

IF I LOSE MINE HONOUR I LOSE MYSELF:
HONOUR AMONG THE EARLY
MODERN ENGLISH ELITE

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If I Lose Mine Honour
I Lose Myself

*Honour among the Early
Modern English Elite*

COURTNEY ERIN THOMAS

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press 2017
Toronto Buffalo London
www.utppublishing.com
Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN 978-1-4875-0122-8



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer
recycled paper with vegetable-based inks.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Thomas, Courtney Erin, 1980–, author
If I lose mine honour I lose myself : honour among the
Early Modern English elite / Courtney Erin Thomas.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4875-0122-8 (hardcover)

1. Social psychology – Great Britain – History – 16th century.
2. Social psychology – Great Britain – History – 17th century. 3. Honor –
Social aspects – Great Britain – History – 16th century. 4. Honor – Social
aspects – Great Britain – History – 17th century. 5. Reputation – Social
aspects – Great Britain – History – 16th century. 6. Reputation – Social
aspects – Great Britain – History – 17th century. 7. Upper class – Great
Britain – History – 16th century. 8. Upper class – Great Britain – History –
17th century. I. Title.

HM1027.G74T46 2017

302.094209'031

C2017-901028-X

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Federation
for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly
Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and
Humanities Research Council of Canada.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its
publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts
Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Funded by the
Government
of Canada

Financé par le
gouvernement
du Canada

Canada

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Acknowledgments

I was fortunate to receive funding at various stages in the development of this project from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University, the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, the Leylan Fellowships in the Social Sciences, and other sources.

Research for this work was conducted at an array of North American and British archives and I would like to thank the archivists and librarians at the Folger Shakespeare Library (especially Georgianna Ziegler), the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, the Yale University Microfilm Library, the Huntington Library (particularly Mary Robertson), the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian Library, the Surrey History Centre, and at the UK National Archives, for the time and assistance they offered me. I would also like to express my gratitude to the scholars in attendance at the various conferences, seminars, and colloquia in North America and England at which several portions of this project were presented between 2010 and 2015. In addition, Alan Bryson provided me with invaluable assistance on the transcription of several of the Cavendish letters – for which I am forever grateful. Portions of the fourth chapter of this work previously appeared in a 2013 article entitled “‘The Honour & Credite of the Whole House’: Family Unity and Honour in Early Modern England,” and I am grateful to the *Journal of Social and Cultural History* (and Taylor & Francis Ltd, on behalf of the Social History Society) for their permission to print reworked portions of that earlier piece here.

I began this endeavour as a doctoral student at Yale University, and I am deeply grateful to many there for their advice and camaraderie. I

am likewise indebted to many others for their support, whether offered in the form of insights into this project (often as probing questions and post-conference panel engagement which has been invaluable in shaping the work) or personal encouragement. In this regard I would like to warmly thank Sarah Eve Kelly, Brendan Kane, Krista Kesselring, Lisa Ford, Steve Hindle, Tim Stretton, Robert Tittler, Lisa Cody, Henry French, Andy Wood, Lindsay O'Neill, Sarah Cieglo, James Caudle, Alexandra Shepard, Paul Griffiths, Linda Pollock, Elizabeth Herman, Jennifer Wellington, Christopher Nixon, Daina and Stefan Esposito, Michael Meadows, Eric Lum, Siobhan Quinlan, Tara Forman, Charles Roeske, James Grant, Sarah Keyes, Jennifer Rolls, Shannon Green, Vanessa Grabia, Cindy Watt, Ellen Schoeck, Heather Hogg, Megan Caldwell, Hillary Taylor, Erin Glunt, Jennifer Ng, and Marita von Weissenberg.

My family, both immediate and extended, deserves a great deal of thanks; the brief remarks here are not sufficient to scratch the surface. My loving parents have made an indelible mark on this project – my mother and father, Judy and Ron Thomas, have provided seemingly boundless help, cheerleading, kindness, reassurance, assistance, and patience over the years, and lovingly edited all my works in progress since as far back as I can remember. The kindness and support offered to me by my partner, Shaun Badry, have likewise been immense. This project is the better for his interest in it, and in all my endeavours.

I also wish to express my great appreciation and indebtedness to Keith Wrightson, who has offered invaluable assistance, support, and guidance. His expertise, enthusiasm, and generosity of spirit seemed remarkable to me when I entered my doctoral program, and they remain so. Over the years he has been unfailing in his kindness and support, as well as in his willingness to engage critically with my ideas and assumptions; in short, a perfect mentor.

Finally, deepest gratitude is also due to the other members of my supervisory committee at Yale: Carlos Eire, Charles Walton, and Brendan Kane. Early on they all displayed a great deal of enthusiasm for the project and without their knowledge and assistance this study would not have been completed. In particular, I owe great thanks to Brendan for his many insightful suggestions and comments over the years, and for his support.

There are, of course, many more individuals who deserve to be thanked here and I hope they will forgive my brevity. The book itself is for Sarah Eve Kelly, who has ever been a source of support, laughter, friendship, and sage advice, and for my parents, who have made this and so many other things possible.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London, UK.
BOD	Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK.
BRBM	Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT.
CUL	Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, UK.
FSL	Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.
HL	Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
HH	Hatfield House, Hatfield, UK (accessed online at http://cecilpapers.chadwyck.com/).
LH	Longleat House, Warminster, UK (accessed on microfilm at Yale University Library).
NA	National Archives, Kew, UK.
SHC	Surrey History Center, Woking, UK.

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Brief Notes

This work retains the original spelling and punctuation when quoting sources directly. However, in instances in which quotations from such sources are difficult to understand, explanatory notes have been added in square brackets. All dates are presented in both new and old style with a slash separating the two styles. Hence, 10 February 1559 [old style]/1560 [new style].

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IF I LOSE MINE HONOUR I LOSE MYSELF

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Introduction: Approaching Honour

Honour and Its Import

William Gouge, the early modern English clergyman, moralist, and conduct book writer, noted in his 1622 treatise *Of Domesticall Duties*, “a good name is a most pretious thing.”¹ Almost a hundred years later, Juba, a character in Joseph Addison’s *Cato, A Tragedy*, exclaimed, “better to die ten thousand deaths than wound my honor.” These sentiments, pointing to the importance attached to honour and reputation, would have resonated with both Gouge’s wide readership and the theatre attendees of Addison’s time. This work examines these concepts among the elite in early modern England and demonstrates that honour was so often invoked because its flexible nature made it a particularly effective representational technique.² The varied meanings of honour could be used in an array of interactions, and variously privileged, one over another, with fluidity depending upon the needs and objectives of an individual in a given situation.

While earlier scholarship often reified honour, discussing it as a static, overarching code of behaviour, recent work focuses instead on the many contradictions and ambiguities found in early modern understandings and expressions of honour. Indeed, this shift in focus has yielded such a range of diverse descriptions of honour that several historians have questioned its usefulness as an analytic category. For example, during a 1996 symposium, “grave doubts were expressed as to whether the term ‘honour’ had any practical utility as a historical category” owing to its “fluid and contradictory” nature.³ This work embraces some of these recent insights with respect to honour’s flexible nature. However, while demonstrating that honour was highly protean (yet bounded by

broadly recognizable central tenets), it affirms its centrality as a category of analysis and stresses the profound sense of importance it had for people in the period. It was from its malleability that honour drew its strength.

One's honour and reputation were constantly articulated and referenced in early modern English society. Honour itself was a broadly constituted mode of conduct that bound social groups together; it likewise served as a frame of reference in reaching decisions about self-presentation and in reacting and responding to the behaviour of others. Simply put, honour was a key facet of people's daily lives. While all social orders in early modern England were concerned with issues of reputation and social credit, and recognized their importance and ubiquity in social interactions, the concept of honour played a particularly large role in the lives of elites. It was a key aspect of their social experience and self-fashioning. Elites cared a great deal about their honour, and issues of honour and reputation arose in almost every social interaction in which they participated.⁴

Yet, for all its importance, honour was not easily defined. Nathaniel Vincent, preaching a sermon before Charles II in 1674, articulated, "though there is not any thing in the world that hath been always more value and desired than honour, yet there is nothing that has been so little understood and explicated."⁵ Honour has been insightfully and variously analysed as a value inherent in political discourse, personal and household display, constructions of self-identity, and notions of masculinity and femininity.⁶ In contrast to much earlier work, analyses from the mid-1990s onwards have moved away from seeing honour in the period as linked most strongly to the expression of violence or a concern with sexual reputation.⁷ Accordingly, they have eschewed a simplistic understanding of honour as rooted most prominently in chivalric displays and militaristic bravado in the case of men and as inseparable from sexual repute with respect to women. Scholars now recognize that honour was dynamic; something that took many different forms and was at play in a broad array of social interactions.⁸ In re-evaluating the meanings attached to honour, recent work has thus overwhelmingly pointed to its plasticity and multi-vocality.⁹ Honour is now described (much as it was in the early modern period) as both an interior and exterior quality, as a deeply personal value that had a role in understandings of self-identity and as a communal asset, and as something self-generated by birth whilst concomitantly bestowed through service and behaviour. With

a complex set of interlocking and overlapping meanings, honour was nothing short of protean.

This study focuses on the multiple meanings associated with honour in the period, and specifically avoids smoothing the edges of honour as a concept. It highlights, rather, the inconsistent and occasionally competing understandings of honour as a social construct, while also connecting them and emphasizing the strength of honour as a concept, despite its ambiguous nature. By embracing these ambiguities, a three-dimensional understanding of early modern honour is achieved, one that considers its many pliable meanings and affirms its appeal as a rhetorical strategy with reference to the manner in which these multiple meanings could be used. As suggested, recent scholarship has provided numerous points of entry to connect the array of meanings attached to honour in early modern England, and the range of behaviours and venues of display associated with it. In particular, this analysis is indebted to work done by Linda Pollock. In a 2007 essay, which itself built upon earlier analyses that probed the contours of understandings of honour and reputation, Pollock drew attention to the role of honour in mediating settlements and mitigating (rather than sparking) violence, the active role of women in elite honour culture beyond a concern with sexual reputation, and the potency of family relationships as a source of honour and good reputation.¹⁰ This project extends that analysis by further investigating some issues outlined by others and broadening the range of behaviours and attributes linked to honour.¹¹ More specifically, it attends to the manner in which early modern elite men and women interpreted honour and negotiated its various, sometimes competing, meanings and accorded them varying levels of precedence, often with a measure of fluidity, based upon their needs and objectives within a given interaction or social performance. In doing so, this work points to honour's utility as a representational strategy and also to the ways in which it can be employed as a lens through which to focus upon other elements, such as the quotidian experiences of elite women and men, the expansion of state apparatuses, the mechanics of family relationships, and constructions of masculinity and femininity, in the history of the early modern period.

In focusing on honour in this manner, I borrow an idea introduced in another essay by Pollock, that of the "cluster concept." As defined by her, a cluster concept is "an umbrella term that linked together a diverse array of related ideas, providing bridges between and connective pathways through the associated attributes."¹² Honour can be

seen as a cluster concept, something that was deeply entangled in early modern life and that connected diverse elements of social behaviour together.¹³ Because honour connected and encompassed such variable meanings and forms of articulation, it is deceptive to perceive too great an element of cohesion in early modern understandings of it. Honour cannot easily be described as a “code,” something of which people possessed a unified and unitary understanding. Its meanings were often determined contextually in a purposeful way as individuals used the divergent understandings of honour present in order to realize their aims in a given moment.

This analysis also demonstrates the utility of honour as a category of analysis. Recognizing that honour was amorphous, this study focuses on how elite men and women used and understood honour in various ways, often deliberately depending upon the context, in the course of their daily lives. Far from rendering honour “empty” as a result of its abundant concurrent and occasionally contradictory meanings, it was this very malleability that made it such an enduring value. In essence, honour was so often appealed to and articulated because of, rather than in spite of, its flexible nature. Likewise, while honour as a social construct had multiple meanings and varied manifestations, this does not mean that it was devoid of tangible meaning. Honour as a culturally weighted, value-laden, yet flexible, term in the early modern period is not notably different from, for example, invocations of the terms “freedom” or “patriotism” in modern American society. Their precise meanings and varying connotations are difficult to pin down because they can be referenced in different ways, and to many diverse ends. And yet, to those articulating them, they are very meaningful.

While claims to honour were capable of generating an infinite variety of surface manifestations in the period, they cannot be dismissed as empty rhetoric. As Keith Thomas has noted, “without a good reputation, normal social existence became impossible” in the years considered here.¹⁴ Advancement at court, the acquisition of prestige and wealth, the promotion to (and retention of) local office, credit relationships, and family reputation were entangled with honour. For elites, honour was deeply woven into the fabric of the everyday. This work, accordingly, addresses what early modern elite men and women understood honour to be in an array of contexts that were common in their daily lives and social interactions. Some of these, such as the importance attached to properly modest feminine behaviour and the role of honour in the political sphere, have been well studied; others, such as

the place of the early modern household, and the relationships therein, as a potent site of honour, have been less explored. Likewise, while several scholars have pointed to various attributes and behaviours that could constitute honour aside from sexual reputation and a willingness to utilize violence to avenge slights, these disparate elements are joined here in a holistic analysis and also further elaborated upon.

Given the versatile character of honour as a social animator, we can gain a more complete awareness of how it was deployed in social life only when we examine the range of contexts and differing ways in which it was enacted. As Pollock asserts, “the only way to understand what concepts meant to early modern individuals is by uncovering the full network of associations” inherent within them.¹⁵ Honour connected together numerous facets of social life, including personal and family reputation, economic credit, hospitality, friend, kin, and family relationships, household and marketplace behaviour, conflict resolution, political involvement, and others. It is in understanding how individuals and families enacted honour in these various spheres that one understands honour itself. Contemporaries recognized that “honour dependeth not onely of our will: but also of theirs who are to allot it vnto vs according to our deserts,” and so crafted social performances that were structured around broadly accepted models of honourable conduct even as they negotiated the boundaries of those models of behaviour based upon the circumstances of a given situation and their individual objectives.¹⁶ Hence, at its core, honour was performative and its true nature can best be seen in its enactment. This work, therefore, looks at honour “not just as a system of meanings, but as a practical code informed by purposes and uses.”¹⁷

Overarching Narratives

Alongside the notions that honour for men was encapsulated in a willingness to defend name and status by any means necessary, and that honour for women was rooted in sexual reputation (which will both be further considered in subsequent chapters), a major theme in earlier analyses of honour and reputation is that of a transition from honour to virtue and from collective to more personalized violence between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁸ In these narratives, which bear similarities to the work of Norbert Elias on the civilizing process, a move from an untamed elite to a more “civilized” and governable one is postulated.¹⁹ This line of argumentation is intertwined with other

complex discussions surrounding the evolution of the early modern European state and its growing monopoly on violence and the regulation of social relations, as well as teleological notions of the development of modernity as related to the suppression of emotions.²⁰ With respect to understandings of honour among the early modern English aristocracy, this transition from honour to virtue/civility is argued to have been guided by a “moralization of politics” that stressed humanist education and learning, service to the state, and the cultivation of reformed piety as the true sources of honour in early modern English society.²¹ These values are often characterized as being adopted most readily by relatively newly promoted, upwardly mobile individuals who lacked an ancient bloodline and were eager to cement their gains by achieving status through service.²²

Yet, speaking to the multiple meanings associated with honour, most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century elites saw their reputations as tied to both a noble name and a reputation for good conduct. As Sir Francis Hastings expressed in a letter to the Earl of Essex,

it hathe pleased God (my good lorde) that you shoulde be the sone of noble parents, and therefore honorable by birth; it hathe pleased him also that you shoulde be servant to a most noble Prince and therefore honorable by calling; and eyther these are sufficiente to make you honored of mere worldly men; but bothe these together must nedes encrease your accustomed affability and curtoisy joyned hearunto doeth not a little adde unto your honour and accounte amongst men ... But (my lorde), I holde this not sufficiente for you to rest upon, for there is a God above that guideth the heavens, and governeth the earth, and without whom nothing is done ... so he looketh to receive some use of them from you. In this can none be dispensed withall, and from this there is not anyone exempted; and the higher his place is in birth and calling, and the greater his guiftes are in wisdom and learning, the more is chalenged from him; for to whom muche is geven from him muche is required.²³

To be truly accorded honourable then, *both* pedigree and behaviour mattered as “lineage created a propensity for honor, not the thing itself.”²⁴

Both “new” men (those whose families had only relatively recently been granted lands, titles, or positions, and who were sometimes labelled as upstarts by the members of the older nobility) and more established ones saw attributes such as Christian morality, sober behaviour, a veneer of education, and involvement in governance as markers

of reputation and sources of honour, in conjunction with lineage.²⁵ These involvements and attributes, as much as bloodline, demarcated them from the lower social orders; although they were fully capable of according varying levels of value to these different elements of honour based upon their aims at a given time. Likewise, while it is certainly true that some closely associated their honour with displays of service and civility, these were not necessarily attributes that only mattered to recently established gentlemen, nor did these more newly elevated men disassociate their honour from their lineage.

Conversely, associating one's honour solely with a prestigious lineage could be problematic on a purely practical level, as failing lines of inheritance and the acts of attainder issued by various Tudor monarchs had done much to undercut the ancient authority of many noble houses by the early years of Elizabeth's reign. Thus, of the sixty-two living peers in 1560, only twenty-five held titles originating before 1509, and of the seventy-four peerages that existed under Elizabeth I, twenty-five had become extinct by 1640. This reality meant that an ancient birthright and genealogical entitlement to a peerage could not, per se, be held up as an undisputed claim to honour, as such birthrights could be stripped away. But the risks of a loss of title or the failing of a bloodline, or even of the advancement of "new" men (sometimes to the resentment of the more established aristocracy), were not entirely novel features of the Tudor period. Noble lines had always grappled with these threats and they did not necessarily lend themselves to a clear impetus in the early modern period for elites to develop new ways of thinking about honour. Thus, rather than seeing an early modern transition from a militaristic and violent form of honour rooted in noble status and lineage to one characterized by the cultivation of inner virtue expressed through service, it is more appropriate to see the two concepts as existing alongside one another.²⁶

The view of honour as a single, unified concept that changed over time is further eschewed in this work, as it obscures the extent to which honour was actually a much more diffuse concept which could (and did) acquire different meanings based on context. Accordingly, this work focuses on the multiple meanings of honour that existed (and persisted) across the period and addresses the ways in which those meanings were negotiated and variously privileged. By investigating the diversity of both practice and understanding that characterized honour, this work addresses one of the problems associated with the perception of a cohesive code of honour and gets to the heart of honour's status as

a multi-vocal cluster concept. Likewise, in demonstrating that honour could be invoked in many different settings and to many different ends, it points to some of the reasons underlying its durability and popularity as a concept. Social agents play a dynamic role in appropriating and remaking/redefining flexible and diffuse terms to both suit and legitimize their own agendas.²⁷ The individuals surveyed in this work, and the ease with which they employed the rhetoric of honour in seemingly conflicting ways dependent on context, are testament to this.

Defining Honour, Defining Elites

Asking what, precisely, "honour" as a term meant to people in early modern England generates a series of questions. Terms such as "quality," "honour," "credit," "name," and "fame" were often used interchangeably in the period, and yet they all described social and moral status in subtly different ways.²⁸ But what were the different connotations of these entangled terms? In what contexts was the usage of "honour" dominant, and not some other term? How were these labels used differently based on one's social rank? Was "honour" only applicable to social elites? Were terms such as "credit" or "reputation" more appropriate for those lower on the social scale? Were all these terms, and "honour" in particular, situational? To whom did people attribute honour, and in what contexts? Like "honour," its various associated terms are social constructs that have complex social and linguistic histories. In this sense, "honour" and its associated terms were concepts that were constantly "being encountered, slowly added to linguistic repertoires, gradually appropriated and turned to advantage as occasion offered."²⁹ While this makes it difficult to satisfactorily resolve the various questions posed earlier, some general assessments are possible. However, what is attempted here is a preliminary examination of the diverse meanings attached to these words, rather than an exhaustive analysis of their cultural complexities.

In its most basic sense, honour was about protocol and hierarchy. Commonplace books from the period show a keen interest in issues of protocol, such as "the Setting of Estates in order at the table," "the forme how that women should beare theire Armes," the procedures involved in the "disgrading of a Knight of the garter," "orders for placing Lordes and Ladies according to their degrees," and in historical examples of honour conflict.³⁰ In addition to this interest in honour as an issue of social protocol and as an element of historical and fictional

narratives, the idea of honour as social currency and a facet of self-identity surrounded contemporaries. Honour, despite its ambiguity, bred trust and confirmed social authority. It was a leading component of the moral system, an arrangement of ideas of right and wrong conduct, which informed the actions of individuals positioned within all levels of the early modern social hierarchy. Alongside, and intertwined with, the related concepts of “credit,” “reputation,” and “worth,” honour structured social reality and interaction. Thus, attributions of honour and matters of reputation formed an integral part of even the most mundane social interactions and were referenced in things as simple yet fundamental as modes of address, interactions within the marketplace, and intellectual inquiry.³¹

It is also necessary to pay attention to the various terms used by those invoking the concept of honour and how they intersected with the social hierarchy of the period. For example, “honour” was a term applied more frequently to the upper ranks, while those of lower social standing typically used terms such as “honesty,” “credit,” “reputation,” and “fame.” An apt example of the manner in which members of the lower orders tended to employ terms such as “credit” or “honesty” more than “honour” can be found in Samuel Richardson’s 1740 novel *Pamela*, in which the heroine uses the term “honesty” to reference her reputation because “I am poor and lowly and not entitled to call it honour.”³² While a review of the definitions of such terms gleaned from an array of early modern lexicons does not overtly reinforce the assertion that “honour” was a term most often claimed by elites, the usage of various associated terms in other documents, such as legal records, certainly does.³³ However, while “honour” as a term was thoroughly intertwined with the hierarchical social structure of the day, all members of the social order claimed variations of the concept for themselves using subtly different terms with overlapping meanings to do so.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists several meanings of “honour” prevalent in the early modern period. It is defined, for example, as a degree of high respect, esteem, or reverence accorded to one of exalted worth or rank. In this sense, honour was an attribute of birth. Yet a secondary meaning attached to the term was a quality that was received, gained, held, or enjoyed; a sense of renown, fame, credit, reputation, and good name that attached to oneself. Essentially, the honour one was born with was augmented by action. Also inherent in this definition was that one could lose honour or gain its opposite, dishonour, through poor behaviour. It is this meaning of honour that appears to

have been the most prevalent in the period (the *OED* lists the most examples of usage and the oldest, dating from 1200, in association with this meaning).³⁴ Another definition, formulated in 1538 by Sir Thomas Elyot, characterized honour as something “gyuen or dewe to a man for his merites. sommetye astate of nobilitie, or great authoritye. sommetye beautie, proprely of a man, specially in gesture and communication.”³⁵ John Baret formulated a primary meaning of honour as “due to ones merites.”³⁶ In many instances, good conduct, just as much as blood and lineage, resulted in the accumulation of honour. In 1610, a treatise on *The Excellencie of Man* stated that all “errors doe procede from perturbacion of reason and order” and “therfor meet it is th[a]t all ... accions shoulde be performed according to moderacion, order, honesty, and comlynes.”³⁷ Exhibiting moderate behaviour conferred good reputation in this context. Thus, as the author writes, “what can be more Noble, then emulation of vertue?” for “prayse is only the wordes pronounced by the Praysor but honor consisteth in the actions & signes of his vertue who is praysed.”³⁸

“Credit,” “worth,” and “honesty” were similarly defined as things one could accumulate and be entitled to through displays of proper conduct. Thus the *OED* describes “credit” as the quality or reputation of being worthy of belief or trust. According to Thomas Cooper, it was “supposall, an opinion or iudgement that one hath of a thing: Also: reputation, honour, estimation, credit or countenance.”³⁹ Hence “credit,” like honour, was understood to be an estimate of the character of a person, a measure of their reputation or repute based on behaviour. In 1598 John Florio defined it as “honóre, honor, worship, reputation, honestie, credit, estimation, the reward of vertue.”⁴⁰ Writing after Florio in 1611, Randle Cotgrave offered a similar denotation, describing “credit” as “authoritie, sway, power ... reputation, dignitie, estimation; also reuerance, grauitie.”⁴¹ Essentially, it was recognition of social status and character derived from behaviour and reputation. Behaving honourably entitled one to be treated with honour and so resulted in one’s good credit. Tied to this was the notion of “honesty,” the possession of which entitled one to credit from peers and deference from subordinates. Thomas Wilson, in 1612, defined it as “all kinde of duties, which men are mutually to practise one towards another, without doing any vncomely, filthy, or wicked thing.”⁴² The performance of proper Christian behaviours such as neighbourliness, kindness, and general good conduct marked one as honest and, in turn, as honourable.

The meanings attached to the terms “reputation” and “fame” also illustrates the extent to which they were linked, indeed entangled, with the concepts of “honour” and “credit.” The primary definition of these terms was the common or general estimate of a person’s character, although the *OED* shows that this usage was rare in the sixteenth century and only became prevalent in the seventeenth. The secondary meaning of “reputation,” however, and one which was quite commonly used in the sixteenth century, was simply “to be.” One was described, for example, as having a reputation for being learned in the same sense that one was spoken of as learned. Thus “reputation” itself was not necessarily a value judgment, but simply what one was thought to be by others. Reputation was attached to, and formed by, related concepts such as fame or *fama*. “Fame” was that which people said or told of another; it was public report and common talk. In his popular lexicon (reprinted three times between 1604 and 1620), Robert Cawdrey defined it as “report, common talke, credite.”⁴³ The extent to which one was treated as honourable depended on one’s fame, which strongly affected one’s reputation and credit, as people observed behaviour and formed assessments of character based on these observations. To behave well gave rise to a good reputation, which was itself a source of honour, as possessing a good reputation resulted in “honour, glory, or reputation that one hath for doing a thing: comelines, honestie: worship, commendation.”⁴⁴

Another common understanding of honour among the elite was that based on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*; namely, “an externally bestowed quality that depended on the good opinion of one’s peers” (although how one arrived at that good opinion was dependent on a range of shifting contexts).⁴⁵ For Aristotle, who ranked honour as the highest of external goods, true virtue was located between the extremes of virtue and vice – between zealously attempting to claim and retain honour through unacceptable behaviour and never attempting to seek honour at all.⁴⁶ True honour was conferred by temperance and personal mediation between these two poles. According to Aristotle, the moral virtues were courage, temperance, self-discipline, moderation, modesty, humility, generosity, friendliness, truthfulness, honesty, and justice, while the moral vices were cowardice, self-indulgence, recklessness, wastefulness, greed, vanity, untruthfulness, dishonesty, and injustice. In this scheme, acts of virtue brought honour to an individual and acts of vice brought dishonour. While some men were honoured for having power and wealth, or being born to it, the honour associated

with wealth and position could be stripped away by a lack of virtue and good conduct. Having accrued an honourable status, this reputation for honour was then cyclically reinforced through social dealings; actions and conduct could alternately debit and credit one's store of personal honour, making it a potent form of social currency. Honour was reflected in action, but that action was also the outward projection of a virtuous mind and good character. Henry Peacham, in *The Compleat Gentleman*, instructed his readers that "nobilitie being inherent and Naturall, can haue (as the Diamond) the lustre but only from it selfe: Honors and Titles externally conferred, are but attendant vpon desert, and are but as apparell, and the Drapery to a beautifull body."⁴⁷ Essentially, individuals were honoured because they were honourable, and they knew they were honourable because they were so honoured.⁴⁸ By extension, being thought of as honourable augmented one's good standing and the desire to be regarded as honourable in turn motivated behaviour. Accordingly, Robert Ashley described honour in 1596 as a quality that, "giveth not onely a certaine grace & ornament to the duties of this life, but is also a great spurr vnto vertue."⁴⁹

Honour was thus both an interior and an exterior virtue. It was a gauge by which elite men and women judged themselves and also by which they were judged in their communities.⁵⁰ As Thomas has noted, it was this "ambiguous combination of inner virtue and outward reputation which gave honour its distinctive quality."⁵¹ Honour was both an internalized effort to adhere to the highest levels of virtuous conduct and reputation and credit, things that were more reflexive and dependent on one's estimation in the eyes of others. While the boundary between "honour" and "reputation" is thus rather imprecise, there is at least one important distinction between honour and reputation; namely that the valuation of honour is always positive. That is to say, one can have more or less of it, but it is always a positive attribute with a negative opposite (dishonour). Reputation, conversely, is an empty vessel and can take on all sorts of characteristics. One can have a bad reputation, but one cannot possess bad honour.

Also helpful for an analysis of honour is the framework developed by Frank Henderson Stewart focusing on vertical honour, or the honour owed to and expected by social superiors, and horizontal honour, which was extended to one's peers. This distinction can be useful in separating the terms "credit," "honour," and "reputation," and their intersections with the social hierarchy, from each other.⁵² According to Stewart, members of the gentry and aristocratic classes used the terms

“credit” and “honour” as they resonated with other members of their own station. In this sense, “credit” and “honour” were judged largely by peers, not inferiors, and elites were most concerned about their standing with each other and in each other’s estimations. On the other hand, “reputation” was rooted in an estimation that anyone could hold about anyone else; it was more public and less easily controlled. All of this is to say that elites could have credit and honour with their peers but not their subordinates; however, they could have a reputation among both.

While it can perhaps be helpful to think of honour and reputation in these terms, on a practical level there were so many overlaps between the two categories that drawing such neat conclusions can be misleading. It is difficult to untangle honour and its associated concepts from one another. Most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century men and women do not appear to have developed clearly delineated definitions of each, but, rather, tended to use the various terms synonymously and with a notable lack of precision. Accordingly, within this work, the terms “honour” and “reputation” are often used interchangeably. This is not done without a proper understanding of the differences between the two, but, rather, to avoid over-using one term to the exclusion of the other, as they were deeply interrelated concepts.

The various attributes that collectively entitled one to an honourable reputation were daily expressed through social performance. Notwithstanding the awareness that individuals undoubtedly had a strong sense of their own internally held honour in the period, honour and reputation were fundamentally concepts that were projected and measured through social interaction and self-fashioning. As Pollock has defined it, honour was “the reputation of an individual, according to his or her peers, less derived from a person’s internal virtue than from society’s judgment of an individual’s worth.”⁵³ Investigating social performances, in which judgments about one’s worth were made, allows one to see the divergent aspects of personal behaviour that contemporaries saw as constituting honour (even if they did not label them directly as such) and the varying ways in which they enacted them. Likewise, it allows one to come closer to understanding the complexities of how honour and reputation honour functioned in social life, and the ways in which elite men and women could privilege the various understandings of honour to varying degrees.

Because elite performers enacted honour in a reciprocal manner before audiences of their peers (displays or invocations of honour before members of the lesser social orders were, in contrast, not reciprocal, but,

rather, rooted in deference), the contours of that audience must also be delineated. The great noble families of early modern England are relatively visible and easily pointed to by the historian, being defined by their heritable titles, right to sit in the House of Lords, and privileges before the law. The qualities that entitled one to gentry or gentlemanly status, however, are more difficult to discern. Thomas Smith distinguished between the *nobilitas maior* and the *nobilitas minor*, recognizing that elites were not a homogenous category.⁵⁴ Other contemporaries also grappled with the level of precision with which the various social orders could be delineated. For example, William Harrison further developed Smith's scheme for the ordering of society and noted the existence of four degrees of people.⁵⁵ The first degree consisted of gentlemen who, while divided internally into nobility, knights, esquires, and others, were taken by Smith and Harrison to represent a distinct social group, those whom birth, blood, and virtue made the preeminent citizens of the realm.⁵⁶ Harrison, importantly, also noted that living like a gentleman made one a gentleman. Smith more cynically noted that "as for gentlemen, they be made good cheape in England," and went on to state that anyone who studied in the universities, who had the ability to live without working, or who bore the countenance of a gentleman was entitled to be called such ("shall be taken for a gentleman").⁵⁷

The possession of wealth, land, titles, and estates all played prominent roles in the construction of elite identity.⁵⁸ However, the categories of gentleman and gentility, often constructed to varying degrees on claims to resources and lineage, were fundamentally flexible ones and often disputed.⁵⁹ As Alexandra Shepard notes in a statement that holds true for all social orders in the period, it is clear "that different titles could be claimed by, or applied to, the same individuals in ways that suggest not only the mutability of social categories ... but also the blurred boundaries between them."⁶⁰ While, ostensibly, the criteria for claiming gentle status were rooted in lineage and the possession of wealth, most people "generally agreed that gentlemanly identity in early modern England was not a simple matter of wealth or blood but involved complex considerations of style of life and social image."⁶¹ It is also hard to precisely define the gentry as a social class because they possessed various levels of wealth and the group was further made porous by prosperous members of the middle ranks of society claiming the status of gentlemen.⁶² As the social and cultural divide between the aristocracy and the gentry was not always an overly great one, it is best to think in terms similar to those outlined by Smith of a linked gentry

and peerage, “presenting the one as a lesser, and the other as a higher, nobility.”⁶³

While, as discussed earlier, the ranks of the peerage were thinning in the period, the number of gentlemen was on the rise. For example, in 1524 there were approximately 200 knightly families and somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 lesser esquires and gentlemen. By 1600, there were as many as 500 knightly families and 16,000 esquires and gentlemen. Even allowing for some inflation of the figures, it is clear that the number of those who felt themselves entitled to displays of honour suited to a gentleman was rapidly expanding.⁶⁴ And these men on the rise, despite their recently gained status, were just as proud of their bloodlines as the ancient aristocracy. They saw themselves as the “better sort” and claimed authority and honour by commissioning genealogies, building lavish houses, having a presence at court, and distributing largesse locally in the same manner as more established men. Many were, likewise, increasingly drawn into state structures via the holding of office, and came to see this as a mark of distinction that carried with it the potential to enhance their spheres of influence and importance, as well as play a role in the shaping of governance.⁶⁵

In this study, most of the individuals examined can clearly be counted as members of the gentry or the lesser nobility. Members of these families held local magisterial offices, sometimes served at court, formed networks of sociability and patronage with other elites, and occasionally hosted monarchs on their progresses. They were entitled to deference within their communities. In identifying these families as elite, I have employed the inclusive definition of the term developed by Diana Newton, namely that “elites are the more privileged members of society exercising the greatest authority or enjoying the highest standing.”⁶⁶ Some of the individuals considered in this study are also clearly identifiable as members of the aristocracy, individuals such as the Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury and the Countess of Bath, for example. Finally, there is a small sampling of clerics. While they were not members of the gentry strictly speaking, several came from gentry bloodlines and they can be classified as occupying positions of authority and elevated status within local society. They felt themselves deserving of deferential treatment, and often were treated in a manner that was, in many ways, comparable to the deference accorded to some members of the gentry.

All the ambiguity surrounding gentlemanly status can also be viewed as providing a further impetus for members of groups aspiring to gentle status to behave in ways that accrued honour. After all,

as writers such as Ashley noted, behaving honourably was how one was known to possess honour, and that was how one was recognized as a gentleman. Behaving honourably and having a reputation as an honourable gentleman could make one an honourable gentleman.⁶⁷ In this sense, honour bound elites (both those whose status as vested in lineage was beyond question and those eager to claim such an established status for themselves via the expression of elite behaviour and the promotion of their lineage) together in a sort of “emotional community.”⁶⁸ That is to say, elites can be identified as a group that adhered to a shared recognition of the importance of honour and a broad set of relatively stable, yet flexible, assumptions with respect to the manner in which honour was articulated. This was a cultural and social solidarity, of sorts.⁶⁹

Sources and Methodology

As has been stressed thus far, honour was, above all, flexible. As with so many other social constructs, its highly pliable nature can best be seen in its performance. Elite men and women were highly attuned to the expectations of their social audiences when it came to behaviour that denoted an honourable reputation. As the many cases examined throughout this work attest, they employed a broad range of performative techniques to claim and maintain honour for themselves and for their families. These techniques, and the malleable nature of honour as revealed in its deployment, become more clearly visible in an examination of practice. As Brendan Kane has noted, “a more fruitful approach to studying honor is to think of it less as a reified code of behavior or ideology and more as a dynamic claim or right through which multiple takes on the subject could be negotiated.”⁷⁰ Accordingly, this work concentrates neither on the prescriptive and popular literature associated with honour culture, nor on the litigation that resulted when elite honour broke down as a discourse and conflict became unavoidable (although a sampling of such sources are examined, as they tell us about the social expectations that existed and point to the ways in which articulations of honour were framed with reference to these expectations), but rather on the manner in which the rhetoric of honour was deployed within daily life and commonplace social interactions.⁷¹ In so doing, it draws attention to the various tendrils of honour and sheds light on the diverse areas of social life in which it was referenced and articulated.