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THE GREATER AND LESSER NOBILITY IN EARLY MODERN  
EUROPE: POLAND-LITHUANIA AND ENGLAND AND WALES  
IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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**MAX WEBER PROGRAMME**

*The Greater and Lesser Nobility in Early Modern Europe:  
Poland-Lithuania and England and Wales in the Sixteenth Century*

**TOMASZ W. GROMELSKI**

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## **Abstract**

This paper comparatively discusses the relationship between the greater and lesser nobilities in two contrasting polities - sixteenth-century Poland-Lithuania and Tudor England. It argues that the szlachta's and the gentry's (the lesser nobility in Poland and England respectively) relations with their social superiors seem not to have undergone such significant changes since the late Middle Ages as has often been argued. The aristocracy were seen as the wealthier, more powerful and more respectable section of the wider class of gentlemen. They were expected to act as leaders of the gentry and the people in peace and at war, and to assist the monarch in running the country through participation in government and administration. From the perspective of the gentry, the great nobles were providers or brokers of patronage who, in exchange for loyalty and service, offered protection and rewards as well as access to the court. This symbiosis, which worked rather well despite occasional disputes, was cemented by traditions of reciprocity, blood links and personal allegiances. The differences in wealth and power between individual nobles and the rank-and-file szlachta and gentry were often great, but in the sixteenth century both lesser nobilities felt quite confident of their relations with their superiors. In the case of England, this seems to have been a consequence of the gentry oligarchies' direct links with the court as well as their increasing importance as provincial magistrates and administrators. In Poland-Lithuania the szlachta could still challenge the magnates, who had not yet become the notoriously over-mighty subjects of the next era.

## **Keywords**

Nobility, aristocracy, gentry, szlachta, magnates, social structure, patronage, clients, affinity.



Modern, and especially the most recent, historiography of the early modern period pays much less attention to the upper strata of societies than studies of the past. While the tendency to turn away from tracing aristocratic pedigrees and analysing the political careers and factional affiliations of prominent noblemen in favour of other topics and methodologies indicates a naturally occurring change in the scholarly approach to the past, it could potentially have an adverse effect on our understanding of the history of European polities and societies. We should not ignore the simple fact that well into the nineteenth century (and in some cases much longer) members of the nobility, great lords and petty squires alike, acting both as a group and as individuals, continued to exert considerable influence on social and political structures, the economy, religion and culture in the majority of realms of the continent.

One of the most neglected aspects of life of the sixteenth-century *noblesse* is the relationship between the higher aristocracy and the lesser men who lacked the resources of their wealthy and influential counterparts but still counted themselves as gentlemen and subscribed to the cultural ideals of the descendants of the knights of yore. This paper sets out to comparatively discuss the mutual obligations that existed between the higher and lower nobility in two very different societies – that of Poland-Lithuania in the reign of Sigismund August and the first elective monarchs, and that of England and Wales under Elizabeth I. Its main focus is the szlachta's and the gentry's attitudes towards their social superiors.

The natural place of the gentry and the szlachta was above the common man but below the titled and usually much wealthier nobility. It seems that in Poland despite the lack of clear dividing lines between the mere nobility and what was effectively an aristocracy, the latter easily asserted their dominant position, and the less prominent szlachta acknowledged their deference to them in the same instinctive manner.<sup>1</sup> The nominal equality of all noble citizens guaranteed by law was cherished as one of the main pillars of the political system and repeated *ad nauseam* in parliamentary speeches and during elections, in political tracts, sermons, literature and correspondence, but the ideal hardly matched reality. Wealth, lineage, office-holding, tradition and several other factors inevitably set some nobles apart from their 'brethren'. Those who 'are so poore as they drink water, and follow the plough bare-footed' and 'are forced to attend on other gentlemen' could not equate themselves with the likes of Jan Zamoyski, Grand Hetman and Crown Chancellor, or Duke Wasyl Konstanty Ostrogski, whose estates

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<sup>1</sup> For modern historiography, a sixteenth-century Polish magnate/aristocrat proves to be an elusive query. Just like the English nobility and gentry the early modern magnates and the 'mere' szlachta overlapped in terms of income and influence (the province of Greater Poland being perhaps the most evident example) and scholars have long struggled to formulate an accurate definition of the former. The debate triggered and fuelled by these attempts is inconclusive but it seems to drive towards a less analytical approach, which emphasizes the importance of taking into account all of the conventional criteria, such as wealth, office, military and political power, and stresses the prominence of social recognition – a public acknowledgement of magnate status by both the local community and the szlachta of other provinces – and the fact that until the later seventeenth century the Polish aristocracy retained the character of an 'open elite'. See H. Litwin, 'The Polish Magnates, 1454-1648: The Shaping of an Estate', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 53 (1986), pp. 63-92; E. Opaliński, *Elita władzy w województwach poznańskim i kaliskim za Zygmunta III* (Poznań, 1981), pp. 33-52, 163-4; L. Kieniewicz, *Senat za Stefana Batorego* (Warsaw, 2000), pp. 5-6, 285-90; R. Frost, 'The Nobility of Poland-Lithuania, 1569-1795', in H.M. Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (2 vols., London, 2007), ii, 288-91; J. Maciszewski, *Szlachta polska i jej państwo*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Warsaw, 1986), pp. 35-6, 75-95; A. Wyczański, *Uwarstwienie społeczne w Polsce XVI wieku: studia* (Wrocław, 1977), pp. 9-69.

consisted of 23 towns and 812 villages, and 100 towns and 1300 villages respectively (including lands leased from the Crown).<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, the szlachta became divided, in the words of Jerzy Zbaraski, castellan of Cracow, 'into *duos ordines* [...] *ratione* certain small *superioris*, which *gradus* must be in every assembly of men.'<sup>3</sup> In the biography of Jan Tarnowski, Stanisław Orzechowski – a prominent scholar and theologian but 'mere gentleman' by birth – described the relation between his magnate patron and himself:

Men in the Commonwealth be like stars in the skies [...] By their heavenly nature they be all equal, which be *proportio arithmetica*. Let us go *ad proportionem geometricam* and we discover great imparity between stars, because one star is more luminous than the other [...] I am equal with every man in Poland by my liberty, my rights, my coat of arms, my king and finally my head which is worth one hundred and twenty marks, that is the same as the head of any Tarnowski [...] However, Tarnowski and myself may have been equal but his house was much more respectable.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the ubiquity of egalitarian slogans, the actual inequality within the noble estate and the subsequent subservience of the masses of the less wealthy szlachta was recognized as a necessary arrangement and accepted without much protest.<sup>5</sup> The elevated position of the magnates was further justified and enhanced by their ministerial or dignitary status and membership of the senate, a body composed of – in the words of an early seventeenth century parliamentarian – 'the most distinguished nobility, famed for great birth and virtue', whose special constitutional function was to act as 'a wall between subjects and the king, which restrains the king and keeps the subjects from sedition.'<sup>6</sup> In the eyes of the szlachta themselves, as well as some foreign commentators, the social structure, built upon the principle of equality but recognizing differences in status, worked well. This was possible because the magnates were 'superior in dignity [...] but not in civic rights nor in the making of laws.'<sup>7</sup> The harmonious relationship between the great nobles and the ordinary szlachta was thus described by Sir George Carew, a surprisingly well-informed royal ambassador visiting Poland in 1598. He observed that equality in law and the fact that

the voyce of every poore servingman being a gentleman weighes as muche in all Conventes and elections as the greatest princes [...] is the common bande of unity between the riche and the poore, bothe by that meanes participating in the benefittes of the lande, the one by commaunde, and the other by dependency of the Commaunders trencher, besides the correspondency of patrone, and Cliente, imitating in that the auncient Rommane state, which by that order was united

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<sup>2</sup> Fynes Moryson, *Shakespeare's Europe: unpublished chapters of Fynes Moryson's Itinerary, being a survey of the condition of Europe at the end of the 16th century*, ed. C. Hughes (London, 1903), p. 90; A. Tarnawski, *Działalność gospodarcza Jana Zamoyskiego, Kanclerza i Hetmana Wielkiego Koronnego, 1572-1605* (Lwów, 1935), pp. 30-45; T. Kempa, *Konstanty Wasyl Ostrogski (ok. 1524/1525–1608), wojewoda kijowski i marszałek ziemi wołyńskiej* (Toruń, 1997), pp. 171-89.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in E. Opaliński, *Kultura polityczna szlachty polskiej w latach 1587-1652: system parlamentarny a społeczeństwo obywatelskie* (Warsaw, 1995), p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Stanisław Orzechowski, *Żywot i śmierć Jana Tarnowskiego* in Orzechowski, *Wybór pism*, ed. J. Starnawski (Wrocław, 1972), pp. 228-9; see also K. Koehler, *Stanisław Orzechowski. Dylematy humanizmu renesansowego* (Cracow, 2004), pp. 421-3.

<sup>5</sup> J. Ekes, *Złota demokracja* (Warsaw, 1987), p. 114; S. Grodziski, *Obywatelstwo w szlacheckiej Rzeczypospolitej* (Cracow, 1963), *passim*; Maciszewski, *Szlachta polska*, pp. 218-23; U. Świdorska-Włodarczyk, *Mentalność szlachty polskiej w XVI i XVII wieku* (Poznań, 2003), pp. 38-9; Frost, 'Nobility', pp. 285-7.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Krasieński, *Polska czyli opisanie topograficzno-polityczne Polski w wieku XVI*, ed. S. Budziński (Warsaw, 1852), p. 58; Stanisław Orzechowski, 'Oratio in conventu particulari visnensi (5 Marca 1566)', in *Orichoviana. Opera ineditae et epistolae Stanislai Orzechowski, 1543-1566*, ed. J. Korzeniowski (Cracow, 1891), p. 624. See also J. Dzięgielewski, 'Magnaci a senat w Rzeczypospolitej końca XVI – pierwszej połowy XVII wieku', in J. Urwanowicz (ed.), *Władza i prestiż. Magnateria Rzeczypospolitej w XVI-XVIII wieku* (Białystok, 2003), pp. 23-45.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Ekes, *Złota demokracja*, p. 114.



and kepte in mutuall amity, the Patricians being the patrones of the Plebeians, counselling them, following their suites, pleading their causes, and defending them in all cases without fee or reward, and on the other syde the Clientes observing, honoring and with greate respecte wayting on their patrones.<sup>8</sup>

The szlachta never really questioned the special position of the magnate elite, but they were extremely sensitive to any abuses of aristocratic and ministerial power and violations of the principle of equality. Political conflicts, cases of corruption and natural antagonism between the rich and influential and the less wealthy and unimportant fuelled the feeling of mistrust which resurfaced at times of increased tensions. At such moments the magnates were described as despots who ‘must needs be kings/ magistrates and judges’, and it was believed that ‘you have as many tyrants under the king/ as there be voivods and starosts.’<sup>9</sup> As part of the criticism of the aristocracy it was also *de rigueur* to complain how ‘the not so wealthy of the equestrian order suffer from the mighty’ and how ‘the less potent must bear wrongs done to them and arduously seek justice.’<sup>10</sup> In popular opinion the roots of this inequality lay in the fact that the earlier generations of szlachta ‘employed all means lest the king should turn a tyrant, lest he could take my possessions, my wife and my children, so that I could be safe and without fear in my house, but they had not sought that the mighty neighbour be not a tyrant.’<sup>11</sup> As a result, observed contemporary commentators sarcastically, the Polish commonwealth was a *gemütlich* abode for a proud petty nobleman who boasts of his liberties and ‘who says: “I do not care about the king”, but who trembles and runs from his mighty neighbour, who in this liberty raids his house, slays him and spoils his estate.’<sup>12</sup> The intensity of complaints about the ‘over-mighty lords’ increased towards the end of the century as the szlachta, who witnessed electoral manipulations of the magnates and intense factional struggles at court, became fully aware of the great nobles’ immense power.

This is about our necks now – wrote Jakub Zawisza at the beginning of the seventeenth century – they call us the nobility and it has been almost since the beginning of this Commonwealth that there was no order higher than the equestrian or knightly estate; should someone have a closer look and properly consider things, he must admit that [...] this has been overthrown by stealth and cunning means and that shortly we shall see how they strip us of all these liberties and equality like small children, and bring in, in the manner of that Trojan horse, the order of lords.<sup>13</sup>

Frequent outbursts of frustration and anger of this kind notwithstanding, the exact nature of the relations between the mere nobility and individual magnates in their regional power bases depended on tradition, political and economic circumstances, the personality of the magnate and a great number of other factors, and therefore varied from region to region. In general, the szlachta recognized the special role and status of the magnates and, if it did not clash with their own interests or convictions, instinctively followed their lead. However, they had a certain vision of the way their superiors should perform their social obligations and judged the magnates by their ability to fit the stereotype. Practically until the end of the *Rzeczpospolita* – and in some cases even longer – magnates failing to meet the szlachta’s expectations, such as providing patronage and protection both to their ‘official’ clients and local community in general, exposed themselves to the risk of losing political influence and undermining their position in their county and at court. It was therefore essential that they properly

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<sup>8</sup> Sir George Carew, *Relation of the State of Polonia and the United Provinces of that Crown Anno 1598*, ed. C.H. Talbot, (EFD, xiii, 1965), 86.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., ‘Wyznanie prawdziwych urazów ślacheica polskiego’, in *Pisma polityczne z czasów Rokoszu Zebrzydowskiego, 1606-1608*, ed. J. Czubek (3 vols., Cracow, 1916-18), i, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Jakub Zawisza z Kroczoza, *Wskrócenie prawnego procesu koronnego*, ed. A. Winiarz (Cracow, 1899), 30; Teki Pawińskiego, Akta Sejmikowe, Łomża, 4 March 1596, cited in J. Choińska-Mika, ‘Postawa polityczna szlachty mazowieckiej w latach 1587-1605’ (Warsaw University Ph.D. thesis, 1991), p. 202.

<sup>11</sup> Łukasz Górnicki, *Droga do zupełnej wolności*, ed. W. Stec (Białystok, 1997), p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Piotr Skarga, *Kazania sejmowe*, ed. J. Tazbir and M. Korolko, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Wrocław, 1984), p. 173.

<sup>13</sup> Zawisza, *Wskrócenie*, p. 48.

understood their own position and were capable of winning the favours of the independent and notoriously moody szlachta.<sup>14</sup>

Relations between the nobility and the gentry in England raise a set of questions similar to those arising in the course of studying the szlachta and the magnates. First of all, despite the formal legal distinction between the titled nobility and the gentry, the dividing line between the two groups was not clear cut. The gentry, though officially commoners at law, considered themselves and were perceived as members of the same class as the great nobles.<sup>15</sup> The problem of how the gentry stood in relation to the aristocracy and the apparent disparity between the gentleman's legal and social status intrigued a number of contemporary commentators. Writing in 1603 William Segar explained (paraphrasing Sir Thomas Smith and William Harrison): 'We in England doe divide our men into five sorts: Gentlemen, Citizens, Yeoman, Artificers and Labourers. Of gentlemen, the first and principle is the King, Prince, Duke, Marqueses, Earls, Viscounts, and Barons. These are the Nobilitie, and be called Lords and Noblemen. Next to these be Knights, Esquires and simple gentleman, which [...] may be called *Nobilitas minor*.'<sup>16</sup>

The barrony or degree of Lordes – wrote Smith in *De republica Anglorum* – doeth answer to the degree of Senators of Rome, and the title of nobilitie as we use to call in England *patricii*: when *patricij* did betoken *Senatores aut senatorum filios* [...] the second sort of gentlemen [...] seemeth to aunswere in part to that which the Romanes called *Equites Romanos*, differing in some pointes, and agreeing in other.<sup>17</sup>

A historical – as in Smith's case – or contemporary comparison was a natural and logical step in search of an accurate description of the native nobility and gentry.

But though we commenlye terme those Nobles, who are next to the Prince and counsayle – observed Lawrence Humfrey – yet the *Latines* call him noble, whom the *Italyans*, *Frenche* men, and we otherwise terme a gentleman. Whereby it appeareth, this worde with his largest reache containeth not onely the highest estates and callinges: but whatsoever worthies, of whatsoever power or place: as also the *Germaines* name theyrs *Iunkers* and *Idelles*, which soundeth in englishe Idle men. These also both be, and may (not unproperlye) be named men of the best sorte. For albeit the best be of the best sorte, of whatsoever estate or degree: yet is this mane restraynd to wealth and dignitie.<sup>18</sup>

For Richard Mulcaster the conclusion was that

there be also three kindes in gentilitie, the gentlemen [...], the nobleman [...] and the prince [...]. Their difference is in their authoritie, the prince most, the nobleman next, the gentleman under both [...] A gentleman in nature of his degree is before a nobleman, though not in height. [...] Therefore whether I use the term of nobilitie hereafter or of gentilitie, the matter is all one, both

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<sup>14</sup> A. Zajączkowski, *Szlachta polska. Kultura i struktura* (Warsaw, 1993), pp. 44-5, 56; S. Tarnowski, *Pisarze polityczni XVI wieku*, ed. B. Szlachta (Cracow, 2000), p. 915; G. Łukowski, *Liberty's Folly: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century, 1697-1795* (London, 1991), pp. 20-1.

<sup>15</sup> K. Wrightson, 'Estates, Degrees, and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England', in P. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 30-5; J.C. Cornwall, *Wealth and Society in Early Sixteenth Century England* (London, 1988), p. 142; G. Mingay, *The Gentry: The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* (London, 1976), p. 53; R. Wagner, *English Genealogy* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 97-8; M.L. Bush, *The English Aristocracy: A Comparative Synthesis* (Manchester, 1984), pp. 2-4, 35-43.

<sup>16</sup> William Segar, *Honour military, and civil contained in foure bookes* (London, 1602), p. 51; see also W. Harrison, *The Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life*, ed. G. Edelen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), p. 96ff; Sir Thomas Smith, *De republica Anglorum*, ed. M. Dewar (Cambridge, 1982), p. 66; Thomas Wilson, *The State of England Anno Dom. 1600*, ed. F.J. Fisher, (Camden Soc., 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., lii, 1936), p. 23; Gerard Legh, *Accedens of Armory* (London, 1562), fo. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *De republica*, pp. 66-7; also Harrison, *Description of England*, pp. 106-15.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Humfrey, *The Nobles, or of nobilitye* (London, 1563), fo. Dv.

the names signifying the whole order, though not of one ground, *nobilitie* being the flower and *gentilitie* the root.<sup>19</sup>

The combination of theoretical assertions, tradition and the practicalities of everyday life seems to have developed into a coherent system whereby the nobility were seen as more respectable members of a larger class whose superior status and special social and political role was indisputable both in their own minds and those of the rank-and-file gentlemen and the people.<sup>20</sup> How the latter reconciled the sense of equality of all men of honour with the seniority of an aristocrat is sometimes illustrated by the reply given to the Queen by Sir Philip Sidney after she had tried to prevent a duel between himself and the Earl of Oxford. When Elizabeth 'like an excellent monarch, lays before him the difference in degree between earls and gentlemen; the respect inferiors ought to their superiors [...] how the gentlemen's neglect of the nobility taught the peasant to insult upon both [...]', Sir Philip 'besought her Majesty to consider that although he were a great lord by birth, alliance and grace, yet he was no lord over him, and therefore the difference of degrees between free men could not challenge any other homage than precedence.'<sup>21</sup>

The gentry's relations with the nobility must be seen in the context of social and political changes taking place in the sixteenth century, especially the much debated 'crisis of the aristocracy'. Some historiography such as Lawrence Stone, Richard Tawney or Gordon Mingay have suggested that the Tudor nobility were a declining class, a mere shadow of their mightier predecessors, 'the lords in former times' who 'were farre stronger, more warlike, better followed, living in their Countries'.<sup>22</sup> The crisis, it was argued, was a result of Tudor policies aimed at weakening or even destroying the nobility, economic hardships caused by overspending, lack of economic acumen (in contrast to the enterprising gentry who quickly adapted to the increasingly capitalistic market), and the decline of feudal values which upheld aristocratic hegemony in localities and at court. More recently scholars – most notably George Bernard and Steven Gunn – while acknowledging that the nobility were in many ways affected by the political and social developments of the Tudor era, have challenged 'the crisis theory' and demonstrated that in the period in question neither the status nor the role of the peers had been drastically redefined. The Tudors eliminated some distrusted magnates, restrained oppressive noblemen and seem to have consciously worked towards ensuring that 'their number and wealth was moderate, and their spirits and powers counterpoised with [monarchical] magistracy from being authors of any new Barons' Wars.'<sup>23</sup> Yet, they did not display consistent hostility to the aristocracy, nor did they 'industriously apply' themselves 'to glean up the remainders of the house of York, from whence a competitor might arise, and by all means to crush those who were most able to oppose them.'<sup>24</sup> The government placed more and more responsibilities in the hands of local gentry with direct links to the court, but the process of incorporating county elites into the governance of the shires was not a new phenomenon and it did not mean bypassing and excluding great noblemen.<sup>25</sup> As for wealth, although some individual nobleman and families experienced either periodical or prolonged financial difficulties, 'namely the earl of Oxford' who 'prodigally spent and consumed all, even to the selling of the stones, timber and lead of his castles and houses', or Henry Hastings and Thomas

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training up of Children*, ed. W. Barker (Toronto, 1994), pp. 198-9; also Humfrey Braham, *The institution of a gentleman* (London, 1555), fo. Bvii.

<sup>20</sup> J. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History 1550-1760*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 1997), pp. 157-9; Mingay, *Gentry*, p. 4; R. Kelso, *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century* (Gloucester, Mass., 1929), p. 191; D.M. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth. England under the later Tudors 1547-1603*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 1992), p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Fulke Greville, *A Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney*, in Greville, *The Prose Works*, ed. J. Gouws (Oxford, 1986), pp. 40-1.

<sup>22</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Prerogative of Parliaments. Proved in a dialogue between a counsellour of state, and a justice of peace* (London, 1657), p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> Greville, *Dedication*, p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> Algernon Sidney about Henry VII in Sidney, *Works*, ed. J. Robertson (London, 1772), p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> R.W. Kaeuper, *War, Justice and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 153-5, 175-8; A. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 49-50.

Radcliffe, the aristocracy still held in their hands a very substantial chunk of land and with easy access to the court as source of grants they constituted the most opulent section of society.<sup>26</sup>

The position and role of the Tudor nobility was therefore a combination of tradition and political developments that had been taking place since the late fifteenth century and had led to the establishment of a strong monarchy and a consolidated national state. First and foremost, the nobility were seen as natural counsellors of the monarch – a role that implied providing expert advice in the literal sense because ‘one mortal man cannot have knowledge of all things done in a realm or large dominion’, guiding the ruler to ensure that he always acted in the best interest of the commonwealth, curbing his autocratic instincts, and securing and legitimising royal power.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the aristocracy were expected to act as intermediaries between the localities and the court, as ‘brave half-paces between a throne and a people’ by exercising their power and influence as traditional leaders, magnates and administrators to implement government policies and facilitate smooth communication.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the gentry and the people looked up to them as great lords in their own right for whom ‘it is most naturall, and no less honourable’ to ‘have the government and ruell under the Prince in this countrie’, and who are therefore obliged to provide protection and patronage.<sup>29</sup> This continued to be done in a traditional seigniorial manner as, despite increasing emphasis on obedience, civil society and national interest, feudal values could not be suppressed without compromising the stability of relations between the great and lesser men.<sup>30</sup> Though stripped of some of their powers and diminished in number, the great families continued to rule in their counties and derive a large proportion of their strength from their vast landed resources and more importantly from the loyalty and allegiance of the country gentry.<sup>31</sup> The gentry for their part were ready to serve the nobles and relied on their assistance in enhancing their own position and wealth in the way they had done in the past. Naturally, while in some counties the symbiosis between the two groups remained unhindered for

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<sup>26</sup> Wilson, *State of England*, p. 22; C. Cross, *The Puritan Earl: The Life of Henry Hastings, 3rd Earl of Huntingdon, 1536-95* (London and New York, 1966), pp. 99-105; S. Doran, ‘The Finances of an Elizabethan Nobleman and Royal Servant: A Case Study of Thomas Radcliffe, 3rd Earl of Sussex’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 66 (1988), pp. 292-4, 299-300; see G. Bernard, ‘Introduction. Tudor Nobility’, in Bernard, *The Tudor Nobility* (Manchester, 1992), esp. pp. 6-8.

<sup>27</sup> Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book named the Governour*, ed. S.E. Lehmborg (London, 1975), p. 13; J. Guy, ‘Monarchy and Counsel: Models of the State’, in P. Collinson (ed.), *The Sixteenth Century 1485-1603* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 113-42; idem, ‘The Rhetoric of Counsel in Early-Modern England’, in D. Hoak (ed.), *Tudor Political Culture* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 293-310; idem, ‘Tudor Monarchy and Its Critiques’, in J. Guy (ed.), *The Tudor Monarchy* (London, 1997), pp. 78-109; M. Crane, ‘*Video et taceo*: Elizabeth I and the Rhetoric of Counsel’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 28 (1988), pp. 1-15.

<sup>28</sup> Greville, *Dedication*, p. 113; D. MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors: Politics and Religion in an English County, 1500-1600* (Oxford, 1983), p. 53; F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (London, 1994), pp. 195-6; R. Asch, *Nobilities in Transition 1550-1700. Courtiers and Rebels in Britain and Europe* (London, 2003), p. 7; S. Gunn, ‘Off with their Heads: The Tudor Nobility, 1485-1603’, in R. Smith and J. Moore (eds.), *The House of Lords: A Thousand Years of British Tradition* (London, 1994), pp. 63-4.

<sup>29</sup> George Clarkson, servant of the 7<sup>th</sup> earl of Northumberland, cited in M.E. James, ‘A Tudor Magnate and the Tudor State: Henry Fifth Earl of Northumberland’, reprinted in M.E. James (ed.), *Society, Politics and Culture. Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 52.

<sup>30</sup> M. E. James, ‘The Concept of Order and the Northern Rising, 1569’, reprinted in James, *Society, Politics and Culture*, pp. 270-7; D. Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth. England under the later Tudors 1547-1603*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 1992), p. 42; K. Wrightson, ‘Social Order of Early Modern England: Three Approaches’, in L. Bonfield, R.M. Smith and K. Wrightson, (eds.), *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure. Essays Presented to Peter Laslett on his Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 192-3; P. Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers 1500-1650* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1982) i, 62-3; A. Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 142-44.

<sup>31</sup> S. Adams, ‘Faction, Clientage and Party: English Politics, 1550-1603’, reprinted in S. Adams, *Leicester and the Court: Essays on Elizabethan Politics* (Manchester, 2002), p. 14; Adams, ‘Baronial Contexts? Continuity and Change in the Noble Affinity, 1400-1600’, reprinted in Adams, *Leicester and the Court*, pp. 374-410; Bernard, ‘Introduction. The Tudor Nobility’, pp. 20-2; G. Jones, *The Gentry and the Elizabethan State* (Swansea, 1977), pp. 23-4; A.H. Smith, *County and Court: Government and Politics in Norfolk 1558-1603* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 36-44.

decades, in other regions it was disturbed by clashes and feuds resulting from conflicting interests or merely from personal grievances.<sup>32</sup>

Neither in Poland nor in England was the boundary between the lesser and the greater nobility precisely delineated – as was the case in Germany or Spain – despite the fact that the latter enjoyed certain privileges. The sixteenth-century theories discussing the status and role of the aristocracy and their relations with the gentry may at times appear nebulous and somewhat clumsily construed but it seems that in real life contemporaries had little trouble in identifying the great nobles' place in the social hierarchy. They were seen as the political and social elite, whose existence had deep historical, symbolic and practical justification: they were natural advisors to the monarch, statesmen, recognized go-betweens in relations between localities and the court and traditional leaders of men. In the much more centralized and bureaucratized England, the aristocracy was gradually becoming part of the state machinery, whereas the Polish magnates were growing more independent and more confident in their relations with both central authority and the rank-and-file szlachta, the lower echelons of which were to them quickly becoming a class of political and economic clients and dependents.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> A. Wall, 'Patterns of Politics in England 1558-1625. Historiographical Review', *Historical Journal*, 31 (1988), pp. 947-63.

<sup>33</sup> T. Manteuffel, 'Problem feudalizmu polskiego', *Przegląd Historyczny*, 37 (1948), pp. 62-71, esp. 69-71.



