Dictionary of the Middle Ages

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SUPPLEMENT 1
SERVANTS were essential at all levels of medieval society. Royal households employed five hundred or more domestic servants, and higher servants employed their own personal servants. A peasant household added a servant if at all possible; that person might be a poor relative who received no more than bed and board in return for hard labor. Because notions of hierarchy, division of labor, and the social values assigned to domestic work—indeed the very definition of domestic labor itself—differed markedly from modern times, a number of distinctions must be made to set medieval domestic servants in context.

Service held manifold meanings in medieval life. In fifth- to ninth-century kingdoms, administrative offices that governed the realm evolved out of service roles in royal households. The mayor of the palace guarded the king’s door before he ascended to power in his own right; in early times a royal marshal or constable oversaw the stables, while a seneschal or steward and a chancellor or chamberlain provided for the needs of the king and his family. In southern Germany the ministerials (ministeriales) or knightly administrative class remained bondsmen of the crown throughout the medieval era. Service at this level of society was anything but menial, providing one indication among many that personal access to the ruler and his circle was a sure route to power than freeborn status and military prowess. In no way did this evolution of administrative offices out of service roles enable the hard menial labor necessary for the smooth running of a great household, nor did the language articulating feudal bonds—for example, “your humble servant, milord”—influence attitudes toward domestic servants. Vassalage, with its elaborate gestures of deference and service, was a form of dependence peculiar to the upper classes, where being the “man” of a great lord to whom one was bound to give aid and obedience was an indication of high status and conveyed no intention to perform base tasks.

Domestic servants’ actual roles are best understood from the twelfth century onward. With the proliferation of household accounts, contracts, court proceedings, letters, sermons, and advice manuals a detailed picture emerge of the lives of servants and the conditions under
which they lived. As towns grew so did the demand for domestic staff. Occasionally in artisan households domestic service shaded into apprenticeship, creating some opportunity to develop marketable skills. In medieval London more males than females entered apprenticeships, which were designed to fill roles in male-dominated crafts. In periods of labor shortage households resorted to hiring the sons of serfs to get the cheap labor that apprenticeship provided an artisan household. A learned skill improved an ordinary servant’s prospects in life. In Paris in 1272 Orentge of Fontenay, a servant trained in wool carding, developed a right arm and elbow so inflamed that she could not work. Her labor in the house of Maurice, a weaver, was so valued that she received room and board until, four years later, she was cured by a miracle at the tomb of St. Louis and returned to her former work. In fourteenth-century Exeter households supported by women servants frequently brewed and sold ale, thereby enriching the household, which in turn bettered the relative position of servant women who brewed.

Domestic servants who performed the least skilled and most menial tasks might or might not be paid; they either worked as servants in their youth and passed on to a better life or remained servants for a lifetime, performing the skilled work they had learned on the job, like cooking or stable work. Households hired out some of the most despised tasks. In late medieval London teams of men called “gong farmers” cleaned privies at two shillings a ton, piling their refuse onto carts and sending it out of town by barge. This task had to be performed every two years or so, and it was the good fortune of household staff to avoid it. Launderesses picked up and delivered loads of laundry to urban households, taking on a task considered among the most backbreaking and undesirable household drudgery. Launderesses, whose personal lives were not overseen by a mistress and master but who instead lived independently, were frequently accused of loose living and were at times regarded as little better than prostitutes.

GENDER AND DIVISION OF LABOR

Sometimes the gender division of labor in the Middle Ages surprises. Well-born young men, usually in training to be knights, served at high table in great noble or royal households. Some acquaintance with good manners was desirable, and presenting dishes at table could teach social skills. But their time serving others was brief, and certainly it was not onerous work. The heavy work of butchering, food preparation, and cooking was handled by menial servants who labored at their jobs without respite. Women servants were not spared the heavy work of carrying firewood for the kitchens, and they often hauled goods. In the north of England a feminization of the servant population involved in the victualing and the leather-tanning trades occurred after the Black Death, when men found better jobs elsewhere. Leather workers tanned their own skin along with the hides on which they worked, so both the color of their hands and the lingering smell of the chemicals they used branded these women.

In Germany from the fourteenth century onward women’s wages were usually about half of men’s. This was true whether employment was in an elite house in a city, a rural estate, or an artisanal household. A feminization of service occurred in Germany and across western Europe. Very possibly the transformation of “maid” (German, magd), originally denoting an unmarried woman, into a synonym for a single woman employed as a domestic worker, began at this point. In tight labor markets after the Black Death men moved out of the domestic service sector and into more lucrative jobs. This resulted in a devaluation of domestic service, as women who encountered few other chances to better their position remained in service.

Perhaps the most specialized of all female servants was the wet nurse, who might perform her services within the infants’ family’s household or in her own home, very possibly out in the countryside. In Florence over the course of the later Middle Ages there was a movement to send children out to wet nurse. This was a change driven by a shortage of reliable wet nurses in town, as more and more wealthy households sought them for their children. A rural wet nurse living with her husband was regarded as somewhat untrustworthy, because against strict orders, she might cohabit with her husband, become pregnant, and lose her milk. St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), the next-to-last of twenty-five offsprings, was the first of her siblings to be nursed by her mother, while her twin was sent out to be breast-fed by a wet nurse and soon died. It is unlikely that Catherine’s parents could have produced such a large family had her elder siblings been breast-fed by their own mother rather than a wet nurse. Scholars associate wet-nursing with affluent families’ desire to produce as many offspring as possible during the wife’s childbearing years. High priority was placed on hiring a competent, clean, and conscientious woman for the task.

SLAVERY AND CONTRACT LABOR

In the Mediterranean south, a wet nurse might be referred to as a balia and might be either a free or unfree
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SERVICE AGREEMENT

I, Giacomo from Cremona now an inhabitant of Venice in the parish of San Paternian, make manifest with my heirs and successors that I give and affirm to you, lady Clara, a widow of sir Pietro di Avanzo of the parish of San Lorenzo, my daughter named Francesca such that from now on at your free will she must live and remain with you and in your service (and) serve you loyally and that she must maintain and keep your possessions to the best of her ability, without fraud or evil intent. For your part, you must give her food, clothing, and shoes in good measure according to your means. The girl must not leave you or your service without your consent. And if at any time I cause the girl to leave your service, then I promise and obligate myself to pay you all the expenses that you have incurred up to that day on which she is removed by me or by some other person acting on my behalf from your service. If, however, I ever try to act against this agreement, then I, with my heirs and successors, am obliged to pay you or your heirs and successors five gold lire. And this agreement remains in force.

[Venice, dated March 1407. No mention of a wage or term of service, which was likely ten years, according to a statute from 1388.]


woman. In thirteenth-century Dubrovnik (Ragusa) the wet nurse was likely to be a slave, and she might also live out her life as the nurse and companion of her young charge, often accompanying her to her new home upon marriage. Slavery appears to have been highly attractive to wealthy householders because of the absolute control it offered over those who provided personal services like wet-nursing and child care. At best a slave could run away, but unless there was a supportive community to which to flee, escape was seldom feasible. While close to 90 percent of slaves registered in medieval Dubrovnik were women, runaways were almost evenly divided between women and men. This suggests that enslaved men, who probably performed work outside the home, had far better opportunities to run away than did women slaves, who lived under close surveillance.

A revived slave trade in the Mediterranean south was part of the response to the shortage of domestic servants in the late Middle Ages. Traditionally, Italian cities fulfilled their needs for domestic labor by contracting for service; this was referred to as indenture in Venice (see sidebar). If money was paid out when a service contract was drawn up, the parent or guardian of the young person very likely received it. In Florence, rural girls contracted for domestic service received room, board, and a basic wardrobe, and they worked for a protracted term of five, eight, or ten years. Contract servants remained single through their years of service, but if all went well they might receive a small dowry at the end of their term, which probably afforded them the opportunity to wed and remain in town. Dowries might also be awarded to servants in a master’s or mistress’s will. Servants simply did not think in terms of regular wages, and often it took a precipitous departure for a servant to collect any money. A servant’s best chance to collect sums due was to force the master to close his or her account.

A household staffed by young girls working under contract might also employ some slaves purchased from Bosnia or Greece, or Tartar or Russian slaves obtained in the Crimea. Piero Guarducci and Valeria Ottaviani agree that a slave brought into an Italian household served as a warning to servants that they could be replaced, thus ensuring a docile workforce. Wealthy households throughout Europe relied on a rigid hierarchy of tasks and obligations for servants, as well as different terms of service and distinctions between free status, contract labor, and slavery. These distinctions strengthened the householder’s control over domestic staff, who were seldom viewed as honest or hardworking.

MORALITY AND RELIGION

Servants were frequently characterized as untrustworthy, disrespectful, and incompetent. Indeed, advice manuals make grim reading whenever the subject of servants is raised. A wife’s task was to keep servants honest, hardworking, obedient, and silent by both example and instruction, as the Goodman of Paris admonishes his young bride-to-be. Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454), a Venetian humanist, took matters one step further in “On wisely duties.” Following the example of Cato the Elder, a good wife should immediately rid the household of any servant or slave too old to work, since “it [is] in no way proper to keep useless slaves in a household,” Barbaro advised. On the other hand he stated that an ignorant servant might be turned into a hardworking,
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faithful, and diligent worker through training and the promise of promotion, and he further advised that servants should not be separated from their children and families. He noted as well that servants would be grateful for good medical care. Positive incentives were recommended to householders, but the general tenor of Barbaro’s discourse is that servants are lazy, possibly slovenly, and probably immoral if left to their own devices.

On the issue of morality, town statutes, religious authority, and advice manuals all concurred: servants were to remain chaste as well as obedient. The difficulty in living up to this standard was the likelihood that a pregnant servant would bear her master’s child or that of another member of his family. Through the medieval era households tended to care for the illegitimate offspring of their servants or to find them suitable mates, thus terminating their service. Generally speaking, the servant who was not chaste was regarded as the guilty party; in some towns she could be punished, branded, or even banished for fornication.

Servants working in Jewish households had to meet special conditions throughout Christian Europe. In Venice Christian servants working for Jews needed special approval from officials with jurisdiction over the Jewish population. These servants were forbidden to eat, drink, or sleep in the homes of their employers, and only mature servants were permitted to serve in Jewish homes. Servants or slaves whose religious backgrounds aroused suspicion of heresy or schism were required by the Catholic church to be baptized. The religious and moral conduct of domestic staff fell squarely on the shoulders of the Christian household.

In the Middle Ages some women servants moved from the countryside to town to better their prospects, and some contract servants obtained dowries so they could wed and remain in town. Nevertheless menial unskilled labor in the household was increasingly devalued as the medieval world shifted into the modern. While labor shortages affected domestic service in the later Middle Ages, this failed to improve the conditions under which most servants labored. Men left domestic service, attracted by work with better prospects elsewhere; in the south labor shortage was answered in part by a revival of the slave trade. Throughout Europe householders remained steadfastly in control of the terms under which servants rendered their labor.


SECONDARY SOURCES


BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY WORKS

SEXUALITY

"Sexuality" refers to the set of meanings a given culture constructs around sexual behavior. The European Middle Ages had its own distinct set of sexual categories and identities. Where modern schemes of categorization put great emphasis on the gender or age of one's partner (one is classified as a heterosexual, a pedophile, etc., based on the object of one's desire), medieval schemes put more emphasis on whether one played an active or passive role than on who one's partner was. "Active" and "passive" did not mean pursued and pursuer; a woman could be very aggressive in seducing her partner but was still considered the passive partner in intercourse because she was the one mounted and penetrated.

The history of sexuality is a history of attitudes or ways of thinking and feeling rather than a history of who did what to whom. Different people in medieval society had very different attitudes; there is no such thing as "the medieval attitude" toward sex. The leaders of the church might espouse one view, but it never completely permeated the culture, and sexual behavior may indeed have been less restricted in this supposedly church-dominated society than in more modern ones. Different kinds of writing, written for different purposes, express different ideas about sexuality. These writings rarely took into account the ways the man or woman in the street (or the field) understood sexuality. In a society where most writing was for public consumption, some aspects of intimate life never got recorded.

CHASTITY

The fundamental distinction in the Christian Middle Ages was between those who were sexually active and those who were chaste. For the majority of modern people, virginity or chastity is not an identity, orientation, or way of life but a circumstance. People may approve of those who remain virgins until marriage, but a much smaller number find it admirable to remain unmarried and virgin for one's entire life. In the Middle Ages, however, virginity was not only a life stage (although remaining a virgin until marriage was certainly valued) but also a highly respected calling, one might say a state of the soul. It was not necessarily a goal for everyone, but it was a distinct sexual identity.

Among Jews and Muslims, on the other hand, virginity before marriage was important for women, but virginity as a lifelong status was not desirable. While they feared the same desires as Christians, most Jewish authors held that marriage legitimated these desires. Marriage was required not only for the sake of procreation but also to prevent lustful thoughts. Jewish philosophers in the Mediterranean region were more ascetic than northern rabbis; the German pietists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Hasidei Ashkenaz), while very concerned about the harmful effects of lust, urged marriage rather than chastity.

For many Christians, choosing chastity meant taking up a particular way of life in a religious order. Men could become monks or secular priests; both were required to be celibate (unmarried), although priestly celibacy was not fully enforced until the twelfth century. Women could become nuns. Widows or widowers as well as the unmarried could join religious orders, and even the married could do so if both spouses agreed. By the later Middle Ages, other options appeared. Men could become mendicant friars who traveled and preached. Women, especially in the Low Countries, could join the Beguines, who lived in groups without undergoing the enclosure of nuns; they could also become Franciscan or Dominican tertiaries, lay affiliates of a religious order, some of whom lived together in communities. Throughout the Middle Ages both men and women chose to become recluse or anchorites, living on their own. These options might offer women (and men) more autonomy than marriage or the cloister.

Throughout the Middle Ages—indeed, from the beginning of Christianity—Christians argued about whether sexual intercourse could ever be anything other than a sin. For some, marriage was a lesser evil, permissible because not everyone could be expected to maintain strict chastity. For others, it was a positive good, although perhaps still a lesser good than virginity.

Particularly in response to the teaching of dualist groups—the Manicheans in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Cathars in the twelfth—who claimed that the body and therefore all sexual intercourse was evil, mainstream Western Christian teaching held that sex for purposes other than pleasure—to have children, to prevent