

death might actually meet their punishment. The 1547 Vagrancy Act proclaimed that those who had left their parish or were found to be unwilling to work would be branded with a ‘V’ and put to hard labour for two years. The 1563 Statute of Artificers introduced whipping for vagrants. By 1572, Parliament proclaimed that vagrants could be whipped, put to hard labour and for a third offence, hanged.

Politics, power and ideologies

The cultural mindset of the period we are considering was influenced by a host of different factors. Many of the enquiries which we might now term as political theory explored (and sometimes questioned) the ways in which ideas of hierarchy and sovereignty might be seen to organise society. The majority of people across Europe from the late fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries would be most likely to express a feeling of belonging in terms of family, household, the community in which they worked and indeed, most importantly for the time, religion. Appeals by the political elite to larger ideas of the ‘country’, so common in more modern periods of conflict and triumph, could never be widely successful in societies often bound by local, economic loyalties.

It is becoming increasingly evident that there was some geographical movement by families and groups to and from different communities, prompted often by economic hardship and unemployment. For the mid-sixteenth century, for example, it has been estimated that less than one-fifth of the London population was actually born in the capital, while by the beginning of the next century it is thought that one in eight adults lived there at some time in their lives. Nonetheless, in whatever community you happened to reside one feature of Renaissance society would be immediately apparent to the modern observer: the power relationships were firmly patriarchal in nature. This is a social vision in which it is perceived as ‘natural’ and commonplace that men

Surviving in the city

Men of trades and sellers of wares in this City haue often times since changed their places, as they haue found their best aduantage . . . But now in our time in steade of these inormities [of plagues]: others are come in place no lesse meet to be reformed: and first, and namely . . . incrochments on the high wayes, lanes, and common grounds, in and about this citie . . . Then the number of Carres, Drayes, and Coatches, more then hath beene accustomed, the streets and lanes being strengthened, must needes be daungerous, as dayly experience proueth.

(John Stow, *A suruay of London Contayning the originall, antiquity, increase, moderne estate, and description of that citie, written in the yeare 1598. by Iohn Stow citizen of London . . .* (London, 1598), pp. 62, 64, 65)

Who therefore soeuer shall haue occasion to come to the City for the occasions before mentioned; the first thing he is to doe, is to arme himselfe with patience, and to thinke that he is entred into a wood, where there is as many bryers as people, every one as ready to catch hold of your slee[v]e, as your selfe . . . Let a monyed man or Gentleman especially beware in the City . . . your silken and gold-laced harlots [are] every where (especially in the Suburbs) to bee found: these haue been and are daily the ruine of thousands . . . walking abroad, take heed with what company you sort your selfe withall: if you are a Countrey man, and but newly come to towne you will be smelt out by some cheaters or other, who will salute, call you by your name . . . carry you to the Taverne . . .

(Henry Peacham, *The art of living in London . . .* (London, 1642), sigs. Alv, A3r, A3v)

(as fathers, employers, monarchs) should control the dominant positions of power. In his speech to the Commons at the Palace of Whitehall in March 1609, James I insisted that 'a Father may dispose of his Inheritance to his children, at his pleasure; yea, even disinherit the eldest upon just occasions, and prefer the youngest, according to his liking . . . So may the king deal with his subjects.'

Drawing upon lines of thinking inherited from classical writers and the Bible, many (mostly male-authored) texts from the period frequently testify to the fact that women were considered as 'the weaker vessel'. When women such as Elizabeth Tudor or Mary, Queen of Scots did gain access to significant political power, they encountered opposition or vigorous forms of manipulation from rival political factions. Interestingly, such was the pervasive influence of patriarchy in the early modern society that these female leaders (and their supporters) often promoted themselves in terms of their 'masculine' strengths and virtues.

As many of the literary texts from the Renaissance indicate, the role of the court was key in the area of political decision-making as well a central arena for ceremonial, literary production and entertainment. It could often move between a number of royal palaces or during Elizabeth's reign, for example, it famously went on 'progresses' away from the capital, staying at the great houses of courtiers and eminent servants of the Crown. The court was often riven with bitter rivalries and this situation was made worse by the fondness of monarchs such as Henry VIII, Elizabeth and James I for favourites. Nonetheless, such men could fall from high positions of power in spectacular and indeed violent ways, like Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell during the reign of Henry VIII; and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, who finally led a short-lived revolt against Elizabeth in 1601. In general, the court was frequently associated with human vices, as in George Wither's *Britains Remembrancer* (1628), for example, where there is a remorseless tirade against this elite community which was 'fraught with bribery and hate, / With envy, lust, ambition and debate'. Throughout the Tudor and Early Stuart reigns there was an enduring

concern (particularly in prose and drama) with court corruption and the positions held by self-seeking flatterers. As a consequence, much attention was devoted to the role of the good courtier as a potential source of wise advice, loyalty and knowledge about the needs of the larger nation. During Henry VIII's reign, for example, Sir Thomas Elyot begins the final chapters of *The Book Named the Governor* (1531) with the assertion that 'The end of all doctrine and study is good counsel . . . wherein virtue may be

Elizabeth I and the Spanish Armada

My loving people: I have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how I committed myself to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery. But I tell you that I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people . . . I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too and take foul scorn that Parma or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm. To the which, rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will venter my royal blood.

(From a speech delivered at Tilbury, 1588, to forces organised to repel the Spanish invasion, in *Norton Anthology*, pp. 699–700[A])

found.’ In the same period the distinguished humanist scholar Erasmus urged in his *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516) that ‘you cannot be a king unless reason completely controls you; that is, unless under all circumstances you follow advice and judgement. You cannot rule over others until you yourself have obeyed the course of honour.’ Later in the century in his essay ‘Of Counsel’, Francis Bacon insisted that ‘The greatest Trust, betweene Man and Man, is the Trust of *Giving Counsell* . . . The Wisest *Princes*, need not thinke it any diminution to their Greatnesse, or derogation to their Sufficiency, to rely upon *Counsell*, *God* himselfe is not without: But hath made it one of the great Names, of his blessed Sonne; *The Counsellor*.’

In the event, the political realities occasioned by weak, flawed and tyrannous monarchs continued to figure prominently in literature throughout the Renaissance. Nonetheless, the privileged community of courtiers under the Tudors and the Stuarts attracted many others (including writers) who were spurred on with hopes of financial gain and political and social advancement, as well as the possibility of gaining access to the elite society of the land. It is surprising to note that the nobility of England during the Tudor period remained relatively small, numbering around fifty – with the execution of the Duke of Norfolk in 1572, for example, there were no more dukes created for the rest of the century. The situation changed radically with the accession of James I. Henry VIII had been happy to sell off church lands in the aftermath of the dissolution of the monasteries but it was not linked to any systematic policy of ennobling the new owners. At the turn of the century the newly acclaimed Stuart King of England created over three hundred knights just on his journey down from Edinburgh for his coronation, and decided to sell off noble titles, including the newly invented one of ‘baronet’, in order to generate funds for the royal purse. Indeed, in his first four months as English monarch he created more knights than Elizabeth had done in the whole of her long reign. It is all too possible that the Scottish king’s largesse was designed to win him friends across the elite of his new realm. James was notable also for introducing a much more informal atmosphere to the proceedings of his court, as well as a determination to spend lavishly on ceremony and entertainment. Indeed, this custom of informality meant that courtly society in the Jacobean period could be given over to some rather gross displays, as on the occasion of the visit of Christian IV of Denmark to the Jacobean court. After the death of James in 1625 a more moral tone was struck by Charles I in his court culture, though great energy continued to be devoted to opulent display and costly entertainment. Interestingly, even during the English Republic when dramatic production was for the most part suppressed, Cromwell’s interest in music, art and sculpture meant that visiting dignitaries and ambassadors were received by the English government surrounded by many of the former trappings of royal society.

In the context of this largely pre-industrial society we need to think about communities being organised around concepts of rank, birthright, obligation