

Tim Mc Inerney

NOBILITY AND
THE MAKING
OF RACE IN
EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY BRITAIN



B L O O M S B U R Y

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For Emma

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Note on translations

Where possible this study uses contemporary translations of eighteenth-century texts, which are frequently examined in their own right. In some instances, where the contemporary translations have significantly abridged or modified their sources, the original texts are referenced alongside them. I have provided my own translation for certain texts, in which case the original versions have been included in footnotes.

Introduction

Something extraordinary took place in the field of natural history towards the end of the eighteenth century. Until this point, the study of human diversity had revolved primarily around ideas of environmental influence: the body was seen as a decidedly malleable subject, responsive to the influences of nutrition, sunlight, altitude and civil society and was thus innately capable of comprehensive transformation. Natural historians in Europe and America had generally approached the anatomical variation they observed in different parts of the world as a question of bodily potential; it was commonly held that, given enough time, the human body could adapt to match the environment in which it was placed. From the 1770s onwards, however, these theorists increasingly turned towards an alternative model of human classification: race. In doing so, they were making use of a concept that had previously held little association with ideas of human phenotype or skin colour. 'Race', for most of the eighteenth century, had constituted a discourse of lineal family. It was rooted most firmly in the ancient traditions of hereditary nobility, which disseminated the notion that one's natural place in the order of the universe was intricately bound up with bloodline and descent. Race, in this capacity, formed part of a strategic paradigm which not only protected and maintained hereditary elites in positions of sociopolitical authority but also perpetuated spirals of descent-based hierarchy that ultimately served to sustain a greater illusion of natural order in all levels of society. Through race, in other words, hereditary elites were able to present themselves as naturally, inimitably excellent while simultaneously framing those around them according to various degrees of non-excellence based on descending grades of lineage. By the later decades of the century, this ancient language of 'race' was progressively being deployed to reimagine the entire global population in terms of blood purity rather than climatic adaptation. According to the emerging doctrine of race theory, mankind could be divided up into a handful of lineal families, each perpetuating a certain set of physical and mental

characteristics through their bloodlines. A 'major human race', like a noble lineage, became something that could be tarnished or contaminated through admixture with another line of descent. Bodily potential was swapped in for bodily destiny, and the infinite possibilities of the environment were exchanged for the ineluctability of heredity. The following study argues that natural history's shift towards blood hierarchy at the end of the eighteenth century was by no means arbitrary or incidental. On the contrary, it represented the integration of a tried and tested collection of highly successful power strategies that had been refined by hereditary elites over millennia. These same power strategies fundamentally influenced the structure of race as it came to exist in subsequent years. By reframing global populations in terms of purity and impurity and by recasting whiteness in terms of genealogical excellence that automatically defined the nature of non-excellence, white Europeans were able to use the ancient paradigm of nobility to portray themselves as the natural aristocracy of mankind.

Focusing primarily on Britain and Ireland, this book examines the web of interlaced relationships that existed between nobility and race thinking over the course of the eighteenth century and demonstrates how both can be considered as part of a common hierarchal discourse. The period under examination falls primarily between 1735, when the Swedish natural historian Carolus Linnaeus first created the revolutionary genus *Homo*, and 1795, the year in which the German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach published his seminal treatise on major human races, the *De generis humani varietate nativa*. This represents a time frame wherein the vocabulary and methodology of race theory had yet to be firmly established, and before the word 'race' itself had fully come to represent the idea of major divisions within the human species. Nevertheless, it was during this same period when some of the most important building blocks of modern race thinking were positioned. Both race and nobility, this study argues, exist primarily within a discourse of inference and intimation, which seamlessly permeated a remarkable range of disciplines and contexts at this time. The primary sources examined in this book therefore include a selection of both well-known and much lesser-known texts, from fields as diverse from one another as natural history, philosophy, political theory, travel writing, medical tracts, literature, drama and poetry. They do not attempt to exhaustively catalogue the structural relationships between nobility and race but rather to identify a consistent set of patterns that underpinned the very idea of hierarchy and natural order in early modern Britain and Ireland. They also demonstrate that these influences were not always of the 'top-down' variety, proliferating

instead within a complex matrix of assumption and prejudice which constantly reinforced fundamental paradigms of excellence at all levels of society. The first seven chapters of the book break down the major narratives of eighteenth-century human hierarchy, examining the foundational paradigm of nobility in Britain and Ireland (Chapter 2), the development of race as a discourse of genealogical gradation (Chapter 3), the 'Great Chain of Being' world view of universal hierarchy (Chapter 4), the dynamic evolution of heredity as an agent of human type (Chapters 5 and 6) and the steady entry of race-based identity into theories of human classification (Chapter 7). From there, the shared paradigmatic codes of nobility and race are explored more closely through a selection of more specific analyses: the example of multiple, ethnically based nobilities in Ireland (Chapter 8), the projection of noble rank onto racialized groups in the South Seas (Chapter 9), the confrontation of inherited nobility with inherited slavery (Chapter 10) and the re-imagining of noble race in the turbulent 1790s (Chapter 11).

It goes without saying that this is a study that builds on an extensive critical and historiographical tradition, which has long endeavoured to delineate the complex origins and structure of race. That critical tradition is, in fact, as old as race theory itself. Even during the heyday of racial pseudoscience in the early twentieth century, scholars such as the American anthropologist Franz Boas (1912: 530) or the German political philosopher Eric Voegelin (1933: 12) railed against the doctrines of racialism, denouncing its plethora of internal contradictions and glaring dearth of empirical evidence. When an international committee of anthropologists came together to definitively renounce race theory after the Second World War (see Chapter 3) and when their condemnation was subsequently vindicated by the steady advancement of molecular genetics, questions about the origins of race became all the more urgent. If the so-called major races were not grounded in any scientific reality, why had so many people come to accept them as a self-evident element of the natural world? Why did this particular model of human stratification achieve such ubiquity and so quickly? Why has race continued to proliferate for so long after its scientific basis was debunked? Why, indeed, have we felt such a powerful desire to stratify human anatomy in the first place? The acceptance of race as social construct, notes Ron Mallon, involves the recognition that 'race is real, but not a biological kind', thereby opening up a whole host of new metaphysical questions about the nature of its construction (2004: 644). Kwame Anthony Appiah, for instance, distinguishes 'racialism' (by which he means the belief that humanity is divisible into a small number of heritable phenotypes) first against an 'extrinsic racism'

which makes moral distinctions between those groups on account of their supposed differences in behaviour or mindset, and second against an 'intrinsic racism' which holds that those groups should be treated differently merely by virtue of being different (1989: 44–6). George Fredrickson similarly points out that racism as well as race has historically manifested itself in extremely diverse ways, both before and after the inception of racial pseudoscience, and that these manifestations rarely map perfectly onto one another (2002: 79). Jean-Frédéric Schaub has drawn attention to the political and geographical contextuality of any such questions: the race concept has manifested itself remarkably differently in different parts of the world, and thus determining the precise moment that a 'modern' notion of race emerged often holds specific political and cultural implications in different geopolitical contexts (2015: 77–95). Indeed, notes Stuart Hall, speaking of race in terms of 'transcultural or transcendental' categories can miss out on the 'extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities' composing individual racialized categories (1996: 444). The very word 'race', Michael Banton has demonstrated, can hold very different significance in different languages; concordantly, the use of a particular vocabulary of race, such as 'coloured' or 'mixed race', often reinforces a set of racial idioms that are specific only to a certain place and time (1998: 1–2). To begin to understand race, then, suggests Joshua Glasgow, we must accept that the reality of race is itself contingent on what racial terms purport to refer to – so that it is often most important to 'empirically identify the folk theory of race' in a given cultural context (2008: 334). It is the multifaceted 'folk theory' of race, and its various influences, with which this study is mainly concerned.

One problem faced by any historian of race in the pre-modern world, notes Andrew Wells, is that the modern concept of race always 'lurks in the background' of its pre-modern antecedents (2015: 427). When discussing the rise of race theory at the end of the eighteenth century, therefore, it is essential to appreciate the myriad and often disparate contexts in which it was conceived. Bancel et al. point out that a 'deep epistemological change' took place in the domain of natural history towards the end of the century, 'enabling the strict separation of human groups' through the use of new techniques in taxonomic classification and anthropometry (2014: 1–3). Joyce Chaplin, meanwhile, has argued that race as we know it is 'a specific product of Atlantic history', designed to uphold systems of human inequality that were moulded by the international slave trade (2009: 173). At the same time, this developing vision of race was predicated on much older hierarchical tropes, which often continued to exist alongside the doctrines of race theory. Hannah Arendt's highly influential

observation that there exists a phenomenon of ‘race thinking’ – which always undermines the unity of mankind by asserting the existence of a superior kind of human being – highlights how the power dynamics underpinning race and racism can proliferate quite independently of any specific race ideology (1951: 160–1). Michel Prum has relatedly asserted that to study race is not to study differences within a particular template of human type but ultimately to study social ‘alterization’ – the fabrication of an other (2012: 7). In fact, suggests Tzvetan Todorov, racial pseudoscience could be seen as ‘a way of responding with biological data to what is actually a question of social psychology’ (1993: 92).

Further distinctions must be made between race as a lineal family, race as a fully realized model of human taxonomy, and the various historical discourses that we might consider racialized from a modern standpoint. Robert Bernasconi, for example, points out that the blood-purity statutes of early modern Spain and Portugal, which were deployed against Jewish and Muslim *conversos* even after their conversion to Christianity, can be identified as a case of ‘racism’ while not being ‘sustained by a scientific concept of race’ (2009: 83). Bernasconi also earmarks the significance of the seventeenth-century physician François Bernier’s ambivalent human taxonomy in the *Nouvelle Division de la Terre* (1684), which used the French terms *race* and *espèce* interchangeably to describe an indefinite number of human varieties (Bernasconi 2009: 84; see Chapter 5). Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans Jörg Rheinberger, meanwhile, pinpoint the *casta* system in sixteenth-century Latin America as an early building block of race, because it assigned legal and social status to individuals not only based on their skin colour but also according to the minute details of their parentage (2012: 66). Francisco Bethencourt, on the other hand, stresses that while such systems likely influenced the classifications of natural history, they were local by nature and never pretended to represent a universalist scheme of racial type (2013: 171; see Chapter 7).

Racial categories are also deeply embroiled with ideas of nation. Nicholas Hudson has highlighted the interplay of race and nation during the eighteenth century in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, which systematically stripped enslaved people of signifiers of national difference and instead projected racialized identities onto the commoditized body (1996: 251–2). Paul Stock notes how eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century encyclopaedias often emphasized linguistic differences as markers of perceived race groups, indicating a kind of heredity of mores and national character that maintained a specific identity over time (2011: 26–8). Some historians, such as Benjamin Isaac, have identified ‘sets

of ideas' they equate with 'proto-racism' in the Ancient Greek and Roman world (2004: 1–2). Ian Hannaford, in his landmark study *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, also recognizes these modes of thinking dating to antiquity while cautioning against ascribing modern ideas of race to constructs which appear familiar but which are actually built around entirely different criteria from our own (1996: 6, 21). For the modern concept of race to exist, Hannaford asserts, Man must first be understood as a biological subject, removed from ethics, morality and history, and comprising a global network of categories and sub-categories (1996: 57–8). Effectively, this interpretation of mankind would not be fully refined until the inception of the genus *Homo* in 1735 (see Chapter 5).

The argument presented in this book is indebted to the work of scholars who have already interrogated the intriguing overlaps between race thinking and noble tradition in the early modern world. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein have highlighted the existence of an 'aristocratic racism', which delineates racial categories 'by elevating the group which controls the discourse to the status of a "race"' (1991: 208). That is to say that the isolation and self-definition of a hereditary caste marked out as superior creates a prototype of race and in turn shapes the parameters of those who will be understood as 'racially' inferior (1991: 207–8). Jenny Davidson's study of 'breeding' among the upper orders charts how a combination of blood lineage, high civility and animal husbandry often informed understandings of human nature and perfectibility during the eighteenth century, helping to blur distinctions between innate and environmental influences on the body and mind (2009: 1–4). Nicholas Hudson has likewise noted that race was an especially convenient term for eighteenth-century natural historians, precisely because it originally pertained to both animal husbandry and noble genealogy. In the context of human-variety theory, Hudson claims, race could therefore be invoked to dehumanize ostensibly inferior groups while conveying a sense of dynastic dignity in the case of white Europeans (1996: 253–4). Roxann Wheeler has highlighted the steady development of skin colour as a component of developing race discourse in the eighteenth century, notably pointing to marriage plots in mid-century fiction wherein complexion is sometimes deployed as a symbol of inherited social rank (2000: 153–75). Jean Feerick, meanwhile, claims that noble blood allowed hereditary elites in the early modern period to define their physical bodies first and foremost in terms of rank distinction. The noble body itself provided evidence of metaphysical separation from social inferiors while intimately linking each individual noble with a wider network of noble families (2010: 9–14). Race, Feerick stresses, was originally a quality of the upper

ranks alone; it was the absence of documented bloodlines that characterized the greater population (2010: 9). Claude-Olivier Doron has written about how the ‘genealogical reasoning’ of race – which he characterizes as an exclusively cultural discourse based on ‘nobiliary discourses’, ‘breeding practices’ and ‘spiritual status’ – began in the eighteenth century as largely incompatible with the ‘logico-classificatory style of reasoning’ deployed by natural historians. Yet, Doron notes, over the course of the century this language of family and blood can be seen to permeate the realm of natural philosophy, altering the shape and sense of emerging taxonomies (2012: 75–82).

The idea of nobility is in many ways just as nebulous as that of race. In eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland, nobility officially indicated membership of the peerage – a precise legal status granted to the (primarily male) heads of the kingdoms’ most powerful landed families. From this simple legal standpoint, standards of nobility were changing all the time and often quite dramatically. Yet, the titled peers of Britain and Ireland, comprising only a few hundred individuals, do not come close to encapsulating the reach of noble authority at this time. As discussed in Chapter 2, nobility must at the very least include the close-knit circle of families who overwhelmingly dominated the peerage throughout the eighteenth century and not simply their titled patriarchs. Even more importantly, we must take into account the implications of nobility as an idea at this time. Legally recognized titles were, after all, contingent on a much broader understanding of nobility as a part of the universal order. Arlette Jouanna has pointed out the unique and quasi-mystical nature of noble status, which marries recognized hereditary privilege with a metaphysical idea of the most perfect specimen within a given classification (1981: 125). By virtue of this greater idea of nobility, an English lord could be compared to a Spanish *señor* or a French *baron*, even though each of those titles depended on a different legal framework. In Scotland the inherited chiefdoms of Highland clans were understood as an alternative form of nobility and were accordingly entwined with the honours of Scottish peerage and royalty. The Dukes of Argyll, for instance, were also the hereditary *Tòisichean* (chiefs) of the *Clann MacCailean Mór* (Clan Campbell), while the Earls of Seaforth also formed part of the *Clann MacCoinneach* (Clan Mackenzie). In Ireland, the beleaguered lords and ladies who held legally recognized titles of nobility were widely ridiculed as fatuous *arrivistes*, while Gaelic and Hiberno-Norman dynasties with their avowed genealogical mandates remained the only true nobles in the eyes of many (see Chapter 8). Princely visitors from far-flung lands frequently made appearances at the London court, in the understanding that they represented an exotic state of

nobility, comparable to that of the courtiers who clamoured for their attentions (see Chapters 9 and 10).

More than this, nobility had been associated with ideas of bodily difference for centuries. H. C. Baldry has noted that even Homeric poetry regularly recognized ‘a hereditary physical difference between nobles and the multitude, a natural division separating them in bodily physique as well as spirit and way of life’ (1965: 15). Certain low-born characters in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he points out, are berated as ugly, or deformed, while those titled *basileis* (‘kings’) are commonly described as ‘more delicate and beautiful than ordinary people’ (Baldry 1965: 15; Starr 1992: 8). Anatomical difference was no less relevant to noble tradition in the eighth-century CE when the Venerable Bede recounted the story of Imma – an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who tried to evade capture by disguising himself as a peasant, but whose high birth was revealed when no fetters could bind his feet ([c. 731 CE] 1907: 4.22, 268). In medieval chivalric romances, notes Lawrence James, attention is constantly drawn to the ‘fine features and complexions’ of the hereditary elite, while medieval funerary effigies in England frequently represented them as markedly taller, more muscular and more physically robust than other people (2009: 25; 2004: 118). Such representations may have partly reflected contemporary health inequalities and their effects on physical stature. Even by the late eighteenth century, note Jaadla et al., an analysis of Dorset’s militia ballot lists shows a ‘clear wealth gradient in height’, with an average difference of 2–3 centimetres between recruits drawn from the highest and lowest economic brackets (2021: 390). The cultural trope of the superior noble body certainly remained resilient throughout the eighteenth century, constantly blurring the lines between fantasy, expectation and reality, and frequently manifesting itself in the more ‘serious’ fields of medicine, history and taxonomic classification (see Chapters 5–7). For the New England theologian Samuel Stanhope Smith, enigmatic accounts of the superior noble body throughout history were not necessarily confined to the realm of fantasy. ‘The tales of romances that describe the superlative beauty of captive princesses’ he wrote in his *Essay on the Causes of Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1787),

are not to be ascribed solely to the venality of writers prone to flatter the great, but have a real foundation in nature . . . [L]anguage, which is borrowed from nature, vindicates this criticism. A *princely* person, and a *noble* thought, are usual figures of speech. (Stanhope Smith 1787: 74)

The resulting understanding of noble difference is now so tightly woven into cultural narratives of social hierarchy that today we can often fail to notice its

decidedly strange premise. Modern readers will probably not find it particularly unusual that Hans Christian Anderson's fairy-tale princess should detect a handful of peas secreted beneath her tower of mattresses, while her non-noble rivals – though posing as high-born pretendants to the prince's hand – cannot. She, we already understand, is different from the other women; she is a *real* princess and thus bestowed with some additional, ill-defined quality that allows her to achieve super-human feats. The very fact that noble difference, from Homer's *Odyssey* to Anderson's *Princess and the Pea*, lends itself so readily to fantasy and folktales is revealing in itself. Much like race theory, nobility is a discourse that revels in superstition, flourishing on its own fanciful logic whereby bloodlines are neatly arranged on a predetermined hierarchy, and wherein every individual's position on that hierarchy has a meaning. The internal logic of nobility, it must be remembered, functions no differently in the pages of a children's storybook than it does within the present-day halls of Westminster. In both instances, though it might be all too easy to forget, it is equally fictional.

It is this greater idea of nobility that I have called the noble paradigm: a set of basic tenets without which nobility loses all coherence. The noble paradigm contends that a special brand of excellence can be passed down through lineal families, who must reperform the virtues of their ancestors and defend the purity of their bloodlines in order to maintain the integrity of their 'race'. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, this basic structure of nobility is built around a number of highly successful power strategies, which have been refined over the centuries to make this model of hereditary governance one of the most enduring in European history (Leonhard and Weiland 2011: 6). Moreover, these power strategies constantly endeavour to render themselves invisible, instead presenting paradigmatic nobility (and the various states of non-nobility which are essential for its existence) as a reflection of the natural order of the world. The same power strategies can be seen to percolate through the discourse of human variety at the end of the eighteenth century alongside the language of 'race' and descent. By reframing human variety through the prism of the noble paradigm, natural historians were able to reconceive entire global populations according to a familiar and even intuitive hierarchy that had bolstered ideas of natural superiority and inferiority for as long as anyone could remember.

In the historiographical fields of both nobility and race, terminology can be misleading. As mentioned, nobility as an idea extended far beyond the peerage, and thus the term 'nobility' is used in this study not only in reference to titled peers but also to denote the multiple incarnations of nobility that competed with or complemented this institution. As for the peerage itself, it should be

appreciated that there were originally three peerages on the islands of Britain and Ireland, representing the distinct nobilities of England, Scotland and Ireland, which were only merged in 1707 and 1801, respectively, into a 'Peerage of Great Britain and Ireland'. Since Ireland was not incorporated into this system until the beginning of the nineteenth century (and since its elite ranks were in countless ways incomparable with those of Britain), the terms 'British peerage' and 'British nobility' are used deliberately to refer to groups in Scotland, Wales and England. Likewise, 'Britain' and 'Great Britain' are used as retrospective geographic terms for the island of Great Britain before and after the 1706–7 Acts of Union. The term 'elite' is frequently used when discussing involvement from both the nobility and those loci of power outside the main noble spheres of influence (top-tier income families who had few direct connections to the peerage, for example). This last term is important since, as will be seen in Chapter 2, one of the main power strategies of paradigmatic nobility involves the management and potential assimilation of non-noble power.

Most importantly, it is crucial to appreciate that the English word 'race' has undergone multiple and almost uninterrupted semiotic shifts since the eighteenth century. Despite the landmark taxonomical texts of the late eighteenth century, the definition of human races as 'major groupings of mankind' did not begin to gain widespread acceptance until many decades later. Moreover, race held enormous figurative potential – it was a term that could be employed to frame nations, cultures and almost any given group in terms of lineal family. In this respect, race could easily be used to categorize populations, divided up, among other things, on account of physical appearance. Thus, while it should be presumed unless otherwise stated that the term 'race' in this text refers to the broad and capacious concept as it existed in the eighteenth century, it must also be appreciated that all these applications ultimately fed into the later idea of discrete and immutable human races. The terms 'heredity' and 'blood' must also be understood in their contemporary sense. In an age before molecular genetics or reproductive biology, noble blood did not necessarily correlate with a tangible physical liquid, nor was that liquid commonly understood to 'reproduce' traits in the next generation (see Chapters 3, 6 and 7). Ideas of 'unmixed' or 'pure' blood, likewise, generally implied a complex process of breeding, which incorporated active virtue, environmental influences and careful cultivation of civility over multiple generations. All this meant that eighteenth-century ideas of heredity, or rather 'the hereditary', did not form a single unified concept as we would understand it today (see Chapter 6). To complicate matters further, these terms could hold a metaphorical dimension: to speak of 'inherited' traits was

to borrow from a language of intergenerational property transfer and did not always reference direct transmission of material from one body to the next. That considered, we should remember that the modern construct of pure blood is still a metaphor. There is not, and never has been, any such thing as blood purity from the point of view of genetics. While eighteenth-century commentators did not interpret genealogical purity in the same way as, say, early-twentieth-century eugenicists, that does not mean that their understanding of hierarchized bloodlines did not contribute to those subsequent ideas. If anything, the racial pseudoscientists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries built their discourses of pure and impure bloodline on the 'metaphorical' biases of their forbears.

In all, this book argues that the noble paradigm was fundamental to the development of race and racism as we know them today. Eighteenth-century noble tradition, it suggests, promoted a seminal template of heritable superiority that could be cultivated over successive generations within individual bloodlines, asserting that these bloodlines thereafter needed to be protected from contamination from inferior inherited traits, and consolidating the idea that the human body itself was an expression of social and political rank. The noble paradigm's projected ladder from *demoi* to *aristoi*, from lowly servitude to anatomical and moral excellence, thereby informed a wider system of social order, which provided the conceptual framework for a scale of excellence from the Black to the white body, from the non-European to the European and from the savage to the civilized. Just beneath the surface of those fanciful tales of prodigious kings and slumbering princesses, this is a tradition that vaunted a brutal form of human hierarchy based around the protection and maintenance of those who had decided, for themselves, that they were born to rule.

The noble paradigm

In 1968, the eminent social historian Harold Perkin extolled the merits of eighteenth-century Britain's singularly open aristocracy. 'France', he pronounced confidently, 'where social climbing was frustrated, had a political revolution. Britain, where it was not, had an industrial one' (1968: 137). For Perkin, Britain simply boasted the 'right king of society' for industrial expansion, being centred around an 'open aristocracy based on property and patronage' (1968: 127). Younger sons of 'aristocratic' families, he explained, 'had to compete with those below them for positions in the professions and in trade and industry', thus establishing 'that two-way flow of men and wealth so characteristic of English as distinct from continental society' (1968: 130, 136). His is a familiar nationalistic fantasy: Britain's nobility, gentry and middling sorts alike are portrayed as a pugnacious band of businessmen, hard-wired towards economic success and ever ready to choose mercantile pragmatism over the foppiness and effeminacy of the mainland. Even the monarch, according to Perkin, was little more than 'the greatest property-owner, the first of the borough-mongering country gentlemen of England' (1968: 130). Indulgent as such a narrative may seem, it had already dominated historiographies of British nobility for over a century and a half before Perkin put pen to paper. In the wake of the French Revolution, notes Amanda Goodrich, the postulation that British peers were more level-headed, more meritocratic and more industrious than their freshly deposed cousins across the Channel was carefully crafted and disseminated by anti-radicals, who at once sought to defend 'the supremacy of hereditary aristocracy and its superior education and culture' and to distance the peerage from the French *noblesse* (2005: 102). Unsurprisingly, the historiographical myth of an open aristocracy in eighteenth-century Britain quickly collapses under interrogation, but its legacy has nevertheless rendered the power structures upholding British nobility particularly surreptitious. First, it is a story that has always taken a curiously English perspective on the kingdoms'

noble institutions. It is rather unlikely, for instance, had Harold Perkin thought to consider Britain's colonial aristocracy in Ireland, that he would have judged it 'the right kind of society to generate a spontaneous industrial revolution' (1968: 127). Moreover, it has meant that Britain and Ireland's nobilities have all too often been studied in starkly economic or political terms, while the phenomenon of nobility itself has been treated as a merely superficial detail. The rituals and customs of Britain's hereditary elite, we might easily understand, represented little more than a colourful but harmless legacy of feudal rule – nobles were simply gentlemen with bigger homes and nicer titles. What this historiographical perspective tends to overlook is the fundamental *idea* of nobility. The state of being noble was certainly not incidental, nor irrelevant, nor superficial. It was the product of a carefully tended set of political strategies, which had successfully protected schemas of hereditary power since antiquity. This chapter examines that paradigm of nobility in eighteenth-century Britain (Ireland will be explored in a separate chapter). Through a review of noble privileges, noble display and noble self-presentation, we will see how its power strategies – the same strategies which would eventually come to uphold race theory – actually worked.

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All manifestations of nobility can be seen to rely on the same basic paradigm, whose shape, form and function are designed to preserve the illusion of its reality. What I have called the 'noble paradigm' refers to a set of self-sustaining power strategies which endeavour above all to control and define what human excellence looks like. Through maintaining authority over the discourse of human excellence, the noble paradigm not only harnesses the ability to fashion that excellence in its own likeness but simultaneously defines non-excellence according to descending degrees of adherence to those arbitrary parameters. It follows that entire spectrums of superiority and inferiority, sophistication and vulgarity, and civility and barbarism rely on how closely one can approach the parameters of excellence set down by those who have defined the nature of excellence itself.

The noble paradigm, I propose, can be summarized in six basic tenets:

1. Some people are naturally excellent.
2. This excellence can be transmitted genealogically.
3. This familial excellence naturally gives rise to cultural and economic dominance.

4. Inherited excellence must be re-performed in each generation.
5. The noble body is both an expression and a tool of inherited excellence.
6. Integrity of genealogical, cultural, economic, performative and corporeal excellence – called ‘true nobility’ – is essential for the continuance of inherited excellence in future generations.¹

These ideas are extraordinarily insidious. The strategy of the noble paradigm is not, as one might expect, to convince everyone to revere titled nobles. If that were the case, it would have failed at the outset: for as long as nobility has been recorded, its representatives have been met with satire, ridicule and mockery as much as (and sometimes more than) they have enjoyed respect and deference. Rather, the core strategy of the noble paradigm relies on three ostensible truisms. The first of these is that something called nobility exists in the first place. The tenets listed earlier are articulated around the idea of individual nobles gaining access to a common well of natural excellence. Some or even many might fail in this endeavour, it is understood, but at no point is the existence of that well of excellence called into question. Thus, no matter how much nobles might be derided or denounced, they nevertheless preserve and promote a particular idea of human hierarchy. ‘Bad’ nobles call attention to the absence of noble excellence, while ‘good’ nobles confirm expectations of what noble excellence looks like. Either way, the existence – and, by implication, the necessity – of true nobility is constantly reinforced. The second ostensible truism is that nobility is transmissible between generations. True nobility is distinct from other forms of excellence because it is always anchored to genealogy: a born noble’s excellence is the expression of virtues handed down through generations; a non-noble who has attained noble excellence likewise warrants ennoblement, so as to immediately establish a new genealogical line of transmission. The noble paradigm allows, as it must, for the inevitable failures along the way: deficiencies of noble excellence can be blamed on the insufficient performance or embodiment of inherited virtues; individual nobles may fail to live up to the great deeds of their ancestors, but their bloodline continues unscathed – taking up where it left off in subsequent generations. The transmissible nature of noble excellence, in turn, casts a genealogical lens on the various degrees of non-excellence against which it is defined. The third ostensible truism is that what nobles *do* is noble. In other words, noble excellence always revolves around attributes that nobles themselves have defined as excellent, thereby controlling

1 These tenets notably reflect and build upon Arlette Jouanna’s four precepts of the ‘noble race’ concept as it stood in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France (see Jouanna 1981: 24).

the parameters of their own excellence and ensuring that to be non-noble is to be non-excellent. Horsemanship, say, or decorum; breeding, or deportment; grace, or countenance, are only marks of nobility in so far as nobles themselves affirm them to be and only for as long as they remain effective signifiers of the specific brand of excellence the nobles wish to promote. Noble identity, in short, is at the centre of a solar system of its own creation – orbited by infinite cycles of value and hierarchy that are always directly relative to the cardinal star.

In his discussion of the British upper orders between 1780 and 1820, David Cannadine remarks that ‘one of the greatest strengths of the British aristocracy has been to present itself as venerable, while constantly evolving and developing’ (1994: 2). The same, in fact, can be said of the noble paradigm in every age. The capacity to adapt to new social, economic and political contexts while maintaining the illusion of constancy is essential to the survival of nobility as a concept. Nobility can be at once a legal status, a cultural motif and a metaphysical representative of ordered hierarchy in the world. It has been granted to social-climbing commoners and has been fiercely protected by haughty ancient lines. It has been portrayed as a quality of military prowess and of parliamentary perspicacity, of the battlefield and of the court; it has been the position of laymen and churchmen, of Christian and heathen, even of rich and of poor. The historiographical label of ‘nobility’ can be applied to groups as different from one another as the senatorial Patricians of Ancient Rome and the warring *taoisigh* of Gaelic Ireland, the feudal chevaliers of medieval Paris and the modernizing grandees of eighteenth-century London. Hereditary elites – be they courtly, military, senatorial, clerical, parliamentary or otherwise – have consequently resurfaced with striking regularity in European history, almost always maintaining the same base template of descent-based exclusivity and constituting one of the most recognizable ‘longue durée’ elements of the European hierarchical tradition (Leonhard and Weiland 2011: 6).

In the process, noble tradition has fashioned a curious discourse of real-world power based on quasi-mystical allusions. As Arlette Jouanna has pointed out, nobility can never represent just another ‘normal’ aspect of government because it always evokes both an imagined reality and a social reality that interact to varying degrees:

Nobility does not identify beings of a different nature; it serves to determine the most perfect, those who possess the defining quality of their ‘kind’ [*espèce*] to a more eminent degree. . . . [T]hus, the idea of nobility features as just one category in an imagined framework, which allows for a hierarchy of created beings: this category corresponds with the notion of the most perfect within