Manners Makyth Man: Wykeham's Portrait and the Making of Merit

Portrait of William of Wykeham (oil on panel, 1596), English School
New College, Oxford, NCI 2333

This article reinterprets Sampson Strong's 1596 founder portrait of William of Wykeham at New College, Oxford, as a programme rather than a likeness: a visual technology that communicates, tests, and legitimates collegiate merit. Strong's triad—sitter, vistas, inscription—stages a theory of formation in which conduct ('Manners makyth man') functions as a rule, a threshold, and a test. The portrait makes visible a late medieval and Tudor grammar of selection: mores are rendered

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legible in pose, gesture, and placement, and the vernacular motto serves as a civic lintel between institutional spaces. Tracking the migration from mores to metrics, the essay argues that modern instruments—dashboards, league tables, admissions scripts—inherit the persuasive labour once performed by images, shifting the tokens of recognition from habitus to numerical rank while preserving the gate. Reading founder portraits, gatehouses, seals, and collegiate choreographies alongside contemporary ranking displays, the article proposes a transhistorical method for art and institutional history: images and built forms do not merely reflect merit; they actively organise recognition, producing publics who assent to hierarchies of desert. The upshot is both analytic and normative: the same visual grammars that can dignify selection also risk becoming elegant screens. Curatorial and pedagogical recommendations follow, urging that Strong's portrait be displayed and taught as an instrument of formation—and a standing test of whether collegiate gateways still justify themselves by the persons they help to make.

In New College, Oxford, a posthumous founder portrait of William of Wykeham (1324–1404), painted by Dutch portrait painter Sampson Strong (1550–1611) in 1596, functions less as likeness than as programme. Its compositional logic is a triad that sutures sitter, vistas, and inscription: Wykeham stands before a dark ground with a central drop of red drapery, while parted curtains disclose prospect views of Winchester College and New College, the two institutions with which his name is identified. His left hand affirms jurisdiction with the crozier; his right hand performs instruction by directing the beholder to the centrally placed English device. The pictorial grammar—gaze, gesture, inscription—renders the panel an instrument of institutional self-definition as much as commemoration, a late Tudor contribution to the founder-portrait genre that made the moral economy of collegiate life theatrically legible to successive generations. Art-historical catalogues agree on the date and keep the work within Strong's Oxford production, a corpus that translates medieval corporate claims into a post-Reformation idiom.

What the picture stages, above all, is a theory of the collegiate life. The two vistas do not simply mark property; they diagram an itinerary—admission, regimen, service—in which the college is imagined as both passage and probation. The inscription at the centre condenses that itinerary into rule, yet the argument of the image exceeds any single sentence. The whole panel is declarative: the eyes meet the viewer, the hand instructs, the words interpret; a commemorative likeness is turned into a device for thinking about how institutions make persons and how persons legitimate institutions. Strong paints nearly two centuries after Wykeham's death; the portrait is necessarily a work of invention and selection rather than recovered physiognomy. The face he supplies—steady dark eyes, fair skin, flushed cheeks, restrained affect—reads as a disciplined type calibrated to late Tudor expectations of episcopal demeanour. In that sense the painting 'makes' a man according to a rule, just as Wykeham's colleges aspired to 'make' their scholars. Education is presented not only as the acquisition of knowledge but as the formation of stable dispositions legible in conduct.

This staging also carries a social narrative. Wykeham's trajectory—from modest Hampshire beginnings to Bishop of Winchester and twice Lord Chancellor—was legible to later cohorts as a case in which formation and service, rather than lineage, secured advancement. The parted curtains therefore do more than frame picturesque grounds; they stage institutional gateways. The inscription, placed between the vistas like a lintel, reads as a condition of passage: the claim that entry and progression depend upon cultivated conduct and the habits of life that a collegiate regimen is meant to form. In this late Tudor context, the picture belongs to a world saturated with humanist *civilitas* and Protestant didacticism; founders' portraits functioned as public pedagogy, visual homilies on corporate order, translating 14th-century programmes into forms that a 16th-century audience could read.[1]

Yet the same image discloses the tensions within this compact of formation and advancement. If conduct 'makes' the person, who recognises the making, and on what terms?

[1] Desiderius Erasmus, *De civilitate morum puerilium* (Basel: Froben, 1530); Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named the Governour* (London: Thomas Berthelet, 1531); Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster* (London: John Daye, 1570).

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Wykeham's statutes, for all their solicitude for 'poor and indigent scholar-clerks', routed admission through diocesan geographies, patronage networks, and the male clerical ambit. Both foundations quickly became engines of elite reproduction, even as they continued to narrate themselves as ladders for talent. The statutes that seek to suppress status play—'no odious comparisons' of county against county, faculty against faculty, noble birth against its absence—presuppose a community already filtered by mechanisms of preference (not least privileges for founder's kin).[2] Thus the very visibility of formed conduct—those 'manners' that the panel instructs the beholder to prize—could serve as both ladder and screen. Strong's architecture keeps that double function in view: threshold as gateway and as filter.

For historians of education, the portrait's grammar offers more than iconographic interest; it supplies a template for thinking about status and selection across periods. When, in the twentieth century, 'meritocracy' was coined—originally satirically—it came to signify a regime that legitimates hierarchy through measured ability and effort. Wykeham's foundations long predate written examinations and mass credentialing, but the legitimating move is already in place: translate claims to status into claims of virtue, and claims of virtue into visible signs. The difference is instructive. In the older frame, merit is not a score; it is a life under rule, learned in company and recognisable in practice. That account resists modern individualism by emphasising common discipline and service; it also reveals how norms of comportment, once adopted as the tokens of formation, can naturalise exclusion—especially when recognition is controlled by those already inside the gate. The portrait's triadic staging—sitter, inscription, vistas—keeps both possibilities in play and turns the image into a durable diagram of how colleges justify themselves.[3]

Attending closely to Strong's handling of likeness and time sharpens the point. Because the work is posthumous, likeness is necessarily imagined; what is made legible is character rather than historical face. The sobriety of expression, the disciplined gaze, the poised gesture: these are pictorial correlates of a programme in which education aims at the acquisition of habits, not the display of erudition alone. The panel is an image of habitus. It claims that formation can be seen—that there are signs by which a life under rule becomes publicly legible—and it invites the beholder to assent to that claim. In doing so it also exposes the risk bound up with any regime of visible virtue: when recognition is mediated by established actors and conventions, the same signs that dignify selection can function as covert tests of conformity.[4]

The language of the inscription matters, though its philological unpacking belongs to the dedicated section that follows. It is enough here to register two features. First, the device was remembered in institutional tradition as the founder's personal motto and adopted by both colleges.[5] Second, the choice to present it in English rather than Latin recalibrates audience and function. Latin would have situated the words within the intra-collegiate economy of learned signs; English renders them civic, binding insiders and outsiders to the same rule and turning the portrait into an address to town and gown alike. Strong makes that choice architectural: the inscription occupies the very space where one would imagine a threshold, so that language becomes lintel.[6]

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[2] *The Statutes of Winchester College* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1855), rubr. V ('comparationes, quae odiosae sunt'), on p. 16; cf. 'Statutes of St. Mary's College of Winchester in Oxford: or, New College' in *Statutes of the Colleges of Oxford*, printed by desire of Her Majesty's Commissioners, vol. 1 (Oxford: J. H. Parker; and London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853), passim, on admissions preferences and founder's kin.

[3] On the proverb's semantics and its college life, see Mark Griffith, 'The Language and Meaning of the College Motto', *New College Notes* 1 (2012) no. 1.

[4] For the risks of visible virtue as conformity test, see Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 25–31.

[5] New College, Oxford 'The History of New College': <www.new.ox.ac.uk/new-college-history> (Accessed: 28 October 2025) states that Wykeham 'allowed New College to adopt his private coat of arms and personal motto "Manners Makyth Man"'; Winchester College, 'History': <www.winchestercollege.org/welcome/history/> (Accessed: 28 October 2025), refers to the phrase as Wykeham's personal device.

[6] Griffith, 'Language and Meaning', on Chaundler's Latin gloss *Mores componunt hominem*; Thomas Chaundler, *Collocuciones* (1462–4), New College Library, Oxford, MS 288, ff. 5r– , discussed by Griffith.

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Set back into space, the motto's placement between Winchester and New College deserves the last word of this introduction because it focuses the inquiry of the pages that follow. The two vistas are not merely topographical markers; they figure a pedagogy that moves from admission through regimen to service. The founder's hand performs the institutional claim that a visible fabric of habituated virtue constitutes the person fit to pass from one side of the curtain to the other. The rest of this essay proceeds by taking that claim seriously. First, it reads the device not as a decorative tag but as a rule that organises space, conduct, and recognition within Wykeham's houses. Next, it tracks how a pre-modern regime of formation migrated, in modernity, into a regime of measurement—how mores gave way to metrics without abolishing the gate they authorised. Finally, it tests whether contemporary gateways still justify collegiate status as the certification of formation rather than the consecration of advantage. Strong's portrait remains a touchstone throughout, not because it furnishes nostalgically pleasing detail, but because it articulates—succinctly and sternly—the central wager of the collegiate ideal: that education makes persons, that formation is evidenced in conduct, and that such conduct, rightly recognised, legitimates advancement; and, conversely, that these same claims can be turned into screens unless the community that utters them is held to the making it promises.[7]

'Manners makyth man': a motto as rule, threshold, and test

'Manners makyth man', the English device behind Wykeham in Strong's portrait and the phrase to which the founder directs the beholder, is not simply a label affixed to a likeness. It is the operative rule by which two colleges construed their purpose and policed their passage. The line begins life as an alliterative proverb in late Middle English—'manner(s) makyth man'—before being stabilized in college tradition as Wykeham's personal motto and adopted as the shared device of his twin foundations. Its reception was interpretive from the start. Warden Thomas Chaundler (1454–1475), glossing the English in Latin, rendered it *Mores componunt hominem*. That move matters. It refuses a thin etiquette reading of 'manners' and fixes a moralized sense: *mores* as habitus, the acquired dispositions through which conduct becomes a reliable sign of character. Middle English usage allows both shades—social polish and settled way of life—but college actors anchored the broader meaning that a bishop-founder would want for a clerical community.[8]

The choice to retain the device in English rather than Latin is equally programmatic. Vernacularity alters audience and function. Latin would have addressed insiders within the intra-collegiate economy of learned signs; English makes the claim civic, legible to visitors, benefactors, and townspeople. Strong makes that choice legible in the image: the inscription sits like a lintel between two vistas; the hand that points to it converts language into rule and rule into the condition of passage.[9] The motto thus operates as a verbal threshold: it stands at the gate not just of the painting's space but of the institutional spaces it pictures, articulating the demand that the colleges place upon those who would move through them. Later French would separate *manières* (behaviour) from *mœurs* (morals/customs); Wykeham's English straddles both, insisting that the way one inhabits social life is inseparable from who one is becoming under rule.

Once the proverb is treated as programme, it ramifies through statute and space. Wykeham's regulations—modelled on Merton, elaborated 'to keep out every abuse'—legislate chapel, hall, disputation, residence, alms, gifts, quarrels, and speech. Their aim is concord as a precondition of formation. They explicitly ban the very comparisons by which status seeks to re-

[7] On the 20th-century migration from mores to metrics, see Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958); Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (London: Allen Lane, 2020); Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020), esp. pp. 3–38.

[8] Griffith, 'Language and Meaning', for MED/OED senses and proverbial antecedents.

[9] William of Wykeham (1324–1404), oil on panel, 1596, attrib. Sampson Strong, New College, Oxford: Art UK catalogue entry, with date and attribution: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/william-of-wykeham-222805> (Accessed: 28 October 2025).

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enter—between county and county, faculty and faculty, noble birth and its absence—because such comparisons corrode the common life that makes learning and habituation possible. In this legal ecology the motto is not decorative. The formula of 'odious comparisons' appears across late-medieval collegiate statutes; New College usage is noted in Griffith's analysis, which situates the oath-like prohibition as a recurrent device rather than a Winchester-only peculiarity.[10]

To read the motto only as a hymn to social mobility would be to miss its knife-edge. Wykeham's own trajectory from Wickham to Winchester and Westminster invites precisely such a reading: not 'to the manner born', but formed into office by skill and service. And indeed, later college narratives availed themselves of that emblem, presenting Wykeham's houses as ladders for 'poor scholars' disciplined into learning and leadership. Yet the same statutes that pledge concord also specify admissions channels that reproduce advantage: diocesan priorities, founder's-kin privileges, a male clerical ambit.[11] The motto's power lies in naming both possibilities at once. Because *mores* are visible, they can serve as a ladder—conduct as proof of a life remade. Because they are visible, they can also be policed by those who control recognition—conduct as screen for the styles already preferred. Strong's staging makes this doubleness architectural. The English phrase is placed where a viewer cannot proceed without passing under it. The threshold opens and filters.

This doubleness is what allows the motto to travel into modern debates without anachronism. When twentieth-century thinkers coin 'meritocracy' to name a regime in which offices and rewards are allocated by measured ability and effort, they inherit the Wykehamist grammar—rule and recognition—while changing the sign. Where colleges once read mores in conduct, they now read promise and attainment in numbers and letters—scores, grades, credentials. The gate remains; the evidence tendered at it has shifted from habitus to metrics. The risk, as critics from Michael Young to Michael Sandel have insisted, is that rankings come to wear the moral aura the motto once claimed for *mores*, converting procedural success into a story of desert.[12] The motto's older semantics help resist that slide. If *mores componunt hominem*, the authority of selection rests less on the fetish of precision at entry than on the credibility of formation after it. Colleges justify gates by the persons they make—not by the elegance of their filters.[13]

Seen this way, the motto supplies an exacting test rather than a comfortable heritage. It asks whether a selective institution can show that its thresholds function as gateways to making rather than screens for advantage; whether its public language of excellence is tethered to a practice of common life that suppresses intra-mural status play; whether the conduct of its graduates offers legible evidence that education has shaped judgment, service, and restraint. It also licenses candour about limits. Wykeham's statutes did not abolish the social order from which applicants came; they disciplined what happened within the walls. So too now: reforms at the gate—contextual offers, bridging courses—are necessary tools, but they will not on their own undo the political economy that feeds the pipeline. The motto keeps both sides in view. It binds the college to the work of formation for those it admits, and it exposes the temptation to mistake recognisable styles of self for the virtues they are meant to signify.[14]

Finally, the motto's vernacular form is not a quaint archaism but a political act. English aligns the device with the university's claim to speak to and for a public beyond itself; it refuses

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[10] For the statutes' concern with concord and the suppression of status play, see Christopher Tyerman, *A History of Harrow School 1324–1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 22–26, for parallels in collegiate rule; and (for Wykehamist material) Griffith, 'Language and Meaning'. On the formula of 'odious comparisons', see the oath formula in late-medieval collegiate statutes (e.g., Eton and King's) and Griffith.

[11] G. D. Squibb, *Founders' Kin: Privilege and Pedigree* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 1–22.

[12] Young, *Rise of the Meritocracy*; Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*.

[13] For the 'gate justified by making', compare Adrian Wooldridge, *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), pp. 15–34.

[14] On measurement cautions, see Donald T. Campbell, 'Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change', *Evaluation and Program Planning* 2 (1979), 67–90; see also Charles Goodhart (as discussed in) Marilyn Strathern, 'Improving Ratings', *European Journal of Sociology* 40 (1999), 155–76.

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the self-sealing of Latin and invites accountability. That choice shadows Strong's entire conception: a founder addresses us across centuries in a language that binds insiders and outsiders to the same rule. To accept the device on those terms is to accept that a college's status is never self-evident. It is always argued—by statutes, by images, by thresholds—and always on probation, answerable to the making it promises. 'Manners makyth man' thus remains a live sentence. It is the rule the hand points to, the threshold the vistas require, and the test by which gateways are kept from becoming elegant screens.

Making people: merit and meritocracy

The ideal that offices and rewards should follow ability and desert is ancient; the clarity of the ideal is not. As Amartya Sen drily observes, 'the idea of meritocracy may have many virtues, but clarity is not one of them', because what counts as 'merit' depends on a prior theory of the good society.[15] The difficulty begins not with the suffix *-cracy* but with merit itself. In English usage from the 13th century, merit chiefly denoted spiritual desert—the quality in acts or persons that entitled one to reward from God—a meaning that anchored medieval soteriology: could human beings, by prayer, penance, and good works, merit divine favour; or is salvation wholly God's free gift? Aquinas's synthesis refined rather than resolved the issue. Scholastic writers distinguished *meritum de condigno* (a reward proportionate to an act, possible only because grace elevates human action) from *meritum de congruo* (a fitting but not strictly proportionate reward). On this account, any human merit is derivative—enabled by grace, measured against divine promise, and grounded finally in the merit of Christ.[16] The Reformation recast the terms: Luther's *sola gratia* and *sola fide* denied that human works can merit justification; Trent, in response, affirmed the priority of grace and denied the possibility of meriting the 'first grace', while retaining a qualified sense in which grace-infused works may be truly meritorious.[17] What concerns us here is not confessional adjudication but conceptual residue. The theological lineage reminds us that merit long named not a score or a rank but formed character and rightly ordered action—habits visible in conduct—an older grammar that clarifies what Wykeham's vernacular device ('Manners makyth man') was doing in a collegiate setting: announcing a regime of formation in which persons are made fit for office by habituated virtue.[18]

The neologism meritocracy—Latin *mereō* ('earn') + Greek *kratia* ('rule')—arrives surprisingly late and, first, as a warning. In 1956 the industrial sociologist Alan Fox (1920–2002) used meritocracy pejoratively in *Socialist Commentary* to describe a putatively fair order that would actually entrench advantage.[19] Two years later Michael Young (1915–2002) popularized the term in his satirical *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033* (1958), narrated from the vantage of the 2030s and culminating in revolt against an exam-selected elite.[20] Young's immediate British target was the post-war Tripartite System created under the 1944 Education Act—grammar, technical, and secondary modern schools—with allocation at age eleven via the 11-plus. The system promised mobility by selection; in practice, technical schools were rarely built, many areas operated a de

[15] Amartya Sen, 'Merit and Justice', in *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality*, ed. Kenneth Arrow, Samuel Bowles, and Steven Durlauf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 5–6.
[16] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q.114, aa.1–6, in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 28: *Grace*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963), pp. 119–49.
[17] Martin Luther, 'On the Freedom of a Christian' (1520), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), pp. 327–77; Council of Trent, 'Decree on Justification', Session VI (13 January 1547), in Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), pp. 671–79.
[18] For the collegiate framing of *mores* as habitus, see Thomas Chaundler's Latin gloss of the Wykehamist device: Griffith, 'Language and Meaning'.
[19] On Fox's first printed use, see Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 3–4.
[20] Young, *Rise of the Meritocracy*, esp. pp. 15–18, 106–112.

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facto two-tier regime, and an index of 'ability' hardened into hierarchy.[21] Young's book—regularly misread as advocacy—was intended as a cautionary genealogy of hubris: when IQ + effort becomes the sole public measure of worth, winners mistake fortune for virtue and losers internalize stigma.[22] Sen's conceptual caveat and Young's satire together set the research agenda: if meritocracy names both a normative principle and an institutional technology, the question is whether the instruments we build to pursue it (tests, credentials, competitions) can track the moral contents we impute to 'merit'.[23]

Following Young, contemporary scholarship treats meritocracy in two registers at once. As a normative principle, it claims that scarce offices and rewards ought to be allocated by assessed ability and performance rather than by ascriptive traits (lineage, wealth, caste, race). As an institutional technology, it denotes the concrete procedures by which societies sort persons (examinations, auditions, algorithmic rankings, credentialing pipelines). The alliance between the two relies on a strong presumption—often tacit—that observed success reliably tracks effort and talent. But that presumption can import the 'just-world' inference in which achievement becomes its own proof of merit. To resist the circularity, philosophical defences of meritocracy typically rest on two pillars: impartial competition and equality of opportunity. The first is procedural: neutral, rule-governed contests whose metrics are public and consistently administered. The second—'careers open to talents'—has thin and thick versions: at minimum, the absence of legal bars; more robustly, material guarantees (nutrition, education, time, cultural capital) that render competition meaningfully comparable across starting points. The conceptual structure is clear; the empirical implementation is not.[24]

Higher education supplies the canonical stage on which these issues play out, because universities function simultaneously as engines of formation and as devices of selection and signalling. On one reading, this is simply the modern migration of Wykeham's wager: that cultivated 'manners'—habitus learned in community—make persons fit for responsibility. On another reading, the migration alters the substance: examinations, grade-point averages, and branded credentials substitute procedural rank for visible character. The motto's older grammar ('words as rule; conduct as evidence') is preserved but repurposed; the gatehouse becomes an admissions office. That pivot is why so much of the recent literature interrogates the instruments through which meritocratic judgment is instantiated. Donald Campbell's and Charles Goodhart's famous laws locate a deep design flaw: once a measure becomes a target, it degrades as a measure, and high-stakes indicators invite gaming and distort practice. In education, the phenomena are familiar—teaching to the test, score inflation, the appearance of precision without construct validity or measurement invariance across groups.[25] In short: even if the moral defence of meritocracy held, the measurement would often fail.

Two influential critiques attack the moral defence directly. Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) challenges desert-based justifications on principled and civic grounds. Natural endowments and market luck are morally arbitrary, yet the meritocratic imaginary translates their payoffs into a story of earned success; the result is an economy of hubris and humiliation that corrodes solidarity.[26] Daniel Markovits's *The Meritocracy Trap* (2019) complements Sandel's argument with a structural account: far from dismantling aristocracy, meritocracy has matured into

[21] John Roach, *Secondary Education in England 1870–1902: Public Activity and Private Enterprise* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 236–45; Brian Simon, *Education and the Social Order, 1940–1990* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), pp. 117–26.
[22] Michael Young, 'Down with Meritocracy', *The Guardian* (29 June 2001), 17.
[23] Sen, 'Merit and Justice', pp. 5–7.
[24] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 73–5 (on 'careers open to talents' and fair equality of opportunity).
[25] Campbell, 'Assessing the Impact'; Charles A. E. Goodhart, 'Problems of Monetary Management: The U.K. Experience', in *Papers in Monetary Economics*, vol. 1 (Sydney: Reserve Bank of Australia, 1975), pp. 91–121. For construct validity and invariance cautions in educational measurement, see Howard Wainer, *Uneducated Guesses: Using Evidence to Uncover Misguided Education Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 27–52.
[26] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 63–89.

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a regime of elite reproduction—intensive early cultivation, expensive enrichment, selective schooling, and prestige certification that together monopolize opportunity, while winner-take-all labour markets reward those credentials and overwork their possessors. The system exhausts the 'winners' it elevates and marginalizes the 'losers' it ignores.[27] Thomas Piketty's broader political-economy lens locates meritocracy within the 'regimes of justification' that legitimize unequal orders: narrating distributions as the transparent expression of talent depoliticizes questions of inheritance, fiscal structure, and institutional design.[28]

Sociology supplies a parallel line of critique that tracks the means rather than the morals. Randall Collins's classic *The Credential Society* (1979) argues that the expansion of formal education has inflated credentials without proportionate productivity gains, allowing certified attainment to trump demonstrated skill and enabling professional closure.[29] Max Weber's (1864–1920) concept of social closure names the underlying dynamic: groups monopolize advantages by restricting entry and controlling recognition.[30] Fred Hirsch's (1931–1978) account of positional goods adds the logic of scarcity: where the value of a good depends on relative position (elite seats, prestige degrees), expansion generates arms races rather than general welfare.[31] These frameworks clarify why meritocratic rhetoric so often ushers in credentialist practice. If the prize is positional, the route will be policed; if the route is policed, the signs of admissibility (manners, accents, forms of capital) become screens as well as ladders.

Two further research threads are worth integrating. First, a strand of critical education studies (exemplified by Khen Lampert) argues that the global demand for measurable 'excellence' is ideological, tethered to competitive schooling that produces social worthlessness for many participants—a moral psychology of exclusion that mirrors Sandel's civic worry.[32] A complementary empirical literature dissects what Satoshi Araki and others call 'imagined meritocracy': the cultural after-image in which participants sincerely believe that open competition explains outcomes even when structural advantage (wealth, tutoring, networks) has done much of the work.[33] On this view, meritocracy functions as a justificatory discourse that renders unequal results intelligible by narrating them as deserved. Second, the measurement community has sharpened the technical cautions: where selection relies on instruments that lack invariance across socio-economic or ethnic groups, the appearance of fairness masks systematic bias.[34]

What, then, becomes of the Wykehamist inheritance? If 'manners makyth man', the medieval and humanist claim is not that tests reveal inner worth but that colleges form persons by rule and common life, and that this formation is legible in conduct. The device sits at a threshold—between vista and vista in Strong's portrait; between admission and office in institutional practice—and it names both a promise and a peril. The promise is that education can make men (and women): a life under rule that shapes judgment and service. The peril is that visible conduct becomes a criterion of recognition controlled by those who already possess power to define the rule. In Wykeham's own foundations, statutes for 'poor scholars' coexisted with diocesan preferences, founder's kin privileges, and gendered exclusions.[35] The modern migration to examination and credential does not escape the ambivalence; it retools it. Where manners once

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[27] Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), pp. 23–28, 173–210.
[28] Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, pp. 3–24, 967–90.
[29] Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), pp. 3–30.
[30] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 2, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 926–39 (on *Schließung* / social closure).
[31] Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 3–7, 52–63.
[32] For a sustained critique of 'excellence' and the ideology of merit, see Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, pp. 1–20.
[33] Satoshi Araki and Mitsuhiro Washida, 'Paradigm of the Imagination: Imagined Meritocracy and Ontological Insecurity', *Theory & Psychology* 32 (2022), 106–23.
[34] Michael J. Kolen and Robert L. Brennan, *Test Equating, Scaling, and Linking: Methods and Practices*, 3rd edn (New York: Springer, 2014), pp. 221–54 (on measurement invariance and equating).
[35] Statutes of St. Mary's College of Winchester in Oxford', passim.

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signalled a stabilized habitus, metrics now signal a stabilized rank. If the prize is scarce and positional, institutions will defend thresholds—architectural, procedural, symbolic. The portrait's triad (sitter—motto—vistas) turns out to be a durable design for social ordering: a person centred by a rule, flanked by institutional spaces of passage, the rule operating as both grammar of formation and technology of selection.

This double function helps adjudicate contemporary proposals. Defences of meritocracy that rest solely on procedural impartiality without substantive opportunity repeat the old mistake of treating recognition as transparent to desert. Conversely, calls to abandon selection altogether ignore the civic need for trustworthy stewardship of scarce offices. A Wykehamist rehabilitation would move on a different axis: not a fetish of measurement but a renewed politics of formation—institutions judged by the habits they inculcate and by the permeability of their gates. Two diagnostic questions follow: (1) Do our colleges plausibly form the dispositions—intellectual, civic, moral—that their public rhetoric invokes? (2) Do their gateways, in practice, function more as ladders of inclusion or as screens of exclusion? Where the answer to (1) is thin and (2) is the latter, the language of meritocracy reduces to what Young warned against: a sanctified hierarchy in which success legitimates itself.[36]

Read back through Strong's Wykeham, the older motto remains useful precisely because it names the hinge. If manners (habitus, civilitas) truly 'makyth man', then education cannot be reduced to credential manufacture; and if makyth implies a visible process under rule, then the authority to recognize 'who counts' must itself be disciplined. That is where many modern regimes fail, not only morally (Sandel's hubris/humiliation) but technically (Goodhart/Campbell). To put the point starkly: no stable polity can long endure on the claim that a scarce positional order is justified by measures that cannot measure and by competitions that pretend to equalize what they cannot equalize. The meritocratic dream requires, at minimum, a Wykehamist memory: that persons are made in company, that making is legible in conduct, and that every threshold is a moral test of whether formation has become pretext for selection. On that view, meritocracy is tolerable only to the extent that its instruments serve the making of persons—rather than the making of ranks. Anything less turns 'manners makyth man' into the most elegant of screens.[37]

Medieval and modern theatres of meritocracy

Wykeham's colleges made a simple but demanding claim: persons fit for learning and public responsibility are not identified first by pedigree but 'made' by disciplined conduct within a common life. The New College statutes operationalised that claim. They bind fellows to renounce 'odious comparisons' of county against county, faculty against faculty, noble birth against lack of it; they prohibit provocations of hatred, envy, and insult that fracture concord; and they require the suppression of status-display inside the house so that formation, not rank, governs the rhythms of work, worship, and sociability.[38] Read through Strong's 1596 portrait, the architecture is almost diagrammatic: the sitter's hand fixes the English device at the visual threshold between the two vistas, turning a proverb into a rule of passage. In the late medieval regime, mores—stable dispositions legible in conduct—served as the criterion at the gate. The modern regime replaces visible habitus with quantified proxies: examinations, graded scripts, predictive algorithms, and an application dossier that compresses a life into a few standardised pages.[39] The structure remains a gate; the evidentiary basis changes.

Because admissions is the gate on which the meaning of collegiate status now turns, it is worth stating the contemporary facts plainly. Oxford receives a little over 23,000 applications for

[36] Young, *Rise of the Meritocracy*, pp. 127–33.
[37] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 201–22; Campbell, 'Assessing the Impact', pp. 35–9.
[38] 'Statutes of St. Mary's College of Winchester in Oxford', R. 33 (rubric on concord and prohibitions of *comparationes odiosae*), on pp. 59–60.
[39] Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 1–15.

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undergraduate study each year and has places for roughly 3,300 students; in the 2024 cycle it admitted 3,245 undergraduates, with offers just under 3,800. The graduate market is still larger—nearly 38,000 applicants in 2023 for about 5,500 places—and the selectivity remains intense across both tiers. The university's official 'Overall numbers' and Annual Admissions Statistical Report show small year-to-year movements at this scale but a stable positional scarcity: on average, about seven applications per place for undergraduate entry.[40] The bare arithmetic is familiar; what matters is the social geography of who reaches the gate with the credentials that make admission likely.

Oxford's own dashboards now report, with admirable candour, the composition of the UK-domiciled intake by neighbourhood disadvantage and progression to higher education. Using the ACORN classification, 14.4% of undergraduates admitted in 2023 came from the two most disadvantaged groups (ACORN 4–5); the proportion in 2024 was 14.5%.[41] On the Office for Students' POLAR measure of areas with the lowest historic progression to university, the intake from the bottom two quintiles was 13.3% in 2023 and 13.6% in 2024.[42] These are improvements on a decade ago, but they remain well below the population shares of those neighbourhood categories. The distribution of feeder grades pulls in the same direction: most Oxford entrants present A-level profiles that sit at the very top of the national distribution. Yet nationally the share of A* grades is small—around 9.3% of entries in 2024—and the share of A*/A combined was about 27.8%, with persistent regional disparities (London at the top, the North East at the bottom) and sector effects.[43] In other words, the pool from which Oxford selects is a thin tail whose production is itself regionally and socio-economically skewed, and the gate reflects those upstream skews even as it tries to counter them.

One response has been to alter the timing of formation. The university's 'Opportunity Oxford' programme admits on contextualised potential and then front-loads academic preparation before matriculation; since 2020 the university has made more than 1,000 offers with a place on the programme, and a further ~1,500 offer-holders have joined the digital variant, with steady-state cohorts of about 250 and 300 respectively each year.[44] This is a Wykehamist move in contemporary dress: it tries to return *mores*—the habits and skills that make study fruitful—to the centre by treating readiness as something that can be cultivated by the institution rather than demanded as a raw input. The policy controversy this provokes is predictable and, in effect, medieval: are we adjusting the gate or the rule? Defenders insist that standards are held constant at point of entry to the degree and that the university shares responsibility for enabling the meeting of those standards; critics worry about 'dual thresholds' and capacity displacement. Either way, the programme clarifies that the question is not simply who possesses merit, but when and by whom the making of persons is to be done.

Situating this debate within the modern literature on meritocracy helps to separate ethos, ideology, and instrument. Michael Sandel's critique targets the moral psychology of ranking. In *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) he argues that a culture which reads educational and professional success as proof of desert generates 'hubris among the winners and humiliation among the losers', corroding civic solidarity and fuelling populist resentment.[45] On this view, even exquisitely fair procedures

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[40] University of Oxford, 'Admissions Statistics': <www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/admissions-statistics> (Accessed: 28 October 2025); University of Oxford, *Annual Admissions Statistical Report* (June 2025): <www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/AnnualAdmissionsStatisticalReport2025.pdf> (Accessed: 28 October 2025).

[41] University of Oxford, *Annual Admissions Statistical Report* (June 2025), section 3 'Disadvantage', including ACORN tables for UK-domiciled intake 2020–24.

[42] ibid., POLAR4 quintile tables, 2023–24.

[43] Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), [GCE Level 3 UK Press Notice—Summer 2024]: <www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/UK-JCQ-A-level-Level-3-press-notice.pdf>, and [GCE Entry Gender and Regional Charts—Summer 2024]: <www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GCE-Entry-Gender-and-Regional-Charts.pdf> (Accessed: 28 October 2025).

[44] University of Oxford, 'What is Opportunity Oxford?': <www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access/opportunity-oxford/about> (Accessed: 28 October 2025).

[45] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 13–16, 183–205.

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cannot answer the deeper worry, because the social meaning we attach to status does the damage: the successful inhale too deeply of their success and forget luck; the unsuccessful are invited to internalise failure. For selective universities the injunction is not to abolish excellence, but to demote the moral freight of rank, to discipline institutional self-congratulation, and to elevate the dignity of work beyond elite lanes. Put back into Wykeham's frame, Sandel asks the college to ensure that the promise of formation does not mutate into a theology of worthiness by credential.

Thomas Piketty extends the critique on a different axis. In *Capital and Ideology* (2019) meritocracy appears as a 'regime of justification', the narrative by which modern democracies stabilise unequal orders.[46] Inequality, Piketty insists, is not a technological fate but a political and institutional settlement: tax systems, housing, school finance, labour law, and asset returns are engineered to preserve advantage; merit is the story that renders the resulting distribution legitimate. The implication for admissions is direct. A university can widen its gate only so far as the upstream political economy allows, because families at the top of the wealth and income distributions can and do repurchase advantage—schools, tutoring, social capital—and then have it certified by selective institutions. Without reform at the level of fiscal structure and public services, change inside the gate will deliver incremental progress rather than compositional transformation. Wykeham would recognise the pattern: statutes can restrain 'odious comparisons' within the walls, but the stream that reaches the gate is conditioned by the surrounding polity.

Adrian Wooldridge, by contrast, offers a conditional defence. In *The Aristocracy of Talent* (2021) he reminds us why meritocracy was historically a moral advance: it displaced hereditary privilege with open competition, exam-based civil services, and ladders of opportunity that found talent in unlikely places.[47] But he also insists that meritocracy succeeds only when married to an ethos of formation and public purpose; left to market logics alone, it decays into what he calls 'pluto-meritocracy', in which the wealthy purchase advantage and the winners adopt the manners of caste. Read alongside Wykeham, Wooldridge's prescription is almost programmatic: retain the gate, widen the search, invest in making, and bind success to service.

The sticking point is instrumental. Even where the ethos is right and the narrative is honest about upstream structure, the tools by which we instantiate admissions are vulnerable to failure modes that the measurement literature has catalogued for decades. Goodhart's and Campbell's laws are not slogans but empirical regularities: when indicators become targets, they degrade as indicators; high stakes invite gaming and teach-to-the-test; construct validity and measurement invariance across regions and school sectors cannot be presumed.[48] The recent stabilisation of top-grade rates above 2019 levels, and their persistent concentration in London and the South East, should therefore be read with humility: identical marks do not encode identical opportunity costs or instructional ecologies. Oxford's year-on-year movement in ACORN and POLAR composition—real, but modest—confirms that the instruments can improve access only at the margin unless the pipeline itself is changed. In Wykehamist terms: if the stream that reaches the gate remains unequal, the college must both rebuild parts of the stream and be candid about what its gate can and cannot do.

College status amplifies these tensions because it is a positional good. In Fred Hirsch's terms, the value of a place at Oxford derives in part from its scarcity and from the prestige gradient across institutions.[49] That positionality intensifies competition and raises the rewards for marginal gains on the chosen indicators, which in turn increases the incentive to arbitrage the system (test prep, admissions consultancy, extracurricular packaging). Randall Collins's classic credentialism thesis bites here: as more education is required to clear status thresholds, formal certificates can inflate faster than underlying productivity or civic contribution, and professional closure follows.[50]

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[46] Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, pp. 1–24, 967–1003.
[47] Wooldridge, *Aristocracy of Talent*, pp. 3–10, 327–46.
[48] Goodhart, 'Problems of Monetary Management'; Campbell, 'Assessing the Impact'.
[49] Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 27–52.
[50] Collins, *The Credential Society*, pp. 3–28.

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One can accept Wooldridge's history—that opening competition was a momentous advance—and still take seriously Sandel's and Piketty's warnings: selection under positional scarcity will moralise rank unless institutions consciously de-moralise the badge and repoliticise the pipeline. Strong's portrait reads as a parable: the inscription between the vistas is both gateway and screen; what justifies it is not the elegance of the lettering but the credibility of the formation it promises.

Against that background, the university's 'Opportunity Oxford' is interesting not as an admissions 'tweak' but as a philosophical bet. It wagers that potential, supported by institutional investment, can be a better predictor of flourishing than raw attainment is in an unequal school system. That is a claim about timing—when standards must be met—and about responsibility—who bears the burden of enabling their achievement. It is also, implicitly, a return to Wykeham's language. If *mores componunt hominem*, then the institution that selects must also accept a share in the making; the hand that points to the words must accept that the words bind the hand. The obvious challenge is scale. Oxford can sustain a cohort of several hundred within bridging schemes; it cannot rebuild the school system alone. Piketty's admonition recurs: admissions reform that is not coupled to fiscal and infrastructural reform will alter the composition of the intake slowly and only at the margins.

What, then, should 'meritocracy' mean for a college that still lives under Wykeham's motto? Sandel would have it mean a lowering of the moral temperature of rank and a renewed civic regard for work and contribution beyond elite tracks.[51] Piketty would have it mean candour that merit-talk is a story we tell to justify an order—and a willingness to change the order. Wooldridge would have it mean recommitment to a demanding programme: ruthless search for talent coupled to a thick pedagogy of character and service.[52] All three converge on a test the founder would have understood. The legitimacy of collegiate status does not rest on the fetish of precision in measurement, nor on the beauty of the gate, but on the plausibility that those who pass through will be made—and held—to ends beyond themselves. That is why Wykeham banned 'odious comparisons': they corrode the common life by turning selection into caste.[53] And it is why Strong's portrait still teaches: the words are not a caption but a condition. In a world tempted to treat admissions as an algorithmic sort on thin data, the older grammar is unexpectedly bracing. Manners makyth man remains both a promise and a rebuke—promise, that institutions can form the persons they admit; rebuke, that the gate is justified only if formation, not advantage, is what the badge comes to signify.

None of this dissolves the hard arithmetic of selectivity. It does, however, locate that arithmetic within a longer history. Medieval statutes tried to suppress intra-mural status games so that common life could do its work. Our problem is that status games now take place at the gate, before common life begins, under the banner of merit. If the numbers show incremental widening of the intake from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and persistent regional skews in top grades, the conclusion is not to abandon selection, nor to baptise its results as natural justice, but to return to the founder's discipline: invest in making, speak plainly about measurement, resist the moralisation of rank, and keep the inscription true by what happens after entry. If colleges can do that—if they can show, in their graduates' conduct, that formation rather than advantage is what their status certifies—then Wykeham's English motto can still be read not as a screen but as a gateway.

Michael Sandel's appeal to 'create conditions to enable everyone to contribute to the common good and receive honour and recognition for doing so' is a powerful reminder of the broader purpose of meritocracy. While recent studies have extensively critiqued the current state of meritocracy, few argue against the principle itself, likely because, at present, there is no clear alternative. The real question, therefore, is not whether meritocracy should exist, but how we design a meritocratic society that is fair and inclusive. The New College motto, 'Manners makyth man', underscores a special responsibility for its students in this context. It suggests that education

[51] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 202–223.
[52] Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, pp. 1001–1050.
[53] Wooldridge, *Aristocracy of Talent*, pp. 327–46.

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is not merely about academic achievement but also about cultivating character and integrity. In light of ongoing disparities in access to higher education, this motto takes on added significance. It calls on those privileged enough to attend institutions like New College to recognize the broader societal implications of their education and to be mindful of the values of fairness, inclusion, and responsibility toward those less advantaged.[54]

Not all of us may become wealthy or have the means to establish schools and colleges like Wykeham, but his motto calls on us to use our abilities and skills in service to others. This service can be embodied in our daily actions—by fostering the potential in others, supporting those around us, and practicing servant leadership.[55] It emphasizes that true success lies not just in personal achievement but in uplifting and empowering others, creating a ripple effect of positive impact that extends beyond individual gain.

Another crucial aspect is opening New College as a 'space for interaction'—a space for meaningful encounters. As Sandel has argued, one of the critical issues facing our democracy is the lack of spaces where people from different backgrounds can meet, converse, and understand diverse worldviews and experiences.[56] For democracy to thrive, such exchanges are essential. Despite initiatives like 'Opportunity Oxford' and outreach efforts to attract applicants from all walks of life, we could go further by creating a social debate forum. This forum would not be limited to university members but open to the entire population of Oxford, encouraging an active exchange of ideas that transcends the academic sphere and helps shape political discourse in a way that is inclusive of the wider community. This would be in keeping with the spirit of Wykeham's legacy and New College's ongoing commitment to fostering both intellectual and social engagement for the common good.

Conclusion

A conclusion worthy of Wykeham must return to the picture's hardest claim. Strong's 1596 panel is not mere commemoration; it is an argument in paint that colleges make persons, that formation is legible in conduct, and that institutional gateways are justified when they test for that formation. Read alongside statutes and later admissions regimes, the image teaches a durable grammar: rule, recognition, passage. In the 14th century the tokens were *mores*—habits acquired in common life and displayed in behaviour; in our own, the tokens are metrics—scores, scripts, dossiers. The gate has endured; the evidence tendered at it has changed. That migration explains both the force and the fragility of modern meritocracy. The force lies in the promise to align status with serviceable excellence; the fragility lies in the ease with which signs—whether manners or marks—become screens.[57] Strong's triad of sitter, inscription, and vistas keeps the ambivalence in view. It is a gateway that can dignify or exclude, depending on whether the community behind it honours the work of making persons or merely canonises advantage.

The essay has argued that the Wykehamist inheritance remains a demanding standard against which to judge contemporary practice. Michael Sandel's critique of the moralisation of rank, Thomas Piketty's account of meritocracy as a regime of justification within a political economy of inequality, and Adrian Wooldridge's conditional defence of competitive selection converge on a single discipline for selective institutions: lower the temperature of status, tell the truth about upstream structure, and recommit to formation as the thing that warrants the gate.[58] Read in that light, 'Opportunity Oxford' and related schemes are not administrative tweaks but

[54] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, p. 226.
[55] For recent synthesis, see Lee Elliott Major and Steve Higgins, *What Works? Research and Evidence for Successful Teaching* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 1–8 (on equity and attainment).
[56] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 210–16 (on 'the dignity of work' and democratic spaces).
[57] Mandler, *Crisis of the Meritocracy*, pp. 1–15.
[58] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 13–16, 183–205; Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, pp. 967–1003; Wooldridge, *Aristocracy of Talent*, pp. 327–46.

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attempts to restore timing and responsibility—treating readiness as something a college helps to make rather than merely inspects. The question that remains is the one the portrait poses to its beholders: will the threshold function as gateway or screen?

Answering that question is not only a policy problem. It is also, and perhaps first, a historical and art-historical one. Bringing 'meritocracy' into the purview of art history sharpens our methods by asking us to treat images and built forms as technologies of selection. Founder portraits, gatehouse inscriptions, seals, stained glass, and hall displays are not neutral decor; they are instruments that teach communities how to see virtue, where to locate authority, and whom to recognise.[59] The visual field around colleges—the architecture of thresholds, the choreography of procession, the siting of mottoes, the iconography of founders and benefactors—constitutes an archive of merit's representation long before the word existed.[60] To speak about meritocracy without attending to those images is to miss how claims about desert are made plausible, habitual, and public.[61]

Across periods, cultures have not only defined 'merit' but made it visible and persuasive—and they have done so through images, architectures, and display regimes that found, normalise, and renew hierarchies of desert. Strong's Wykeham is exemplary: the pointing hand, the vernacular lintel, and the bifurcated vistas choreograph recognition, turning a proverb into a credential and a portrait into an instrument of selection. Read alongside founder galleries, coats of arms, gatehouses, and ritual choreographies, such works belong to an exhibitionary ecosystem that scripts passage and instructs beholders how to recognise excellence.[62] Portrait studies (from Woodall and West to Pointon) show that likeness is a public proposition about status and right to notice; museum and exhibition histories explain how buildings and processions induct viewers into civic hierarchies; political iconology and histories of expert portraiture demonstrate how images authorise authority by yoking moralised character to legitimate office.[63] The upshot is methodological: art objects are not simply reflections of pre-existing orders of merit; they are technologies of selection that help produce the very publics who assent to those orders.[64]

Modernity does not abolish this visual labour; it refactors it. The 'portrait of merit' migrates from oil and heraldry to dashboards, league tables, and ranked lists: a shift from mores to metrics, not from persuasion to truth.[65] Rankings and infographics inherit the old persuasive tasks in the cool idiom of numeracy (as the measurement literature shows), conferring an aura of neutrality while performing consequential acts of sorting.[66] Seeing this continuity equips art historians and historians alike with a transhistorical lens: the same analytic tools used to parse gesture, pose, and placement in founder images can and should be turned on the typographies, grids, and interfaces that now mediate recognition. In short, to ask how meritocracy is communicated, established, and maintained through art is to gain a general method for interpreting artefacts from any epoch—

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[59] Nigel Llewellyn, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1–15 (on ritual display and civic pedagogy).

[60] Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 1–15.

[61] Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 1–12.

[62] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 59–88; Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1–21.

[63] Joanna Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Marcia Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013); Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*; Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*; Marin, *Portrait of the King*; Burke, *Fabrication of Louis XIV*.

[64] Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, trans. Elizabeth Clegg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 1–22.

[65] Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 25–45.

[66] Wendy Nelson Espeland and Michael Sauder, 'Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds', *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (2007), 1–40; Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 1–15; Campbell, 'Assessing the Impact'.

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early modern portraits and portals, no less than today's 'pictures of data'—as active media that make merit thinkable, legible, and actionable.[67]

History, for its part, gains a refined lens on social mobility and elite reproduction by taking images seriously as actors. The prosopography of Wykehamists and the accounting of admissions tell us who entered and from where; the portrait and the gatehouse tell us what entry was supposed to mean, how it was staged, and how that staging licensed exclusion as easily as inclusion. To write the history of merit without its pictures is to write half a history; to write the art history of founders without their statutes is to risk prettifying power. A synthetic method—attending to paint and parchment in a single analytic frame—makes visible the feedback loop that sustains elite institutions: images teach rules; rules shape recognition; recognition selects bodies that then reproduce the images.[68]

There are, finally, curatorial and pedagogical stakes. How we display Strong's Wykeham—what wall text we write, whether we juxtapose the portrait with statutes, admission oaths, or present-day dashboards—bears directly on the institutional memory a college transmits.[69] Exhibiting the picture as a 'programme' rather than as 'likeness' would invite viewers to test the college's present against its historical wager. Pairing the English motto with Chaundler's *Mores componunt hominem* makes legible the moral ambition that the vernacular compresses; pairing the hand that points with contemporary selection instruments makes legible the change in what we ask signs to do.[70] In seminar rooms, the portrait can anchor conversations that include Sandel's worry about hubris, Piketty's insistence on structure, and Wooldridge's call for an ethos—conversations that turn a founder's device into a living demand on graduates and governors alike.[71]

If there is a single claim to carry out of this inquiry, it is that Wykeham's motto remains truer as test than as boast. It binds an institution to prove that what it confers is not only rank but formation; that status follows serviceable excellence rather than precedes it; that thresholds are morally defensible when they are gateways into a disciplined common life whose fruits are public. When those conditions obtain, the image of a founder pointing to English words between two vistas can still do civic work. When they fail, the same image exposes the logic by which elegant screens are mistaken for just gates. To that extent, the study of meritocracy does not sit alongside art history and institutional history as an optional add-on; it discloses their object. It shows how pictures and places make claims about persons—and how those claims, if left untested, become the smoothest rationalisations of inequality.[72] Strong's portrait will go on pointing. Whether 'Manners makyth man' reads, in our practice, as the condition of entry—or of selection—remains the question by which both our colleges and our disciplines should be judged.

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[67] Espeland and Sauder, 'Rankings and Reactivity', pp. 1–10; Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, pp. 25–45.
[68] Bredekamp, *Image Acts*, pp. 1–22; Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, pp. 59–88.
[69] Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–18.
[70] Griffith, 'Language and Meaning' (on Chaundler's *Mores componunt hominem*).
[71] Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit*, pp. 210–23; Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, pp. 1001–1050; Wooldridge, *Aristocracy of Talent*, pp. 327–46.
[72] Goodhart, 'Problems of Monetary Management' (for Goodhart's Law applied generically to indicators).

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