



***Noblewomen, Court Service, and  
Crossing Borders:  
England c. 1500–1550***

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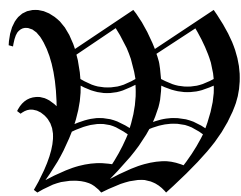
## Noblewomen, Court Service, and Crossing Borders: England c. 1500-1550

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**Abstract:** There are significant difficulties in defining aristocracy when it comes to women in sixteenth-century England, because women were so often agents of social mobility and might in theory move between social classes by dint of multiple marriages. Exactly who “counted” as a member of an aristocratic dynasty could get complex extremely quickly. This issue is further complicated when considering court service, because intimacy with and proximity to the monarch was not usually defined by aristocratic title. Moreover as princesses moved across borders to marry, they brought women with them as ladies-in-waiting who often then married into the aristocracy of their new country, necessitating a “meshing” of systems of nobility that might suggest that actual titles were less significant than sometimes thought.

**Keywords:** Noblewomen; ladies-in-waiting; England; royal court



hen we think of “aristocracy,” or any similar concept relating to the organisation of society in the pre-modern period in western Europe, we tend automatically to think about men first. In most societies, patriarchy was the order of the day, not only socially but economically. Inheritance passed through the male line: titles, money, and status passed from father to son. That tends to give us a very boundaried, “vertical,” lineage-based concept of “aristocracy” and aristocratic hierarchy. But this misses out half of the population, and, to an extent any “horizontal” interpretation of kinship: the aristocracy of any country appears very different from the perspective of its women.<sup>1</sup>

Even where male aristocracy is concerned in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England, straightforward definitions are hard to find. In English historiography

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<sup>1</sup> See Liesbeth Geervers and Mirella Marini, eds., *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe: Rulers, Aristocrats and the Formation of Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015); Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent, *Dynastic Colonialism: Gender, Materiality and the Early Modern House of Orange-Nassau* (London: Routledge, 2016); Nicola Clark, *Gender, Family, and Politics: The Howard Women, 1485-1558* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

“aristocracy” and “nobility” are usually used interchangeably.<sup>2</sup> “The nobility” was and is used to mean the fifty or so men—dukes, marquises, earls, or barons—who sat in the House of Lords in parliament and formed the hereditary peerage. Even they were not a homogenous group. As George Bernard and Steven Gunn have explained, some were regional magnates of long standing, holding considerable influence in their own locality but spending little time at court near the king. Others were rewarded for their service at court with peerages, but were not supported by the same swathes of local territory and its attendant economic or patronage benefits.<sup>3</sup> Nor was the parliamentary peerage the end of what we might usefully term “aristocracy.” English knights were not, strictly speaking, aristocrats, and knighthood was not hereditary. But neither were they entirely non-noble. Edmund Dudley in his *Tree of Commonwealth* treatise of 1509 grouped “nobles and knights” together, but in 1577 William Harrison divided the overall class of “gentlemen” into “the greater sort”—parliamentary nobility—and “knights, esquires, and, last of all, they that are simply called gentlemen.”<sup>4</sup> If contemporaries themselves could not agree on who was aristocratic and who was not, it is clear that the definition of aristocracy cannot be presumed to have rested on title alone. This makes women all the more relevant to the discussion.

Consideration of the early Tudor nobility is currently undergoing a historiographical resurgence since the last flurry of work around the topic in the 1990s, and this continues to take a male-centred approach to consider the foundation and negotiation of aristocratic authority and influence. As James Ross points out, there remains a tendency to assume that the nobility and monarchy were fundamentally in conflict during this period, and that the monarchy sought to repress and limit the perceived power of the nobility.<sup>5</sup> It was generally also thought that peers from different spheres tended to remain in those spheres; regional magnates stayed on their country estates, courtier-peers

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<sup>2</sup> “Nobility” was more commonly used by contemporaries; the first recorded use of “aristocracy” was not until 1561. See [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/aristocracy\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/aristocracy_n?tab=meaning_and_use) [accessed July 2023]. See the introduction to Richard Cust, *Charles I and the Aristocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), for a discussion of this.

<sup>3</sup> See essays in G. W. Bernard, ed., *The Tudor Nobility* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Dudley, *The Tree of Common Wealth* (Manchester, 1859); William Harrison, *Elizabethan England: From “A Description of England by William Harrison”* (in *Holinshed’s Chronicles*), ed. by L. Withington (London: Walter Scott, 1876).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Bernard, ed., *The Tudor Nobility*, and *The Power of the Early Tudor Nobility: A Study of the Fourth and Fifth Earls of Shrewsbury* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1985); Helen Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); M. E. James, *Society, Politics and Culture. Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); R. Rex, *The Tudors* (Stroud: Amberley, 2005).

stayed at court. Ross’s recent study of the Duke of Buckingham’s relationship with the royal court challenges these assumptions, revealing that despite his status as a regional magnate, he was far more integrated at court than previously thought, undermining the notion of automatic conflict between monarchy and nobility.<sup>6</sup> On a related note, Steven Gunn has examined the rise of bureaucrats during the reign of Henry VII—the “new men,” many of whom were given knighthoods—and argued that while sometimes the relationship between these men and aristocrats was uneasy, and the prominence of such individuals and their propensity to disrupt the social and political hierarchy became a pattern stretching on into the seventeenth century, they did not come to replace hereditary peers.<sup>7</sup> These studies revolve around a central concept of personal monarchy: there was often a direct correlation between an individual’s own influence, and his relationship with the monarch. Many of Henry VII’s “new men” worked more closely with the King on a daily basis than many of his hereditary peers did. That did not make the latter less aristocratic, but it meant that they did not necessarily possess the same degree of political influence that some non-aristocrats were able to exercise. This is most clearly revealed at the royal court, and contemporaries were well aware of this. Writers, courtiers, peers, and bureaucrats were all deeply concerned about who should or should not advise the monarch, and they did not always agree. The turn of the sixteenth century saw renewed emphasis across Europe on the definition of a “courtier,” and this discussion was focused particularly on how aristocratic or otherwise a courtier ought to be. At their heart, texts such as Baldesar Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano* and Thomas Eliot’s *Book of the Governor* were debates about what “aristocracy” really was, and what it should be.<sup>8</sup> Castiglione in particular wrote about female courtiers as well as male, but the historiography surrounding these topics has rarely included women. This article argues that if we are to attempt any meaningful definitions of aristocracy—or even accept that while definitions are good to think with, in practice they are necessarily limited—we must consider women as well as men, and we must include the royal court in our discussion.

In late medieval and early modern England, women were a key source of social mobility through marriage. They were carriers of name, status, money, land, and titles in varying combinations, and were therefore crucial to the formation and continuance of

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<sup>6</sup> James Ross, “Alienated Outsider or Integrated Courtier? Edward Stafford, Third Duke of Buckingham, 1498-1521 and the Royal Court,” *History* 108, no. 379-80 (2023): 20-40.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Gunn, *Henry VII’s New Men and the Making of Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Sydney Anglo, “The Courtier: The Renaissance and Changing Ideals,” in *The Courts of Europe: Politics, Patronage and Royalty 1400-1800*, ed. A. G. Dickens, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1977), 33-53.

aristocratic titles and identity. If marriage was an economic contract—and we know that it was—it was also a social one, making and remaking a nation’s aristocracy over generations. Scholarship on women and aristocracy has been of a different sort entirely, focused more on understandings of “dynasty” and “identity” and on the influence that women were able to wield within a patriarchal political system, rather than using women to change or further the debate about the nature of aristocracy.<sup>9</sup> Plenty of scholarship has shown that political influence extended beyond office-holding and that women could also exercise this kind of power, sometimes called “soft power.” We know that early modern women had “agency;” as Merry Wiesner-Hanks has recently pointed out, this is now a starting point, not a conclusion.<sup>10</sup> Yet contemporary discussions of aristocratic status in England were fundamentally centred on a patriarchal framework of possession of titles, military leadership, and office-holding. For contemporaries, these things were crucial descriptors of aristocratic status, even as they accepted that women could hold such status without them.<sup>11</sup> This is arguably an example of what Allyson Poska has termed “agentic gender norms;” a parallel set of expectations whereby women were required to be socially and economically capable and influential in the same ways as men while simultaneously ascribing to patriarchal norms that claimed otherwise.<sup>12</sup> Women both had and did not have aristocratic status, depending who was asked and in what context. This article suggests that the royal court provides a fruitful context in which to interrogate this dichotomy. It argues that while traditional patriarchal definitions of aristocracy continued to hold meaning in some contexts, there were less rigid definitions of “aristocracy” in early modern England “on the ground.”

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<sup>9</sup> Clark, *Gender, Family and Politics*; Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Gemma Allen, *The Cooke Sisters* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Broomhall and Van Gent, *Dynastic Colonialism*; James Daybell and Svante Norrhem, eds., *Gender and Political Culture in Early Modern Europe, 1400-1800* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Women’s Agency: Then and Now,” *Parergon* 40, no. 2 (2023): 9–25.

<sup>11</sup> While there are a few examples of women holding aristocratic titles in their own right, and exercising many of the powers of a male magnate on their own estates, they used male deputies for certain duties such as sitting in parliament, on a jury of peers, military leadership, or overseeing local commissions of the peace. See, for instance, Hazel Pierce, *Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, 1473-1541: Loyalty, Lineage and Leadership* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Allyson Poska, “The Case for Agentic Gender Norms for Women in Early Modern Europe,” *Gender and History* 30, no. 2 (2018): 354–365.

## **Women as Carriers of Aristocratic Status: Hard/Soft Aristocracy and Destabilising Concepts**

Though aristocratic titles were passed down the male line, a sense of aristocratic status might also be inherited from and by women. This was a crucial form of social capital, not merely incidental but sought out by those arranging marriages. A man of lower status might seek to marry a woman whose father was a peer in order to bring himself closer to that status.<sup>13</sup> This most clearly revealed through the financial arrangements of English marriages. In English law, the bride’s family paid a dowry—usually cash—and in return, the groom’s family assured the bride a “jointure”—usually the income from certain lands—that would support her in the event of her widowhood. There was no fixed ratio between dowry and jointure precisely because the two were calculated according to other perceived forms of social capital inherent in any match. When Elizabeth Stafford, daughter of the third Duke of Buckingham, was betrothed to Thomas, Lord Howard, son of the Earl of Surrey, in 1512, her dowry was the princely sum of 2000 marks, and her jointure 500 marks, a quarter of the dowry.<sup>14</sup> This was a good bargain for Howard, whose family were not then quite as elevated as the Staffords. Two years later, though, the Howards were granted a dukedom, and a match arranged that year between the Duke’s daughter and a Welsh knight’s son—not even yet a knight himself—had a much larger ratio; the dowry was 900 marks, and the jointure 300 marks, a third of the dowry.<sup>15</sup> The social capital perceived to result from aristocratic titles, then, could be passed through women.

It could also go both ways. A woman of lower status might be raised up by marriage to an aristocratic man, who sought her not for her status, but for her father’s wealth, or even his civic connections. In the early Tudor period it wasn’t unusual for the daughters of London mayors or aldermen to marry into the nobility, as Alice Keble, daughter of Lord Mayor Henry Keble, did for her second marriage to William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, in the 1510s.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the multiple marriages made by many women were also a complicating factor in England’s aristocracy. Women did not exchange one family for another: they accumulated them. Beginning with the family into which they were born—“natal” family—they added new “marital” families with each successive marital union. Women’s wills show

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<sup>13</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> British Library, Cotton MS Titus B I, fol. 390-390v; T. E. Tomlins and W. E. Taunton, eds., *The Statutes of the Realm*, 9 vols (London, 1810-25), III, 317.

<sup>15</sup> National Library of Wales, MS A 59; The National Archives, SC12/25/53.

<sup>16</sup> G. E. Cockayne, *Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland and Great Britain*, 12 vols (London: George Bell & Sons, 1910-59), vol. 9, 340-341.

that they did not forget their previous families when they entered a new marriage, but brought all of these relationships with them regardless of differing statuses, in what must sometimes have seemed a confusing conglomeration of aristocratic and less-aristocratic identities.<sup>17</sup> As research on the women of the Howard dynasty has shown, women could continue to identify more strongly with their natal family than any of their marital families: once a Howard, always a Howard.<sup>18</sup> Once an aristocrat, then, always an aristocrat.

Where noblewomen were able to exercise choice in marriage, we sometimes see them disregarding aristocratic titles. It was not uncommon in sixteenth-century England for aristocratic widows to choose men far lower in status than themselves for subsequent marriages.<sup>19</sup> The motivations behind these matches imply that criteria other than the possession of an aristocratic title were considered equally important, not least because often these were love matches. The advantage for the man was clear; aristocratic widows were often very wealthy, though this did not preclude a romantic attachment.<sup>20</sup> Both men and women who made such marriages were subject to snide remarks and viewed disparagingly, the woman for having disregarded her lineage, the implication being that she had somehow tarnished the value of all nobility by extension, and the man for likewise having ideas above his station and threatening the exclusivity of aristocracy. A good example of this is Katherine Willoughby/Brandon/Bertie, Duchess of Suffolk. Katherine was an heiress in her own right to the barony of Willoughby, and her first husband was Charles Brandon, first Duke of Suffolk. After his death in 1545, she remained single for a time, raising her two boys. Tragically, both died within hours of one another from the sweating sickness in 1551. After this she took as her second husband Richard Bertie, her gentleman usher.<sup>21</sup> Bertie's status was far below Katherine's own, and he was well aware of this, once signing a letter "the husband of Katherine, Duchess of Suffolk."<sup>22</sup> Despite this, the couple tried to have Katherine's own barony, Willoughby d'Eresby, transferred to him in right of his wife. This was not successful until after Katherine's death, when their son

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<sup>17</sup> This is why I have generally referred to aristocratic women using all of the natal and marital surnames they had accrued to date, separated by a forward slash to avoid confusion with the modern practice of "double-barrelled" surnames. For example: Katherine Howard/ap Rhys/Daubeney, Countess of Bridgwater.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *Gender, Family, and Politics*, 64–91.

<sup>19</sup> Kimberly Schutte, "Marrying Out in the Sixteenth Century: Subsequent Marriages of Aristocratic Women in the Tudor Era," *Journal of Family History* 38, no. 1: 3–16.

<sup>20</sup> Schutte, "Marrying Out in the Sixteenth Century," 7.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Wabuda, "Bertie [née Willoughby; other married name Brandon], Katherine, duchess of Suffolk," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2273> [accessed July 2023].

<sup>22</sup> Schutte, "Marrying Out in the Sixteenth Century," 11.

Peregrine Bertie was granted the title.<sup>23</sup> As Susan Wabuda has shown, Bertie remained "almost completely overshadowed by his wife" for the rest of his life, struggling to fully integrate into the aristocracy, but Katherine herself was largely unaffected; she retained her courtesy title as dowager Duchess of Suffolk, and there is no evidence that others considered her less aristocratic as a result of marrying down.<sup>24</sup>

Even within one country, therefore, who was aristocratic and who was not could be complicated depending on context, audience, and gender. The understanding of lineage and of status could be too. In the case of the Berties, inheritance of title remained patriarchal. Bertie did not become Duke of Suffolk just because his wife was, and neither did their children. But inheritance and titles, vertical lineage, was not always the same as contemporary understanding and treatment of social status. Both Bertie children went on to marry firmly into the top drawer of the aristocracy, with their daughter Susan becoming Countess of Kent, and their son Peregrine marrying Mary de Vere, daughter of the Earl of Oxford. The families of these spouses were unlikely to have agreed to the marriages if the Berties had not been understood on some level to be part of the aristocracy. This shows that though tangible inheritance was patriarchal, intangible inheritance could be matriarchal too. Aristocracy, therefore, might take several tangible and less tangible forms that are elucidated by the study of women. Possession of a title was one thing: perhaps we might usefully call this "hard aristocracy," a concrete, clearly delineated, proveable status. Inheritance of social capital was another. Though the two were evidently related, since in the case of the Berties social capital was a direct result of aristocratic heritage through the female line, the latter was far less clearly-defined. We might perhaps term this "soft aristocracy."

For women, who did not usually hold titles in their own right, even "hard" aristocracy was not as rigid as it was for men. A man held his title for his whole life.<sup>25</sup> His title might well have been connected to his family name for many generations: his understanding of himself and his place in the world was informed by this single dynastic identity. But women, who might hold several titles as wives over the course of their lives, were by definition less strongly attached to a single peerage. It's difficult to gain a sense of how noblewomen saw themselves in relation to their aristocratic status through most of

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<sup>23</sup> J. H. Round, "The Willoughby d'Eresby case and the rise of the Berties," *Peerage and pedigree: studies in peerage law and family history*, 1 (1910): 1-54.

<sup>24</sup> Wabuda, "Bertie, Katherine, duchess of Suffolk."

<sup>25</sup> Unless it was taken from him by a parliamentary Act of Attainder, but this was comparatively rare.



their lives, because as wives, they were usually expected to act in support of their husbands. As widows, though, they possessed a strong element of choice in the way that they chose to represent themselves, and this gives us a far greater insight into their own use and understanding of aristocratic status. As Barbara Harris’ work has shown, this is most evident on aristocratic widows’ tombs.<sup>26</sup> Tombs were a site for display of heraldry; all of a woman’s families would be represented here. And yet a woman might use her highest status title in life, but choose to lie beside a lower status husband, or even her natal family, in perpetuity. Katherine Howard/ap Rhys/Daubeney, Countess of Bridgwater, for instance, had a difficult relationship with her last husband, and though she used his title she chose burial with her natal family, the Howards, in her mother’s chapel at St Mary’s Lambeth in 1554.<sup>27</sup>

This is not to say that “hard” aristocratic status was unimportant for women. They used titles, heraldry, badges, and all of the material trappings of an aristocratic peerage, and were keen for these to be seen, known, and understood by future generations. For women, though, “hard” aristocracy was not a matter of a single title, but potentially of several: female aristocracy was made of multiplicities, and representation of those was a matter of choice.<sup>28</sup> A woman’s own preferences, inherited social capital, and her own influence—her “soft” aristocracy—could sit alongside “hard” aristocratic status, but were not wholly defined by it. For women, then, “aristocracy” was as much negotiation as fact.

### **Aristocracy in Service: Ladies-in-Waiting**

The position of ladies-in-waiting at court can be used to interrogate this hard/soft dichotomy a little further. The royal court was not only a key centre of governance, where one’s own relationship with the monarch might dictate one’s own influence and others’ perception of this; it was also the only place where women could hold office in a manner similar to men. This makes it a crucial locale for the study of women and aristocratic status,

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450-1550* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Nicola Clark, “The Gendering of Dynastic Memory: Burial Choices of the Howards, 1485-1559,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68, no. 4 (2017): 747–765.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Harris’ analysis of the 1558 portrait of Mary Neville/Fiennes/Wotton/Thursby, Lady Dacre, in Harris, “Defining Themselves: English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550,” *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 4 (2010): 734–752. This portrait was commissioned to celebrate her successful battle to have the Dacre estates restored to her son after her husband’s attainder and execution for treason in 1541. The portrait is wholly focused around the Fiennes family and the barony of Dacre, but this is a conscious choice: there is no indication of Mary’s subsequent marriages or other offspring.

and allows us to dig deeper into the concept of “soft” aristocracy. Court service for women, as for men, might be “in ordinary”—live-in, daily service, often (though not uniformly) salaried, with lodging, food, light, and fuel allowances—or “in extraordinary,” which for women meant those who visited but did not live in or regularly serve the queen.<sup>29</sup> The nature of surviving records means that it isn’t realistically possible to create meaningful statistics about the aristocratic status or otherwise of ladies-in-waiting in ordinary during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. There are, however, general observable trends. The queen’s household in ordinary under Elizabeth of York (r. 1486-1503) and Catherine of Aragon (r. 1509-1533) had three basic household ranks. These corresponded broadly, but not always exactly, with social status: the “Ladies” were usually peeresses or the daughters of the highest-ranking peers; the “Gentlewomen” might be the wives or daughters of knights; and the “Chamberers,” the lowest status, were more likely to be wives or daughters of gentry who were not knights.<sup>30</sup> “Hard” aristocratic status, or lack thereof, would certainly help to inform one’s household position, but household ranks were not as stratified as the ranks within the English aristocracy itself. Over the course of this period there were usually between two and four “Ladies,” seven or more “Gentlewomen,” and between two and four “Chamberers,” so the highest-status peeresses were less represented in ordinary service at court than those lower down the elite social scale. This mirrored the structure of elite society. In England as a whole in 1520, for instance, there were only three duchesses, but many more knights’ wives. This meant that the women immediately around the queen on a daily basis were not necessarily of the highest “hard” aristocratic status. Rather than ordinary, daily service, peeresses were more likely to serve as ladies-in-waiting extraordinary: they visited court when in town, and would show up in their finery for special ceremonial occasions where the monarchy required the attendance of its titled aristocracy in order to put on a good show.<sup>31</sup>

This sounds simple. The line between ordinary and extraordinary service, though, was not always clearly delineated in contemporary records, and women might in any case move between these two forms of court attendance over the course of their lives. Elizabeth Stafford/Howard, Duchess of Norfolk, for instance, wrote in the 1530s that she had served

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<sup>29</sup> See Nicola Clark, *The Waiting Game: The Untold Story of the Women Who Served the Tudor Queens* (forthcoming, 2024). See also James Taffe, “Reconstructing the queen’s household, 1485-1547: a study in royal service,” unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham (2021).

<sup>30</sup> TNA E36/210, fol. 91.

<sup>31</sup> This system was similar elsewhere in Europe too; see, for instance, Fabian Persson, *Women at the Early Modern Swedish Court: Power, Risk, and Opportunity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

Queen Catherine of Aragon for sixteen years. We know, though, from Elizabeth's own household accounts, that not all of these years were in ordinary service; she spent long periods away from the royal court.<sup>32</sup> Nor did she remain at the same "hard" aristocratic status throughout, serving first as Lady Howard, then Countess of Surrey, and finally Duchess of Norfolk, as her husband accrued titles through a combination of royal grant and inheritance. Any list made of women in service at court was therefore only a snapshot of a particular moment. Such lists for this period are not numerous, and their contents also depended on the purpose for which the list was made. If a list was made of wages paid, this is far more likely to be the women in ordinary service.<sup>33</sup> If simply a record of attendance on a particular occasion, it requires interpretation alongside other sources, for ordinary and extraordinary attendance were not usually explicitly separated.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the type of court service, status could be yet more complex. For the coronation of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon in 1509, for instance, our knowledge of the ladies-in-waiting in attendance comes from lists made by the royal wardrobe for amounts of red cloth given as livery.<sup>35</sup> These were divided into social, not household, rank, because the yardage and type of fabric given was theoretically representative of "hard" aristocratic status, not household position. Thus Lady Anne Percy, the daughter of the Earl of Arundel, was given twelve yards of crimson velvet and a yard and a quarter of tawny cloth of gold to border the gown and was counted as a baroness, whereas Mistress Mabel Clifford, daughter of a baron, received the same yardage of crimson velvet, but her gown was bordered by tawny velvet, not cloth of gold, and she was listed under "knights' wives."<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, though, for married ladies-in-waiting, the cloth allowances were not solely predicated on their husbands' titles. "Lady Elizabeth Stafford," for example, had married Robert Radcliffe in 1505, but he had not yet regained his father's confiscated

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<sup>32</sup> Clark, *Gender, Family, and Politics*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> As in Elizabeth of York's privy purse expense account for 1502-1503; TNA E36/210, fol. 91.

<sup>34</sup> For example, the list of women in attendance at Elizabeth of York's funeral in 1503 includes Agnes Tylney, Countess of Surrey, but the fact that she is not present in the wage list for the same year strongly suggests she attended the funeral in extraordinary. TNA LC 2/1, fol. 78.

<sup>35</sup> TNA LC 9/50.

<sup>36</sup> TNA LC 9/50, fols. 182v, 204v (old foliation). In this instance there is some evidence that household rank was affected by social status; a wardrobe warrant from 1511 describes Mabel Clifford as "gentlewoman with the queen," and she did not rise to the household position of "lady" until she married Sir William Fitzwilliam in 1513. TNA E101/417/6, no 72; *The Manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Rutland, G. C. B., preserved at Belvoir Castle*, HMC Twelfth Report (London, 1888), vol 1, 21-22.

barony.<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth herself was royalty; her mother had been Catherine Woodville, sister of Queen Elizabeth Woodville, and her father the second Duke of Buckingham. She, too, received crimson velvet and cloth of gold for her coronation livery, showcasing her own royal blood and not her husband’s much lower position.<sup>38</sup> While frustrating to the historian, particularly one trying to gain a sense of the relevance of “aristocracy” to court life, in itself this tells us something: “hard” aristocratic status was more important for the purposes of public display on formal, ceremonial occasions than it was to daily life at the royal court.

Ordinary court service became more stratified over the course of Henry VIII’s reign. Though terminology was not always used in a uniformly precise way, a list of women in ordinary made for Queen Katherine Howard’s household in 1540 clearly shows that the three-tiered system of Ladies, Gentlewomen, and Chamberers had since developed. Now, there were Great Ladies, Ladies of the Privy Chamber, Gentlewomen of the Privy Chamber, Chamberers, Ladies and Gentlewomen Attendant, and the Maids of Honour.<sup>39</sup> In part this was a reflection of institutional and architectural developments within the royal household more broadly; by 1540, the privy chamber was fully established as both a household department, and as the first room in a sequence of increasingly private spaces for each of the monarchs.<sup>40</sup> This list is the first clear indication that female service at court had altered as a result. The number of women in ordinary service had increased by around ten, and there were more peeresses present, though this was arguably because the peerage itself had increased in numbers by this time.<sup>41</sup> The ranks still did not correspond precisely to “hard” aristocratic status. There was a countess present among both the Great Ladies (Mary Arundell/Radcliffe, Countess of Sussex) and the Ladies of the Privy Chamber (Eleanor Paston/Manners, Countess of Rutland). The difference between these two, though, was one of kinship. The Countess of Sussex was a relation by marriage to Queen Katherine Howard; the Countess of Rutland was not.<sup>42</sup> The same was true for one of the two baronesses who were also included among the Great Ladies, though her status theoretically

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<sup>37</sup> Though his father’s attainder was reversed in 1505, he did not receive the barony of Fitzwater himself until an Act of Parliament later in 1509.

<sup>38</sup> TNA LC 9/50, fol. 182v.

<sup>39</sup> TNA SP1/157, fols. 14–15.

<sup>40</sup> See Simon Thurley, *Houses of Power* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2017), 132–136, 221–222.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, *Henry VIII and the English Nobility*.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Arundell/Radcliffe, Countess of Sussex, was sister-in-law to Katherine Howard’s own sister Margaret, who had married Sir Thomas Arundell in 1530. Though tenuous by modern standards, early modern people did not tend to distinguish between in-laws and full blood relations.

placed her below the Countess of Rutland.<sup>43</sup> Kinship, then, was a strong form of social capital, of "soft" aristocracy at court, and so might shared experience be; the second baroness, Lady Clinton, was most likely Ursula Stourton, a former maid of honour alongside Queen Katherine Howard who had recently married into the peerage.<sup>44</sup>

Where change in aristocratic status in court service over time is clearest is slightly lower down the ranks, among what in 1540 was termed the "Ladies and Gentlewomen Attendant," and would earlier have been called the "Gentlewomen," or sometimes "Ladies and Gentlewomen." In 1503 these women were almost all known as "Mistress," which meant that they were of gentle status, but that their husbands were not aristocratic, nor even knights.<sup>45</sup> Not all of these women are identifiable as part of a clear kinship network, which is itself usually a sign of non-aristocratic status. Many, though, were in attendance on the queen because their husbands were there too. Mistress Elyn Brent was probably the wife of Robert Brent, Gentleman Usher of the queen's chamber. Mistress Mary Denys was the wife of Hugh Denys, Groom of the Stool to Henry VII. By 1540, this was still the case: almost all of the Ladies and Gentlewomen Attendant were the wives of men in service with either the King or Queen at court. What had changed, though, was their title. The majority of these women could use the title of "Lady," which meant that their husbands were knights at least. Lady Dudley was Jane Guildford, wife of Sir John Dudley, who was the Queen's Master of the Horse. Lady Wriothesley was Jane Cheyney, wife of Sir Thomas Wriothesley, secretary to the King. And so it went on. This suggests that the "hard" status of those in service at court had risen over the course of the early sixteenth-century. For men, at least, "hard aristocracy" remained of value, and a peerage was something to aspire to for those in royal service; both Dudley and Wriothesley would later rise to Duke and Earl respectively.

The relationship between "hard" aristocracy and political influence for men remained idiosyncratic. For women, it was even less clear. Peeresses might hold considerable influence at court and thus influence royal policy. Mary Howard/Fitzroy, Duchess of Richmond, was the main facilitator of her friend the King's niece, Lady Margaret

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<sup>43</sup> "The Lady Howard" was Margaret Gamage/Howard, wife to William, Lord Howard of Effingham, half-uncle of the Queen.

<sup>44</sup> Stourton was listed among Anne of Cleves' maids of honour in 1539 and 1540, but is not otherwise listed in Katherine Howard's household. Since we know that she had married Clinton by June 1541, it seems reasonable to conclude that this had happened by June 1540 and she was the "Lady Clinton" in Katherine Howard's household. TNA SP1/155, fol. 36v; E101/422/15, 16.

<sup>45</sup> TNA E36/210, fol. 91.

Douglas's marriage with a man far lower in status in 1536. When this was discovered in July of that year it struck horror into the hearts of the King and his ministers; with the succession to the throne newly vulnerable as a result of Queen Anne Boleyn's execution and the resultant illegitimacy of her daughter Princess Elizabeth, Lady Margaret's position had become elevated and she could not be allowed to throw herself away on a mere younger son as she had done.<sup>46</sup> Five years earlier, the Duchess's own mother Elizabeth Stafford/Howard, Duchess of Norfolk, had been dismissed from court for passing confidential information to her mistress Queen Catherine of Aragon during the saga of the royal divorce.<sup>47</sup> But these women's titles were not the reason that they were able to act in these ways. Both had begun court service at a lower status, and the relationships that they had built over time had led them to these positions of intimacy with royal women. In fact, vertical kinship links like these were often the way that women entered court service in the first place. Elizabeth Bryan was raised in close contact with the royal court because her mother, Margaret Bouchier/Bryan, Lady Bryan, was Lady Governess to the royal children under Henry VIII, and her father Sir Thomas Bryan was the Queen's Vice-Chamberlain. As a result of this proximity to the royal court, Elizabeth married courtier Sir Nicholas Carew and became a knight's wife while continuing to serve the Queen during the 1510s.<sup>48</sup> The daughters of ladies-in-waiting became ladies-in-waiting in their turn: Elizabeth Bryan/Carew's daughter Anne would later find herself in service with Lady Jane Grey in the early 1550s, though this meant that she was imprisoned alongside her mistress once Queen Mary I took the throne.<sup>49</sup> That vertical relationship of service and kinship was often more important for women at court than "hard" aristocratic status.

The same sort of intimate service relationships were formed by lower-status ladies-in-waiting too, and in some cases they became closer to the queen than their higher-status colleagues. This becomes particularly clear in the surviving records at times of courtly crisis. The role of a lady-in-waiting was always a difficult balance between confidante and chaperone, and the line between the two was tested on a number of occasions during the

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<sup>46</sup> Clark, *Gender, Family, and Politics*, 111.

<sup>47</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J. S. Brewer et al. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1862-1932), V, 238.

<sup>48</sup> HMC Rutland vol 1, 21-22.

<sup>49</sup> "The examination and imprisonment of Edward Underhill," in *Tudor Tracts*, A.F. Pollard (ed.), (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 181. Though freed shortly after this, her husband's involvement in the Wyatt rebellion in 1554 made her *persona non grata* at court despite his acquittal for treason, and she did not rejoin the court as a lady-in-waiting, though her own daughter Bess Throckmorton became a maid of honour in 1584.

reign of Henry VIII. Only one of the women who gave information about Queen Katherine’s alleged affair with Thomas Culpepper in 1541 was a peeress.<sup>50</sup> The rest were Chamberers—gentry wives or the daughters of knights, the Queen’s most menial female servants. This is because they were the women who stayed up until the Queen was in bed, for instance, and therefore knew whether she was unusually late, whether there was anybody with her, or whether doors were locked.<sup>51</sup> These women turned “king’s evidence,” and were not convicted of treason alongside the Queen. Knowledge was power as much as status.

So for women who served as ladies-in-waiting, “hard” aristocracy was almost incidental to the influence that they could gain at court. Such influence, though, was still seen in itself as a potential route to aristocratic status. Young women were explicitly instructed to speak to the king for certain tangible offices to be awarded to their male relations.<sup>52</sup> They sought service at court in the first place to marry higher than they might be able to otherwise, and there’s evidence from letters that a man’s wealth and position in society were as important to them as his personality.<sup>53</sup> For young women during Henry VIII’s reign, it became increasingly clear that court service might be a route to the greatest of all “hard” aristocratic positions: Queen of England, for four of his six wives had been lady-in-waiting to one or more of their predecessors, though whether this was still understood as the coup it might once have been is debatable. The balance between soft power and hard power, social capital and tangible titles, was a very delicate one, continually renegotiated. What we are seeing here is not one single model of aristocracy uniformly applied, but several different, related, overlapping understandings of aristocratic status.

### **Aristocracy Crossing Borders**

The concept of “aristocracy” became yet more complicated by the norms of royal marriage during this period. It was usual throughout Europe for a male monarch to take a foreign bride. Though this did not always happen in England during this time (Elizabeth of York, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Katherine Howard, and Katherine Parr were all English

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<sup>50</sup> Jane Parker/Boleyn, the widowed Viscountess Rochford. This, though, was as much a result of Jane’s kinship with Katherine—they were cousins by marriage—and her long experience at the royal court, as it was about her status.

<sup>51</sup> Clark, “Queen Katherine Howard: Space, and Promiscuity Pre- and Post-Marriage, 1536-1541,” *Royal Studies Journal* 6, no. 2 (2019): 89–103.

<sup>52</sup> *The Lisle Letters*, ed. M. St Clare Byrne, 6 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), V, no. 1513.

<sup>53</sup> Archivo General de Simancas, Casa de Sitio Real, legajo 11, fol. 310.

subjects who became queen consorts), when it did it created a small influx of ladies-in-waiting from another country, with a different system of aristocracy. When Catherine of Aragon, youngest daughter of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile, arrived in England in 1501 to marry the heir to the English throne, she brought at least twelve women with her to serve in her household in England.<sup>54</sup> Women like these often fall between the cracks of historical scholarship, and this is in part a direct result of contemporary difficulties with foreign nobility. English sources of this period were not much interested in the precise identities of foreigners, never mind their families or former careers in Spain, and Spanish naming conventions were unfamiliar, since children might take the surname of either mother or father, or sometimes both together.<sup>55</sup> For historians, pursuing individuals across borders requires language skills and extra archival knowledge, and a need for this kind of time-consuming biographical research. In the case of Catherine of Aragon’s Spanish ladies-in-waiting, historians who focus on sixteenth-century Spain are loath to cross the channel and deal with English sources, but those working on this material in England rarely venture outside its physical or linguistic borders to explore Spanish sources. The women in Catherine of Aragon’s household therefore occupy a liminal position in relation to both countries and their traditions of historical writing.

Thus these women are often lumped together along the lines of “probably noble but we do not really know.” In reality they were a mix of statuses much like the English ladies-in-waiting. We know that contemporaries did go to some lengths to make sure that they treated “strangers” according to their rank and didn’t inadvertently cause offence; this was why lists of those accompanying foreign princesses were demanded by the English ahead of time.<sup>56</sup> But where women were concerned, the factors already outlined in this article could create additional confusion. María de Salinas is a good example of this. María accompanied Catherine of Aragon to England in 1501. She was approximately the same age as Catherine, and she did not hold an especially exalted household position; on the surviving list she is placed near the bottom.<sup>57</sup> In English scholarship her parentage is frequently mis-attributed, but contemporary Spanish sources show that she was the

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<sup>54</sup> There may have been more than this, since names not on this original list appear in later records, but twelve is the minimum number that we can ascertain.

<sup>55</sup> See the “Note on Names” at the beginning of Helen Nader, ed., *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain: Eight Women of the Mendoza Family, 1450-1650* (Urbana and Chicago (IL): University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> *Letters and Papers* XIV, ii, 634.

<sup>57</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Spain*, ed. G. A. Bergenroth et al. (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1862-1954), I, 288. María is listed here as “the daughter of Inés de Albornoz.”



daughter of Juan de Salinas, who was secretary and chamberlain to Catherine of Aragon’s older sister Isabel, Queen of Portugal, and of Inés de Albornoz, a lady-in-waiting first to the same Isabel, and then to Queen Isabella of Castile.<sup>58</sup> The Salinas do not seem to have been what in England would have been considered “aristocratic,” since they held no title. In Spain, though, this was less clearcut; as Teofilo Ruiz explains, “well-to-do merchants not only claimed the status of nobility, as did the “honoured citizens” of Barcelona and the commercial elite of Burgos, but they also fully shared in the lifestyle and military ethos of the Spanish nobility.”<sup>59</sup> Described as having “hidalgo” origins—rural nobles somewhat like English knights—the Salinas were part of the urban elite of Castile, notably the city of Vitoria.<sup>60</sup> The best English comparative is perhaps Henry VII’s “new men;” not noble, but nevertheless indispensable in the running of the realm, and aspiring to “hard” aristocracy wherever they were able to attain it.

The fact that María’s precise status is not evident from English sources—or, explicitly, from Spanish—again reinforces the point that “hard” aristocracy in the form of title was not the most significant social marker at royal courts. Part of the point of bringing foreign ladies-in-waiting was so that they might marry in their new country and help to cement the diplomatic alliance created by the royal marriage. Few actually did this. In most cases the foreigners went back home, either in small groups or one by one as marriages were arranged for them there. Where Catherine of Aragon’s women were concerned, there was a financial complication. In the Castilian court, ladies-in-waiting were not only all salaried, but had their dowries financed by the queen as a matter of course.<sup>61</sup> Court service was therefore a clearly-defined route to marriage. Not only was this not the case in England, where the provision of a dowry was unusual and entirely at the monarch’s discretion, but Catherine of Aragon’s own situation during her early years in England did not allow her to follow Spanish custom. After the death of her husband Prince Arthur in 1502, Catherine remained in England in the uncomfortable position of diplomatic pawn

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<sup>58</sup> Paula Martínez Hernández, *El Tesorero Vitoriano Ochoa de Landa: Las cuentas de la casa de Juana I de Castilla (1506-1531)* (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, Argitalpen Zerbitzua, 2020), 81–86; See also forthcoming article by Nicola Clark and Vanessa de Cruz Medina.

<sup>59</sup> Teofilo F. Ruiz, *Spanish Society, 1400-1600* (London: Routledge, 2001), 68.

<sup>60</sup> Paula Martínez Hernández, “Promoción y servicio en torno a la corte de los reyes católicos: los “Sánchez de Salinas” de Vitoria,” in Francisco de Paula Canas Gálvez, ed., *La corona y sus servidores: individualidades, instituciones y estructuras curiales en los reinos hispánicos durante la Baja Edad Media* (ca 1340-1516) (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 2021), 405–440.

<sup>61</sup> As contemporary sources make clear; see *Correspondencia de Gutierre Gomez de Fuensalida*, ed. by the Duke of Berwick (Madrid, 1907), 536.

between her father-in-law Henry VII, and her father Ferdinand of Aragon. Her dowry had not been fully paid. Henry VII refused to allow her betrothal to Prince Henry go ahead until it was; but he was also loath to finance Catherine's household in the manner to which she was accustomed. King Ferdinand, for his part, offered excuses but no money. Catherine was particularly distressed about her inability to provide dowries for the unmarried ladies-in-waiting who remained with her, writing in 1505 to ask her father for money for this purpose.<sup>62</sup>

Catherine of Aragon's own reduced position meant that Henry VII was less willing to bestow valuable marriages on her Spanish women. While in 1504 a marriage between María de Rojas and the young Earl of Derby was discussed, this never came to pass, and instead Rojas departed in 1506 to marry at home.<sup>63</sup> María de Salinas' family spent the years between 1501 and 1509 trying to arrange a Spanish marriage for her too. Her candidates, however, were not aristocratic; they were members of prominent merchant or financier families like the Gaona family of Logroño in Castile. At one point she was almost married to Francesco Grimaldi, the Genoese banker who came to England in 1508 responsible for providing the funds for Catherine of Aragon's dowry to marry the future Henry VIII; in the end he married her colleague Francisca de Cáceres.<sup>64</sup> María remained unmarried and in England, and attended Catherine of Aragon as the latter married Henry VIII and was crowned alongside him in 1509. By 1516 she was one of only a few Spanish women remaining at the English court. While there are not clear household lists denoting household ranks for these years, in the eyes of others María's position had risen even though her aristocratic rank had not changed. As one of a minority of Spanish women, now older and more experienced, she was described by the Spanish ambassador in 1514 as the person whom the queen "loves more than any other mortal."<sup>65</sup> The context for this was not positive; the ambassador feared that María's relations were working against the Spanish crown and that she in turn was influencing the Queen to behave in this way. While there is no evidence to show whether this was true, that it was thought plausible says much about her perceived social capital.

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<sup>62</sup> CSP Spain I, 446.

<sup>63</sup> CSP Spain I, 413, 420. Her return is often placed earlier, in 1504 or 1505, but she was given £20 "in reward" by Henry VII on 24 April 1506, which shows that she was still in England at that time, and perhaps suggests that that is when she departed. TNA E36/214, fol. 28v.

<sup>64</sup> See forthcoming article by Nicola Clark and Vanessa de Cruz Medina; Clark, *The Waiting Game*.

<sup>65</sup> CSP Spain II, 201.

In 1516 María finally did marry. Her husband was William, Lord Willoughby d’Eresby, who, as a baron, was a member of the English aristocracy, and their marriage was financed by the crown in Spanish tradition: the documents for the financial arrangements were signed by the Queen.<sup>66</sup> This was a higher “hard” aristocratic status than María could have aspired to at home in Castile, judging by the kinds of marriages her family had earlier been exploring for her. Willoughby, interestingly, was not a courtier. He held no position in the royal household, and is not thought to have visited court often, preferring to occupy the role of minor regional magnate on his estates in Lincolnshire.<sup>67</sup> His status lay in his “hard” aristocracy and not his social capital, but he may well have accepted María because he sought her social capital, her influence with the queen at court. Even after their marriage, he was not regularly at court, and yet María retained her position there. During the 1520s she was often one of only a handful of women to be mentioned by name in livery lists detailing recipients of lodging and food at the court’s expense, partly because so many other ladies-in-waiting were provided for under their husbands’ allowance.<sup>68</sup> In England this was comparatively unusual. Most ladies-in-waiting in ordinary service of comparable social status had husbands who were also courtiers, or in royal service of some sort; María’s colleague Lady Elizabeth Boleyn, for instance, was the wife of a diplomat. In Spain, though, it was much more usual for couples to live apart for long periods while a wife held a position at court and her husband managed their estates, and it could be argued that this was an example of the “meshing” of two systems of aristocratic tradition across borders.<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has shown that defining “aristocracy” in England during the early sixteenth century is considerably more complex than the simple possession of a peerage. Adding women into the equation not only makes this far clearer than the habitual consideration of men only, but makes it clear that aristocratic status was not necessarily clear-cut for men either; aristocratic lifestyle, acceptance by contemporaries, and political influence were not only connected to “hard” aristocratic status, but to kinship relationships. Women did not hold titles in the way that men did, and they might accumulate many family identities over the course of their lives. While they were not uninterested in aristocratic

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<sup>66</sup> Lincoln Record Office 2 ANC 3/A/36; 1 ANC 5/B/1/q; 2 ANC/3/A/37.

<sup>67</sup> Cockayne, *Complete Peerage*, vol. 12B, 670-3; see also Willoughby’s will, TNA PROB 11/23/362.

<sup>68</sup> HMC Rutland vol 1, 21-22; TNA SP1/19, fol. 82v, 117, 149; BL Cotton MS Vesp C XIV, fol. 273; SP1/37, fol 53.

<sup>69</sup> María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, *Juana de Mendoza* (Madrid: Ediciones del Orto, 2004), 44.

status, they were far more flexible in its use, and, especially as widows, could choose how they wanted to represent themselves. I have suggested that we might call the possession of an aristocratic title "hard aristocracy," but that this was only one element that went into the perception of aristocratic status during this period, even if it was the most commonly described. Social capital in the form of influence with the monarch or the consort, at the royal court, or in the local community were of equal and sometimes higher importance for women in their own and others' understanding of their status, and these things were often linked to, but did not directly replicate, the status attached to an aristocratic title. I have suggested that this be termed "soft aristocracy."

These were not two sides of a coin, but more like a kaleidoscope of elements that could make up an overall perception of status, and, like a kaleidoscope, the picture could change. In some contexts, possession of "hard aristocracy" in the form of a title was the overriding consideration: in public ceremonies like a coronation, for instance, where the order of noble precedence dictated the fabric worn and the position one took in the procession. For women, though, "soft aristocracy" was generally of more significance to their daily lives, and this is demonstrated particularly by service at the royal court. The movement of ladies-in-waiting across borders, a common phenomenon during the early modern period, shows how complex this could get: the way that systems of aristocracy had to merge as a result of immigration were usually idiosyncratic, as the example of María de Salinas reveals.

In any discussion of definitions among historians there is inevitably drive to find hard, tangible criteria and to tidy pre-modern people away into neat boxes. The example of early Tudor women, though, shows that while there are certain definitions that are good to "think with," ultimately the relationship between aristocratic titles, status, and influence was not neat and tidy. Contemporaries themselves struggled to outline who was and who was not aristocratic. Sometimes the exact form of soft aristocracy behind a particular position, decision, or relationship remains unclear to us, but may also have been unclear to many at the time. While gender has been used here as a way to re-examine concepts of aristocratic status, the expectation that we should then be able to categorise more clearly as a result is not wholly realistic. Status was flexible, continually constructed and re-constructed both within and adjacent to the boundaries of formal, "hard" aristocracy in the form of titles. "Aristocracy" remains a necessary concept for us to work with, but this must be on the understanding that it is nuanced, sometimes uncomfortably contradictory, and subject to—for want of a better term—"vibes."

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