



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

Alexandra Shepard

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Accounting for Oneself is a major new study of the social order in early modern England, as viewed and articulated from the bottom up. Engaging with how people from across the social spectrum placed themselves within the social order, it pieces together the language of self-description deployed by over 13,500 witnesses in English courts when answering questions designed to assess their creditworthiness. Spanning the period between 1550 and 1728, and with a broad geographical coverage, this study explores how men and women accounted for their 'worth' and described what they did for a living at differing points in the life-cycle. A corrective to top-down, male-centric accounts of the social order penned by elite observers, the perspective from below testifies to an intricate hierarchy based on sophisticated forms of social reckoning that were articulated throughout the social scale. A culture of appraisal was central to the competitive processes whereby people judged their own and others' social positions. For the majority it was not land that was the yardstick of status but moveable property—the goods and chattels in people's possession ranging from livestock to linens, tools to trading goods, tables to tubs, clothes to cushions. Such items were repositories of wealth and the security for the credit on which the bulk of early modern exchange depended.

Accounting for Oneself also sheds new light on women's relationship to property, on gendered divisions of labour, and on early modern understandings of work which were linked as much to having as to getting a living. The view from below was not unchanging, but bears witness to the profound impact of widening social inequality that opened up a chasm between the middle ranks and the labouring poor between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. As a result, not only was the social hierarchy distorted beyond recognition, from the later-seventeenth century there was also a gradual yet fundamental reworking of the criteria informing the calculus of esteem.

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