

CHAPTER ONE

Order and Disorder in Tudor England

Great Chain of Being

Family, Household, Village, Town, Metropolis

State and Society

DISCUSSION

What were English society and economy like ca. 1500? How were families, villages, towns, the London metropolis, and the State ordered and how did they function? The first few documents reproduced in this chapter portray contemporary social ideals – of order, hierarchy, stability, the Great Chain of Being – while the later entries portray a messier world of disorder, tension, and change. But even portraits of Tudor disorder are sometimes idealized views, drawn by contemporaries to show how the ideal is unattainable for sinful man in an inherently corrupt world. As you read the documents in this chapter, you might ask:

- Which images or models of society used by sixteenth-century contemporaries are most effective (convincing) and which least?
- How did the authors of these early modern sources think about continuity or stasis, and how did they think about change?

Great Chain of Being

Early modern people embraced a socially conservative doctrine that every individual should know and keep his or her place in the divinely ordained social hierarchy. The Protestant reformer and first translator of the Scriptures into English, William Tyndale (ca. 1494?–1536), expressed the view succinctly in *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (1528):

Let every man therefore wait on the office wherein Christ hath put him, and therein serve his brethren. If he be of low degree, let him patiently therein abide, till God promote him, and exalt him higher. Let kings and head officers seek Christ in their offices, and minister peace and quietness unto the brethren, punish sin, and that with mercy, even with the same sorrow and grief of mind as they would cut off a finger or joint, a leg, or arm of their own body, if there were such disease in them, that either they must be cut off, or else all the body must perish.¹

This ideal divided the English people by rank, age, and gender (see Bucholz and Key, introduction). It could be expressed metaphorically, as the Great Chain of Being (see the visual representation in plate 1), or as a Body Politic (see the verbal representation from 1536 in document 1.2), but perhaps the most famous description of Tudor social structure is found in *De Republica Anglorum* (1565, pub. 1583, document 1.1), by Sir Thomas Smith (1513–77), the first regius professor of civil law at Cambridge. Note how Smith defines the different levels of society. Are his definitions and distinctions precise? Do they help to distinguish among, say, knights, esquires, and gentlemen? Are his distinctions closer to caste divisions (based on birth) or class divisions (based on income)? Why might an agricultural laborer or cottager subscribe to such a hierarchical view?

Sumptuary laws attempted to prevent people from one social rank wearing “sumptuous” or extravagant clothing reserved for a higher social rank. Several English examples of such laws from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reveal both the ideal of the Great Chain of Being and fears that this ideal was being honored only in the breach. Such laws attempted to regulate dress quite rigidly and, although they might be used to encourage English manufacture, they mainly sought to preserve an ordered society of ranks. Can the 1510 Act Against Wearing Costly Apparel (document 1.3) be used to construct a status hierarchy in Tudor England? Is this an economic hierarchy? What might be the difficulties in enforcing such legislation? Further Acts – 6 Hen. VIII, c. 1; 7 Hen. VIII, c. 6; 24 Hen. VIII, c. 13; 1–2 Philip and Mary, c. 2 – followed. What does their proliferation suggest about their efficacy?

Family, Household, Village, Town, Metropolis

The family was both a unit of and a metaphor for an ordered society. Individual members had to accept their allotted roles and work together harmoniously. In 1465, John Paston (1421–66) wrote from London to his wife, Margaret (d. 1484), living on their estate in Norfolk, and two men in her service, John Daubeney and Richard Calle, to give them, among other advice, some general guidance on running the “household”:

¹ Tyndale, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon taken out of the XVI Ca. of Luke* (1548 ed.), f. 37, sig. Eiii; compared with M. D. Palmer, *Henry VIII*, 2nd ed. (1983), 111.

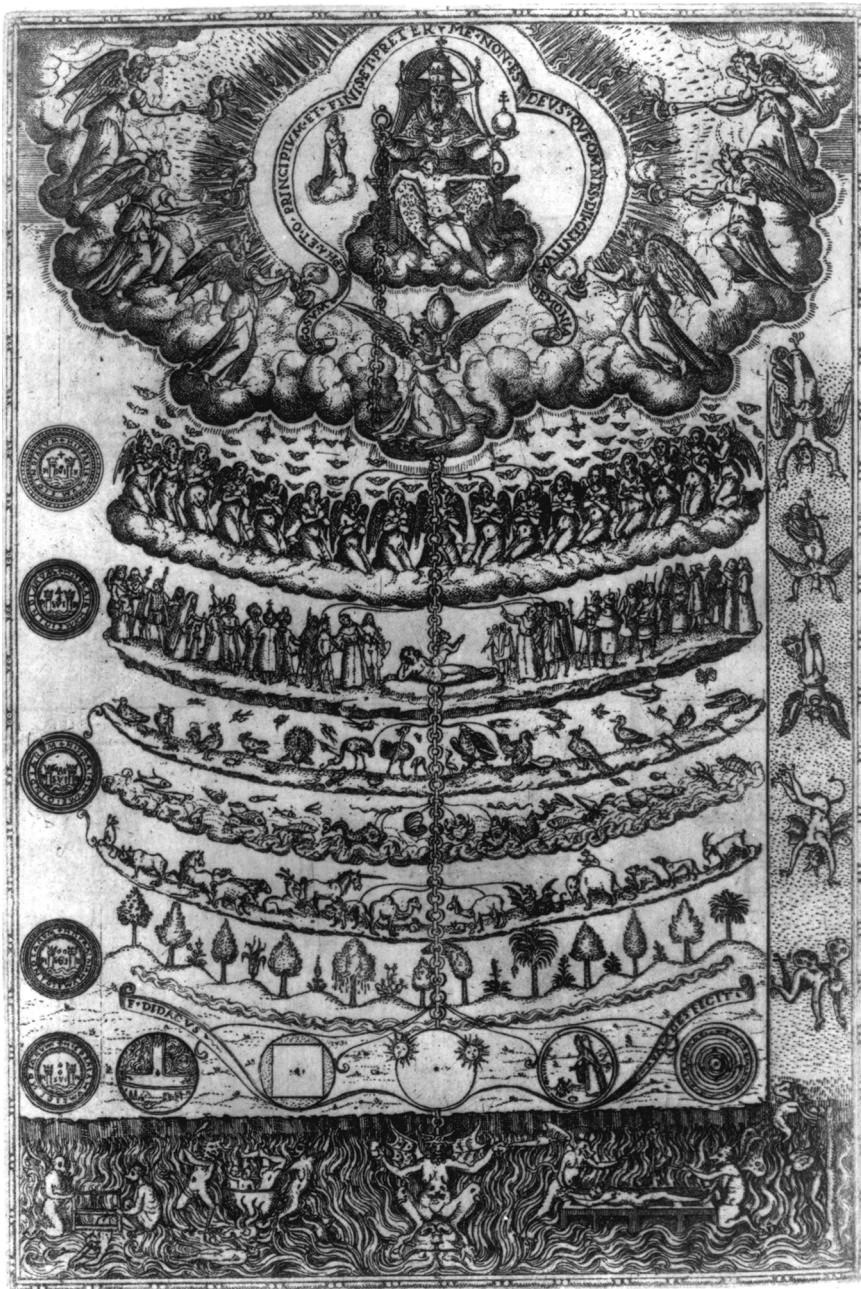


Plate 1 “The Great Chain of Being.” (Source: Diego Valadés, *Rhetorica Christiana*, 1579, © British Library)

Note the hierarchical levels of nature and society reaching to God at the top, while fallen angels plummet toward Hell on the right. What morals might one draw from this image? How might this image or model have difficulty incorporating all social hierarchies within it? What other images or models, possibly drawn from nature, might also represent such a chain of being?

Also remember you in any household, fellowship, or company that will be of good rule, purveyance [provision] must be had that every person of it be helping and furthering after his discretion and power, and he that will not do so, without he be kept of alms, should be put out of the household or fellowship.²

Personal correspondence sometimes hides as much as it reveals by taking day-to-day life for granted and leaving it unexplained (or even unmentioned). What, exactly, is a household? How does it relate to the family? In chapter 2, we will see the Pastons defending their lands and household by legal means in London and force of arms in Norfolk. John wrote again later that year to Margaret, Daubene, and Calle the following advice:

As for your son . . . , I let you weet [understand] I would know him or he know mine intent, and how well he hath occupied his time now he hath had leisure. Every poor man that hath brought up his children to the age of twelve year waiteth then to be helped and profited by his children; and every gentleman that hath discretion waiteth that his kin and servants that liveth by him and at his cost should help him forthward [henceforward].³

What ideals of the family and of social structure are revealed in this statement? What anxieties?

Contemporaries might marvel at London (see document 1.8, discussed below), but most wealth came from the ground. As the Elizabethan writer William Harrison (1534–93) wrote in 1577,

The soil of Britain . . . is more inclined to feeding and grazing than profitable for tillage and bearing of corn [grain, e.g. wheat, barley, oats], by reason whereof the country is wonderfully replenished with neat [oxen] and all kind of cattle; and such store is there also of the same in every place that the fourth part of the land is scarcely manured for the provision and maintenance of grain.⁴

The proportion between grain and cattle (often sheep) production worried Tudor writers as well as farmers throughout the century. The State lived off of taxes, and taxes were overwhelmingly based on agricultural rent and produce which, in turn, depended on how the land was tilled. Because crop yields were so minimal, perhaps averaging a harvest yield of four to one of seed, until about 1600, perhaps ten-to-one by 1720, agricultural production depended in large part on the numbers of farmers and agricultural laborers actually out in the fields. Note the Act Against Pulling Down of Towns (1489, document 1.4). According to the preamble, why does the State fear depopulation? Are there other possible reasons for the State fearing depopulation which are not mentioned? Why might a

² January 15, 1465; N. Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1971), 1: 127–8.

³ June 27, 1465; Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers*, 1: 132.

⁴ Harrison, *Elizabethan England*, ed. F. Furnivall (1877), 130–1; compared with *A Description of Elizabethan England* (New York, 1910), 307, from *A Description of England*, in R. Holinshed, *Chronicles* (1577).

landlord want to destroy a town? *Cui bono* (who benefits)? (You might want to consider this question after reflecting on documents 1.5 and 1.6, discussed below.)

Laws also proliferated in response to felonies such as assault and theft. Humanists, in particular, found the laws of England harshly disproportionate to crimes. Thomas More's (1478–1535) analysis of why people stole, the danger of “men-eating sheep,” and the irrational punishments for theft is justly famous. Document 1.5 is from his *Utopia* (a word he coined, meaning “no place”), which was published in Latin in 1516, and translated into English (many times) and other languages soon thereafter. *Utopia* describes an imaginary, perfect state exactly opposite the globe (itself a concept only recently given weight by the voyages of Columbus and others, of course) from the flawed kingdom of England. According to the discussion, what major problems does Tudor England face? How does the narrator – at this point supposedly the fictional world-traveler, Raphael – propose to solve them? Would his solution work?

While early modern England was overwhelmingly agrarian, towns played a role disproportionate to their puny size. As you read the Complaint of the Norwich Shoemakers (1490, document 1.6), ask whether there is more order (or disorder) in towns or in the countryside? (Norwich was the second-largest city in England at the time; you might compare Norwich's problems with the situation in London, by examining document 1.8.) How does the Great Chain of Being help to explain the views expressed in the Complaint?

State and Society

Sixteenth-century authors disagreed as to why England was so disordered and what were the remedies. But all began with a fairly organic model of how society functioned. Richard Morison (d. 1556) was a Humanist (he may have introduced the work of Niccolò Machiavelli [1469–1527] to England), who had lived in the household of Reginald Pole (1500–58) at Padua, but returned to England to write for Thomas Cromwell (ca. 1485–1540). Morison's *A Remedy for Seditio* (1536, document 1.2) was published in the wake of the Pilgrimage of Grace of that year (see chapter 3). What metaphors (imagery) does Morison use to explain English society? Which are most effective? Which least? How does his view match up with Sir Thomas Smith's (document 1.1)? In *Dialogue between Pole and Lupset* (ca. 1529–32, document 1.7), Thomas Starkey (ca. 1500–38) blames England's ills on a different social group from documents 1.2 or even 1.5 (although both Morison and Starkey were influenced by Humanism and wrote in support of Cromwell). Compare and contrast these sources by asking what are their respective views on the ideal society. How might the Great Chain of Being be used to press for social change as well as the status quo?

Descriptions made by foreigners provide quite different problems and possibilities. Take document 1.8, the report on England from a noble of Venice (ca. 1500). Historians particularly value commentary by foreigners. Why? On what subjects

might this report be most valuable? On what subjects might it be weakest or most unreliable? How are English family relations most different from those on the continent according to the Venetian? Is there an English national identity ca. 1500? Of what might it consist? Finally, note that we have presented these documents in this chapter by theme (roughly from the ideal to the actual). How might your vision of early Tudor society differ if you read them in chronological order (1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 1.3, 1.5, 1.7, 1.2, 1.1)?

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The hierarchical ideal of Tudor social order was refined in a time of crisis or perceived crisis. Historical debate on whether there was a crisis (relative or absolute) during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary has become known as the Mid-Tudor Crisis debate. The debate is summarized in D. M. Loades, *The Mid-Tudor Crisis, 1545–1565* (1992). But see also J. Loach and R. Tittler, eds., *The Mid-Tudor Polity, c.1540–1560* (1980).

Order was threatened by mobility – social as well as geographical. For the former, see L. Stone, “Social Mobility in England, 1500–1700,” *P & P* 33 (1966); for the latter, see P. Clark and D. Souden, eds., *Migration and Society in Early Modern England* (1987). On the elite, in particular, a “storm” developed over whether the gentry were rising or falling, or whether they could be meaningfully distinguished at all. The debate began with a series of articles in *EcHR* by R. H. Tawney (1941), Stone (1948), and H. Trevor-Roper (1950–1, and Supplement, 1953), and is summarized and commented on in J. H. Hexter, “The Storm Over the Gentry,” in his *Reappraisals in History*, 2nd ed. (1961, 1979), as well as Hexter’s review of Stone’s *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (1965) in *JBS* 8 (1968). Stone himself summarized and extracted from the debate in *Social Change and Revolution in England, 1540–1640* (1965); though see now relevant chapters from F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500–1700* (Stanford, 1994); and S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550–1640* (Basingstoke, 2000). For contemporary social structure terms, see K. Wrightson, “Estates, Degrees, and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England,” in *Language, History and Class*, ed. P. J. Corfield (Oxford, 1991); and chapter 5, below.

To compare with the Venetian’s view of London, one might examine the eyewitness accounts in L. Manley, *London in the Age of Shakespeare: An Anthology* (1986) and the articles in A. L. Beier and R. Finlay, eds., *London 1500–1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (1986). While Smith’s *De Republica Anglorum* has long been used as a factual, if ideal, portrait of English social hierarchy, A. McLaren, “Reading Sir Thomas Smith’s *De Republica Anglorum* as Protestant Apologetic,” *HJ* 42 (1999), questions

that view. Other contemporary views are discussed in N. Wood, *Foundations of Political Economy: Some Early Tudor Views on State and Society* (Berkeley, 1994).

DOCUMENTS

1.1 *Sir Thomas Smith, De Republica Anglorum* (written 1565, pub. 1583)⁵

Chapter 16. The Divisions of the Parts and Persons of the Common Wealth.

We in England divide our men commonly into four sorts, gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen artificers, and laborers. Of gentlemen the first and chief are the king, the prince, dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons, and this is called . . . the nobility, and all these are called lords and noblemen: next to these be knights, esquires, and simple gentlemen.

Chapter 17. Of the First Part of Gentlemen of England Called Nobilitas Major.

Dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons, either be created of the prince or come to that honor by being the eldest sons, or highest in succession to their parents. For the eldest of duke's sons during his father's life is called an earl . . . , [etc.]

Chapter 18. Of the Second Sort of Gentlemen Which May Be Called Nobilitas Minor, and First of Knights.

No man is a knight by succession. . . . Knights therefore be not born but made. . . . Knights in England most commonly [are made] according to the yearly revenue of their lands being able to maintain that estate . . . [but] not all [are] made knights in England that may spend a knight's lands but they only whom the prince will honor. . . .

Chapter 19. Of Esquires.

Escuier or esquire . . . be all those which bear arms (as we call them) . . . which to bear is a testimony of the nobility or race from which they do come. These be taken for no distinct order of the commonwealth, but do go with the residue of the gentlemen. . . .

Chapter 20. Of Gentlemen.

Gentlemen be those whom their blood and race doth make noble and known . . . , for that their ancestor hath been notable in riches or for his virtues, or (in fewer

⁵ Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. M. Dewar (1982), 64–7, 70–2, 74, 76–7; compared with B. Coward, *Social Change and Continuity: England, 1550–1750*, rev. ed. (1997), 104–5.

words) old riches or prowess remaining in one stock. Which if the successors do keep and follow, they be *vere nobiles*. . . . If they do not, the fame and riches of their ancestors serve to cover them so long as it can, as a thing once gilted though it be copper within, till the gilt be worn away. . . . As other commonwealths were fain to do, so must all princes necessarily follow, where virtue is to honor it. . . . The prince and commonwealth have the same power that their predecessors had, and as the husbandman hath to plant a new tree when the old faileth, to honor virtue where he doth find it, to make gentlemen, esquires, knights, barons, earls, marquises, and dukes, where he seeth virtue able to bear that honor or merits, to deserve it, and so it hath always been used among us. But ordinarily the king doth only make knights and create the barons and higher degrees: for as for gentlemen, they be made good cheap in England. For whosoever studieth the laws of the realm, who studieth in the universities, who professeth liberal sciences, and to be short who can live idly and without manual labor, and will bear the port, charge, and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called master, for that is the title which men give to esquires and other gentlemen, and shall be taken for a gentleman. . . . (And if need be) a king [officer] of Heralds shall also give him for money, arms newly made and invented, which the title shall bear that the said Herald hath perused and seen old registers where his ancestors in times past had born the same. . . . These men be called sometime in scorn gentlemen of the first head.

Chapter 21. Whether the Manner of England in Making Gentlemen So Easily Is to Be Allowed.

A man may make all doubt and question whether this manner of making gentlemen is to be allowed or no, and for my part I am of that opinion that it is not amiss. For first the prince loseth nothing by it, as he should do if it were as in France: for the yeomen or husbandman is no more subject to *taile* or tax in England than the gentleman: no, in every payment to the king the gentleman is more charged, which he beareth the gladlier and dareth not gainsay for to save and keep his honor and reputation. . . .

Chapter 22. Of Citizens and Burgesses.

Next to a gentleman, be appointed citizens and burgesses, such as not only be free and received as officers within the cities, but also be of some substance to bear the charges. . . . Generally in the shire they be of no account, save only in . . . Parliament. . . .

Chapter 23. Of Yeomen.

Those whom we call yeomen next unto the nobility, the knights, and squires, have the greatest charges and doings in the commonwealth. . . . I call him a yeoman whom our laws call *Legalem hominem* . . . , which is a freeman born English, who may spend of his own free land in yearly revenue to the sum of 40s. sterling [£2] by the year. . . . This sort of people confess themselves to be no gentleman, but give honor to all which be or take upon them to be gentlemen, and yet they have a

certain preeminence and more estimation than laborers and artificers, and commonly live wealthily, keep good houses, do their business, and travail [work] to get riches: they be (for the most part) farmers to gentlemen, and with grazing, frequenting of markets, and keeping servants, not idle servants as the gentlemen doth, but such as get their own living and part of their masters: by these means do come to such wealth, that they are able and daily do buy the lands of unthrifty gentlemen, and after setting their sons to the schools, to the universities, to the law of the realm, or otherwise leaving them sufficient lands whereon they may labor, do make their said sons by these means gentlemen. . . .

Chapter 24. Of the Fourth Sort of Men Which Do Not Rule.

The fourth sort or class amongst us is . . . day laborers, poor husbandmen, yea merchants or retailers which have no free land, copyholders, all artificers, as tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, brickmakers, bricklayers, masons, etc. These have no voice nor authorities in our commonwealth, and no account is made of these but only to be ruled, not to rule other, and yet they be not altogether neglected. For in cities and corporate towns for default of yeomen, they are fain to make their inquests of such manner of people. And in villages they be commonly made churchwardens, aleconners [local brewing inspectors], and many times constables.

1.2 *Richard Morison, A Remedy for Sedition (1536)*⁶

When every man will rule, who shall obey? Now can there be any commonwealth, where he that is wealthiest, is most like to come to woe? Who can there be rich, where he that is richest is in most danger of poverty? No, no, take wealth by the hand, and say farewell wealth, where lust is liked, and law refused, where up is set down, and down set up. An order, an order must be had, and a way found that they rule that best can, they be ruled, that most it becometh so to be. . . . For as there must be some men of policy and prudence, to discern what is metest [best] to be done in the government of states, even so there must be others of strength and readiness, to do what the wiser shall think expedient, both for the maintenance of them that govern, and for the eschewing of the infinite jeopardies, that a multitude not governed falleth into: these must not go arm in arm, but the one before, the other behind. . . .

A commonwealth is like a body, and so like, that it can be resembled to nothing so convenient, as unto that. Now, were it not by your faith, a mad herring, if the foot should say, I will wear a cap with an ouch [ornament], as the head doth? If the knees should say, we will carry the eyes, another while; if the shoulders should claim each of them an ear; if the heels would now go before, and the toes behind? This were undoubted a mad herring: every man would say, the feet, the knees, the shoulders, the heels make unlawful requests, and very mad petitions. But if it

⁶ Morison, *A Remedy for Sedition* (1536), sig. Aii–Aiiiv, Biiiv; compared with A. Fletcher and D. MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, 4th ed. (1997), 137–8.

were so indeed, if the foot had a cap, the knees eyes, the shoulders ears, what a monstrous body should this be? God send them such a one, that shall at any time go about to make as evil a commonwealth, as this is a body. It is not mete, every man to do, that he thinketh best.

1.3 *An Act Against Wearing Costly Apparel* (1 Hen. VIII, c. 14) (1510)⁷

Forasmuch as the great and costly array and apparel used within this realm contrary to good statutes thereof made hath been the occasion of great impoverishing of diverse of the king's subjects and provoked many of them to rob and to do extortion and other unlawful deeds to maintain thereby their costly array: in eschewing whereof, be it ordained by the authority of this present Parliament that no person, of what estate, condition, or degree that he be, use in his apparel any cloth of gold of purple color or silk of purple color but only the king, the queen, the king's mother, the king's children, the king's brothers and sisters upon pain to forfeit the said apparel wherewith soever it be mixed, and for using the same to forfeit 20 pound. And that no man under the estate of a duke use in any apparel of his body or upon his horses any cloth of gold of tissue upon pain to forfeit the same apparel wherewith soever it be mixed and for using the same to forfeit 20 mark [£13 6s. 8d.] . . . And that no man under the degree of a baron use in his apparel of his body or of his horses any cloth of gold or cloth of silver or tinsel, satin, nor no other silk or cloth mixed or embroidered with gold or silver upon pain of forfeiture of the same apparel, albeit that it be mixed with any other silk or cloth, and for using of the same to forfeit 10 mark. And that no man under the degree of a lord or a knight of the Garter wear any woolen cloth made out of this realm of England, Ireland, Wales, Calais, or the Marches of the same, or Berwick, upon pain to forfeit the said cloth and for using of the same to forfeit 10 pound. And that no man under the degree of a knight of the Garter wear in his gown or coat or any other his apparel any velvet of the color of crimson or blue upon pain to forfeit the same gown or coat or other apparel and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings [£2]. . . . And that no man under the degree of a knight, except esquires for the king's body, his cupbearers, carvers, and sewers having the ordinary fee for the same, and all other esquires for the body having possession of lands and tenements or other hereditaments in their hands or other to their use to the yearly value of 300 mark [£200] and lords' sons and heirs, justices of the one Bench or of the other, the master of the Rolls, and barons of the king's Exchequer, and all other of the king's Council and mayors of the city of London for the time being, use or wear any velvet in their gowns or riding coats or furs of marten in their apparel upon pain to forfeit the same fur and apparel wherewith soever it be mixed and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. Nor no person other than the above named wear velvet in their doublets nor satin nor damask in their gowns nor coats, except he be a lord's son or a gentleman having in his possession or other to his use lands or tenements or annuities at the least for term

⁷ SR, 3: 8–9; compared with C. H. Williams, ed., *English Historical Documents, 1485–1558* (1967), 249–51.

of life to the yearly value of an hundred pound above all reprises, upon pain to forfeit the same apparel wherewith soever it be mixed and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. Nor no person use or wear satin or damask in their doublets nor silk or camlet [silk and angora] in their gowns or coats not having lands or tenements in his possession or other to his use office or fee for term of life or lives to the yearly value of 20 pound, except he be a yeoman of the Crown or of the king's guard or grooms of the king's Chamber or the queen's having therefore the king's fee or the queen's upon pain to forfeit the same apparel wherewith so ever it be mixed and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. And that no man under the degree of a gentleman except graduates of the universities and except yeomen, grooms, and pages of the king's Chamber and of our sovereign lady the queen's, and except such men as have . . . an hundred pound in goods, use or wear any furs, whereof there is no like kind growing in this land of England, Ireland, Wales, or in any land under the king's obeisance, upon pain to forfeit the same furs and for using of the same to forfeit 40 shillings. The value of their goods to be tried by their own oaths. And that no man under the degree of a knight except spiritual men and sergeants at the law or graduates of universities use any more cloth in any long gown than four broad yards, and in a riding gown or coat above three yards upon pain of forfeiture of the same. And that no serving man under the degree of a gentleman use or wear any gown or coat or such like apparel of more cloth than two broad yards and an half in a short gown and three broad yards in a long gown, and that in the said gown or coat they wear no manner [of] fur upon pain of forfeiture of the said apparel. . . . And that no serving man waiting upon his master under the degree of a gentleman use or wear any guarded hose or any cloth above the price of 20d. the yard in his hose except it be of his master's wearing hose upon pain of forfeiture of 3s. 4d. And that no man under the degree of a knight wear any guarded or pinched shirt or pinched partlet [neckerchief or collar] of linen cloth upon pain of forfeiture of the same shirt or partlet and for using of the same to forfeit 10 shillings. And that no servant of husbandry nor shepherd nor common laborer nor servant unto any artificer out of city or borough nor husbandman having no goods of his own above the value of 10 pound use or wear any cloth whereof the broad yard passeth in price two shillings nor that any of the said servants of husbandry, shepherds, nor laborers wear any hose above the price of 10 d. the yard upon pain of imprisonment in the stocks by three days.

1.4 Act Against Pulling Down of Towns (4 Hen. VII, c. 19) (1489)⁸

The king our sovereign lord, having a singular pleasure above all things to avoid such enormities and mischiefs as be hurtful and prejudicial to the common wealth of this his land and his subjects, remembering that among all other things great inconveniences daily do increase by desolation and pulling down and willful waste of houses and towns within this his realm, and laying to pasture lands

⁸ SR, 2: 542; compared with R. H. Tawney and E. Power, eds., *Tudor Economic Documents* (1924), 1: 4–5.

which customarily have been tilled, whereby idleness ground and beginning of all mischiefs daily do increase, for where in some towns two hundred persons were occupied and lived by their lawful labors, now are there occupied two or three herdsmen and the residue fall in idleness, the husbandry which is one of the greatest commodities of this realm is greatly decayed, churches destroyed, the service of God withdrawn, the bodies there buried not prayed for, the patron and curates wronged, the defense of this land against our enemies outward feebled and impaired; to the great displeasure of God, to the subversion of the policy and good rule of this land, and remedy be not hastily therefore purveyed: Wherefore the king our sovereign lord by the assent and advice of the Lords spiritual and temporal and Commons in this present Parliament assembled and by authority of the same, ordains, enacts, and establishes that no person, what estate, degree, or condition that he be, that hath any house or houses, that any time within three years past has been or that now is or hereafter shall be let to farm with twenty acres of land at least or more lying in tillage or husbandry, that the owner or owners of every such house or houses and land be bound to keep, sustain, and maintain houses and buildings upon the said ground and land, convenient and necessary for maintaining and upholding of the said tillage and husbandry.

1.5 *Thomas More, Utopia, Book I* (*Description of England*) (1516)⁹

It happened one day that I was at his [the Cardinal John Morton's] table when a layman, learned in the laws of your country, was present. Availing himself of some opportunity or other, he began to speak punctiliously of the strict justice which was then dealt out to thieves. They were everywhere executed, he reported, as many as twenty at a time being hanged on one gallows, and added that he wondered all the more, though so few escaped execution, by what bad luck the whole country was still infested with them. I dared be free in expressing my opinions without reserve at the Cardinal's table, so I said to him:

“You need not wonder, for this manner of punishing thieves goes beyond justice and is not for the public good. It is too harsh a penalty for theft and yet is not a sufficient deterrent. Theft alone is not a grave offense that ought to be punished with death, and no penalty that can be devised is sufficient to restrain from acts of robbery those who have no other means of getting a livelihood. In this respect not your country alone but a great part of our world resembles bad schoolmasters, who would rather beat than teach their scholars. You ordain grievous and terrible punishments for a thief when it would have been much better to provide some means of getting a living, that no one should be under this terrible necessity first of stealing and then of dying for it. . . .

“Now there is the great number of noblemen who not only live idle themselves like drones on the labors of others, as for instance the tenants of their estates

⁹ More, *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz (New Haven, 1964), 24–8; compared with B. L. Blakeley and J. Collins, *Documents in English History: Early Times to the Present* (New York, 1975), 1: 114–18, from *Utopia*, pub. in Latin, 1516.

whom they fleece to the utmost by increasing the returns (for that is the only economy they know of, being otherwise so extravagant as to bring themselves to beggary!) but who also carry about with them a huge crowd of idle attendants who have never learned a trade for a livelihood. As soon as their master dies or they themselves fall sick, these men are turned out at once, for the idle are maintained more readily than the sick, and often the heir is not able to support as large a household as his father did, at any rate at first. . . .

“Yet this is not the only situation that makes thieving necessary. There is another which, as I believe, is more special to you Englishmen.”

“What is that?” asked the Cardinal.

“Your sheep,” I answered, “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. In all those parts of the realm where the finest and therefore costliest wool is produced, there are noblemen, gentlemen, and even some abbots, though otherwise holy men, who are not satisfied with the annual revenues and profits which their predecessors used to derive from their estates. They are not content, by leading an idle and sumptuous life, to do no good to their country; they must also do it positive harm. They leave no ground to be tilled; they enclose every bit of land for pasture; they pull down houses and destroy towns, leaving only the church to pen the sheep in. And, as if enough English land were not wasted on ranges and preserves of game, those good fellows turn all human habitations and all cultivated lands into a wilderness.

“Consequently, in order that one insatiable glutton and accursed plague of his native land may join field to field and surround many thousand acres with one fence, tenants are evicted. Some of them, either circumvented by fraud or overwhelmed by violence, are stripped even of their own property, or else, wearied by unjust acts, are driven to sell. By hook or by crook the poor wretches are compelled to leave their homes – men and women, husbands and wives, orphans and widows, parents with little children and a household not rich but numerous, since farm work requires many hands. Away they must go, I say, from the only homes familiar and known to them, and they find no shelter to go to. All their household goods which would not fetch a great price if they could wait for a purchaser, since they must be thrust out, they sell for a trifle.

“After they have soon spent that trifle in wandering from place to place, what remains for them but to steal and be hanged – justly, you may say! – or to wander and beg. And yet even in the latter case they are cast into prison as vagrants for going about idle when, though they most eagerly offer their labor, there is no one to hire them. For there is no farm work, to which they have been trained, to be had, when there is no land for plowing left. A single shepherd or herdsman is sufficient grazing livestock on that land for whose cultivation many hands were once required to make it raise crops.

“A result of this situation is that the price of food has risen steeply in many localities. Indeed, the price of raw wools has climbed so high that the English poor who used to make cloth cannot possibly buy them, and so great numbers are driven from work into idleness. One reason is that, after the great increase in

pasture land, a plague carried off a vast multitude of sheep as though God were punishing greed by sending upon the sheep a murrain [pestilence] – which should have fallen on the owners' heads more justly! But, however much the number of sheep increases, their price does not decrease a farthing [1/4 penny] because, though you cannot brand that a monopoly which is a sale by more than one person, yet their sale is certainly an oligopoly, for all sheep have come into the hands of a few men, and those already rich, who are not obliged to sell before they wish and who do not wish until they get the price they ask. . . .

“Thus, the unscrupulous greed of a few is ruining the very thing by virtue of which your island was once counted fortunate in the extreme. For the high price of food is causing everyone to get rid of as many of his household as possible, and what, I ask, have they to do but to beg, or – a course more readily embraced by men of mettle – to become robbers?

“In addition, alongside this wretched need and poverty you find ill-timed luxury. Not only the servants of noblemen but the craftsmen and almost the clodhoppers themselves, in fact all classes alike, are given to much ostentatious sumptuousness of dress and to excessive indulgence at table. Do not dives, brothels, and those other places as bad as brothels, to wit, wine shops and alehouses – do not all those crooked games of chance, dice, cards, backgammon, ball, bowling, and quoits, soon drain the purses of their votaries and send them off to rob someone?

“Cast out these ruinous plagues. Make laws that the destroyers of farmsteads and country villages should either restore them or hand them over to people who will restore them and who are ready to build. Restrict this right to rich individuals to buy up everything and this license to exercise a kind of monopoly for themselves. Let fewer be brought up in idleness. Let farming be resumed and let cloth-working be restored once more that there may be honest jobs to employ usefully that idle throng, whether those whom hitherto pauperism has made thieves or those who, now being vagrants or lazy servants, in either case are likely to turn out thieves. Assuredly, unless you remedy these evils, it is useless for you to boast of the justice you execute in the punishment of theft. Such justice is more showy than really just or beneficial. When you allow your youths to be badly brought up and their characters, even from early years, to become more and more corrupt, to be punished, of course, when, as grown-up men, they commit the crimes which from boyhood they have shown every prospect of committing, what else, I ask, do you do but first create thieves and then become the very agents of their punishment?”

1.6 Complaint of the Norwich Shoemakers against their Journeymen (September 21, 1490)¹⁰

To our right honorable masters, the mayor, and his brethren alderman and to our good masters and weelwillers [well-wishers] of the Common Council of the city: Showeth to your great discretions the poor artificers and craftsmen of shoemakers of the said city, that where diverse journeymen and servants of the said craft

¹⁰ Tawney and Power, *Tudor Economic Documents*, 1: 97–8, from *Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. W. Hudson and J. C. Tingey (1910), 2: 104.

greatly disposed to riot and idleness, whereby may succeed great poverty, so that diverse days weekly when them lust to leave their bodily labor till a great part of the week be almost so expended and wasted, against the advantage and profit werely [not only] of themselves and of their masters also. And also contrary to the law [of] God and good guiding temporal [temperance], they labor quickly toward the Sunday and festival days on the Saturdays and vigils [evening of festival days] from four of the clock at afternoon to the deepness and darkness of the night following. And not only that sinful disposition but much worse so offending in the mornings of such fests, and omitting the hearing of their divine service. Wherefore prayeth the said artificers heartily, that the rather for good cause and also that virtuous and true labor might help to the sustentation of the said craft, that by your general assent may be ordained and enacted for a laudable custom, that none such servant or journeyman from henceforth presume to occupy nor work after the said hour in vigils and Saturdays aforesaid, upon pain by your discretions to be set for punishment alsweel of [as much against] the said artificers for their favoring and supporting, as for the said journeymen so working and offending.

1.7 *Thomas Starkey, Dialogue between Pole and Lupset (ca. 1529–32)*¹¹

Pole: There is also, in this politic body, another disease and sickness more grievous . . . , and that is this, shortly to say: A great part of these people which we have here in our country, is either idle or ill-occupied, and a small number of them exerciseth themself in doing their office and duty pertaining to the maintenance of the common weal, by the reason whereof this body is replenished and over-fulfilled with many ill-humors, which I call idle and unprofitable persons, of whom you shall find a great number, if you will a little consider all estates, orders, and degrees here in our country. First, look what an idle rout our noblemen keep and nourish in their houses, which do nothing else but carry dishes to the table and eat them when they have down [done]; and after, giving themselves to hunting, hawking, dicing, carding, and all other idle pastimes and vain [vanities], as though they were born to nothing else at all. Look to our bishops and prelates of the realm, whether they follow not the same trade in nourishing such an idle sort, spending their possessions and goods, which were to them given to be distributed among them which were oppressed with poverty and necessity. Look, furthermore to priests, monks, friars, and canons with all their adherents and idle train, and you shall find also among them no small number idle and unprofitable, which be nothing but burdens to the earth; insomuch that if you, after this manner, examine the multitude in every order and degree, you shall find, as I think, the third part of our people living in idleness, as persons to the common weal utterly unprofitable; and to all good civility, much like unto the drone bees

¹¹ Starkey, *A Dialogue between Pole and Lupset*, ed. T. F. Mayer (Camden Society, 4th ser., 37, 1989), 52–4; compared with Williams, *English Historical Documents*, 297–9.

in a hive, which do nothing else but consume and devour all such thing as the busy and good bee, with diligence and labor, gathereth together.

Lupset: Master Pole, me seemeth you examine this matter somewhat too shortly, as though you would have all men to labor, to go to the plow, and exercise some craft, which is not necessary, for our mother the ground is so plenteous and bountiful, by the goodness of God and of nature given to her, that with little labor and tillage she will sufficiently nourish mankind none otherwise than she doth all beasts, fishes, and fowls which are bred and brought up upon her, to whom we see she ministereth food with little labor or none, but of her own fertile benignity. Wherefore if a few of our people busy themselves and labor therein, it is sufficient; the rest may live in triumph, at liberty and ease free from all bodily labor and pain.

Pole: This is spoken, Master Lupset, even as though you judged man to be born for to live in idleness and pleasure, all thing referring and applying thereto. But, Sir, it is nothing so; but, contrary, he is born to labor and travail (after the opinion of the wise and ancient antiquity) none otherwise than a bird to fly, and not to live (as Homer saith some do) as an unprofitable weight and burden of the earth. For man is born to be as a governor, ruler, and diligent tiller and inhabitant of this earth, as some, by labor of body, to procure things necessary for the maintenance of man's life; some by wisdom and policy to keep the rest of the multitude in good order and civility. So that none be born to this idleness and vanity, to the which the most part of our people is much given and bent, but all to exercise themselves in some fashion of life convenient to the dignity and nature of man. Wherefore, though it be so that it is nothing necessary all to be laborers and tillers of the ground, but some to be priests and ministers of God's Word, some to be gentlemen to the governance of the rest, and some [to be] servants to the same. Yet this is certain, that over-great number of them, without due proportion to the other parts of the body, is superfluous in any commonalty. It is not to be doubted but that here in our country of those sorts be over-many, and specially of them which we call servingmen, which live in service to gentlemen, lords, and others of the nobility. If you look throughout the world, as I think, you shall not find in any one country proportionable to ours like number of that sort.

Lupset: Marry, sir, that is truth. Wherein, me seemeth, you praise our country very much, for in them standeth the royalty of the realm. If the yeomanry of England were not, in time of war we should be in shrewd case; for in them standeth the chief defense of England.

Pole: O, Master Lupset, you take the matter amiss. In them standeth the beggary of England. By them is nourished the common theft therein, as hereafter at large I shall declare. Howbeit, if they were exercised in feats of arms, to the defense of the realm in time of war, they might yet be much better suffered. But you see how little they be exercised therein, insomuch that in time of war it is necessary for our plowmen and laborers of the country to take weapon in hand, or else we were not like long to enjoy England, so little trust is to be put in their feats and deeds.

Wherefore doubt you no more but of them, like as of other that I have spoken of before (as of priests, friars, monks, and others called religious), we have over-

many, which altogether make our politic body unwieldy and heavy, and, as it were, to be grieved with gross humors, insomuch that this disease therein may well be compared to a dropsy in man's body.

1.8 *Venetian Nobleman's Report on England (ca. 1500)*¹²

The English are, for the most part, both men and women of all ages, handsome and well-proportioned; though not quite so much so, in my opinion, as it had been asserted to me, before your Magnificence went to that kingdom [perhaps 1496]; and I have understood from persons acquainted with these countries, that the Scotch are much handsomer; and that the English are great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think that there are no other men than themselves, and no other world but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say that "he looks like an Englishman," and that "it is a great pity that he should not be an Englishman"; and when they partake of any delicacy with a foreigner, they ask him, "whether such a thing is made in *their* country?" . . . [T]hey think that no greater honor can be conferred, or received, than to invite others to eat with them, or to be invited themselves; and they would sooner give five or six ducats [Venetian ducats varied from 3s. 6d. to 4s.; thus, about £2] to provide an entertainment for a person, than a groat [4d.] to assist him in any distress. . . .

The want [lack] of affection in the English is strongly manifested towards their children; for after having kept them at home till they arrive at the age of 7 or 9 years at the utmost, they put them out, both males and females, to hard service in the houses of other people, binding them generally for another 7 or 9 years. And these are called apprentices, and during that time they perform all the most menial offices; and few are born who are exempted from this fate, for every one, however rich he may be, sends away his children into the houses of others, whilst he, in return receives those of strangers into his own. And on inquiring their reason for this severity, they answered that they did it in order that their children might learn better manners. But I, for my part, believe that they do it because they like to enjoy all their comforts themselves, and that they are better served by strangers than they would be by their own children. Besides which the English being great epicures, and very avaricious by nature, indulge in the most delicate fare themselves and give their household the coarsest bread, and beer, and cold meat baked on Sunday for the week, which, however, they allow them in great abundance. That if they had their own children at home, they would be obliged to give them the same food they make use of for themselves. That if the English sent their children away from home to learn virtue and good manners, and took them back again when their apprenticeship was over, they might, perhaps, be excused; but they never return, for the girls are settled by their

¹² *A Relation, or Rather a True Account, of the Island of England . . . , about the Year 1500*, trans. C. A. Sneyd (Camden Society, 1847), 20–2, 24–9, 41–3; compared with A. F. Pollard, *The Reign of Henry VII from Contemporary Sources* (1914), 2: 216–18, 221–5; 3: 153–4, 194–5; and Williams, *English Historical Documents*, 197.

patrons, and the boys make the best marriages they can, and, assisted by their patrons, not by their fathers, they also open a house and strive diligently by this means to make some fortune for themselves; whence it proceeds that, having no hope of their paternal inheritance, they all become so greedy of gain that they feel no shame in asking, almost “for the love of God,” for the smallest sums of money; and to this it may be attributed, that there is no injury that can be committed against the lower orders of the English, that may not be atoned for by money.

Nevertheless, the apprentices for the most part make good fortunes, some by one means and some by another; but above all, those who happen to be in the good graces of the mistress of the house in which they are domiciliated at the time of the death of the master; because, by the ancient custom of the country, every inheritance is divided into three parts; for the Church and funeral expenses, for the wife, and for the children. But the lady takes care to secure a good portion for herself in secret, first, and then the residue being divided into three parts as aforesaid, she, being in possession of what she has robbed, of her own third, and that of her children besides (and if she have no children, the two thirds belong to her by right), usually bestows herself in marriage upon the one of those apprentices living in the house who is most pleasing to her, and who was probably not *displeasing* to her in the lifetime of her husband; and in his power she places all her own fortune, as well as that of her children, who are sent away as apprentices into other houses. . . . No Englishman can complain of this corrupt practice, it being universal throughout the kingdom; nor does any one, arrived at years of discretion, find fault with his mother for marrying again during his childhood, because, from very ancient custom, this license has become so sanctioned, that it is not considered any discredit to a woman to marry again every time that she is left a widow, however unsuitable the match may be as to age, rank, and fortune.

I saw, one day, that I was with your Magnificence at court, a very handsome young man of about 18 years of age [Richard de la Pole], the brother of the duke of Suffolk, who, as I understood, had been left very poor, the whole of the paternal inheritance amongst the nobility descending to the eldest son; this youth, I say, was boarded out to a widow of fifty, with a fortune as I was informed, of 50,000 crowns [Venetian crowns, or, about £10,000]. And this old woman knew how to play her cards so well, that he was content to become her husband, and patiently to waste the flower of his beauty with her, hoping soon to enjoy her great wealth with some handsome young lady: because when there are no children, the husband succeeds to the whole of the wife’s property, and the wife in like manner to her husband’s, as I said before; the part, however, belonging to the Church always remaining untouched. Nor must your Magnificence imagine that these successions may be of small value, for the riches of England are greater than those of any other country in Europe, as I have been told by the oldest and most experienced merchants, and also as I myself can vouch. . . . This is owing, in the first place, to the great fertility of the soil, which is such, that, with the exception of wine, they import nothing from abroad for their subsistence. Next, the sale of their valuable tin brings in a large sum of money to the

kingdom; but still more do they derive from their extraordinary abundance of wool, which bears such a high price and reputation throughout Europe. And in order to keep the gold and silver in the country, when once it has entered, they have made a law, which has been in operation for a long time now, that no money, nor gold, nor silver plate should be carried out of England under a very heavy penalty. And everyone who makes a tour in the island will soon become aware of this great wealth . . . , for there is no small innkeeper, however poor and humble he may be, who does not serve his table with silver dishes and drinking cups; and no one, who has not in his house silver plate at least £100 . . . , is considered by the English to be a person of any consequence. . . .

[A]t present, all the beauty of this island is confined to London; which, although sixty miles distant from the sea, possesses all the advantages to be desired in a maritime town; being situated on the river Thames, which is very much affected by the tide, for many miles . . . above it; and London is so much benefited by this ebb and flow of the river, that vessels of 100 tons burden can come up to the city, and ships of any size to within five miles of it; yet the water in this river is fresh for twenty miles below London. Although this city has no buildings in the Italian style, but of timber or brick like the French, the Londoners live comfortably, and, it appears to me, that there are not fewer inhabitants than at Florence or Rome. It abounds with every article of luxury, as well as with the necessaries of life, but the most remarkable thing in London is the wonderful quantity of wrought silver. I do not allude to that in private houses, though the landlord of the house in which the Milanese ambassador lived, had plate to the amount of 100 crowns [£25], but to the shops of London. In one single street, named the Strand, leading to St. Paul's, there are fifty-two goldsmith's shops, so rich and full of silver vessels, great and small, that in all the shops in Milan, Rome, Venice, and Florence put together, I do not think there would be found so many of the magnificence that are to be seen in London. And these vessels are all either salt cellars, or drinking cups, or basins to hold water for the hands; for they eat off that fine tin, which is little inferior to silver [pewter]. These great riches of London are not occasioned by its inhabitants being noblemen or gentlemen; being all, on the contrary, persons of low degree, and artificers who have congregated there from all parts of the island, and from Flanders, and from every other place. No one can be mayor or alderman of London, who has not been an apprentice in his youth; that is, who has not passed the seven or nine years in that hard service described before. Still, the citizens of London are thought quite as highly of there, as the Venetian gentlemen are at Venice, as I think your Magnificence may have perceived.