges, reap your fields, rifle your coffers, and level your houses to the ground.”³⁷ In 1649, the same year that **Charles I** would be executed, a Digger manifesto (the Diggers were one of the many radical groups to arise in the wake of **the Civil Wars**) called property “a bloody and subtle thievery.”³⁸ The Homily’s vision of everyone marching in mutual, well-beseeming ranks seems more wishful thinking than accurate reportage.

Economics

England’s economic development contributed to this underlying sense of stress and instability. The growth in population after a century and a half of decline meant that prices also rose, and the Tudor–Stuart era witnessed a sustained period of inflation. Wages doubled,

but prices increased by a factor of between five and seven times the original price in 1500. The harvest failures in 1519–21, the 1550s, the 1590s, and the 1630s also caused prices to spike, although good harvests would somewhat ease inflationary pressures. Agriculture provided the main industry in this period. First wool, then cloth, provided the main export commodity, and the price for raw wool went up accordingly. A key consequence (according to sixteenth-century commentators) of this rise was **the enclosure movement**, meaning, the “enclosing” or fencing off of previously unrestricted, or common, fields for raising sheep because the animals offered more profits than corn. In fact, the enclosure movement had been going on since the fourteenth century, but for a variety of reasons, it was widely considered to have reached crisis proportions in the first half of the sixteenth century. Because sheep take much less manpower to raise than corn, enclosing fields by greedy landlords contributed to depopulation, unemployment, abject poverty, and social unrest, a fact noted by **Thomas More** (1478–1535) in *Utopia* (1516): “Your sheep,” says Hythlodæus (More’s chief exponent of the Utopian way of life and chief critic of European and English society), “which are usually so tame and so cheaply fed, begin now, according to report, to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses, and towns.”³⁹ The problem eased by 1550s, but not before causing the 1549 insurrection, the largest in the sixteenth century, led by **Robert Kett** of Norfolk (see Chapter 4). While the discovery of the New World and the early English attempts at colonization had an incalculable intellectual impact on early modern England, their economic impact would become significant only after the Restoration.

While in one sense England’s economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries encouraged the stratification of society, in that the rich generally got richer while the poor got poorer, the ranks of the aristocracy and the wealthy merchants were in constant flux in this period. “Social mobility, upwards and downwards, was occurring at an unprecedented rate,” as one distinguished historian writes, and the Jacobean poet and playwright, **Ben Jonson**

(1572–1637) is reported to have remarked, “the most worthy men have been rocked in mean cradles.” Yet the porosity of supposedly fixed boundaries between the divisions in society caused terrific anxiety in some quarters.⁴⁰ Elizabeth’s government tried to fix the problem through sumptuary laws (rules governing who can wear what), but these statutes were a dead letter from the moment of their publication. The result, as the Elizabethan pamphleteer, Phillip Stubbes, wrote in his diatribe against contemporary mores, the *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583),

is such a confuse[d] mingle-mangle of apparel in Ailgna [England], and such preposterous excess thereof, as every one is permitted to flaunt it out, in what apparel he lust himself [he wants], or can get by any means. So that it is very hard to know who is noble, who is worshipful, who is a gentleman, who is not.⁴¹

Yet while some, like Stubbes, mourned the loss of old certainties, the growth of trade also led to the development of an increasingly powerful merchant class, people whose wealth was not always grounded in land (although as merchants acquired capital, many purchased the land that aristocrats, caught in a financial bind by a combination of extravagant spending and inflation, had to sell). This group developed its own identity, its own politics, and they demanded their own literature. Shakespeare, whose father was a glover, and Ben Jonson, whose stepfather was a brick-layer, belonged to the **middling sort**, the term historians often use for this group, and the public theater catered to their tastes. Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607), a clear precursor to Monty Python, explicitly lampoons the middling sort’s desire for a literature of its own.

Even so, one’s position in society did not always determine one’s politics. Stubbes belonged to the merchant class, yet he opposed social mobility. Similarly, when in 1525, Thomas Howard, the third Duke of Norfolk, was sent to quell an insurrection in Suffolk, he sympathized with the rebels because he understood that their complaints of economic hardship were “true.”⁴² **Edward Seymour**

(King Edward VI's Lord Protector, see Chapter 4) also took the side of those protesting the enclosure movement. However, those who opposed absolutism were not necessarily in favor of the disenfranchised. Even as **Sir Thomas Smith** denounces absolutism as fundamentally un-English, he is the source for William Harrison's comments about the "fourth sort of men which do not rule."⁴³ Politics in the early modern era was messy and, often to our eyes, inconsistent or contradictory.

Gender

The same applies to the problem of gender. As with politics, here again one has to recognize the multiplicity of ideas, some contradictory, circulating throughout early modern England, sometimes within the same texts. Certainly, many believed that women should occupy a subordinate position in early modern society. Like the view of class and social structure in the Homily on Obedience, the notion that women are fundamentally inferior to men has a Biblical warrant, in particular, Eve's creation after Adam in the second creation story (Genesis 2:18–25)⁴⁴ and the Fall (Genesis 3:1–24), one result being women's subjection to men: "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3:16). This passage was elaborated in the New Testament. In his epistle to the Corinthians, for example, Paul insists that the man does not have to cover his head when praying, but women do, because "he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (I Cor. 7–9). This view received official sanction in the "Homily on the State of Matrimony:" (1563): For thus doth Saint Peter preach to them:

"You wives, be you in subjection to obey your own husbands" [1 Peter 3:1]. To obey is another thing than to control or command, which yet they may do to their children, and to their family; but as for their husbands, them must they obey, and cease from commanding, and perform subjection.⁴⁵

Women were not only subordinate to men, they were widely considered fundamentally inferior. To again quote the Homily on Matrimony:

For the woman is a weak creature, not endued [endowed] with like strength and constancy of mind, therefore, they be the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weak affections and dispositions of mind, more than men be; and lighter they be, and more vain in their fantasies and opinions.⁴⁶

This position had severe practical consequences in early modern England. Women could not, for example, attend Oxford or Cambridge; they could not pursue a career in law or medicine, and when married, all their property became their husband's. According to *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights* (1632), written by one "T. E.," the status of women was almost exactly analogous to that of the "fourth sort": because of Eve's punishment after the Fall,

women have no voice in Parliament; they make no laws; they consent to none; they abrogate none. All of them are understood either married or to be married, and their desires subject to their husband The Common Law here shaketh hand[s] with Divinity.⁴⁷

At the same time, the status of women in early modern culture was both officially and unofficially more complex. Despite the injunctions mandating female subservience and fulminations about female inferiority, England was ruled by a woman for over half a century (first Mary Tudor, then Elizabeth I). Contemporary descriptions of England's political structure fully accept that the monarch may be a "King or Queen," and that a queen's powers are identical to a king's.⁴⁸ To return to the question of marriage, women had more agency in choosing their partners than was often thought. When Lord Burleigh declined the marriage offer, he does not say, presumably because it would be assumed, that his daughter would have veto power over the match. While marriage manuals and other texts on domestic affairs often insisted that children needed to consult their parents before marrying, these texts evidence a long,

vociferous tradition deploring forced marriage and warning of its consequences.⁴⁹ Furthermore, a sizable minority of women did not get married at all.

Despite the lack of access to formal education, literacy became increasingly common among both elite and non-elite women. (T. E., for example, writes at the conclusion of *The Law's Resolutions* [1632] that his work is "chiefly addressed to women."⁵⁰) The same applies to paid labor and the law. Even though women were supposed to restrict themselves to the home and parenthood, it was not unusual for married women to have shops, and widows were granted the right to practice their late husband's craft. While the law clearly favored men in property disputes, during Elizabeth's reign, the court of Chancery "developed procedures to protect and enforce the property rights of wealthy married women," and the common law courts held that "a husband could not dispose of a wife's property or her dower as he wished."⁵¹ While misogyny and the secondary status of women were facts of life in this period, there is strong evidence that many thought otherwise, and they acted out their lives accordingly. T. E., for example, may declare that the "Common Law here shaketh hand[s] with Divinity" in authorizing the inferior status of women, but that does not mean he is happy about it, and he recognizes that theory and practice conflict with each other for at least some: "I know no remedy, though some women can shift it well enough."⁵²

Indeed, there is a fascinating awareness of the costs of being a woman in early modern culture even among those insisting upon that cost. The Homilist, for example, grants women "must especially feel the grief and pains of their matrimony, in that they relinquish the liberty of their own rule, in the pain of their travailing [giving birth], in the bringing up of their children. In which offices they be in great perils, and be grieved with great afflictions, which they might be without, if they lived out of matrimony."⁵³ T. E. also illustrates how misogyny and a consciousness of the injustice of misogyny could co-exist. In his section on widowhood, T. E. first claims that the death of the husband means that the wife's "head is cut off, her intellectual part is gone, the very faculties of her soul are, I will

not say clean taken away, but they are all benumbed, dimmed and dazzled."⁵⁴ T. E. then offers to provide comfort, but he does not suggest that the widow restore her soul by remarrying. Rather, he reminds the widow that for the first time in her life, she is free: "Why mourn you so, you that be widows? Consider how long you have been in subjection under the predominance of parents, of your husbands; now you be free in liberty ... at your own law."⁵⁵ T. E.'s emphasis on newfound liberty reflects social reality, as those widows lucky enough to inherit their husband's business were often reluctant to remarry.

* * *

Early modern England, therefore, is a study of contrasts, contradictions, and contending forces. For every position on monarchy, social organization, or gender, there is a counter position. Absolutism is answered by the Ancient Constitution; a view of the social order as hierarchical, stable, and divinely instituted is complemented by social mobility and more than occasional vitriolic outbursts against inequality; the one true church must contend with the competing claims of many churches; and Biblically sanctioned misogyny is answered by decades of female rule and a keen awareness of the price women pay for the accident of their gender. The key is not to privilege one view over another, but to try to comprehend England's multiple and competing discourses and ideologies.

Notes

- 1 For an excellent introduction to the differences between these two terms, see David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller, "Introduction," *The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature*, ed. David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4–7.
- 2 *Illustrations of British History, Biography, and Manners in the Reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth and James I*, ed. Edmund Lodge (London: John Chidley, 1838), vol. 2, 52–3.

An Overview of Early Modern England

- 3 D. M. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth: England under the later Tudors 1547– 1603* (London: Longman, 1983), 40–1.
- 4 All references to Shakespeare’s plays will be to the Riverside edition.
- 5 The information from this paragraph is taken from Louis Schwartz, *Milton and Maternal Mortality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 37–40.
- 6 Quoted in Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England: 1550–1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 152.
- 7 David Scott Kastan, “Print, Literary Culture, and the Book Trade,” *Cambridge History of Early Modern Literature*, ed. David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller, 82.
- 8 Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75. With her two subsequent books, *Press Censorship in Jacobean England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Press Censorship in Caroline England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Clegg has written the definitive history of the subject.
- 9 Harold Love and Arthur F. Marotti, “Manuscript Transmission and Circulation,” *Cambridge History of Early Modern Literature*, ed. David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller, 57.
- 10 D. M. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth: England under the Later Tudors 1547– 1603* (New York: London, 1983), 365.
- 11 Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington *et al.* (New York: Norton, 2002).
- 12 Quoted in David Harris Willson, *King James VI & I* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 207.
- 13 *An Admonition to Parliament*, in *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the Origin of the Puritan Revolt*, ed. W. H. Frere and C. E. Douglas (rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), 29.
- 14 *Admonition to Parliament*, 115.
- 15 Thomas Tymme, *A Plain Discovery of Ten English Lepers* (1592), sig. M1v.
- 16 *An Homily against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* was printed in the aftermath of the Northern Rebellion, and the text consists of not one, but six connected homilies on the evils of rebellion. I have used the abridged version in *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political*

An Overview of Early Modern England

- Writing in Stuart England*, ed. David Wootton (London: Penguin, 1986), 95–6.
- 17 *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, in *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72.
 - 18 Sir John Fortescue, *In Praise of the Laws of England*, in *On the Laws and Governance of England*, ed. Shelley Lockwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 17.
 - 19 Fortescue, *In Praise of the Laws of England*, 48.
 - 20 *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Sommerville, 143.
 - 21 Fortescue, *In Praise of the Laws of England*, 21.
 - 22 *Journals of the House of Commons* (London: House of Commons, 1803), 147.
 - 23 Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. Mary Dewar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 54.
 - 24 Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, 78.
 - 25 *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 1128. Unless otherwise noted, all further references to Milton's poetry and prose will be to this edition.
 - 26 John Ponet, *A Short Treatise of Politic Power* (Strasbourg, 1556), sig. Gii.
 - 27 Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis (London: J. Johnson *et al.*, 1809), 10.
 - 28 Selden, *Table Talk of John Selden*, ed. Frederick Pollock (London: Selden Society, 1927), 137.
 - 29 *The Boke of Magna Carta and all Other Statutes* (London, 1534), sig. Aiiii. It was common in this period for collections of statutes to begin with Magna Carta.
 - 30 *English Coronation Records*, ed. Leopold G. Wickham (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1901), 240–1.
 - 31 "The Exhortation concerning Good Order and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates," in *Certain Sermons or Homilies* (London, 1547), sigs. Riir–Riiiv. Faced with the problem of an uneducated clergy, Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), Archbishop of Canterbury, proposed writing a book of model sermons or homilies. The first book of homilies was officially issued in 1547, during the reign of Edward VI. It was repressed during the reign of the Catholic Mary Tudor, but reissued by Elizabeth I

An Overview of Early Modern England

- in 1559. A second book of homilies, with twenty one additional sermons, came out in 1563.
- 32 William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 120.
- 33 Harrison, *Description of England*, 120.
- 34 Harrison, *Description of England*, 118.
- 35 Harrison, *Description of England*, 118.
- 36 *Hall's Chronicle*, 642.
- 37 *Historical Manuscripts Commission: Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquis of Salisbury*, ed. E. Salisbury (London: HMSO, 1915), ser. 9, vol. 13, 168–9.
- 38 *The True Leveller's Standard Advanced*, in *Puritanism and Liberty*, ed. A. S. P. Woodhouse (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 382.
- 39 Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 24.
- 40 Laurence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558–1641* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 23. John Aubrey, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver L. Dick (New York: Godine, 1999), xxiii. I am grateful to Robin Hamilton for his help with this quotation.
- 41 Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses* (London, 1583), sig. C2v.
- 42 The incident is recounted in Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, 699–700.
- 43 Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, 76.
- 44 The first creation story can be found in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Generally, early modern interpreters conflated the two stories. I have used the King James translation.
- 45 *The Second Tome of Homilies* (London, 1563), sig. Lll.5v-r.
- 46 *The Second Tome of Homilies*, sig. Lll.4v.
- 47 T. E., *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights* (London, 1632), sig. B4v.
- 48 Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, 85. See also Harrison in note 52.
- 49 Alan McFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300–1840* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 134.
- 50 T. E., *The Law's Resolutions*, sig. Dd2r.
- 51 Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England: 1550–1720*, 40, 41.
- 52 T. E., *The Law's Resolutions*, sig. B4v.
- 53 "Homily on the State of Matrimony," sig. Lll.6v.
- 54 T. E., *The Law's Resolutions*, sig. Q5v.
- 55 T. E., *The Law's Resolutions*, sig. Q5v.