

Dinner in the Castle

(Offend Not the Lady and Take Small Bites)

By Nancy Mann

Female status in the feudalistic world was determined through marriage and fulfillment of responsibilities of daily life.

The English Lady of the Castle woke early to say prayers. She would be dressed by her ladies-in-waiting, have her hair combed and netted, and begin her discussions as to the lord's moves to other castles, coming betrothals, and poems of courtly love. She would direct young women's education – upper class women were often in her charge. She would oversee tapestry making, and the nursing of wounded knights, who lived in the castle. Due to strenuous martial training, some knights became deformed, and needed assistance in daily grooming (Richard III was arguably not a hunchback, but developed an oversize arm and shoulder). The Lady might give the "Royal Touch," or lay hands on the diseased – scrofula was known as "The King's Evil," when uncured.

She assisted the Lord in four areas: hunting, judicial decisions, army strategy, and revenue collection, from the Villein (peasantry). Historian Peter Ackroyd stated, "Violence was common as almonds and sugar." Ladies often counseled victims of violence. She meted out punishments for idleness, and gathered information as to poaching in the King's Forest. Changes in local custom, brought by the Lord had to be linked to tradition, and Ladies would counsel stubborn peasants.

In the afternoons, she entertained visitors in games of "fox and geese," and chess.

In the Great Hall, she directed the placement of huge planks in the form of an "H." The cross bar to the "H" held a salt-cellar; a man "worthy of his salt" could approach it. Dinner was served to the clergy, then to nobles, and lastly, to the retinue (including jesters, grooms, saucers). Dinner was brought from the upper-floor kitchen; boiling oil could be poured down on invaders, from the height.

Pantlers passed out spoons (there were no forks) and ladies detached gown sleeves. Cup-bearers distributed cups of horn, agate or gourd. Knights kept side-arms at table. Carvers used "courtesy fingers" to carve meat and place it on bread trenchers. Younger guests chopped meat for the elderly, hence the term, "mincemeat." All ate with their fingers.

The menu included swans, waffles, jellies, doves, whale, plums, nuts, pork, eels and venison. Horsemeat? Forbidden.

Medieval women accompanied male Crusaders and first appreciated spices, and their correct order: mustard, pepper, coriander, turmeric, cinnamon, verjuice, and mace. Manners became important; they were called "Vestibule to Paradise." Diners were not to gnaw on bones, or spit.

After dinner, the Lady lead music, dancing, coin tossing to acrobats, and allowed Knights to deliver poetry. Such events reduced drunkenness.

The Lady would retire, after interviewing servants and pages as to any breaches in etiquette, or plots formed by ambitious lords. She held her position of marriage dearly; widows gave up guardianship of children; marriages could be annulled for lack of male heirs. Much depended on her intuition, shrewd observations, elaborate menu—and for guests...“Much Depended on Dinner.”