

In this book Alexandra Shepard uses 13,686 witness statements (of which 3,331 were by women) made between 1550 and 1728 in the church courts of seven dioceses and two archdeaconries, alongside similar evidence from the Cambridge University courts, to examine the relationship between wealth, occupation and social identity across the long seventeenth century. Witnesses were asked both what they were worth in goods, their debts paid, and how they maintained or got a living, and their responses enable Shepard to track how the calculus of esteem was re-evaluated as assessments of worth moved from being based primarily on what one owned to how one earned a living. The book is organised into three sections, the first consisting of three chapters dealing with concepts of wealth and poverty; the second of three chapters addressing questions of maintenance; and the third comprising a single chapter on changing concepts of credibility.

Between 1550 and 1650 lack of specie made farm animals, tools and 'household stuff' important as repositories of wealth and indices of credit which might be seized in lieu of debts, and Shepard argues that there was far less distinction between goods and currency than previous scholarship has assumed. Those witnesses who placed a cash value on their goods gave reasonably reliable, albeit minimum, values in round numbers of what they owned, often attaching qualifiers such as 'more than', 'at least', 'almost' and 'scarcely', or declaring that they were 'not worth' an amount. Scribes cast doubt on some estimates by inserting phrases such as she or he 'believes', 'supposes', 'conceives' or 'says', and the evidence reveals that fine gradations of poverty existed in relation to receipt of alms, absence of a stable living, quality of clothes, wage dependency, and lack of goods—with women, servants, the young and old especially likely to describe themselves as poor, dependent, subordinate, and lacking credit.

To counter accusations of dependency and immorality, those of limited means emphasised their ability to maintain themselves by their own industrious means or labour, descriptions which challenged beliefs that waged work equated to dependence and subordination, and which contrasted with the claims of self-sufficiency made by yeomen, gentlemen and wealthy widows. Yet dependency on others was not always imagined in negative terms, especially in the case of husbands and wives. Housewifery was regarded as a key occupational identity and counterpart to husbandry which Shepard argues needs to be included in assessments of the early modern economy, and, despite the legal restrictions of coverture, wives undertook more varied and independent work than single women, with two-thirds of wives claiming to maintain themselves and others through a range of activities. Young people also spoke of their dependence on parents in positive terms of dynastic entitlement, with delayed independence regarded as a luxury, not a cause for concern; but, unlike in marital relationships, reciprocity was absent, with little expectation that children would assist elderly parents in kind.

Across the seventeenth century, occupational identity became increasingly bound up with what people did, rather than what they had on which to depend. As the range of occupational titles increased, skilled work became regarded as a form of property and a source of respectability, and witnesses placed a growing emphasis on their profession, business, trade or occupation—particularly in London and other major urban centres. Women deployed occupational descriptors less often than men, instead giving verb-oriented accounts of what they did, which reveal that their work was integral to economic growth, and that they comprised a similar proportion of the rural labour force to men across the seventeenth century. Traditional social categories became less representative of lived experiences, and the social hierarchy elongated and diversified. With greater numbers of male deponents claiming to be husbandmen and gentlemen, the number of yeomen declined, and the gulf widened between those who had and those who needed to get or produce sufficient means to survive.

After 1650, growing proportions of witnesses did not supply a cash estimate of the net value of their goods; claimed not to know their worth; or declared themselves not liable to respond, with the change being particularly marked in the south-east, and with more men than women seeking to avoid providing an answer. Shepard argues that, although the compulsion to acquire and consume household goods did not become greater across the seventeenth century, it was reformulated as net worth became less easy to quantify. In the century after 1650, consumption became divorced from saving and domestic consumables became bound up with more select and personal indicators of wealth such as dress and sociability, especially among urban middling sorts. Interpersonal credit continued to be important, but was likewise reformulated, becoming less secure with the diversification of forms of property and new forms of transferable credit, with trust more heavily based on social and cultural rather than economic or material capital.

It is no exaggeration to state that Shepard has produced one of the most important studies of early modern English society to have been written in the last three decades. This is a wonderful book which combines statistical clout with theoretical nuance, and the bibliography alone is an invaluable resource for any early modern social or economic historian. Some scholars will quibble about the reliability of the evidence, particularly with regard to the numerical values presented and the uneven distribution and richness of depositional statements across the period, while others will argue that Shepard ought to have made use of surviving household artefacts (such as textiles) or printed texts. No doubt these debates will play out in due course, but whatever their outcome there is no doubt that this is a magnificent piece of scholarship with which historians interested not only in social rank, gender and age, but also in consumption and political participation, must engage.