

Tim Mc Inerney

**Ancient Privilege: the History
of Hereditary Power in Maurice Shelton's
True Rise of Nobility (1718)**



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In 1718, the English squire Maurice Shelton¹ proposed a «universal» definition of nobility, which he claimed to have been applicable to hereditary elites since time immemorial. Though legal accolades of nobility were awarded, transmitted, and celebrated in different ways in different parts of the world, he explains in his *True Rise of Nobility*, people of all ages have always recognised the same, natural essence of nobility among mankind:

[...] for all this so great diversity of manners and customs of nations, in all places the same definition of civil nobility is agreeable to all; viz. *quod sit qualitas sive dignitas, quâ quis legitime a plebeia conditione eximitur & per gradus erigitur*, i.e. that it is a quality or dignity whereby a man is lawfully exempt and by degrees promoted out of and above the estate of the vulgar and common sort of people².

Shelton's *True Rise of Nobility* represents an exhaustive compendium of the honours and privileges attributed to the different ranks of the British nobility and gentry, and also includes a meticulously detailed description of each subject's place on the scale of precedence from monarch to commoner. The work additionally featured an ostensibly complete history of nobility spanning right back to the dawn of earthly creation, as reflected in its extended title: *An Historic and Critical Essay on the True Rise of Nobility Political and Civil, from the First Ages of the World, through the Jewish, Grecian, Roman Commonwealths etc. down to this Present Time*. Nobility's privileges, their place in the social order, and the origin of their precise ranks, were, for Shelton, intimately intertwined. By identifying the same quality of nobility in all ages and nations, he fortifies the idea of a timeless, universal

¹ There is currently no literature with a substantial focus on Maurice Shelton or his writings. The Shelton family were nevertheless well established in Norfolk and Suffolk, with the English antiquarian Francis Blomefield exhaustively chronicling their bloodline back to the fourteenth century in his multi-volume *History of the County of Norfolk* (1739-45); see F. Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, vol. 3, London, W. Wittingham and R. Baldwin, 1769, pp. 174-183. The Shelton lineage was still being lauded as late as 1826 in the «Gentleman's Magazine», 96, pt. 2, July-December 1826, p. 32.

² M. Shelton, *An Historic and Critical Essay on the True Rise of Nobility Political and Civil, from the First Ages of the World, through the Jewish, Grecian, Roman Commonwealths etc. Down to this Present Time*, London, C. Rivington, 1718. p. 4. The first edition of the *True Rise* was published anonymously and by consequence it is sometimes mistakenly attributed to Maurice Shelton's father-in-law, Rev. John Randall of Guilford. Shelton's portrait and coat of arms, however, were included as a frontispiece to the 1720 edition of the work, above an inscription affirming that they were «the true effigies of the author»; see W.A. Copinger - H.B. Copinger, *The Manors of Suffolk: their History and Devolution*, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1905, p. 277. Shelton had previously published a short treatise on English jurisprudence, and later in life would produce an English translation of William Wotton's abridged version of George Hickes's *Linguarum Vettarum Septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico criticus et archeologicus* (1705); see M. Shelton, *A Charge Given to the Grand-Jury, at the General Quarter Sessions of the Peace*, London, T. Clive and R. Knaplock, 1716, and Id., *Wotton's Short View of George Hickes's Grammatico-Critical and Archaeological Treasure of the Ancient Northern Languages*, London, D. Browne, 1735. The *True Rise* was reprinted once again without Shelton's name in the mid-nineteenth century, ostensibly having been «collected from the best authorities», and presented under the title of *The Manual of Rank and Nobility, or, Key to the Peerage*, London, Saunders and Otley, 1832.

noble essence, and through this he can portray the otherwise arbitrary ranks of society in eighteenth-century Britain as natural and inevitable elements of the *scala naturae*. A contemporary duke or earl, according to this understanding of the world, was directly comparable to an Ancient Roman Patrician or a chief among the Tribes of Israel – not only because they occupied important positions of governance, but because those positions were built on the same natural excellence that underpinned the birthright of all hereditary elites. Regardless of the particular religious, cultural, or political frameworks by which it was upheld, that is to say, nobility formed part of the universal order of the world. This article briefly examines how this assertion implicitly reinforced the underlying power paradigm of noble tradition, and goes on to explore how Shelton carefully utilised this same paradigm in the *True Rise* to extol his own place in the social hierarchy.

Shelton was merely the latest in a long line of noble apologists to assert this timeless quality of hereditary elites. In fact, his universal definition of nobility was just one incarnation of a standard trope that had featured in the literature of jurisprudence and heraldry throughout the early modern period. A variation on his definition of nobility, for instance, had appeared in Thomas Milles' *Nobilitas Politica vel Civilis*³ over a hundred years earlier in 1608, which itself consisted of edited manuscripts largely compiled by Milles' uncle, Robert Glover, Somerset Herald of Arms under Elizabeth I. The German juridical commentator Johann Limnaeus also presaged Shelton's definition of universal nobility in his extensive analysis of the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, *Juris publici Imperii romano-germanici* (1629-32)⁴, as did the later English law-writer John Brydall in his *Law of England relating to the Nobility and Gentry* (1675)⁵. These and other chroniclers of nobility appear to have copied and adapted each other's writings, transcribing whole pages of text from one work to the next, and steadily forging a distinct historiographical tradition of noble defence that almost always looked back to the ancient world as a template of natural rank distinction. Ultimately, the principal aim of a universal definition like this was to assert an objective quality of nobility that existed independently of legal or cultural concession, and thus remained consistent, effectual, and immediately identifiable regardless of political context.

The idea that nobility exists autonomously from its own legislative support has always represented an abidingly valuable power strategy for hereditary elites. One of the prime advantages of nobility as an elite identity is that it remains legitimate even when removed from the political framework by which it is ostensibly upheld. In other words, hereditary elites and their descendants can continue to claim rightful rulership of states or domains even after they have been usurped – a curiosity that was no less true in eighteenth-century Britain than it

³ Th. Milles, *Nobilitas Politic vel Civilis*, London, William Faggard, 1608, p. 2.

⁴ J. Limnaeus, *Juris publici Imperii romano-germanici*, Strasbourg, Friderici Spoor, 1645, Tome 3, book 8, ch. 8, par. 102.

⁵ J. Brydall, *The Law of England relating to the Nobility and Gentry*, London, John Billinger, 1675, p. 18.

is for the pretendants to the thrones of France or Greece today. This inherent legitimacy fortifies the authority of hereditary elites even when their non-noble rivals may represent more accomplished, more powerful, or more popular rulers. Ultimately, those rivals can never imitate true noble birth; noble identity comes with the inbuilt exclusivity of blood and family, designed to create a hegemonic fortress around those groups who already hold the reins of power. These remarkably consistent power strategies, which I have called the noble paradigm⁶, are designed in every way to mask the arbitrary nature of noble authority, to create entire social and political hierarchies based on the parameters set down by the noble patriciate, and to consolidate nobility as a touchstone of natural, social, and political excellence against which all other social ranks are to be compared. Shelton's assertion that there is a specific, universal noble quality, which one either does or does not possess, is an elemental part of this discourse, portraying not only nobility but the entire hierarchy of social ranks built around it as quintessentially natural.

In eighteenth-century Europe the term «nobility» often explicitly denoted the official framework by which one's hereditary privilege was codified in law. This meant that there were countless different «legal» interpretations of noble rank, with a noble's social or governmental role largely depending on the place, time, and political regime in which they lived. Noble titles varied from one country to the next, and they could be granted, recognised, and transmitted between generations according to completely different criteria. From this perspective, nobility was a surprisingly nebulous concept. The titles and privileges of a French *compte* relied on a completely different legislative framework from that of an English earl or a Spanish *marquès*, their heirs might inherit titles (or indeed not inherit titles) according to entirely different principles, and there might exist profound discrepancies in their access to power at a governmental level. And yet, a *compte*, an earl, and a *marquès* had little trouble recognising each other as noble. This is because all those different legal interpretations of nobility were built around the same greater paradigm of nobility, which defined each of those social groups as singularly eminent on account of their inherited (or inheritable) virtue. In fact, not only did the noble paradigm underpin diverse manifestations of hereditary privilege in Europe, but it was also commonly projected onto those who existed outside the orbit of feudal tradition. In the 1740s, for instance, Britain's Royal Africa Company faced a public relations disaster when it emerged that the son of a powerful Fante ruler had been sold into slavery by British traders and transported to the Caribbean. The enslavement of William Ansah Sessarakoo, who had been travelling to London for a diplomatic visit to the royal court, incited outrage precisely because he was perceived as a man of noble birth whose bondage was contrary to the order of nature. «The inability to recognise social rank as a legitimate security from slavery was taken as evidence of [private] trader's moral deficiencies», explains Ryan Hanley; «[t]here was nothing dishonourable

⁶ For an extensive discussion on the noble paradigm, see T. Mc Inerney, *Nobility and the Making of Race in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, pp. 13-41.

in slave trading, but ignorance of or disregard for the dignity of a “prince” was vulgar⁷. In 1774, the British explorer Captain James Cook returned from the South Seas with a young Ra’iatean man named Mai (or Omai, as he would become known in England) who was not only presented to the London court as a man of high birth, but as emblematic of the especially sophisticated hereditary nobility that Cook’s naturalists claimed to have identified in the Polynesian archipelago⁸.

Nobility was just as adaptable in more familiar contexts. In Britain, the legal status of nobility was conferred only on the head of the household, with the rest of a peer’s family technically remaining commoners. Generally speaking, however, the families of titled peers would almost always be understood as noble, in the sense that they belonged to a noble household and more importantly to a noble bloodline. What was more, alternative iterations of nobility existed alongside the honours of the British peerage, exemplified in the clan system of Scotland whereby titled peers and untitled commoners alike might assume the hereditary chieftaindom of their clan. Helping to bridge these gaps between rigid legal understandings of noble status and the much wider cultural paradigm of nobility was the underlying idea of a «nobility of nature», which permeated the language of art and science, and which was perennially difficult to extricate from more «civil» understandings of noble status. Shelton also acknowledges these overlapping ideas in the *True Rise*, noting that nobility effectively exists in three forms: nobility celestial «which consisteth in religion», nobility philosophical «which is got by moral virtues», and nobility political «whereof this present treatise is»⁹. One of the more inscrutable aspects of «political nobility», therefore, is that it can always draw on the implicitly providential and moral dimensions of nobility as an essence of nature. Both as a metaphysical element of nature and as a political construct, Arlette Jouanna has noted, nobility essentially described the «most perfect» of a given category; a noble entity possessed the defining quality of its «kind» to a more eminent degree than others¹⁰. The imagined reality of what was noble in nature and the social reality of elite groups who assumed noble status at the very apex of society could thus be brought to interact as necessary, depending on context and circumstance.

The paradigm setting down the parameters of nobility as opposed to other forms of elite governance has been remarkably consistent in European hierarchical tradition, precisely because it is so effective as a power strategy for seizing and maintaining power within lineal families. It relies first on the idea that some people are naturally excellent, and that these people instinctively rise to the top

⁷ R. Hanley, *The Royal Slave: Nobility, Diplomacy and the «African Prince» in Britain, 1748-52*, in «Itinerario», 39, 2015, pp. 329-347, p. 334.

⁸ See T. Mc Inerney, *Nobility and the Making of Race*, cit., pp. 157-174; see also Id., *Race and Nobility in the Works of Johann Reinhold and Georg Forster*, in «Études anglaises», 66, 2013, pp. 250-266, p. 260.

⁹ M. Shelton, *True Rise*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ A. Jouanna, *L’idée de race en France au XVI^e et au début du XVII^e siècle: 1498–1614*, doctoral thesis originally presented at L’Université Paris IV on the 7th of June 1975, revised edition, Montpellier, Atelier de reproduction des thèses, Montpellier III, 1981, p. 126.

of society. Secondly, it contends that this excellence can be transmitted between generations, usually through a heady mix of intergenerational trait transmission (being the various ideas of descending features that foreshadowed the biological concept of heredity) and the careful cultivation of moral, civil, and political education carried out over successive generations. In this way, individual nobles could be thought of as a repository of accumulated virtue, inheriting a concentrated infusion of traits from their illustrious ancestors and benefitting from the unparalleled education and guidance of those whose own upbringing had been unparalleled in their own time. In this way, too, since noble blood was understood as both the genitor and the issue of natural rulers, a correlation could seamlessly be established between noble status and cultural and economic dominance. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the noble paradigm holds inherited excellence to a certain standard: nobility cannot simply be imbibed through the blood, it must be constantly performed in order to fully exist; likewise, the body and mind of a noble are imagined as expressions of inherited excellence but also as tools of active virtue. «True nobility» – that ever-elusive concept at the heart of noble tradition – can only be attained when one has ensured perfect integrity of all these noble qualities. In many ways, the noble paradigm works primarily to obscure the rather less illustrious realities of hereditary privilege. Since noble excellence is always anchored to genealogy, non-nobles can never «ape» noble status; even if a usurper claims the power once held by a noble, as long as the latter and his progeny maintain hegemonic authority, only they can constitute the «real» nobility. Accordingly, the paradigm allows for those who approximate noble status to be ennobled, if it is expedient to do so, thereby locking them in their turn into a descending genealogical spiral¹¹.

It is not difficult to see why this paradigm has remained unchanged for so long. The basic criticisms of nobility are obvious: why should certain families enjoy arbitrary privilege on the basis of great deeds they themselves did not achieve? These criticisms are as old as nobility itself. They can be found, for instance, in the writings of the early second-century Roman poet Juvenal, who asks «What use are family trees? / [...] / Though you [*nobiles*] deck your hall from end to end with ancient waxes / On either side, *virtue* is the one and only true nobility»¹². The same sentiment pervades the impassioned speech of Gaius Marius in Sallust's first-century *War Against Jugurtha*, wherein the *novus homo* scathingly contrasts the active *virtus* of a warrior like himself with the effeminacy and corruption of the old dynasties who looked down upon him. «I can show spears, a banner, trappings, and other military honours, not to mention the scars on the front of my body», he tells the Roman patriciate, «[t]hese are my family portraits; these are my nobility»¹³. The paradigm of nobility in many ways takes its shape from these very criticisms, constructing itself around ideas that deftly bypass the most persistent lines of condemnation that have been cast against it.

¹¹ See T. Mc Inerney, *Nobility and the Making of Race*, cit., pp. 14-17

¹² Juvenal, *The Satires*, tr. N. Rudd, Oxford, Clarendon, 1991, Satire 8, lines 1, 19-20, p. 72.

¹³ Sallust, *The War against Jugurtha*, tr. M. Comber and C. Balmaceda, Oxford, Oxbow, 2009, par. 85, lines 29-30, p. 151.

In particular, the paradigm allows for the denigration of individual nobles, or even entire generations of nobles, without undermining the noble bloodline from which they are sprung. Since «true nobility» is contingent on active virtue as well as inborn excellence, a deficient noble can be understood as one who has not lived up to expectations – squandering their inherent potential for greatness in luxury or idleness, rather than channelling it into virtuous rulership. In texts of antiquity no more than in commentaries of the eighteenth century, it is a perennial complaint that contemporary nobles are in a state of decline and must be restored to their natural state of true nobility in order to fully reclaim their status as natural rulers. Ironically, this idea only places more emphasis on the necessity of nobility: the criticisms here are grounded in the assumption that true nobility *exists*, and moreover that it persists in the bloodlines of the hereditary elite regardless of the failures or shortcomings of its more recent members. The noble paradigm ensures, therefore, that the solution to noble decline is not to abolish nobility but to fortify its parameters. Its architecture guarantees that deficient nobles actually bolster the importance of true nobility in the upper orders, while nobles who perform their role exceptionally well only further confirm the fundamental precepts of the paradigm: here is true nobility in its natural state, proof that a special kind of inborn excellence continues to flow through the bloodlines of the ruling elite.

Maurice Shelton's invocation of the noble paradigm in 1718 must be understood in terms of the turbulent political context of his time. When he composed the *True Rise* in the decades after the Revolution of 1688, the English nobility was still burdened with a host of negative associations it had garnered over the course of the seventeenth century. The early Stuart kings had explicitly emphasised the importance of ancient bloodlines among their peerage as a safeguard against usurpation. James VI of Scotland and I of England, in his *Basilikon Doron* of 1599, cautioned that a monarch's closest courtiers should always be of «the noblest blood that can be had», as in this way «their service shall breed you great goodwill and least ennui (contrary to that of start-ups [i.e. newly ennobled peers])». Such reasoning was based on the idea that the oldest noble bloodlines boasted the greatest excellence, since, in the words of James VI, «ye shall oft find virtue follows noble races»¹⁴. Yet, James and his successors were also responsible for a significant escalation in the creation of new peerages – as well as a massive increase in knighthoods and baronetcies, the latter of which were created primarily for financial gain¹⁵. In this way, the English House of Lords came under attack from multiple angles at once: from one perspective, mass ennoblement could be seen as a detrimental dilution of the noble bloodlines; from another, it threatened to shatter the illusion that noble blood mattered in the first place¹⁶. By the outbreak of the Second English Civil War in 1648, noble apologists had come to rely heavily on the quasi-mystical essence of noble blood to justify the

¹⁴ James VI of Scotland and I of England, *Basilikon Doron, or, His Majesty's Instructions to his Dearest Sonne*, 1559, London, Wertheimer, 1887, p. 83.

¹⁵ Ch. H. Firth, *The House of Lords During the Civil War*, London, Longman, 1910, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

continued existence of the House of Lords. That same year, for instance, the anti-leveller pamphleteer William Prynne beseeched his readers to recognise that men of noble birth were possessed of «more generous heroic spirits than the vulgar sort of men», and thus less likely to submit to corruption or coercion, even if it should stem from a regal source¹⁷. Nevertheless, the House of Lords was abolished in 1649 alongside the office of monarch, and upon its restoration some ten years later, few in parliament were willing to reinstate the bountiful privileges that the England's peers had enjoyed in the past. Instead, by the early decades of the eighteenth-century the peerage had largely been transformed. After the Acts of Union of 1706-7, the separate English and Scottish peerages were merged into a single peerage of Great Britain, and the House of Lords now functioned increasingly as a parliamentary revising chamber whose members played an unprecedentedly active role in government¹⁸.

In light of this legacy, Maurice Shelton adapts his line of noble apology accordingly. He repudiates the by-now highly unpopular idea that nobility was a kind of magic essence in the blood and instead emphasises the natural role of nobility in the social and spiritual order. The legal status of nobility may be passed down from father to son, he assures his readers, and that status deserves respect in its own right, but *true nobility* cannot exist in the absence of virtue¹⁹. The key to preserving virtue within noble bloodlines, he contends, lies in the successful application of a noble education – cultivating the young mind of a future ruler, and rightfully bestowing it with the wisdom and expectation that only an ancient dynasty can provide²⁰. Shelton thereby succeeds in making a shrewdly paradoxical argument in favour of hereditary privilege. Without virtue, he claims, the honours of nobility are empty; it is the dignity of the office that is to be admired, and not the arbitrary designation of titles or privileges. This does not mean, however, that virtuous commoners should appropriate the place of nobility in society. On the contrary, the virtues of a true nobleman are primarily cultivated through his upbringing within a noble family: he is raised from birth to be a great ruler; he is surrounded at every moment by the great rulers of his time, who were in their turn raised under the tutelage of the great rulers before them; his entire life is underpinned by the immense obligations of his place in the universal order, by the expectations of his nation, and by the singular pressure he feels to honour the legacy of his dynasty. Nobility may reside in virtue alone, Shelton's argument goes, but virtue most likely resides in nobility.

This central paradox permeates Shelton's extensive historical account of the origin of nobility. He identifies Adam as the first nobleman, having received celestial honours from God upon his creation. After his fall from grace, Shelton explains, Adam retained his worldly nobility which was passed on to his children

¹⁷ W. Prynne, *A Plea for the Lords*, London, Michael Spark, 1648, p. 26.

¹⁸ M.W. McCahill, *The House of Lords in the Age of George III (1760-1811)*, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell, 2009, pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ M. Shelton, *True Rise*, cit., pp. 2, 54-56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-23.

«being first in them to be *native*, or nobility by birth»²¹. Not all descendants of Adam would enjoy the honour of nobility, however, since «the first householder» conveniently found himself inclined towards the particularly British tradition of primogeniture²². That is to say that his God-given quality of nobility would be bestowed on his first begotten son only. Adam also transmitted the power of «dative nobility» (i.e. the power to ennoble others) to his primary descendants, in the aim that titles be propagated only among those whose virtue proved worthy²³. In this way, great noble races were established across the world while ignominious bloodlines were kept at a distance from noble rank. It is little surprise that Shelton goes on to mention Noah's wayward son Ham, whose descendants were cursed with the «title of obscure and base persons» while the progeny of his virtuous brothers Shem and Japhet were granted «all the names and titles of honesty, nobility and vertue»²⁴. He cannot but have been aware of the contemporary legend that claimed Ham's descendants were additionally cursed with blackened skin, eternal servitude, and exile to Africa – promulgated widely by slave traders at the time and linking these ideas of «noble race» in the progeny of Shem and Japhet with an early foreshadowing of «human race» in the lineage of Ham²⁵. Regardless, by linking noble status with the descending «races» of Biblical tradition, Shelton definitively inscribes nobility into a graded hierarchy of bloodline. No more than the various lineages of the Old Testament, noble dynasties ostensibly perpetuated a particular brand of excellence as part of their divinely ordained place in the order of creation.

For all this, Shelton manages to avoid accusations of arbitrary power by proving that the exalted place of nobility was also the result of a natural struggle for greatness. Originally, he insists, noble dynasties *earned* their place at the summit of the social order, and continued to prove their worth over successive generations. Over countless centuries, he contends, only the best individuals were elevated by the community to positions of rulership; and only those lines that maintained their active virtue could sustain enduring and successful noble families. Starting from the very earliest days of mankind, therefore, distinctions between nobility and the common people arose naturally, as Shelton explains:

[...] it was necessary to distinguish the good from the bad, and for the preservation of public peace and tranquillity to separate and divide them: whereupon wise, just, and vertuous men, and the lights as it were of the world, shining before others, were set over the rest [...]. Vertue and not blood made men noble. Such men were by the people call'd, chosen, and approv'd counsellors and judges, who by their subjects were elected

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 62.

²⁵ The legend was heavily embroidered: in Genesis 9 it is Canaan, and not Ham, who is cursed by Noah, and the scriptural passage makes no mention of skin colour or exile to Africa. See T. Mc Inerney, *Ham's Curse and Genealogical Race in the Early Modern World*, in *Catégoriser l'autre*, ed. by M. Prum, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2017.

kings and princes. And they who for their worthy deeds had obtain'd such honourable titles and offices ennobled both themselves and their posterity²⁶.

Throughout Shelton's historical account of nobility in different ages and nations, two things seem consistent. Firstly, those deemed to hold the greatest dignity in the community were bestowed with honours by that community, and those honours (and by extension the dignity they represented) would be passed down genealogically. Secondly, in all ages dishonourable actors would inevitably infiltrate into noble ranks and bring the status into disrepute, thus necessitating the constant safeguarding of noble virtue and integrity. While hereditary dynasties were admittedly vulnerable to the designs of aspirational outsiders, Shelton warns, they nonetheless represented the most concentrated locus of inherited virtue. One of the main reasons why nobility began to be honoured, he explains, was because outside their ranks a dangerous ignorance reigned supreme, threatening the very fabric of social and moral order. The community at large turned to nobles for protection against the «gross ignorance and unskillfulness of the vulgar and common sort of people», whose «sense, reason, and understanding [is] so dispers'd and scatter'd, that they cannot gather, discern, or judge anything certain, firm, or sound»²⁷.

And so, Shelton continues, great rulers were steadily distinguished from the multitudes – sometimes by way of their martial prowess, sometimes being called upon by God, and sometimes through the honour they received from the common people on account of their riches. «It most plainly appeareth», Shelton concludes, «that the kindred, stock, and descent of the nobility in the former ages flourish'd and became famous only for vertue, noble acts, and valour of mind»²⁸. Here, Shelton works once again to reconcile the idea that nobility springs from virtue alone with the reality of exclusive, blood-based noble dynasties. Since the most virtuous members of society originally rose to the top of society, as is evidenced by their great honours and dignity, Shelton concludes that it makes sense to maintain them in that position so as to ensure that the most virtuous family lines continue to lead the greater mass of dangerously ignorant commoners. It is not *because* of their blood that these people enjoy such privilege, he might have said, but rather their bloodlines are an indicator of ancient virtues that should be strictly upheld among their ranks. If virtue is deficient among those ranks, it must be rekindled and maintained; if virtue is evident among those ranks the natural order is functioning as intended. In this way, Shelton can use his history of noble origin to claim once again that while nobility resides in virtue rather than blood, that the virtues of true nobility are usually exclusive to certain bloodlines.

Shelton traces this process of virtuous men giving rise to noble dynasties across European history. In Ancient Greece, he recounts, it was Theseus who first consolidated nobility as an integral part of an organised polis, dividing the

²⁶ M. Shelton, *True Rise*, cit., p. 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 73-74.

people of Athens into «order and degrees» so as to avoid «confusion and chaos», and categorising the nobility as those who excelled among the rest of the population in «dignity [...] riches, knowledge, and vertue»²⁹. Romulus played a similar role in Ancient Rome, being the first to segregate his people «according to their honours and dignity, *viz.* into Patricians and Plebeians; the former as being elder and more nobly descended, had the care of religious rites, bore offices of magistracy, administered justice [...] the latter tilled the ground»³⁰. The Patricians, Shelton claims, thereafter bestowed nobility on the office of senate, so that in later years, even Plebeians who gained access to the senate would be conferred with *nobilitas*, «because the dignity of a senator gave beginning to nobility» which would thereafter become hereditary³¹. Steadily, he notes, the ancestors of the British titles duke, earl, marquess, viscount, and baron gradually emerged in the states of medieval Europe, each with its own origin story of martial valour or political prowess. In Britain, he relates, the monarch played the same role as the sons of Adam in bearing responsibility for the sustained dignity of his nobles, elevating the most virtuous among them to higher ranks when necessary, resisting the aspirations of the avaricious and vain, and ennobling only those of exceptional virtue into the peerage³². The British nobility was thus a reflection of the monarch's own perspicacity – an extension of his will and of the greater order of nature³³.

There is another political dimension, however, to Shelton's illustration of the noble paradigm. As mentioned, in eighteenth-century Britain, noble titles were legally assigned only to the patriarchs (and occasionally to the matriarchs) of noble families, meaning that only around 200 people held a noble title at any one time over the course of the century. The untitled members of a noble's immediate family, however, had access to a particularly select sphere of influence through their almost exclusive domination of the peerage throughout this time, forming what has been called a «peerage class» of magnificently wealthy magnate dynasties³⁴. Untitled members of a peerage family were generally considered to occupy a considerably superior rank to titled knights and baronets, whose honours were not recognised as noble in any official capacity. That superiority was very often consolidated along the lines of income, with noble families usually outshining even the most affluent knights and baronets in terms of wealth³⁵. These lesser titles belonged instead to a wider rank of gentry, whose elevated positions in the social order were usually rooted in landownership rather than in

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 188-121.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

³⁴ See R.G. Wilson, *The Landed Elite*, in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by H. T. Dickinson, Malden, Blackwell, 2002, pp. 158-171, p. 159.

³⁵ See G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, London, Routledge, 1963, pp. 23-25.

legal writ³⁶. Shelton's contemporary the English courtier John Chamberlayne, for instance, defined a gentleman as anyone who «maintains themselves without manual labour» and has an income of between £ 6,000 and £ 10,000 per annum³⁷. The resulting conventions of honorific categorisation in Britain were widely recognised as exceptional; in much of mainland Europe Britain's conspicuous caste of landed gentry would have immediately been understood as a *petite noblesse*, especially if possessed of heraldic arms (as Shelton was), and its members could have claimed a certain official status to support this. Moreover, in practice the British gentry essentially did exist as a *petite noblesse*: they followed the same codes of conduct, they pursued the same education, they copied the same architectural styles and sartorial fashions, they emulated noble marriage practices, they drew up their own genealogies, and they assumed a similar claim to natural rulership as the nobility did. In a certain way, the gentry could be understood as a pastiche of nobility, living the lives of their social superiors on a much smaller scale and financed (usually) by a dramatically smaller income. In this way, the gentry ultimately derived their power from their *proximity* to the nobility – either direct proximity in terms of blood-relationship, friendship, or marriage, or conceptual proximity as evidenced in their pastiched performance of noble civility. By consequence, it was only by virtue of accepting – and indeed promoting – their social inferiority to titled peers that the gentry were able to assert their superiority over the rest of the commonality³⁸.

Shelton belonged to one of the most ambiguous ranks of this somewhat amorphous gentry, holding the title of «esquire». This was a title which was quickly becoming notorious on account of its large-scale adoption by almost anyone with pretensions to greatness, including educated professionals and the more audacious ranks of the middling orders. Chamberlayne's *Magna Britannia Notitia*, published ten years before Shelton's *True Rise*, had already noted that the title of esquire was being assumed in an almost casual way by public officials or professionals like mayors, legal counsellors, and doctors, even though there was no question that they had any claim to it³⁹. Since such titles had little legal framework to protect them, their integrity relied almost completely on social convention, which in turn relied on the protection and preservation of the greater status quo of social hierarchy. In order to vindicate his own title, that is to say, Shelton thus must reinforce the matrix of titles and rank upholding the framework upon which it depended. Asserting that British nobility was simply the latest manifestation of a timeless noble essence is one way in which he can achieve this goal. According to this view of the world, the title esquire is not arbitrary and cannot simply be adopted by those who have no claim to it; rather, it is an ancient component of the universal order, occupying a specific place on the chain of precedence that upholds the honour of all ranks. If the gentry resembled the *petites*

³⁶ M.W. McCahill, *Open Elites: Recruitment to the French Noblesse and the English Aristocracy in the Eighteenth Century*, in «Albion», 30, 1998, pp. 599-629, p. 601.

³⁷ J. Chamberlayne, *Magna Britannia Notitia*, vol. I, London, Timothy Goodwin, 1708, p. 236.

³⁸ See T. Mc Inerney, *Nobility and the Making of Race*, cit., pp. 19-22.

³⁹ J. Chamberlayne, *Magna Britannia Notitia*, cit. p. 234.

nobles of the continent, Shelton proclaims, it is because that is what they were. The great peerage families might be compared to the *nobiles maiores* of the Ancient Roman patriciate, and therefore the gentry can be understood as concomitant with the *nobiles minores*⁴⁰. It was perhaps most appropriate, he suggests, to recognise them as *nobiles innominate* (un-named nobles), and the chapter in which he describes their ranks does not fall under the title of «gentry», but rather of «Lesser Nobles». These lesser nobles are then carefully associated with ancient ranks of the hereditary elite, ensuring that they fall into Shelton's own timeless and universal definition of nobility.

The lesser nobility, according to the Shelton's scale of precedence, is divided into three main branches: knights, esquires, and gentlemen. Knights, unsurprisingly, he frames as the contemporary equivalent of the Roman *equites*, or equestrian order. In former times, they held the «middle place betwixt the *Patricii* [...] and the *Plebeii*», and were referred to by Tacitus as the «*Illustres*, or men of note»⁴¹. The same rank, he notes, could be identified across Europe in the Italian «Cavallieri», the Welsh «Marchog», and the German «Reyters»⁴². Esquires he aligns with the Latin *armiger*, or arms-bearer, as well as the French *scutifer*, meaning shield bearer. This rank is awarded to either the younger sons of knights and baronets, those of the «chiefs of some antient families», or those specially appointed to the king's household⁴³. The status of gentleman, he explains, is mainly ascertained through blood, and may be proven through heraldry. A gentleman, he asserts, either derives his title from his «stock, with arms, from his ancestors», or if he is granted arms during his lifetime he will be «called a gentleman and giveth gentility to his sons»⁴⁴. Some men of outstanding virtue may be esteemed gentlemen in their time, Shelton notes, but without heraldic arms the dignity cannot be hereditary. The various ranks of gentry are thus given a relatively secure position in the greater hierarchy of honour; their characterisation as part of a lesser nobility, meanwhile, lends them a more official air of authority, all the while reinforcing the trope that nobilities of all ages have more or less assumed the same shape and function.

Consolidating these ranks even further, Shelton goes on to provide an extensive and indeed exhaustive list of the descending degrees of nobility and lesser nobility, entering into the minutiae of rank precedence to an extent that frequently borders on the absurd. Younger sons of viscounts, for instance, outrank younger sons of barons; both are outranked by knights of the garter, but not by knights of the bath. A knight that has held the office of ambassador meanwhile, outranks a knight bachelor, but not the youngest son of an earl⁴⁵. Rank precedence moreover extends to every family member: the wife of a baronet who was granted his title by a king or a prince ranks above the wife of any other baronet;

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

unmarried knight's daughters, likewise, rank below married knights' daughters⁴⁶. In this network of social gradation, specific blood relationships very often stand in as automatic demarcations of rank distinction. «A duke's eldest son and heir, descended of the royal blood, shall have place before a marquis [i.e. marquess]» Shelton explains, but «if not of the royal blood, then he shall have place above and before an earl»⁴⁷. The rankings in the *True Rise* even extend to how many mourners each rank can have at their funerals (5 for a knight, 3 for an esquire), and how many chaplains they can keep (4 for viscounts, 5 for marquesses)⁴⁸.

That Shelton's work should be so devoted to the preservation of strict rank observance provides a rich illustration of how the noble paradigm creates spirals of vested interest in the maintenance of hereditary elites. His title of esquire only has value in a scale of precedence that derives from and is maintained by those at the apex of the social pyramid. When this is considered, Shelton's defence and reverence of noble rank in the *True Rise* takes on a particular significance. As an ersatz *petit noble* he has a major stake in the preservation of nobility, since it is the only thing that maintains the much greater hierarchy of honour in which he has secured a relatively privileged place. The same, then, can be said of the claim that nobility has ever been thus. By consolidating the idea that there is a natural, immediately recognisable noble essence, which people of all ages, religions, and political organisations have identified and celebrated in their own way, this claim does not just protect the peerage or the House of Lords. Rather, it defends an entire hierarchy of privilege that has used varying degrees of proximity to that peerage as an instrument of power, with various actors claiming, staking, and protecting their own place on the hierarchy of precedence. This indeed is one of the main supporting buttresses of the noble paradigm: the power strategy of self-proclaimed noble excellence is entirely reliant on the non-noble who define themselves against that excellence, and whose own interest in the preservation of that excellence constantly protects and maintains those at the top of the social chain. Shelton's *True Rise*, therefore, is on one level a simple work of noble apology at the brave new dawn of the eighteenth century in Britain; on another level, however, it provides a window into the very mechanics of nobility as a mode of seizing and maintaining power.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.



Tim Mc Inerney

Transcrit Research Unit, Université Paris VIII
tim.mc-inerney@univ-paris8.fr

– Ancient Privilege: the History of Hereditary Power in Maurice Shelton’s *True Rise of Nobility* (1718)

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Maurice Shelton’s pseudo-historical account of the origins of hereditary privilege, *The True Rise of Nobility* (1718), this article explores how the traditions of nobility could be used as a power strategy to defend and fortify the status quo in eighteenth-century Britain. The author examines how Shelton’s *True Rise* vindicates hereditary privilege as an integral element of universal order, thereby depicting the British peerage as the most recent manifestation of a natural ruling caste that had existed since the dawn of creation. This assertion, this article explains, not only bolstered the hegemonic power paradigm at the heart of noble tradition, but also reinforced the authority of lesser elites whose own power depended on the continued preservation of noble supremacy.

KEYWORDS

Britain; Eighteenth Century; Nobility; Ancient History; Maurice Shelton

SOMMARIO

L’antico privilegio: la storia del potere ereditario nel True Rise of Nobility di Maurice Shelton. L’articolo si concentra sul testo di Maurice Shelton *The True Rise of Nobility* (1718), una narrazione pseudo-storica delle origini dei privilegi ereditari, per esplorare l’uso delle tradizioni nobiliari all’interno di strategie di potere volte a difendere e fortificare lo status quo nella Gran Bretagna del XVIII secolo. L’autore esamina come Shelton rivendichi il privilegio nobiliare in quanto elemento integrante dell’ordine universale, dipingendo così l’aristocrazia britannica come la manifestazione più recente di un ceto dominante naturale che esisteva fin dagli albori della creazione. Questa affermazione, come mostra l’articolo, non solo rafforzava il paradigma del potere egemonico alla base della tradizione aristocratica, ma rafforzava anche l’autorità delle élite minori, il cui potere dipendeva dalla continua persistenza della supremazia nobiliare.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Gran Bretagna; XVIII secolo; Nobiltà; Storia antica; Maurice Shelton