Magnificent Money:
Wealth and Nobility in *Magnificence*
and *Gentleness and Nobility*

Karina Welna

Tudor interludes, performed for and often sponsored by the aristocracy of England, offer us a unique insight into how the elite discussed and viewed the changing face of their country.¹ Through the texts of John Skelton's drama *Magnificence* and the Rastell and Heywood collaboration *Gentleness and Nobility* this essay will examine the debates that surrounded the use of wealth and the definition of nobility, and how these topics were discussed before royalty and the elite. Although most probably written within a couple of decades of each other, between the end of the fifteenth century and beginning of the sixteenth, *Magnificence* and *Gentleness* show that opinion was hardly monolithic at the time. Within the plays an air of anxiety surrounds the prominent new wealth of the middle classes as well as their aspirations to rise both in power and status. *Magnificence* most obviously reveals a deep seated anxiety over the changing social and economic world of England. This drama sees the upward social mobility and rising economic affluence of the commonality as a result of sinful and ambitious behaviour, bound to destabilize the commonwealth and destroy the status of the nobility. In *Magnificence* nobleness can only be achieved by those who are born to the elite; 'commoners' are simply seen as incapable of nurturing and understanding this virtue regardless of the wealth they may have acquired. *Gentleness* has none of this ambivalence about the rising influence of the economically fortunate. Instead, it sees many similarities in the goals and beliefs of the affluent middling class and the established nobility. In fact, for *Gentleness*, it is this very similarity which can be the bar to both elite and 'common' people fully understanding what nobleness is and how wealth should be used. Together these plays reveal the breadth of opinion that existed over nobility and wealth and the anxieties and tensions that social and economic change could cause for the elite.

*Magnificence* was written by John Skelton, a poet laureate and satirist, the sometime tutor of Prince Henry (later King Henry VIII).² Written in the late fifteenth or the early sixteenth century³ the play focuses on the financial, political and social responsibilities of a sovereign, particularly the relationship between wealth and
nobleness. The close focus on monarchical matters results in only passing mention of the rising social and financial fortunes of many ‘commoners’, but what mention is made is derogatory, revealing an anxiety over and general dislike of such changes. Magnificence is a highly conservative work which seeks to reaffirm the status quo and the established social hierarchy, resisting all temptation to validate change of any nature that does not fit into its neat ‘traditional’ framework of what English society is, or rather, should be.

Gentleness and Nobility was first published in 1525, and was probably written only a few years before this date. While no mention is made of John Heywood’s authorship in the text, modern scholarship has shown a strong case for Heywood being the author of the bulk of the piece, Rastell only contributing the Philosopher’s epilogue at the end. Heywood has a connection to the court reveals at this time, so it is not inconceivable that this drama may have been presented before royalty. Unlike Magnificence, Gentleness openly acknowledges social changes apparent in contemporary England. Heywood’s play features only three characters, a Knight, Merchant and Plowman, and their discussion focuses squarely on the relationship between wealth, power and status, and the true definition of nobility. The fact that a merchant is one of the central characters points directly to the rising prominence of this group as ‘[t]he rapid growth of a well-educated and wealthy middle class towards the end of the fifteenth century eclipsed the importance of “clergy” in social thinking and challenged the “gentle” class.’ During the fifteenth and sixteenth century men of non-noble origins, such as Thomas Wolsey and Thomas More, took prominent roles in the political sphere of England. The exalted achievements of these ‘new men’ were made possible through the self-made wealth of their families as well as their own personal ambition. As a character, the Merchant represents not just persons of a mercantile background but also broadly those who have risen in rank and status through their own efforts. Within the play, this middling class character is given a role that allows him to be seen as a valued and important member of society, not prone to sinfulness or illicit activity any more than his counterpart, the Knight. In effect he is given dramatic equality with his social superior—the same amount of time on stage and the same validity attached to his arguments. Coupled with this acknowledgement of the changing social world of England is a strong emphasis on humanist values and beliefs, which probably sat well with the affluent rising middling classes. Colin Burrow notes, ‘English humanism was in part a systematic programme for the self-advancement of low-born, highly educated and ambitious men.’ The influence of humanist learning is ever present in the dialogue of the characters. Cameron’s indispensable work on the background and sources of the play has shown that the playwright was drawing on the work of some very prominent humanists, such as More and Erasmus, to further his argument. Analogues to the play can also be found in the work of prominent medieval writers, such as Chaucer and Christine de
Pizan, as well as anonymous works. The reason the sources can be so broad for this drama is simply that the argument presented was in itself not new; what is unique is the way in which the play systematically refuses to believe that nobility in virtue could only be limited to the elite. Despite its progressive appearance, Gentleness is far from a simple endorsement of the newly rich and humanist philosophies; instead it is a thorough interrogation of both wealth and nobility according to the precepts of the new learning, revealing the problems of applying humanism to established definitions and understandings.

Magnificence is an allegorical work in the style of a morality play. Drawing on Aristotelian and Horatian influences Skelton constantly harks back to the classics by either direct reference to the works of the ancients or in the names of the characters that inhabit his play. Felicity, who is personified on Skelton’s stage, features greatly in Aristotle’s work Politics, as a common goal for a society to have for its citizens. The very name Magnificence is a direct reference to Aristotle’s Ethics in which it is a central characteristic and virtue of leading a good life. Magnificence is characterized by liberality and generosity, particularly in public spending, and a willingness to help others in any way possible. Coupled with many of the other Aristotelian virtues such as courage, temperance, high-mindedness, ambition and good temper, to name a few, it is clear that the person who is magnificent will never do anything solely for personal benefit; while great honours may come his way he would never indulge in vanity or seek to be glorified. Such a person realizes the importance of social bonds, is generous, gentle in disposition and a shining example of virtue. In a play that seeks to show the ideal character for a prince, magnificence, with its association of public spending and largesse, is an ideal worth espousing.

A similar case can be made for the central importance of the character of Measure within the play, since the idea of moderation is of vital importance to much of Aristotle’s work on ethics. Some critics have also noted the influence of other classical authors, particularly Horace. In fact, William O. Harris makes a convincing case that the main classical influence behind the play is Horace, not Aristotle. Ramsay (whose foundation work still influences many readings of the play) was the strongest voice to posit that Aristotle was the main classical reference behind the drama. While his case is strong, Ramsay is sometimes forced to claim that Skelton has misread or misunderstood the ancient author in order to strengthen his own argument. It is important to remember that the only classical author that Skelton directly refers to in the play is Horace, saying ‘Oracius to record in his volymys olde, / With every condycyon Measure must be soughth.’ (114–15) In many respects Measure within the play is far more consistent with Horace’s odes than it is with Aristotle’s Ethics. Measure for Aristotle is a way to divide one’s possessions in a fair minded way with liberality at its heart, while for Horace measure is more an outlook on life; a way to deal with adversity and prosperity in a level headed way. The term
'magnificence' was also often used to refer to the cardinal virtue Fortitude.\textsuperscript{19} This seems particularly appropriate for this drama since much of Magnificence's problem is his lack of fortitude in adversity. Harris has also shown that Skelton may also have been relying on the cardinal virtue tradition through the work of Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{20} It is likely that both scholars are correct to some extent, since the relationship between Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas is well documented, and Horace's work was also appropriated by various Christian scholars during the Middle Ages to espouse the cardinal virtue tradition.\textsuperscript{21} Whatever the classical influences, they would all have come through the filter of the Christian school, thus the overriding moral philosophy is religious. While Magnificence may not be exactly like previous morality plays, in that it is not only concerned with the soul of its main character but also attempts to advise the audience on more earthly matters, any message it espouses is in the end a conservative religious one. Regardless of the dispute about the actual classical source, the influence of the ancients through the filter of religion is strong in the moral message of the play. The drama is constantly seeking to make its audience realize the role wealth plays in moulding the character of a person, particularly a noble, with regard to contemporary religious teaching rather than solely classical scholarship.

The play opens with the character of Felicity declaring that wealth is much abused despite the fact that it can easily be put to good purposes if men are reasonable and measurable in their use of it. Liberty is next to appear on stage and he laments the notion that he should be restrained declaring 'there is no Welthe where as Lyberte is subdue'(73).\textsuperscript{22} Felicity continues that while Liberty is necessary it must be controlled in order to be useful and profitable. Measure enters and breaks up the fight between the two, asserting that he must be in charge for 'Welthe without Measure wolde bere hymselfe to bolde; / Lyberte without Measure proue a thynge of nought'(116–17). Magnificence appears on stage and ratifies Measure's organization of Liberty and Felicity, putting Measure in charge of all his affairs. All seems well until the prince's wits are put to the test with the entrance of the first vice, Fancy. Fancy enters proclaiming he is Largesse and, through his wiles and Magnificence's own foolishness, manages to snare the unwitting prince into his grasp. Having succeeded in making the sovereign accept him, Fancy opens the door for other undesirables to impact upon Magnificence's life and conduct. All the vice characters slowly introduce themselves to the audience through dramatic activity with each other and individual monologue, revealing their motivations and dispositions. Each vice expresses a wish to join the retinue of the monarch. In order to do this each assumes an alternate name; thus Counterfeit Countenance, the ring leader of the group masquerades as Good Demeanance, Crafty Conveyance calls himself Sure Surveyance, Cloaked Collusion: Sober Sadness, Courly Abusing: Lusty Pleasure and Foly: Conceit. These advisors lead Magnificence to renounce Measure and live a
courtly life filled to excess which eventually leads to the prince losing all his wealth. The sovereign is then visited by Adversity and Poverty, who inform him that God can restore all to him but he must learn to not trust so much in worldly things. Seeing himself in such a state, betrayed by those he held most dear, Magnificence falls into Despair's hands and is ready to kill himself. At this point Good Hope enters and saves him from damnation. Having repented his wrongful ways Magnificence is visited by Redress who will help him get back what he has lost. The play ends with Redress giving the final sober advice on how a nobleman should act with regard to his wealth.

Magnificence's obvious concern with Royal matters has led many critics to attempt to link it directly to a particular event or political position. Greg Walker and others posit that the play deals with expulsion of the minions,\textsuperscript{23} Ramsay that it is Skelton's personal tirade against Cardinal Wolsey\textsuperscript{24} and John Watkins that it is a stand against the 'new men' who often profited from Henry VIII's style of absolutist rule.\textsuperscript{25} While such exercises are always interesting I have chosen to instead look at the drama outside of any specific event or political position. In my analysis I attempt to show that the concerns of Magnificence were general, and not specific, qualms about nobility and its relationship to wealth at the time. While Skelton's play can be seen to apply to Henry VIII, it also offers advice for any monarch ruling in the medieval and early modern period. Much like Scattergood, I see the drama as being deeply concerned with the financial dealings of a monarch, particularly the running of his household, and how this will inevitably affect his realm.\textsuperscript{25} I also agree with Greg Walker's position that the Aristotelian influence cannot be denied and that its focus on measure can also be found in the protocols and organization of the royal household, as he notes: 'When Edward IV and his council attempted to reform the royal household in 1478, it was in the language of the Aristotelian mean and of personal virtue that they expressed their political desires.'\textsuperscript{27} Throughout the period people constantly mixed philosophy with daily life, so it is not surprising that the organization of the nobility and royalty would often refer to and rely upon the classical philosophers. I believe Skelton, by using classically referential language in his play, seeks to make it part of an understood royal discourse that is already entrenched in the psyche of the ruling elite; thus his advice can be seen as both timeless and timely. While Skelton may have often written for or about an 'occasion', it is not always necessary to know what this event was to make some insightful discoveries about the playwright's time.\textsuperscript{28}

From the first line of the play a clear relationship is asserted between wealth, happiness and nobility. Wealth and happiness are melded together into the character of Felicity, and throughout his opening monologue Felicity clearly links the prosperity of the realm to the character of the ruling sovereign. It is telling that within Felicity's opening it is already declared that wealth can be used well and to the benefit of the
individual but only if ‘noblenesse’ is capable of nurturing the necessary skills and traits needed to use wealth in a good way,

But yf Prudence be proued with Sad Cyrcumspeccyon,
Welth might be wonne and made to lure,
Yf Noblenesse were aquayntyd with Sober Dyreckyon.

(17–19)

While both Magnificence and Gentleness and Nobility assert that nobility is an inner virtue, Skelton’s work clearly does not acknowledge that a common person can be noble in any shape, way or form. Within the text of Magnificence nobility is a virtue that is inextricably linked to status and therefore can only be attached to those of the elite class. Only Magnificence is capable of cultivating nobility and carrying out its hallmark practices. Such a viewpoint is traditionally medieval:

The frequency with which virtue is mentioned as a necessary qualification of the gentleman through the middle ages and the renaissance is misleading unless due attention is paid to current general definitions of nobility and explanations of the value of gentle birth. True nobility is almost always defined as that of race and virtue, and much of the insistence on virtue is intended not to comfort the lowly born but to admonish the well born who seem generally to have prided themselves on birth to the neglect of virtue.²⁹

Whenever the text mentions those ‘commoners’ who have risen through the ranks to gain both riches and power it always insinuates that these people have either attained their positions and affluence illicitly, or, that they are simply incapable of carrying out and maintaining their offices in a proper manner. Lacking ‘noblenesse’ such people, once in possession of wealth, are often wasteful and extravagant in their use of it. Counterfeit Countenance, whose very name implies deception through appearance and demeanour, explicitly refers to the ambitious ways of many people in society. He notes that by striving to appear greater in status then they really are, these ‘upstarts’ only manage to act foolishly, squander what wealth they have, get into debt and pay the ultimate price for their wasteful ways. Through employing the services of Counterfeit Countenance,

A knaue wyll counterfet nowe a knyght,
A lurdayne lyke a lorde to syght,
...
Thus make I them wyth thryft to fyght;
Thus at the laste I brynge hym ryght
To Tyburne, where they hange on hyght.

(417–20)
Another character that similarly comments on the habits of some ‘common’ people is Courtly Abusyon, who notes that they will ‘Spare for no coste’ (891) to dress fashionably and in an excessive manner. Such wasteful behaviour results only in a sticky end, ‘A Tyborne checke / Shall breke his necke’ (910–11). Like Counterfeit Countenance Courtly Abusyon tells of the dire, virtually inevitable, results of living above ones means and station simply to satisfy status seeking behaviour.

In Magnificence there is not one example of a ‘commoner’ that has done well and used his affluence in a manner beneficial to himself and society. To further the sense that people of non-noble birth are simply not able to nurture truly noble behaviour Foly takes great glee in explaining how he humiliates those who have ‘come vp of nought’ (1241) and ‘be set in auctorite’ (1244). He makes them to be so proud and haughty that ‘All that he dothe must be alowde’ (1248) and thus ‘maketh hym besy where is no nede’ (1250) which leads to the person being ridiculed by all. While even the nobility can fall into such excessive and wasteful behaviours, and Magnificence does, it cannot be disguised that within the play there is a clear dislike of social changes which manifests itself by ridiculing the hallmark features of the rising ‘commons’: conspicuous affluence and powerful office. The drama continuously characterizes their activities as excessive, wasteful and possibly illegal. Magnificence is able to redeem himself through his noble faculty, something that ‘commoners’ are simply not seen to be in possession of.

Using wealth as a noble presents its own unique set of dilemmas, particularly in a modern world full of deception. It is telling that Magnificence’s fall is inaugurated by the appearance of a vice, Fancy, who masquerades as Largesse. Fancy or in its original spelling fansy is, as Spinard reminds us, a variation on the word fantasy and in Skelton’s age it meant a delusional mindset.³⁰ Fancy, therefore, is representative of a delusional and false version of largesse. The noble practice of gift exchange in itself is not criticized. Felicity notes that largesse should reside with Magnificence for it is ‘encrease of noble fame’ (271) and ‘Largesse is laudable, so it be in Measure’ (78). As long as Magnificence can be liberal in moderation it can only serve his nobility well; problems only arise when the purpose behind this generosity is misunderstood as extravagant, prudeful display and a show of excessive expenditure.

Largesse, as the Middle English Dictionary defines it, is a ‘Willingness to give or spend freely; liberality, generosity, munificence’ and the ‘Liberal bestowal of gifts, grace, etc.; free spending.’³¹ Its purpose for the nobility was to facilitate the growth of a good reputation among subjects and allies and reinforce good social bonds.³² This great generosity was both a public and private affair with social, political and economic goals; it was not meant to be an excuse to spend vast sums of wealth without reason on favourites and others. Fancy only revels in the material side of the gift exchange and misunderstands its broader, deeper social use, as he says, ‘without Largesse Worsyp hath no place, / For Largesse is a purchaser of pardon and of
grace’ (267–68). Initially this statement may look quite right, but the use of the term ‘purchaser’ is a clue to how Fancy misunderstands this noble practice. Largesse is never meant as payment for a service or good but as an expression of favour and generosity that should be returned in turn with loyalty and goodwill. The material aspect is simply part of that expression. Further clues to how Fancy truly views noble generosity are shown in a story he tells Magnificence about how he came to have a letter of recommendation, supposedly from the virtuous Sad Circumspection. The vice tells how the guard at Pontoise thought he was a spy and wished to harm him physically. Fancy attributes his ability to get out of this situation to his use of largesse, as he says, ‘Had I not opened my purse wyde, / I trow, by Our Lady, I had ben slayne’, (347–48) and

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{By my trouthe, had I not payde and prayde,} \\
\text{And made Largesse, as I hyght,} \\
\text{I had not ben here with you this nyght.} \\
\text{But surely Largesse saved my lyfe;} \\
\text{For Largesse stynteth all maner of stryfe.}
\end{align*}
\]

(363–67)

From Fancy’s little tale it seems clear that he equates noble munificence with bribery, a far less exalted activity. As Fancy continues it becomes clear that he is completely uninterested in, or perhaps simply unable to comprehend, largesse’s more subtle noble uses. To capture Magnificence he first plays on the prince’s pride saying that,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Syr, I here men talke—} \\
\text{By the way as I ryde and walke,—} \\
\text{Say howe you exceede in Noblenesse,} \\
\text{If you had with you Largesse}
\end{align*}
\]

(374–77)

and ridicules Measure’s authority by saying that ‘measure is mete for a marchauntes hall, / But Largesse becometh a state ryall’ (382–83), finally telling Magnificence that “A lorde a negarde, it is a shame”; / But Largesse may amende your name’(388–89). By appealing to the prince’s pride and linking his solely materialistic definition of largesse to supposedly being capable of not only increasing but also fixing the apparently marred name of Magnificence, Fancy manages to join the royal retinue and thus starts the prince’s slippery slide to ruin. The message is clear: by simply misunderstanding what the purpose of noble liberality really is, wealth will be lost and with it nobility—perhaps the playwright had in mind the sticky end that both Edward II and Richard II met in part because of their apparent misuse of royal favour. The great importance of wealth to nobility is shown in the final segment of the play,
when Magnificence loses everything because he failed to understand the importance of moderation in his royal lifestyle.

By rejecting true largesse and instead engaging in reckless favouritism, spending all his wealth to appease the tastes and wishes of his vice-filled entourage, Magnificence fails to build a supportive network around himself. The lack of loyalty in the vices is illustrated amply when Magnificence comes begging while they revel in their successful ruination of him. Not only do they boast that 'we have ryfled hym metely well' (Magnificence, 2170) but they also refuse to help poor Magnificence and instead taunt him. Wealth is a necessary and integral facet of nobility and its practices. As soon as Magnificence's fortune is squandered by his ill chosen companions he loses not only his comfortable life but his status and power and is reduced to the station of a humble beggar. As a noble Magnificence's God-given position in the play is that of a person with great power and wealth, to fulfil his role in God's plan he must come to terms with earthly wealth and learn to use it to his own and society's betterment. Nobility and wealth go hand in hand, Magnificence notes himself that without wealth his nobility is diminished and gone, 'Where is now my kynne, my frendys, and my noble blood?' (2060). For those of royal or even noble status, there is no happiness or nobility without wealth.

By the conclusion of the play the audience would have witnessed the importance of using wealth wisely to the maintenance of the noble estate. Furthermore the playwright has methodically defended nobility as both a quality and status, that cannot be achieved or earned by those not born to the high estate. But, while 'commoners' may not be able to be fully noble, the nobility can most definitely descend to the level of a 'commoner'. In order to rise to the demands of the noble status that one is born to, a member of the elite must use his 'noblenesse' to rule with reason and spend in moderation. Such behaviour will not be at the expense of the expressions of nobility, such as largesse and good dress, but rather to its exaltation, praise and longevity.

Where Magnificence shows a careful defence of noble wealth, noble practices and a deep suspicion of new wealth and social change, Gentleness and Nobility instead reveals an open willingness to explore the commonalities between nobles and commons, as well as interrogate the definition of nobility and its relationship to wealth. Throughout, the play uses humanist philosophies to support its overall belief that true nobility rests in the moral character of the individual, not his birth. Unlike in Magnificence, in which nobility is so intertwined with wealth that it ceases to exist when affluence disappears, Gentleness shows that nobility can be attained by even the lowest and poorest of men although it is also fully aware that such a position can be very problematic and unpalatable for some. This play lacks any plot; instead it is an extended dialogue between a Knight, a Merchant and a Plowman, each representing an estate in English society. At the conclusion of the play a Philosopher appears on
stage to deliver a monologue that seeks to encapsulate, correct and emphasize the message of the drama. During their time on stage the three main characters discuss extensively how nobility should be defined and what role, if any, wealth plays in influencing a person’s ability to develop nobleness.

The Plowman character is far from a realistic plowman; instead he is an amalgamation of a far reaching literary tradition,

Behind him stands a Christian tradition of satirical complaint, in particular, of course, Piers the Plowman and its progeny: Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede, the pseudo-Chaucerian Plowman’s Tale [and] Jack Upland. The honest plowman was a touchstone against pretension, a licensed spokesman against exploitation by landlords, clergy, and the ‘kyngis purviours’.³³

Within Gentleness the Plowman’s role is to spice up and enlighten what could have easily been a rather predictable and dull debate, as Axton notes: ‘Insistence that true nobility depends on inner virtue and active merit became commonplace in humanist writing.’³⁴ The Plowman becomes a devil’s advocate of sorts, more than willing to expose the flaws and assumptions of the other protagonists as well as add his own voice and opinion to the argument.

At the start of the play the Knight and the Merchant are both shown to have a rather limited perception of what makes a nobleman. The knight defines nobleness or gentilnesse in terms that are favourable to him saying, ‘Mary, I call them gentylmen that be/ Born to grete landys by inherytaunce’³⁵ (I.30–31), while the Merchant offers a slightly different definition,

For I call hym a gentylman that gentilly
Doth gyf unto other men lovingly
Such thing as he hath of hys own proper.

(I.45–47)

Neither of the definitions is satisfactory because both fail to look at the inner characteristics and virtues of an individual. Remarkably the Merchant in his faulted definition actually seems to be referring to the practice of largesse, which, as Magnificence has shown, is a facet of the noble estate. This may reflect the simple fact that most merchant families actually aspired to join the established ruling class, often hoping to marry up into the nobility or gentry.³⁶ Merchants rarely hoped to stay as such. Astonishingly it seems that both the Merchant and the Knight, despite seeing themselves as opponents, are actually arguing for a defence of the same noble estate since both their definitions rely on seeing nobility more as status than virtue; perhaps the playwright is subtly suggesting that the ‘rising’ classes are not threats at all but instead strengthening supports to the traditional organization of
society. During their arguments the Knight and the Merchant do show that they actually attach some internal qualities to their understandings of nobility, such as wisdom and intelligence, but they rarely seek to interrogate their own personal moral character; preferring instead to focus on the material and temporal achievements of their ancestors. Such a line of argument resists humanist understandings because it rests on asserting that nobleness is innate to a person and can be passed on through inheritance, rather than a virtue that is developed through environment, spiritual knowledge and education.\textsuperscript{37}

It is the Plowman who is the first to attempt to turn the argument away from earthly or materialist scales of nobleness which see it mostly as a status or dependent on ancestral pedigree and instead focus it on the character of the individual. Up until the Plowman’s entrance the Knight and the Merchant succeeded in reducing their debate into a contest of whose ancestors were better, a dispute that seemed to have no conclusion or victor. The reason for the focus on ancestral achievements is largely due to the Knight’s strong belief in his nobleness resting in his ancestral blood which he attempts to prove is superior to the Merchant’s ancestry. The fact that this line of argument does not prove the Knight’s superiority easily shows already the fallacy of his belief, and necessitates a change in the debate. His line of argument, which in the medieval period was taken for granted, is denied its air of superiority and is now forced to defend itself.\textsuperscript{38} Soon after his entrance, the Plowman tells the two that their arguments ‘be not worth a fly’(I, 210), because they have falsely based their argument on the accomplishments of their ancestors and not on their own acts or personal qualities,

\begin{quote}
Ther is nother of you both dyd prove or lay
Ony of your actys, wherby that ye
Shulde in reason prove you noble to be,
Or therby deserve any maner praysyng.
\end{quote}

(I, 212–16)

Through the Plowman’s direction the debate between the Knight and the Merchant is transformed into a fuller and more developed argument. Forced to focus on their own personal qualities the Knight and the Merchant attempt to prove their superior nobleness through their own acts. Curiously, their debate results in their proving to the audience that they both provide necessary and integral services to the nation; the Knight through military and political leadership and the Merchant through ensuring economic growth and good trade relations. Clearly their argument will not be resolved if they only focus on the more material aspects of nobleness and character, so the Plowman adds another dimension to the definition of nobility, the spiritual or moral element, as he says,
Man is most noble of creature lyvyng,  
Not by hys body, for that is impotent,  
But by hys soule, beyng so excellent.  

(I.376–78)

Through his soul man has reason and intellect which allow him to govern the earth, provide for himself and also to improve his character in a spiritual manner. While ethically both men may seem to or at least know how to behave correctly with reference to their station, on a personal spiritual level they seem lacking.

It is when looking at the personal spiritual aspects of nobility that both the Merchant and the Knight find it hardest to make themselves seem noble. Using the seven deadly sins as a measuring stick of sinfulness and lack of virtue, the Plowman systematically asserts and shows his own inner nobleness, while also revealing the many sinful activities of the estates that the other characters represent. The Plowman shows through examples that he is relatively free of lust, avarice, pride, envy, wrath, sloth and gluttony. He says he is content with his plain wife ‘blak Maud’ (II.925), and does not care for ‘vanytese worldly’ (II.944). The Plowman also lives in his simple cottage, dresses plainly, is not envious or prone to anger, works hard for his living and has a simple and basic diet. In contrast, he notes the apparent sinfulness of the Merchant and the Knight. The vicious activities and behaviours that the Plowman lists cannot be based on a personal assessment of either of the other characters simply because he does not know the Knight or the Merchant so intimately. Instead the sins that he attributes to the other protagonists refer to the commonplace and stereotypical practices and habits of the estates they embody. He cites the fine array of his dramatic companions as proof of their pride,

Furst, for pryte, your rayment shewyth what ye be,  
For ye wyll never be content except that ye  
Have the fynest cloth and sylke for to were.  

(II.894–96)

The Plowman also assumes they are covetous because they ‘covet evermore goodis, landis, and rent; / What so ever ye get, yet never content’(II.900–1). In addition they are probably wrathful and envious of every man. Their ‘beddys so pleasaut and soft’(II.910) make them slothful, their fine diet filled ‘Wyth flesh and fysh most dylycate and fat, / All frutis and spyces that can be gat’(II.916–17) makes them indulge in gluttony and finally their lustfulness is also noted,

To aswage your carnall insurrecyons  
What so ever she be—wyfe wedow or mayde—  
If she come in the way, she shalbe assayd.  

(II.919–20)
Undoubtedly the Plowman’s opinion of himself and the other characters has some truth and also some fiction in it. Perhaps the most easily recognizable points that seem questionable are his claims to being slow to anger and non-violent. Only 200 lines previously the Plowman whipped the Knight in his indignation. Just like the Knight and the Merchant he also is an imperfect character, prone to seeing himself as better than he really is. The Knight, who holds himself to have the best of breeding, often resorts to name calling and insults when he feels too much opposition, calling the Plowman ‘stark kneve’ (706) and even a ‘swyne’ (II.932). It was this sort of behaviour that earned him a beating. The Merchant also often engages in similar behaviour, calling the Plowman a ‘skanderous chorle’ (II.922). Regardless of how much the Plowman may have exaggerated his goodness or the sinfulness of his companions, there is much truth in what he says and his reasoning. Nobleness can be found in a plowman, and the opposite in persons from higher estates.

It is interesting that much of the sinful behaviour of the Knight and the Merchant is linked to their affluence. Wealth is also much commented upon in the play, particularly on how it relates to virtue. The Plowman makes clear that wealth does not help cultivate good virtuousness,

\[
\begin{align*}
grete possessions \\
Make no gentylmen but gentyl condycyons. \\
That is the cause and best reason why \\
One should be callyd a gentylman truly.
\end{align*}
\]

(491–92)

Wealth is a troublesome entity, as the Plowman notes, an obsession with maintaining wealth can lead to covetousness and wrong behaviour as well as too much pride in one’s birth. It can also cause much suffering for the poor honest folk that he represents,

\[
\begin{align*}
Some wyll suffer hys dettis unpayd to be \\
And dye and jeourd hys soule, rather than he \\
Wyll any of hys landys mynysh and empayre, \\
That shuld after hys deth come to hys heyre. \\
And some of them so proud be of theyre blod \\
And use small vertew and doo lytyll good, \\
But gyfe all theyre myndys and theyre study \\
To oppresse the pore people by tyranny. \\
And some of them thynk thys for a surete, \\
It is the most honour to them that can be \\
To be able for to doo extorcyon \\
And to mayntayn it wyouth punycyon.
\end{align*}
\]

(695–706)
Leaning on the tradition of honest complaint that the Plowman character descends from there can be no denying the truth of his words. Those who have much will always be more likely to engage in worldly conceits, as Felicity in the opening of *Magnificence* reminds us. Regardless of his uneasy opinion of wealth and its effect on virtuousness, the Plowman is aware that affluence and wealth are necessary for people of high office, as long as such powerful positions are awarded on the grounds of true noble character:

And such people of vertuouse condycyons  
And no nother shuld be chosyn governours,  
And thei shuld have landys to maintain their honours.

(II.776–78)

What the Plowman argues is that virtuousness should be rewarded and be the source of power rather than wealth and birth; only in this way can the people be sure of having good men in office to lead the country. Wealth and power are only safe in the hands of those who are already virtuous. This argument, undeniably underpinned by humanist ideals and understandings, is completely in line with the ‘humanist slogan (adapted from chivalric sources) that virtue, not birth, was the true nobility.’

Thomas Starkey’s *Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset* was even so radical as to suggest that monarchy should be decided on personal merit rather than birth; understandably this work remained in manuscript form. While most works were not as radical as Starkey’s, there is an innate belief in many humanist works that merit should be the primary way in which offices are bestowed. In a less radical but still revolutionary work, More’s Utopians divide wealth equally; ‘Among them virtue has its reward, yet everything is shared equally, and all men live in plenty.’

Furthermore their prince is elected by representatives of the Utopians.

The Plowman’s position on virtue, wealth and power, although sound and reasonable, is met with vehement opposition. Both the Knight and the Merchant refuse to accept that their wealth or birth does not entitle them to power or make them more likely to be virtuous.

By the end of the play, the Plowman, through his clever argument, has shown that virtuous and noble behaviour can be found even in the most lowly of men, and the opposite in the highest. Wealth and birth guarantee nothing about true nobility. This proves too much for his two companions, who decide to withdraw from this debate in annoyance rather than see who is the victor. The withdrawal of the Knight and the Merchant from the debate shows the difficulties in trying to convince others of the value of humanist philosophies. In his parting monologue the Plowman takes the attitude that if a man is set in his beliefs then no amount of talking will change them, ‘In effect it shall no more avayle / Than wyth a whyp to dryfe forth a snayle’ (II.992–93). The Knight and the Merchant are not interested in a philosophy
that would not easily show them to be noble. Unable to argue with the Plowman's superior reasoning, they retreat. Having excluded the Plowman, the Knight and the Merchant simply reaffirm their previous positions on all accounts. The Knight declares 'That gentylmen borne to land must nedys be / For suffycyency of most noble' (II. 1076–77) and the Merchant affirms 'He that hath grete haboundance of ryches / May use lyberalyte and gentynles' (1090–91). The only effect of the debate seems to have been that the Knight and the Merchant have realized that they share much more in common than they once believed for, at the end of the play, these enemies are now good friends—perhaps a social comment on the period where men of lowly birth were beginning to rub shoulders with the elite.

The Philosopher's epilogue serves to reaffirm the value of the humanist reasoning and argument that has been represented within the play; primarily that virtue is the only real decider of nobility. The very need for this epilogue seems to belie the problems of applying a newer way of thinking to established value systems. While the philosopher reaffirms that nobility is an inner virtue, unrelated to class or status, and wealth and birth guarantee nothing in terms of moral character, the entire play shows that however correct or good such reasoning is, it may meet much resistance. Effecting change may take more than a good argument. Much as Thomas More's Utopia reveals, customs can often halt development and change. 43 Gentleness and Nobility shows a clear awareness of the difficulties inherent in effecting change. Just as Magnificence laments the lack of reason in the conduct of life, Gentleness shows a similar frustration—reason is not always easy to accept however right it may be.

Through their texts the Tudor dramas sought to discuss contemporary issues before the elite of England. These plays show that despite the rising influence of humanist beliefs and the easy prominence of 'commoners' in high office, neither of these developments was taken as self-evidently right or good. Both Magnificence and Gentleness and Nobility interrogate the social, economic and political changes that were occurring in contemporary England. While thinking differently about the value of such changes, they do agree on some fundamental points—both see nobility as, at least in part, an inner virtue and they agree that wealth should be used in a moderate way that only serves to enhance the individual and society. Such similarities reveal the strength of traditional values and understandings for the English elite. The primary difference between the plays rests, surprisingly, not in their definitions of nobility or their theories on how wealth should be used, but in their faith in change. Gentleness' positive association with humanism, an intellectual trend associated with the rising middling classes, makes it accepting and accommodating of change, while Magnificence is the opposite. The result of this distinction between the plays is that Gentleness is tolerant of social mobility, the reorganization of power and intellectual development, while Magnificence is genuinely suspicious of ambitious individuals and refuses to allow them to be perceived as potentially noble in character. The
divergent opinions and arguments of the plays show the willingness of the audience and the playwrights to explore the many viewpoints surrounding nobility and wealth. Yet, the fact that neither play can unproblematically incorporate its agenda and philosophy reveals the anxieties that change of any sort could elicit.

Notes

5 Axton, p. 20.
7 Axton, p. 22.
12 For a detailed discussion of the sources and influences of Gentleness and Nobility see K.W. Cameron, Authorship and Sources of ‘Gentleness and Nobility’ (Raleigh, N.C.: Wilson and Partridge, 1941).
13 Cameron, p. 20.
14 Cameron, pp. 22–25.


Harris, pp. 11–12.

Harris, p. 16.

Harris, pp. 11–12.


Scattergood, pp. 21–22.


*Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘largesse’.


Axtion, p. 23.

Axtion, p. 22.


Erasmus’ *Institutio Christiani Principis* and *Declamatio de Pueris Statim ac Liberaliter Instituendis* both see education, not birth, as vital to cultivating virtue and goodness. Chapter VIII of *Pueris* advocates that the rich should help the poor in any way possible to gain an education.

See Kelso.

Burrow, p. 802.

Burrow, p. 802.

42 Utopia, pp. 48–49.

43 Burrow, p. 804.