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Gender and changing foodways in England's late-medieval bourgeois households

Nouveaux arts de la table et convivialités sexuées

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Gender and changing foodways in England's late-medieval bourgeois households

Katherine L. FRENCH*

In the fifteenth century, consumption among England's bourgeois households – generally citizen merchants and artisans – increased. Expanded availability of new types of consumer items presented users with new opportunities, choices, and behaviors, which altered household behavior and activities including what archaeologists call women's maintenance activities: the provisioning and running of the household, including childcare.¹ Because women's behavior was an important marker and determiner of household respectability, their behavior as wives, daughters, servants, and apprentices, was closely watched, commented upon, and regulated. On the one hand then, increased consumption signaled increasing standards of living, on the other hand, however, it had the capacity to challenge expected household dynamics and gender roles.

The contexts from which archaeologists recover objects from England's urban past hamper identification of the social impact of new forms of consumption. While household items survive in abundance, archaeologists usually excavate them from refuse piles and riverbanks. It is thus difficult to situate them within houses or by status, placing limitations on what scholars can say about the impact of material culture on urban behavior. This article approaches the question of the impact of changing material culture on household dynamics through

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¹ Sánchez-Romero & Aranda 2008: 75.

textual descriptions. While attentive to the changes in quantity and use that archaeologists ascribe to particular classes of objects, this article reads texts against changes in consumption patterns and changes in the use of household objects. In the process I hope to illuminate some of the conscious and unconscious assumptions that people made about the role of the material world in their lives.

Writing about eating, women, and disorder

Two Middle English texts, a late-fifteenth century ballad, “Wives at the Tavern” and an early sixteenth-century English translation of the late-fifteenth-century French text [*Les Évangiles des Quenouilles*] *The Gospelles of Dystaves* both tell of women leaving their houses and husbands to eat dinner with their friends.² As the story of Lucretia, told by Livy demonstrates, women dining together had long been considered problematic.³ However, the material culture of eating, such as food, tableware, and spaces, that is embedded and assumed in our two accounts, allows us to historicize women’s sociability and the anxieties generated around it. While the misogyny of these texts might appear timeless, it is I will argue quite historically specific. Attention to changes in eating and drinking habits, what archaeologist call foodways, allow us to see that the concerns about women’s socializing addressed in our texts were responding to the changes transforming late-medieval English women’s material world.

The ballad “Wives at the Tavern” appears in a manuscript of seventy-seven songs probably owned by an Augustinian canon.⁴ In the ballad, an anonymous male narrator follows six women sneaking off to eat, drink, socialize, and commiserate with each other.⁵ Following satirical conventions that mock and stereotype women’s

² Wright 1847: 91-95; see also Kowaleski 2006: 196-99; Huntington Library, *The Gospelles of Dystaves*, (STC 12091).

³ Pailler 2001: 119-131.

⁴ Taylor 1991: 62.

⁵ The ballad appears in Bodley ms. Eng. poet c. 1, (sum. Cat. No. 29734) dating from c. 1480. Robbins 1955: xxvii; Taylor 1991: 62-64.

behavior, the narrator portrays them as wanton, boozy, and outspoken. What they most desire is sweet wine:

...a pot of muscatel
Fore of all the wines I love it well
Sweet Wines keep the body in health.

The narrator's misogynistic mocking of women's behavior alternates with the women's celebration of the emotional support provided by their friendship:

Good gossip mine, where have you been?
It is so long since I've seen you.

The central event of the ballad is a shared meal:

Each of them brought forth their dish
Some brought flesh and some fish.

After some laughter, bravado, commiseration and much eating and drinking, the women go home to bed and the narrator then rues women's excessive drinking habits more generally.⁶ As a performed song, groups of women might have sung the women's words, and men the narrator's part, with the men having the last word.

A similar dinner scene appears in *The Gospelles of Dystaves*. This work has a long manuscript and print tradition. In about 1510, one of Wynkyn de Worde's apprentices, Henry Watson, translated the well-known French text *Les Évangiles des Quenouilles* into English.⁷ The work is a satirical misogynistic work in the tradition of the *querelle des femmes*, a genre that debated the nature of women.⁸ It purports to be a transcript by an unnamed clerk of the teachings of six elderly "wise doctouresses" before an assembly of their female friends and neighbors. The women are all old and ugly, with suspect pasts: all had had multiple sexual partners, several were skilled at divination, and one was descended

⁶ Wright 1847: 93, 95.

⁷ *Les Évangiles des Quenouilles* appeared first in two French manuscript versions. Once in print, it enjoyed wide popularity on both sides of the English Channel. Jeay & Garay 2006: 23. Little is known about de Worde's edition, including the size of the print run. The only surviving copy is held by the Huntington Library. Duff 1948: 166-167.

⁸ Angelo 2000: 23.

from heretics. Over the course of six evenings, the women take turns revealing their knowledge about marriage, fertility, infidelity, sexual pleasure, and medicine.⁹ Following scholastic tradition, women in the audience gloss their teachings. The clerk narrates the proceedings, offering comments laced with irony, paternalism, and sarcasm.¹⁰ In parodying scholastic form, the work positions men's rationality, knowledge, and writing over women's irrationality, superstitiousness, and orality.¹¹ At the end of the Thursday session, one woman proposes "a little joyous banquet for to refresh our understanding with and our spirits."¹² The women return home to supply the feast. One woman brings a dozen eggs, another goes to "fetch flour and butter for to make pancakes," a third a "great quart of sweet wine," another said she would "dress the meat."¹³ As the women announce what they will bring, they explain that they will have to bring their fare without their husbands' knowledge.¹⁴

While these two texts tap wide unease over women's gatherings, whether in the market, tavern or even church, a variety of platters, bowls, plates, and jugs to transport the meat, poultry, pasties, fish, flour, butter, eggs and sweet wine enabled the women's socializing. Attention to the material culture of dining and drinking in these texts situates the expressions of misogyny common in the late medieval period in concerns about the impact of rising urban consumption on household order and ideology.

⁹ Jeay 1983.

¹⁰ Gates 1997: 13-20, esp. 14.

¹¹ Jeay 1982: 166.

¹² Huntington Library, *Gospelles of Dystaves*, D1v-D1r. The two French mss. differ from each other. The earlier version, the Chantilly mss., has no clerk and no dinner party. The later Paris mss. has both and is the source for subsequent printed versions.

¹³ Watson altered the meal's menu to suit his English audience. He changed waffles (*gauffres*) to pancakes, changed new wine to sweet wine, and added meat to the foods the women brought. Huntington Library, *Gospelles of Dystaves*, D1r.

¹⁴ Huntington Library, *Gospelles of Dystaves*, D1r.

Meals, gender and the ideal household

Late medieval urban households, formed when a man and a woman married, were the basis of production, trade, and retail, much of which was regulated by a guild. The household was also the fundamental unit of civic order and morality. The economic basis of these households distinguished them from the rural gentry, despite intermarriage between the two groups and the fact that many a younger gentry son found success in the city.¹⁵ Men did not become masters until they were married, and despite their unequal legal or guild status, women were essential to the productivity and economic success of these household-based ventures. The shared values of order, restraint, piety, and industry bound these households together, with strongly gendered behavior marking men's and women's conduct: passivity, silence, and obedience for women and hierarchy, diligence, and ambition for men.¹⁶

Eating together did not just symbolize household order, it was household order. Christian Eucharistic theology imbued medieval meals with the themes of sacrifice, redemption, largesse, and social harmony.¹⁷ Eating together was also fundamental to canon law's concept of marriage and divorce. The great Canonist, Gratian, admonished separated couples "you shall not eat with her, drink with her at the same table, or stay with her under one roof."¹⁸ The brides' vows in England's *Sarum rite* include promising to be "bonour (good or obliging) and buxom in bed and at board, till death us depart,"¹⁹ while the legal language for divorce was "*a mensa et thoro*," (from table and bed).²⁰ So basic was the assumption that husbands and wives ate together that one fifteenth-century sermon explained that priests should be wary of assigning fasting as penance, lest it betray a wife's sin.²¹ In summing up the essence of a harmonious properly-ordered

¹⁵ Horrox 1988: 22-44.

¹⁶ Riddy 1996; McSheffrey 2006: 175-189; Karras 2003: 109-150; Bardsley 2006.

¹⁷ Bynum 1987.

¹⁸ Butler 2013: 134.

¹⁹ McSheffrey, 2006: 45.

²⁰ McSheffrey 2006: 23-25; Butler 2013.

²¹ Weatherly 1936: 77.

marriage, a late-fifteenth century poem's advice for choosing a good wife turns to meal-time dynamics. It recommends that the prospective groom value meekness over wealth, explaining that it is better to have a courteous and good wife who "serves you well and pleasantly ... with rest and peace a nice meal of homey fare ... than to have a hundred dishes with grumbling and with much care."²² The image of a wife serving and then eating with her husband reinforced the idea that each played a different role within the household, and while the husband ruled over his wife, marriage created a household unit, requiring the labor and commitment of both.

Eating together was not just a legal or liturgical expectation. Real couples understood eating together as evidence of a marriage's health. Margery Kempe's famously determined negotiation for a celibate marriage involved her eating habits. While returning from York, Margery and her husband discussed their relationship. Margery claimed they had been celibate for eight weeks, and she wished to take a vow of permanent chastity before the bishop. Her husband refused, stating "that I will not grant you, for now I may use you without deadly sin and otherwise I will not be able to."²³ While having this conversation, they were walking in the hot weather of late June; Margery carried a bottle of beer and her husband a cake. The items for a shared meal provide a counterpoint to their sexual disagreement. John Kempe finally agreed that if she would continue to share a bed with him, pay his debts, and "eat and drink with me on Friday as you used to do" he would cease demanding sexual relations. Initially Margery challenged the third stipulation. Only when Christ gave her permission to "eat and drink as your husband does," did Margery agree to John's conditions and then "they ate and drank together in great gladness of spirit."²⁴

²² "serviþ þee weel and pleasantly...with reste and pees, a melis meete of hoomeli fare...þan for to have an hundred mees [dishes] with grucchinge [grumbings] & wiþ myche care. Furnivall 1868: 50-51.

²³ þat wyl I not grawnt 3ow, for now may I usyn 3ow with-owtyn dedly synne & þan might I not so." Meech & Allen 1940: 25.

²⁴ "ete & drynk as thyn husband doth," "etyn & drykyn with me on þe Fryday as 3e were wont to don," "þei etyn & dronkyn to-gedyr in gret gladness of spyryt." Meech & Allen 1940: 24-25.

John's willingness to give up sex, but not a shared meal illustrates eating together's centrality to household order.

Eating together could also serve as legal evidence in marriage cases. In a mid-fourteenth-century divorce case from York, John Middleton declared that after a fight between the married couple in question, he saw them eating and drinking together.²⁵ The witness interpreted their behavior as a resolution of their marital differences. In a late fifteenth-century case, John Brocher sued Joan Cardif in London's consistory court for breach of marriage contract. One witness, who had served as a liaison when the couple was courting, understood a shared meal as evidence of their desire to wed. According to the witness, John Brocher had sent a fish to Joan with the message that he "was coming right away with certain other people and that she should prepare the fish for their dinner. Joan received the fish happily," and cooked and served it.²⁶

Eating habits not only defined marital behavior and household order; they embodied notions of social identity.²⁷ In late-medieval bourgeois households, eating habits were one way the bourgeoisie tried to distinguish themselves from the aristocracy. John Lydgate's hugely popular poem "Dietary," written in the first half of the fifteenth century, advocates a consciously bourgeois manner of eating.²⁸ Responding to new forms of consumption, Lydgate juxtaposed the elite values of largesse, opulence, and abundance that were hallmarks of their banquets, with the bourgeois values of restraint, moderation, and self-mastery that he felt should be embedded in their meals.

Suffer no overindulgence in your house at nyght;
 Beware of late supper of great excess;
 ...
 Drink not early in the morning before you eat;
 Clear air and walking make for good digestion
 Between meals drink not for pleasure
 But make thirst or work the occasion.²⁹

²⁵ Butler 2007: 154.

²⁶ McSheffrey 1995: 37.

²⁷ Grenville 1997: 66-69; Girouard 1978: 25-31.

²⁸ Sponsler 2001: 1-22.

²⁹ Suffer no surfytys in thy hous at nyght;

Similarly, a set of early-fifteenth-century devotional instructions for a literate layman, probably a member of London's merchant class, described mealtime as an occasion for the husband to display his pious leadership of his household. Eucharistic symbolism reinforced the order that family meals were to embody.

When you dine, and also after dinner, say grace standing. Let the book be brought to the table as readily as the bread. And lest the tongue speak vain or hurtful things, let there be reading, now by one, now by another, and by your children as soon as they can read...

Let the family be silent at table, and always, as far as possible. Expound something in the vernacular which may edify your wife and others.

...

You can make a cross on the table out of five bread-crumbs; but do not let anyone see this, except your wife; and the more silent and virtuous she is, the more heartily you should love her in Christ.³⁰

These instructions note the man's relationship with his wife; ignorant of Latin, she is to be dependent on her husband for instruction and guidance. Her passive acceptance of his instructions will earn her husband's love. The manipulation of bread crumbs into a cross creates a Eucharistic-inspired moment that binds husband and wife together in a way that links Christian piety to his household leadership and her subservience. Both Lydgate's poem, and the merchant's pious instructions connect eating behavior and the bourgeois values of piety, restraint, and household order.³¹

Were of rere-sopers and of grete excese;

...

Drynke not at morow befor thyn apetyte;
Clere ayre and walkyng makys gode degestyon.
Betwix mele drynke not for no delyte,
Bot thyrst or traveyll gyfe thee occasyon.
Lydgate 2008: lines 49-50; 57-64.

³⁰ Pantin 1976: 399-400.

³¹ Riddy 1996: 66-86.

New dishware and new eating habits

The behavior of the wives who abandoned their husbands for their friends in the ballad and the *Gospelles* needs to be read against both the symbolism of husbands and wives eating together and late medieval urban households' increased consumption and rising standards of living. Whether just an increase or a full-on consumer revolution, the hallmarks of this changing consumption, like the consumer revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were structural increases in demand, driven by rising wages, social mobility, greater availability of luxury goods, and a sense of identity that could be expressed by choice in goods.³² Changes in consumption affected clothing, household furnishing, food, and dishware.

The bourgeoisie's dishes, spoons, drinking vessels, and table linens actively promoted these household values. All were common testamentary bequests to children, servants, or godchildren in preparation for marriage. Alice Lord, widow of George Lord, divided her own extensive collection of eating and drinking ware among her seven sons.³³ With these bequests her sons could observe proper dining habits even at the beginning of their adult lives. The decorations adorning eating and drinking ware further linked eating to household morality. Lord had several drinking bowls or mazers, each with an image in the bottom. She left the one with the image of St. George to her youngest son Henry.³⁴ When she wrote her will in 1539, Lord had been widowed for six years; Henry, who had not yet entered into an apprenticeship, must have only barely remembered his father.³⁵ St. George symbolized England and heroic virtue, qualities valued by the bourgeoisie, but he was also his father's name saint. The bequest would have reminded the boy of both his paternity and his family's ideals.³⁶ Apostle spoons, another popular bequest, connected family meals to the Last Supper, further inculcating meals with Eucharistic piety. Lord owned six apostle spoons, which she

³² Dyer 2005: 126.

³³ The National Archives, Kew (TNA) Prob11/27/252.

³⁴ TNA Prob11/27/252

³⁵ For George Lord's will, see TNA PROB 11/25/9-9v.

³⁶ Good 2009.

divided among her six unmarried sons. Even the more affordable ceramic table ware tried to foster particular kinds of behavior. The funnel-necked beaker imprinted with Virgin Martyrs excavated in London promoted in young women – the very population that often worked as servants – the ideal female behavior of passivity and courtesy.³⁷ While decorations, colored glazes, and pleasing shapes had much to do with aesthetics, the choice of images on the bottom of cups, at the ends of spoons, or on the sides of jugs also connects adornment with pious expectations and household order.

In the centuries after the plague, medieval diets became more diverse, higher in animal protein, washed down with greater quantities of ale, and supplemented with wheat bread rather than barley or rye bread.³⁸ Town inhabitants also ate better cuts of meat from younger animals. Other changes to urban food consumption included the introduction of beer and an increase in demand for garden produce.³⁹

Urban residents cooked, ate, and drank their enhanced diets on a growing variety of dishware made out of wood, pewter, and ceramic. Ceramic survives in the archaeological record in greater quantities than either wood or metal and is a good indicator of changing styles, because it is easily shaped, easily broken, and easily replaced.⁴⁰ After the plague, the English ceramic industry declined, and imported ceramics mostly from the Low Countries and the Rhineland filled the void.⁴¹ The new shapes and sizes included tall and short beakers, wide and funnel-necked jugs, bowls of varying diameters and depths, and a range of drinking vessels. By the end of the fifteenth century, English kilns were back in business, and producing pottery in the new Continental styles. This imitation fed an expanding market for

³⁷ London Museum accession #6583; Winstead 1997; Phillips 2003: 43-51.

³⁸ Dyer 1994: 77-100.

³⁹ Bennett 1996: 43-59; Dyer 1994: 196-202.

⁴⁰ Dyer 1989: 205-207; Blair & Ramsey 1991: 78; 200-208; Gaimster & Nenck 1997: 171; Bryant 2004: 119-120; Egan 2005: 97-121.

⁴¹ Gaimster 1993; Blackmore 1994; Brown 1997: 101-103.

diverse-shaped dishes.⁴² Artisans working in wood and horn in this period also imitated Rhenish styles.⁴³

While pottery is ubiquitous in the archaeological record, it rarely appears itemized in inventories or wills. Early Modernists interpret this evidence as a lack of ceramic in late medieval and Early Modern households;⁴⁴ yet it may be that ceramics were simply not valuable enough to be itemized. Wills and inventories, however, reflect a diversity of metal dishware. A short list of named dishes and cups culled from London's wills and inventories includes saucers, chargers, platters, chaffing dishes, and porringers, goblets, and large, small, and low drinking bowls and cups.⁴⁵ Such variety either increased specialization or reflected existing specialization. When he died in 1533, among the many items in the possession of John Amadas, a wealthy goldsmith, was "a pint pot for ale," "a dish for eggs," "a quart vinegar pot," several "mustard pots," and large and small "fritter chafers."⁴⁶

Archaeologist David Gaimster believes that the new variety of dishware available in fifteenth-century London changed eating habits—switching from shared dishes to individual ones.⁴⁷ Archaeologists also note that finds of metal plates and wooden bowls often have knife cuts, indicating people were eating from them.⁴⁸ The bequest of "6 silver spoons, 6 platters, 6 dishes, 6 saucers" that John Plonkett left his servant Celene Dyker also suggests some notion of individual place-setting.⁴⁹ These findings challenge Early Modern historians, who have argued that this shift happened first among elites in the seventeenth century and trickled down to rural inhabitants and the poor by the later part of the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ Gaimster does not

⁴² Gaimster 1993: 253-254.

⁴³ Blair & Ramsey 1991: 73-79; 102-103; 207.

⁴⁴ Hatcher 1973: 26-95; Hatcher & Barker 1974: 24-80; Weatherhill 1988: 26-30; Yentsch 1990: 25-31; Bryant 2004: 117-123.

⁴⁵ Yentsch 1990: 36-41.

⁴⁶ TNA Prob2/486.

⁴⁷ Dyer 1989: 158-60, 198-202; Gaimster 1993: 253-255; Wood 2005: 20.

⁴⁸ Wood 2005: 20; Weinstein 2005: 445.

⁴⁹ London Metropolitan Archive, 9171/7 fo. 120v.

⁵⁰ Braudel 1981: 203-207; Weatherhill 1988: 26-30; Yentsch 1990: 25-31; Sarti 2002: 153-166.

speculate on how widespread this fifteenth-century change was, but imported ceramics were available in other parts of the island and replication of Continental ceramic styles in cheaper local wares suggests that less well-off consumers also wanted the latest fashions. Moreover, London's cultural impact on literature or dress suggests something of how widespread its impact could be across England.

The adoption of new dishware and new eating habits did not have to be an all or nothing proposition. Households that changed their eating habits would have done so gradually, as they acquired new dishware and new recipes. Individual dishes might be associated with a new menu, in much the same way that non-Asian Americans often use chopsticks when they eat Asian food, but not Mexican food. The affordability of ceramics and the variety of shapes produced suggests that a broad social spectrum consumed these new varieties of dishware and potentially changed their eating habits.

New objects create new choices and it is difficult to control how people will use them. New varieties of dishware presented users with many options, with the same dish or bowl serving multiple purposes. While some shapes and sizes suggested particular functions and purposes, such as bowls for liquids and plates for solid food, some vessels could fill a variety of functions, and different vessels could perform the same functions. One archaeologist found that shallow bowls served as both milk skimmers and grain measurers, two very different tasks.⁵¹ Anthropologists have also observed that special-purpose vessels, such as mustard pots or fritter pans, separate cooking, serving, and eating.⁵² The distance from which servers brought food and the ways in which they distributed it, whether into common or individual dishes, had implications for eating dynamics. Servers could privilege some diners with the order of service, and varieties and portions of food, and efforts to correct servers presented new opportunities for exercising authority. While individual dishes increased the social distance among those at the table and between the server and the served, individual dishes also allowed a server to interact with a diner differently than if diners were eating

⁵¹ Blinkhorn 1998-1999: 37-46.

⁵² Yentsch 1990: 36.

from shared trenchers or bowls. Taken together, multiple foods, varied dishes, and individual portions created new dynamics around meals that had the potential to destabilize household order.⁵³

Back at the table: rereading women, foodware and gender order

The varied food and dishware that made up the dinner parties in both the ballad and the *Gospelles* thus allows us to understand these all-women's dinner parties as much more than a new version of an old story. These texts were grappling with the unexpected challenges that increasing consumption posed to eating and drinking habits in particular, and to gender roles and household order in general. The women's use of the dishware to meet with their friends, gave them respite from the demands of their husbands. They were also feeding these same friends at the expense of their families. The very goods that made merchants and artisans who they were also had the potential to confound their identity and values.

These literary works provide a glimpse into what a world changed by increased consumption could look like. In stark contrast to the idealized meal described in the instructions for the London layman, the women's meals are egalitarian or communal. The layman's wife has no voice, and if there were other women at the table, we do not hear of them. While late medieval England experimented with new forms of women's sociability, these experiments were confined to the parish, which was ultimately a male-controlled space.⁵⁴ Thus the ballad and the *Gospelles* suggest that new eating habits could not only facilitate alternative models of women's sociability, they could reorder the household, and make women more difficult to control.

The women's dinner parties contrast with the ideal bourgeois household in a number of ways. The women are boisterous, bawdy, and undisciplined. Both meals allowed the women to create alternative hierarchies, where men, like the clerk in the *Gospelles* served the women. Moreover, late medieval English taverns and ale houses were suspect places, associated with a host of crimes,

⁵³ Sánchez-Romero & Aranda 2008: 77.

⁵⁴ French 2008: 118-179.

including fighting, gambling, fencing stolen goods, secret assignations, and prostitution.⁵⁵ As taverns and ale houses increased in the fifteenth century, moralists denounced them as the “devil’s chapel,” where patrons gave into their baser natures.⁵⁶

Like modern bars, not all taverns were disreputable, yet even respectable public drinking houses were sites of limited or overturned hierarchies, conviviality, escapism, and good humor. According to any number of drinking songs, one escaped the cares of the world, met with friends, and laughed and commiserated over life’s problems in taverns and ale houses.

Here I was and here I drank
Farewell dame and many thanks.
Here I was and had good chear
And here I drank much good beer.⁵⁷

Because of their own lack of space within their masters’ homes, female servants often resorted to taverns without much condemnation or trouble. Married women also visited taverns. Yet even so, there was some sense that taverns were masculine spaces, inappropriate for respectable women; the most upstanding tavern, still required women to negotiate a number of issues surrounding behavior, place, and personal reputation.⁵⁸ They were places where groups of women could throw off their husband’s control.

Into this place of overturned or minimized hierarchies, the dishes and food for a meal that should have affirmed their husbands’ governance over them instead upset household order, replacing it, even if only temporarily with women’s mutual support and friendship. The dangers that the women’s meal posed to this order are fully realized in the details of the women’s conversation in the

⁵⁵ McIntosh 1998: 74-75, 96-97.

⁵⁶ Clark 1983: 21, 46; Raymo & Whitaker 2003: 191.

⁵⁷ Her I was and her I drank;
farewyll dam, and mykyll thanks.
her I was and had gud cher,
and her I drank wyll gud ber.

Robbins 1955: 9 (Original mss Trinity College Dublin ms. 214.)

⁵⁸ Karras 1996: 15-16, 71-74; Hanawalt 1998: 70-87; McSheffrey 2006: 121-134.

tavern. Much of their conversation denounces the domestic violence they regularly experience. The ventriloquizing of women's unhappiness over domestic violence is another way the ballad upsets expected household order.

Would to God that I had listen
 Because my husband is so wrathful
 He beats me like the devil of hell
 And the more I cry the less mercy.

As the ballad moves on, the women act out an alternative social structure. The six women equally share food, expenses, and advice.

And each of them will something bring
 Goose, pig or capons wing
 Pasty of pigeon or some other thing.⁵⁹

Some aspects of the meal require leadership, but no one woman leads throughout. One pours the wine,⁶⁰ and another divides up the bill. When one woman leaves after underpaying, the remaining women denounce her, promising to refuse her future fellowship, but the rest of the group holds firm. While neither taverns nor dinner parties were new to the late middle ages, the greater ease of transporting food and the increased variety of food available added to the women's sociability and their ability to experiment with alternative eating arrangements.

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* *

⁵⁹ Wold God I had don aftur yowr counsel
 fore my husband is so fell
 He betyth me lyk the devil of hell
 And the more I cry, the lesse mercy.

...

And ich of them wyll sumwhat bring
 Goose, pygge, ore capons wyng
 Pastes of pigeons ore sum other thing.

⁶⁰ In the tenth stanza, Margaret wishes Anne were with them, but in the twelfth stanza, Anne pours the wine, possibly a scribal error for Alice.

The possibility of women's rebellion is as old as patriarchy. In her book *History Matters: patriarchy and the challenge of feminism*, Judith Bennett addressed the "seeming ahistoricity of patriarchy," writing "if patriarchal power is a feature of all historical societies, then what can historians have to say about it? ... If patriarchy is everywhere, where is its history?"⁶¹ She continues, however, that patriarchy is not the same everywhere or at all times, and that understanding its variations and mutations will help us write better history. Thinking about material culture, the unpredictable ways people use it, and how it changes behavior offers one way of historicizing both patriarchy and misogyny.

Late medieval changes in eating and drinking habits required new movements and offered new choices. Changes in dishware created a new means of physically controlling the food, even if only momentarily. Choices and control did not combine easily with the value late-medieval society placed on women's subservience, silence, and passivity. In this way, the accounts of women's dinner parties acknowledged both changing eating habits and concerns about the inability to determine the consequences. The dishes that facilitated the women's all-female dinner parties – platters, dishes, bowls, and ewers – were the very types of dishes that appear so frequently in wills. They were as easily implicated in a world of license, rebellion, and limited hierarchies as they were in bourgeois household order and economic success.

The new eating habits of the late middle ages threatened to transform a female task that was supposed to create good household order, into one that undermined it. While the new dishware was created in a world with clearly articulated gender roles, that world could not easily control how the new dishware would be used: sometimes a shallow bowl measured grain, sometimes it skimmed milk; sometimes it manifested piety, sometimes it promoted license. From this perspective, the women's behavior in the ballad and the *Gospelles* was not timeless, but rooted in the challenges these economic and material changes posed to a particular kind of household and its economic success. Challenges to that order, even

⁶¹ Bennett 2006: 54.

when they came as a consequence of that order needed to be contained and misogyny was one way of containing it.

While it might be difficult to believe that people cared this much about how they ate, let me close with a law suit where they did. In the case of *Ireby c. Londesdale*, a divorce case from York, we see an instance where decisions about the dinner ware produced terrible consequences. A servant testified that Robert Ireby attacked his wife Joan Londesdale at dinner because she had served his meal on a new pewter dish, rather than his accustomed one.⁶² Whatever the difference between the two plates, Joan had dishes from which to choose and she made a decision that had violent repercussions, rooted in late medieval hostility towards women's independent choices, and in the symbolic nature of eating together. In this lawsuit, we can see that husbands' and wives' eating habits did not automatically create a working marriage, nor could the new eating habits necessarily reinforce a husband's superiority because they demanded decision making from those who were valued for their subservience. As a result, changes in foodways contained the possibility of a new social or family order. The all-women's dinner parties in "The Wives at the Tavern," and *The Gospelles of Dystaves* were not then simply a late medieval version of Lucretia's story, but a historically specific comment on changing medieval behavior, based on changing material culture.

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⁶² Butler 2007: 161, 164.

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