

Table Manners

This handout accompanies a class on latter-period table manners, given at Pennsic 45 by Dani of the Seven Wells, who may be contacted at dani@pobox.com.

The prioress, from *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1370):

....At meat her manners were well taught withal;
No morsel from her lips did she let fall,
Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;
But she could carry a morsel up and keep
The smallest drop from falling on her breast.
For courtliness she had a special zest,
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean
That not a trace of grease was to be seen
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,
She reached a hand sedately for the meat.

The Marriage at Cana, attributed to Hieronymous Bosch c.1480:



A Christmas Feast for Peasants at Glastonbury Abbey manor, from *Customs and Manners of Glastonbury* (c.1250):

And he ought to have his dinner at Christmas in the lord's court, himself and his wife, that is, two white loaves of bread, and two dishes of meat and sufficient ale, clearly and honourably. And he ought to bring with him a dish and a cup and a table-cloth. And he ought to bring before Christmas one bundle of firewood to cook his dish. And if he does not do this he shall have his victuals uncooked.”

Woodcut from the Roman de Renaud de Montauban (15th C.):



TABLE SERVICE OF A LADY OF QUALITY.

Fac simile of a miniature from the *Roman de Renaud de Montauban*, a ms. of fifteenth century.
Bibl. de l' Arsenal

Serving Dinner – summarized from *The Manner of Serving a Knight, Squire, or Gentleman* in “The Boke of Nurture”, 1577:

- Set the table. Lay a tablecloth and set the table. Place bread and salt. Each man gets a trencher a napkin and a spoon, and possibly a personal cup and loaf. Seat guests according to their rank.
- Serve the meal. As new courses come in, remove previous courses – meat and sauce. Keep cups of ale or wine filled. Carve for the master’s mess. Have voiders ready, and use a trencher-knife to move left-over bits from trenchers to the voiders. Replenish the master’s trenchers as they get soggy.
- Clear the main meal. At the end of the main meal, clear the meats, broths, and spoons, starting from the lowest mess. The bring fruit-cheese. Finally, clear the fruit-cheese and the ale and wine and clear and sweep the tables. Remove the bread, voiders, and salt, then bow. Bring a jug, basin, and towel for your master if he wishes to wash at the table. Remove them, and the tablecloth.
- For dessert (apples, nuts, etc.), lay a towel on the table and a loaf or two, and have trenchers or spoons if they are needed. Serve, and after clean again with a voider.

Geoffrey Luttrell, family, and guests, from the Luttrell Psalter (c. 1325):



John of Gaunt with the King of Portugal, from *Chronique d'Angleterre* (c. 1475):



Rules for guests, from *The...Schoole of good manners* in “The Boke of Nurture”:

- Try your soup before putting bread to it. If another shares your dish, don't crumble bread in it, as your hands may be sweaty. Cut nice bits of bread to put in your broth.
- Don't spit over the table. Don't pick your teeth with your knife or fingers – especially if they are rotten. Wipe your mouth with your napkin before drinking. Don't use your napkin for blowing your nose, use your handkerchief. Don't blow on your soup or drink – especially if your breath stinks.
- Don't fill your trencher with bones and morsels; empty them into a voider. Also leave your trencher, crumbs, and napkin in the voider at the end of the meal. Don't throw bones onto the floor. Don't break wind.

Selections from *Erasmus's [Handbook of] Good Manners for Children (1530)*:

Whilst dining, you should be cheerful, but not cheeky. Don't sit down without having washed, and before that, having trimmed your fingernails, in case any dirt is stuck under them and you are called — dirty-knuckled — as they say, a grimy soap-dodger. Remember, before sitting down, to empty your bladder, or, if need be, your bowels in private. If your belt is a bit tight, it's wise to loosen it a little, but to do that at the table would be considered rude....

Don't be the first to touch the food when it's put on the table, not only because it will show you to be greedy, but also because it can sometimes be risky, since someone who puts scalding hot food in their mouth without testing it first, is either forced to spit it out, or if he swallows it, to burn his throat. Either way he is silly and miserable....

It's pretty poor show to pass off to another something you've already bitten into....

It's considered tactless to offer food to strange dogs at the table, and even ruder to stroke them during dinner....

To shove your fingers into dishes with sauce is very rude, but you should pick up what you want with a knife or fork....

Just as it's a sign of greed to thrust your hand into every part of the dish, so it's just as rude to turn the dish around so that the best bits come your way. If someone else offers you a particularly choice piece of food, you should try to decline gently before accepting it, but only cut off a small portion for yourself, and offer the remainder to the person who gave it to you, or share it with someone sitting near you. Food that you can't take with your fingers should be put on your plate. If someone offers you a piece of cake, or a spoonful of pie, either accept it straight onto your plate or take what is offered on the spoon and when you have put the food onto your plate, return the spoon.

When listening to the conversation of other people, if you're not given a chance to speak, you should avoid giving any indication of boredom....

Desiderius Erasmus. *A Handbook on Good Manners for Children: De Civilitate Morum Puerilium Libellus* (Kindle Locations 415-418). Random House. Kindle Edition.

Selections from *Bishop Grossetest's Household Statutes (c. 1450)*:

Make your servants [gentlemen, yeomen] wear your livery. Make sure they don't wear old shoes. Make all the household dine together in the Hall. Allow no private meals. Let no woman dine with you. Allow your servants to go home as seldom as possible, and when they do, make them return quickly, on pain of losing their places. Command that your dish be well filled and heaped, so that you may share generously with those sitting by you, and so that they may eat what you do.

A Bill of Fare, for a Feast in Oxford, reprinted in *Reliquae Antiquae (1452)*:

Primus Cursus: A sutteltee; the bore hed and the bulle. Brawne and mustarde. Frumenty with venysoun. Fesaunt in brase. Swan with chawduen. Capon of grece. Herundsew. Poplar. Custad ryalle. Graunt fflaupaut departid. Lesshe damask. Frutour lumbert. A sutteltee.

Secundus: Viant en brase. Crane in sawce. Yong pocok. Cony. Pyions. Butter. Curlew. Carcelle. Partriche. Venysoun bake. Fryed mete in past, Lesshe lumbert. A ffrutour. A sutteltee.

Tertius: Gely ryalle departid. Haunche of venison rostid. Wodecok. Plover. Knottis. Styntis. Quayles. Larkys. Quynces bake. Viant in past. A frutour. Lesshe. A sutteltee.

A sumptuary law, parliament of Edward III, reprinted in Froude (1336):

"Whereas, heretofore through the excessive and over-many sorts of costly meats which the people of this Realm have used more than elsewhere, many mischiefs have happened to the people of this Realm--for the great men by these excesses have been sore grieved; and the lesser people, who only endeavour to imitate the great ones in such sort of meats, are much impoverished, whereby they are not able to aid themselves, nor their liege lord, in time of need, as they ought; and many other evils have happened, as well to their souls as their bodies--our Lord the King, desiring the common profit as well of the great men as the common people of his Realm, and considering the evils, grievances, and mischiefs aforesaid, by the common assent of the prelates, earls, barons, and other nobles of his said Realm, and of the commons of the same Realm, hath ordained and established that no man, of what estate or condition soever he be, shall cause himself to be served, in his house or elsewhere, at dinner, meal, or supper, or at any other time, with more than two courses, and each mess of two sorts of victuals at the utmost, be it of flesh or fish, with the common sorts of pottage, without sauce or any other sorts of victuals. And if any man choose to have sauce for his mess, he may, provided it be not made at great cost; and if fish or flesh be to be mixed therein, it shall be of two sorts only at the utmost, either fish or flesh, and shall stand instead of a mess, except only on the principal feasts of the year, on which days every man may be served with three courses at the utmost, after the manner aforesaid."

Richard II with his dukes, from *Chronique d'Angleterre* (c. 1475):



A lyttl report of how young people should behave from “The Babees Book” (c.1475):

- Attend the lord as he washes, and don't leave him to set until he dismisses you after grace.
- Eat your broth with a spoon, and don't leave the spoon in the dish.
- Don't dirty the tablecloth. Don't dirty the cup with your hands. Don't dip your meat in the salt. Don't put your knife in your mouth.
- Taste every dish that's brought to you and, when it's taken away, don't ask for it again. If you are dining with strangers, share any good food that's brought.
- At the end of the meal, clean your knives, stay seated until you've washed, then go to the lord's table to attend him as he washes.

Ordinance of Henry VIII (cited in Paston-Williams), 1526:

Cap. 37. And for the better avoyding of corruption and all uncleannesse out of the King's house, which doth ingender danger of infection, and is very noisome and displeasante unto all the noblemen and others repaireing unto the same; it is ordeyned, by the King's Highnesse, that the three master cookes of the kitchen shall have everie of them by way of reward yearly twenty marks, to the intent they shall provide and sufficiently furnish the said kitchens of such scolyons as shall not goe naked or in garments of such vilenesse as they now doe, and have been accustomed to doe, nor lie in the nights and dayes in the kitchens or ground by the fire-side; but that they of the said money may be found with honest and whole course garments, without such uncleannesse as may be the annoyance of those by whom they shall pass...

Howe to behaue thi selfe in seruyng the table, from "The Schoole of Vertue", F. Seager, 1557:

- If you are big enough, bring food to the table. Be careful not to spill.
- Be at hand to make sure there's enough of everything, to empty voiders as needed. Make sure you have spare trenchers for the guests.
- When the meat is done, clear the table, and set out clean trenchers for cheese, fruit, and biscuits, and serve wine (or ale and beer).
- After these, clear the table, take the tablecloth, and bring a towel, basin, and jug and pour for your parents when they wash. Clear the table and make your bow.

Serving a Duke, from "The Boke of Curtasye", (c.1430):

Of the Ewerer [De aquario]. He has all the candles and cloths, and gives water to everyone. The Ewerer shall cover the lord's table with a double cloth, the lower with the selvage to the lord's side; the upper cloth shall be laid double, the upper selvage turned back as if for a towel.

Of the Panter [De Panetario]. He carries three loaves cut square, for trenchers, and the covered saltcellar. Two carving knives, and sets the third, and a spoon to his lord. ..., Then three loaves of white bread are brought, and one coarse loaf is put in the Alms-dish.

To assay bread, the Panter kneels, the Carver cuts him a slice, and he eats it. The Ewerer strains water into his basins, on the upper one of which is a towel, folded dodgily ["with fulle grete lore"]. Then the water is assayed in a cup of white wood. The Carver takes up the basins; a knight takes down the towel, and wipes the cup, into which the Carver pours water; the knight hands it to him; he assays it, and empties the cup.



Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (January) (C. 1410):

Two knights hold the towel before the lord's sleeves, and hold the upper basin while the Carver pours water into the lower; then he puts the lower into the upper, and empties both, takes them to the Ewerer, returns to the lord's table, and lays four trenchers for him, with one above. The carver takes three to cut the lord's messes on, and has a cloth round his neck to wipe his knives on.

Of the Almoner [De Elemosinario]. He says grace, sets down the Alms-dish, and the Carver puts the first loaf in it. The other loaves he pares round, cuts one in two, and gives the upper half in halves to him. The Almoner has a staff in his hand. He keeps the broken food and wine left, for poor men at the gate, and is sworn to give it all to them. He distributes silver as he rides.

Of the Sewer (or setter out of dishes) [De ferculario]. The Cook assays the meat before it's dished. The Sewer puts the cover on it, and the cover must never be raised for fear of treason. (A Dodge: If the silver dish burns you, put bits of bread under it.) The Sewer assays all the food: potage with a piece of bread; fish or flesh he eats a piece; baked meats hot, he lifts up the crust, and dips bread in the gravy; baked meats cold, he eats a bit. The meat-bearer stands or kneels as the Sewer does.

When bread is wanted, the Butler puts one loaf on the table, the other on the cupboard. The Butler assays all the wine. What is left in the lord's cup goes to the Alms-dish. The Carver fills the empty cup, assays it, and gives the lord or puts it down. He carves the lord's meat, and lays it on his trencher, putting a piece of every thing in the Alms-dish, except any favourite piece or potage.

After dinner the Sewer brings the Surnape, a broad towel and a narrow, and slides it down. The Usher takes one end of the broad, the Almoner the other, and when it is laid, he folds the narrow towel double before his lord and lady. After grace removes them, lays the table on the floor, and takes away the trestles.

The chaperone's advice, from *The Romance of the Rose* (c.1230, 1275):

She ought to behave properly at table....She should carve for the others and distribute the bread to those around her, and in order to win favour, she should serve her companion, who will eat from the same bowl, before herself. Let her set before him a leg or a wing, or carve the beef or pork for him, depending on what food there is, whether fish or flesh. She should never be chary of serving others if they will allow her to do it. She must be very careful not to dip her fingers in the sauce up to the knuckles, nor to smear her lips with soup or garlic or fat meat, nor to take too many pieces or too large a piece and put them into her mouth. She must hold the morsel with the tips of her fingers and dip it into the sauce, whether it be thick, thin, or clear, then convey the mouthful with care, so that no drop of soup or sauce or pepper falls on to her chest. When drinking she should exercise such care that not a drop is spilled upon her, for anyone who saw that happen might think her very rude and coarse. And she must be sure never to touch her goblet when there is anything in her mouth. Let her wipe her mouth so clean that no grease is allowed to remain upon it, at least not upon her upper lip, for when grease is left on the upper lip, globules appear in the wine, which is neither pretty nor nice.

A sequence of pictures from *Romance of the Saint Graal* (?), Royal ms. 14 E iii (early 13th C.):



INVITING TO THE REPAST. Royal MS. 14 E 3.



SAVING GRACE. Royal MS. 14 E 3.



SERVANT, TO PREVENT TREASON, TASTING THE WINE BEFORE SERVING IT AT TABLE. Royal 6. 14 B. 2.

Advice for a [possibly-late] guest, from the Boke of Courtesy:

- Wait until you're seated. Cut your loaf in half; cut the top half in four and the bottom half in three.
- Have your nails clean. Don't let your fingers or knife dirty the tablecloth. Don't stuff your face. Don't leave your spoon in the dish or on its side, but clean it. Don't put bread you've bitten into the dish. Don't blow on your food, or put your knife in your mouth, or wipe your teeth or eyes with the tablecloth. Dry your mouth before drinking. Don't ask for a dish back after it's been removed.
- Don't stroke the cat or dog. If you blow your nose, clean your hand; wipe it with your skirt or put it through your tippet. Don't pick your teeth at meals, or drink with food in your mouth. Don't dip your thumb in your drink or your food in the salt cellar. Don't spit in the wash basin.
- If you sit by a good man, don't put your knee under his thigh.

Paraphrased from a from *S'ensuivent les Contenances de la Table* (15th C.):

When told to sit in another's house, do so at once, but take care there's nothing nasty on the seat.

Take enough bread and wine but not too much. Don't eat too freely of the first dish, so as not to be able to eat others. Don't touch any dish first; let the host do that. When you've put food in your mouth, don't let it touch the dish again. Don't offer anyone else food that you've bitten. Don't stuff in your mouth what you can't eat, and then have to spit it out again. Take salt on your trencher. Don't dip your food in the salt-cellar. Mix water with strong wine, or it will muddle your wits. (To get drunk is disgraceful, and it makes your head hurt.)

If you have a cloth, never drink out of a cup with a dirty mouth. If you take a sip out of a glass, drink all the wine or throw it away.

Don't touch your nose with the hand that holds your meat. Don't wipe your teeth with the cloth. Offer no one the leavings of your soup. Keep the tablecloth clean, and put your leavings in a cup. Don't blow your nose loud at table.

Lord Cobham with Family, 1567:



Picture of a Polish trencher knife c.1400 (used to smooth bread) from “Food and Drink in Medieval Poland”, Maria Dembinska, William Woys Weaver:



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