

THOMAS WRIGHT



***A HISTORY
OF DOMESTIC MANNERS
AND SENTIMENTS
IN ENGLAND DURING
THE MIDDLE AGES***

Thomas Wright

A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England During the Middle Ages

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Kenneth Gale

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Introduction

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Between the tangible routines of medieval households and the ideals that justified them, Thomas Wright traces how private life both reflected and shaped a broader social order.

A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England During the Middle Ages is a work of social history by Thomas Wright, an English antiquary writing in the Victorian period. Focused on England across the medieval centuries, it surveys the textures of everyday life—homes, habits, and the values attached to them—within a scholarly culture that was increasingly attentive to the material and documentary remains of the past. The book belongs to nineteenth-century efforts to synthesize evidence into readable cultural histories, and it addresses a general audience while remaining rooted in the learned practices of its time.

Readers encounter a careful, explanatory voice that builds its portrait of domestic life from a wide range of historical traces, producing a narrative that is descriptive, methodical, and often reflective. The tone is measured rather than polemical, aiming to render medieval practices intelligible in their own contexts. The book proceeds thematically rather than through dramatic incident, so the experience of reading is cumulative: rooms, tools, customs, and courtesies gradually cohere into a picture of how households operated and how people understood their

obligations to kin, guests, servants, neighbors, and authorities.

One central theme is the mutual reinforcement of space and behavior. Wright considers how the organization of dwellings influenced privacy, hierarchy, and hospitality, and how routines—meals, work, rest, recreation—depended on seasonal rhythms and local resources. He attends to distinctions of rank without reducing the period to caricatures of nobility and peasantry, emphasizing how social boundaries were performed at the table, in clothing, and through ritualized greetings. The analysis shows how custom domesticated power: authority appeared in the ordering of rooms, the staging of feasts, and the etiquette that bound host and guest, lord and dependent, parent and child.

Another recurring concern is the interplay of belief, regulation, and habit. Religious observance permeated the calendar of the home, shaping patterns of restraint and celebration. Law and custom framed inheritance, marriage, and service, while also guiding household discipline and care. Wright traces how tools and furnishings—basic implements as well as items of display—mediated comfort, labor, and status. He is attentive to age and gender as organizing principles of work and authority, and to the ways communities negotiated scarcity, safety, and conviviality through shared norms that made domestic life legible and predictable.

For contemporary readers, the book matters because it shifts attention from battles and rulers to the ordinary arrangements that sustain societies. It resists myths that

cast the Middle Ages as uniformly crude or uniformly pious, instead revealing a complex fabric of practical wisdom, aspiration, and compromise. Its method—reading texts against the grain of everyday practice and correlating them with material evidence—anticipates approaches that later became central to cultural and social history. In illuminating continuities and ruptures with our own domestic habits, it helps explain how privacy, comfort, civility, and care became moral as well as practical concerns.

Approached today, Wright's study rewards a reflective reading that acknowledges its nineteenth-century vantage point while appreciating its breadth and ambition. The Victorian context shaped his categories and comparisons, yet the archive he assembles remains a valuable gateway to medieval English households and the sentiments that regulated them. The book invites readers to imagine rooms and routines while thinking critically about how values travel from public institutions into private spaces. In doing so, it offers a durable lesson: the history of manners is also the history of moral imagination, traced not in grand events but in the measured cadence of daily life.

Synopsis

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Thomas Wright's *A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England During the Middle Ages* surveys everyday life through the lens of the home, arguing that shifts in private habits reveal larger social change. Drawing on manuscripts, legal records, early literature, illustrations, and surviving objects, Wright pieces together how people ate, dressed, slept, celebrated, and expressed feeling across centuries. The study proceeds thematically rather than chronologically, yet it repeatedly situates each custom within its historical phase, inviting comparisons between early and later medieval practice. Its guiding question is how material arrangements and routine behaviors shaped, and were shaped by, evolving notions of comfort, status, and propriety.

Beginning with dwellings and domestic space, Wright traces the development from communal living centered on a great hall toward arrangements that allowed more seclusion. He describes construction materials and layouts, the uses of hearths for heat and cooking, and the challenges of light and ventilation. The account notes the gradual multiplication of specialized rooms and furnishings, which implies changing expectations of privacy and order. Household governance appears in the distribution of tasks and the placement of servants, while storage, locks, and chests indicate new concerns with security. Sanitation and

water supply, though limited, also register as markers of habit, necessity, and social rank.

In attire and personal adornment, the book links fabric, cut, and color to hierarchy and morality. Wright outlines how clothing signaled occupation and estate, and how regulations sought to restrain conspicuous display. He observes practical needs—warmth, durability, ease of movement—alongside symbolic choices that conveyed respectability or courtliness. The treatment of hair, headgear, and footwear connects bodily presentation to wider codes of modesty. Attention to laundering, bathing, and scent shows concerns with cleanliness that were uneven across time and class, while medical and religious ideas influenced what was considered healthy or decent. The result is a portrait of the body as both instrument and emblem.

Foodways supply another window onto sentiment. Wright gathers evidence on cultivation, hunting, and marketing to profile the provisioning of households large and small. He contrasts festive abundance with ordinary fare, describing breads, pottages, meats, and the primacy of ale, while noting fasting regimes that reordered weekly and yearly diets. The etiquette of the table—seating, service, handwashing, carving, the use of knives, spoons, and trenchers—maps both hierarchy and a slow refinement of manners. Hospitality, almsgiving, and the obligations of host and guest underscore social bonds, as do inns and roadside accommodation, where travel habits expose standards of comfort, risk, and trust.

Turning to the household as a social institution, Wright considers marriage arrangements, kinship obligations, and the upbringing of children. He treats servants and apprentices as integral to family economy, showing how authority, discipline, and reward structured daily cooperation and conflict. Legal customs surrounding inheritance, dowry, and wardship illuminate expectations of duty, while ecclesiastical influence threads through calendars, rites, and moral instruction. Domestic accounts, inventories, and wills are read for their emotional registers, revealing where affection, memory, pride, and anxiety attaches to objects and spaces. In this way, the book links sentiment not just to feeling, but to routines of care and control.

Recreation and public celebration punctuate the narrative, balancing labor with play. Wright surveys field sports, games of chance and skill, storytelling, music, and dramatic performance, and he notes how authorities alternately patronized and policed them. Fairs and seasonal festivals draw the household into the community, blending devout observance with revelry, while civic processions and guild customs reinforce shared identities. Tournaments and pageantry illustrate aristocratic ideals, even as satires and fabliaux expose their contradictions. Across these entertainments, the text tracks debates over excess, idleness, and decorum, using critique from moralists to triangulate what ordinary people valued in fellowship, spectacle, and diversion.

Throughout, the study argues for gradual transformation rather than abrupt rupture. Greater specialization of rooms,

furnishings, tableware, and garments signals a rising valuation of privacy, comfort, and civility, yet many practices persist beneath changing forms. By assembling dispersed evidence into a coherent picture of home life, Wright challenges nostalgic or heroic portraits of the Middle Ages, emphasizing complexity over myth. His synthesis demonstrates how the intimate sphere mirrors economic, legal, and religious structures, and how sentiments leave traces in the most practical objects. The book endures as a touchstone for social and material history, clarifying how cultures negotiate the boundaries of the everyday.

Historical Context

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Thomas Wright (1810–1877), an English antiquary and founder of the British Archaeological Association, published *A History of Domestic Manners and Sentiments in England During the Middle Ages* in 1862. Writing amid Victorian medievalism and expanding documentary editing by societies such as the Camden Society, Wright assembled evidence from manuscripts, chronicles, and household records. His subject is England from roughly the Norman Conquest to the eve of the Reformation, with attention to households across ranks. By foregrounding everyday life rather than battles, the work aligns with emerging social history, situating private conduct, emotions, and material habits as windows into national development.

Medieval England's institutions framed domestic experience. The monarchy consolidated authority after 1066, while Henry II's 12th-century legal reforms extended common law through itinerant justices. Barons governed localities under feudal tenures, and manorial courts regulated labor, inheritance, and petty disputes. From the 13th century, Parliament evolved as a forum for consent to taxation, affecting royal finance and household provisioning. Royal and noble households, organized under stewards, marshals, and chamberlains, set patterns emulated by gentry and urban elites. Parish structures anchored communities, collecting tithes and maintaining church

fabric. This architecture of governance subtly directed rhythms of work, hospitality, charity, and domestic order.

Most people lived within the manorial economy, combining demesne farming with peasant holdings. Open-field cultivation, common pastures, and customary labor services defined food supply and seasonal labor. Peasant statuses ranged from free tenants to villeins bound by rent and service, with commutation into cash payments increasing after the 13th century and especially post-plague. Elite residences centered on the great hall, with service areas and private chambers gradually multiplying. Simple rural homes used timber, wattle and daub, and thatch; urban dwellings stacked shop and living space. Diets hinged on cereals, ale, and pottage, with meat and fish varying by status, season, and fasting rules.

The Latin Church permeated domestic life through sacraments, preaching, calendars, and courts. Parish priests baptized, married, and buried parishioners, while monastic houses—Benedictine, Augustinian, and Cistercian—managed estates and provided hospitality. Mendicant orders, notably Franciscans and Dominicans from the 13th century, preached in towns and influenced lay piety. Ecclesiastical courts adjudicated marriage, defamation, and testamentary matters, shaping household formation and inheritance. Feast and fast cycles governed diet; Lent and vigils curtailed meat, promoting fish and dairy substitutes. Devotional objects, guild chapels, and charity practices linked homes to altars. Clerical and didactic literature prescribed comportment, modesty, and charity as domestic virtues.

England's towns expanded between the 12th and 14th centuries, with London dominating commerce and administration, and York, Norwich, Bristol, and Coventry as regional centers. Borough charters secured self-government and markets; craft and merchant guilds regulated apprenticeship, quality, and prices. International trade moved wool and cloth through staple towns designated by the Statute of the Staple (1353), while inland fairs—such as Stourbridge near Cambridge—concentrated seasonal exchange. Urban households blended production and residence, with workrooms, shops, and kitchens tightly arranged. Craft ordinances and civic by-laws governed cleanliness, waste, fire safety, and night-time order, embedding public regulation into private routine.

Shocks reshaped domestic conditions. The Black Death of 1348–49, followed by recurrent plagues, drastically reduced population, elevating wages and hastening the commutation of labor services. The Statute of Labourers (1351) sought to cap pay and bind workers, while the Peasants' Revolt (1381) exposed agrarian tensions and anxieties about social mobility. War also touched households: the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) spurred taxation, provisioning, and coastal defense, and the Wars of the Roses (1455–1487) unsettled noble fortunes. Fashion, consumption, and sumptuary laws reflected status concerns, as did regulations on livery and retainers that aimed to discipline household retinues.

Wright's reconstructions lean on documentary and visual sources that modern historians also prize. Illuminated manuscripts—such as the Luttrell Psalter (c. 1320–1340)

and other psalters and books of hours—depict dining, labor, play, and dress. Wills, inventories, and account rolls itemize utensils, textiles, and furnishings, while civic records note sanitation, ale-tasting, and building standards. Royal and aristocratic household ordinances define staffing, allowances, and etiquette. Archaeological finds—ceramics, floor tiles, and metalwork—corroborate usage and trade networks. From this evidence emerges a spectrum of domestic spaces, from monastic refectories to urban workshops, allowing patterns of sentiment and sociability to be inferred cautiously.

Composed amid mid-Victorian historical scholarship, the book reflects a turn from constitutional chronicles to everyday life. Record publication projects—the Rolls Series, county histories, and society editions—supplied transcribed texts, while antiquarian illustration practices translated manuscript images into woodcuts for readers. Wright, active in the Camden Society and British Archaeological Association, synthesizes such materials with a didactic clarity typical of his age. The result challenges purely romantic visions of chivalry by foregrounding labor, festivity, discipline, and domestic care. At the same time, its emphasis on manners and moral tone mirrors contemporary Victorian concerns, offering a critical yet sympathetic portrait of medieval English households.

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.—THE ANGLO-SAXONS BEFORE THEIR CONVERSION.—GENERAL ARRANGEMENT OF A SAXON HOUSE.

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Much has been written at different times on the costume and some other circumstances connected with the condition of our forefathers in past times, but no one has undertaken with much success to treat generally of the domestic manners of the middle ages. The history of domestic manners, indeed, is a subject, the materials of which are exceedingly varied, widely scattered, and not easily brought together; they, of course, vary in character with the periods to which they relate, and at certain periods are much rarer than at others. But the interest of the subject must be felt by every one who appreciates art; for what avails our knowledge of costume unless we know the manners, the mode of living, the houses, the furniture, the utensils, of those whom we have learnt how to clothe? and, without this latter knowledge, history itself can be but imperfectly understood.

In England, as in most other countries of western Europe, at the period of the middle ages when we first become intimately acquainted with them, the manners and customs of their inhabitants were a mixture of those of the barbarian settlers themselves, and of those which they found among the conquered Romans; the latter prevailing to a greater or less extent, according to the peculiar circumstances of the

country. This was certainly the case in England among our Saxon forefathers; and it becomes a matter of interest to ascertain what were really the types which belonged to the Saxon race, and to distinguish them from those which they derived from the Roman inhabitants of our island.

We have only one record of the manners of the Saxons before they settled in Britain, and that is neither perfect, nor altogether unaltered—it is the romance of Beowulf^[1], a poem in pure Anglo-Saxon, which contains internal marks of having been composed before the people who spoke that language had quitted their settlements on the Continent. Yet we can hardly peruse it without suspecting that some of its portraitures are descriptive rather of what was seen in England than of what existed in the north of Germany. Thus we might almost imagine that the “street variegated with stones” (*stræt wæs stân-fáh*), along which the hero Beowulf and his followers proceeded from the shore to the royal residence of Hrothgar, was a picture of a Roman road as found in Britain.

It came into the mind of Hrothgar, we are told, that he would cause to be built a house, “a great mead-hall,” which was to be his chief palace, or metropolis. The hall-gate, we are informed, rose aloft, “high and curved with pinnacles” (*heáh and horn-geáp*). It is elsewhere described as a “lofty house;” the hall was high; it was “fast within and without, with iron bonds, forged cunningly;” it appears that there were steps to it, and the roof is described as being variegated with gold; the walls were covered with tapestry (*web æfter wagum*), which also was “variegated with gold,” and presented to the view “many a wondrous sight to every

one that looketh upon such." The walls appear to have been of wood; we are repeatedly told that the roof was carved and lofty; the floor is described as being variegated (probably a tessellated pavement); and the seats were benches arranged round it, with the exception of Hrothgar's chair or throne. In the vicinity of the hall stood the chambers or bowers, in which there were beds (*bed æfter búrum*).

These few epithets and allusions, scattered through the poem, give us a tolerable notion of what the house of a Saxon chieftain must have been in the country from whence our ancestors came, as well as afterwards in that where they finally settled. The romantic story is taken up more with imaginary combats with monsters, than with domestic scenes, but it contains a few incidents of private life. The hall of king Hrothgar was visited by a monster named Grendel, who came at night to prey upon its inhabitants; and it was Beowulf's mission to free them from this nocturnal scourge. By direction of the primeval coast-guards, he and his men proceeded by the "street" already mentioned to the hall of Hrothgar, at the entrance to which they laid aside their armour and left their weapons. Beowulf found the chief and his followers drinking their ale and mead, and made known the object of his journey. "Then," says the poem, "there was for the sons of the Geats (Beowulf and his followers), altogether, a bench cleared in the beer-hall; there the bold of spirit, free from quarrel, went to sit; the thane observed his office, he that in his hand bare the twisted ale-cup; he poured the bright sweet liquor; meanwhile the poet sang serene in Heorot (the name of Hrothgar's palace), there was joy of heroes." Thus the

company passed their time, listening to the bard, boasting of their exploits, and telling their stories, until Wealtheow, Hrothgar's queen, entered and "greeted the men in the hall." She now served the liquor, offering the cup first to her husband, and then to the rest of the guests, after which she seated herself by Hrothgar, and the festivities continued till it was time to retire to bed. Beowulf and his followers were left to sleep in the hall—"the wine-hall, the treasure-house of men, variegated with vessels" (*fættum fáhne*). Grendel came in the night, and after a dreadful combat received his death-wound from Beowulf. The noise in the hall was great; "a fearful terror fell on the North Danes, on each of those who from the walls heard the outcry." These were the watchmen stationed on the wall forming the chieftain's palace, that enclosed the whole mass of buildings (*of wealle*).

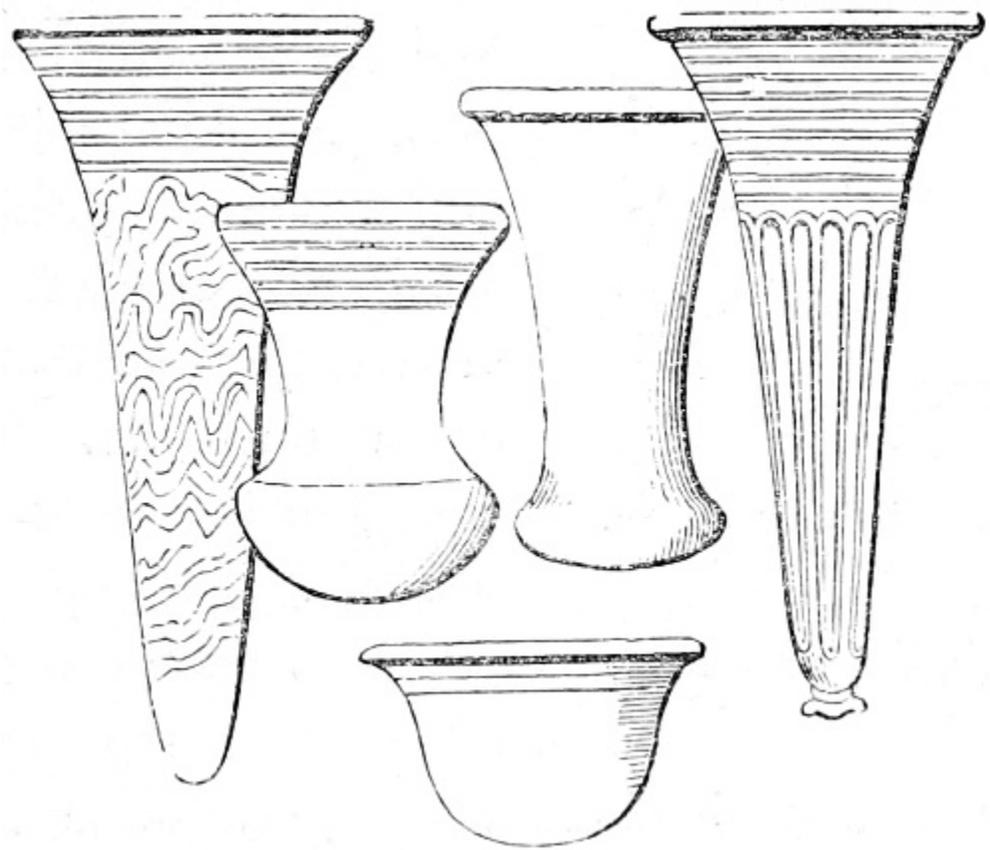
As far as we can judge by the description given in the poem, Hrothgar and his household in their bowers or bed-chambers had heard little of the tumult, but they went early in the morning to the hall to rejoice in Beowulf's victory. There was great feasting again in the hall that day, and Beowulf and his followers were rewarded with rich gifts. After dinner the minstrel again took up the harp, and sang some of the favourite histories of their tribe. "The lay was sung, the song of the gleeman, the joke rose again, the noise from the benches grew loud, cup-bearers gave the wine from wondrous vessels." Then the queen, "under a golden crown," again served the cup to Hrothgar and Beowulf. She afterwards went as before to her seat, and "there was the costliest of feasts, the men drank wine," until

bed-time arrived a second time. While their leader appears to have been accommodated with a chamber, Beowulf's men again occupied the hall. "They bared the bench-planks; it was spread all over with beds and bolsters; at their heads they set their war-rims, the bright shield-wood; there, on the bench, might easily be seen, above the warrior, his helmet lofty in war, the ringed mail-shirt, and the solid shield; it was their custom ever to be ready for war, both in house and in field."

Grendel had a mother (it was the primitive form of the legend of the devil and his dam), and this second night she came unexpectedly to avenge her son, and slew one of Hrothgar's favourite counsellors and nobles, who must therefore have also slept in the hall. Beowulf and his warriors next day went in search of this new marauder, and succeeded in destroying her, after which exploit they returned to their own home laden with rich presents.

These sketches of early manners, slight as they may be, are invaluable to us, in the absence of all other documentary record during several ages, until after the Anglo-Saxons had been converted to Christianity. During this long period we have, however, one source of invaluable information, though of a restricted kind—the barrows or graves of our primeval forefathers, which contain almost every description of article that they used when alive. In that solitary document, the poem of Beowulf, we are told of the arms which the Saxons used, of the dresses in which they were clad; of the rings, and bracelets, and ornaments, of which they were proud; of the "solid cup, the valuable drinking-vessel," from which they quaffed the mead, or the

vases from which they poured it; but we can obtain no notions of the form or character of these articles. From the graves, on the contrary, we obtain a perfect knowledge of the form and design of all these various articles, without deriving any knowledge as to the manner in which they were used. The subject now becomes a more extensive one; and in the Anglo-Saxon barrows in England, we find a mixture, in these articles, of Anglo-Saxon and Roman, which furnishes a remarkable illustration of the mixture of the races. We are all perfectly well acquainted with Roman types; and in the few examples which can be here given of articles found in early Anglo-Saxon barrows, I shall only introduce such as will enable us to judge what classes of the subsequent mediæval types were really derived from pure Saxon or Teutonic originals.



48 A jesse is a small strap of leather or silk fastened to a hawk's legs so the falconer can hold or tether the bird; it is standard equipment in medieval and later falconry practices.

49 A projecting stake or sign hung outside a house to indicate it sold ale; medieval inns and ale-houses commonly used a bush, garland, or other object on a stake as a public sign.

50 A woman who kept or served at an ale-house or tavern; in medieval sources the term denotes the female proprietor or keeper of such establishments.

51 A popular medieval didactic work (commonly attributed to Jacques de Cessoles) that allegorizes the game of chess to teach moral and social lessons, composed in the later 13th century and widely copied in manuscript.

52 Medieval lodging-keepers in towns who provided rooms or 'harbour' to travellers (distinct from public hostellers or inn-keepers) and who were often subject to municipal regulation and fees.

53 A medieval device for publicly punishing and shaming offenders (often used for 'scolds'); originally an exposed seat, with the later practice of ducking a person in water added at a subsequent period.

54 A medieval French collection of one hundred short tales compiled in the later 14th century; the text cited is preserved in a manuscript (the Hunterian copy) used as a source for the book's illustration.

55 A medieval pottage (thick soup or stew) prepared in the recipe given: it typically used pork entrails or other

meat, broth, leeks/onions, bread mixed with blood and vinegar, and spices like pepper and cloves.

56 A spiced and sweetened wine served at medieval and early modern feasts, typically made by infusing wine with sugar and aromatic spices and then straining it before serving.

57 A fifteenth-century French expression for metrical rules or manuals of etiquette describing proper behaviour at table; these were short didactic poems giving contemporary dining customs and prohibitions.

58 A medieval term for a copper-zinc alloy (brass) used in household metalwork; latten candlesticks and fittings were common in late-medieval inventories and furnishings.

59 Title of an allegorical 'morality' drama (literally 'The Ship of Health') by the French writer Nicole de La Chesnaye, used here to explain a fifteenth-century tapestry's moral about excessive banquets; the drama dates from the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century.

60 French name for Charles the Bold (1433–1477), duke of Burgundy, who was defeated and killed at the 1477 Battle (or siege) of Nancy; his court and lifestyle influenced Burgundian and wider European aristocratic fashions.

61 A medical term used historically for a sudden loss of consciousness or paralysis, often from stroke; here it is one of the personified 'Diseases' in the morality play and tapestry rather than a specific historic patient.

62 A French phrase literally meaning 'good company' used as the proper name of a character in the morality play and tapestry, representing the assembled guests or hostess of the feast.

63 A historical English term for a late or additional meal taken after supper, also called a 'banket'; the text notes this term was in use throughout the fifteenth century.

64 The Latin word (here printed with the œ ligature) for an after-supper meal; contemporary writers such as Higins and lexicons equate it with a 'rear-supper' or banquet following the main meal.

65 An influential Middle English allegorical poem attributed to William Langland, composed in the mid-14th century, which critiques social and religious abuses and influenced later debates about social reform.

66 A late 14th–15th century English reform movement inspired by John Wycliffe that promoted vernacular scripture and criticized clerical wealth; its followers were often labelled heretics and faced persecution.

67 A poet active around the reign of Henry VII (late 15th–early 16th century) known for eclogues and satirical verse addressing social and moral questions in England.

68 A manchet was a small, fine white loaf of bread regarded as a luxury in medieval England and frequently recorded in household provision lists.

69 Refers to Thomas Occleve (also spelled Hoccleve), an English poet and royal clerk active in the late 14th and early 15th centuries (c.1368–c.1426), known for autobiographical and didactic poems about contemporary life.

70 In the medieval and early modern context, 'gossips' denotes women who met as intimate companions or social equals (often including godmothers or close female friends) who gathered to converse and share food and drink.

71 A cresset is a portable pan or lamp—often a small receptacle of combustibles on a pole—used for lighting streets, processions, watchmen, or large interiors; the word derives from an Old French term meaning a night-lamp.

72 A dining convention in which the communal salt-cellar was placed mid-table to separate higher-status guests (sitting 'above the salt') from lower-status diners ('below the salt'), so the phrase came to indicate social rank at table.

73 Refers to the mid-17th-century period in England after the Civil War when the monarchy was abolished (commonly dated c.1649–1660); the Protectorate (c.1653–1659) was the republican government led by Oliver Cromwell (and briefly his son Richard).

74 A dining unit in the period described: four people counted as one party and often sharing a single dish and attendant; the word later became the standard term for an organized dining group in military and institutional contexts.

75 Confectionery made from sugar and ground almonds (an early form of what is now called marzipan), often molded into decorative shapes and served as a sweet at banquets in the period.

76 A mock-Latin phrase used contemporaneously to describe the practice of 'drinking on the nail' — testing that one had emptied a cup by pouring remaining liquid onto the nail; it was part of formal pledge-drinking ceremonies.

77 A variant spelling of 'hammam' — the Persian/Arabic public bath or steam-bath; these establishments served for washing and socializing and the term appears in early modern English sources to denote eastern-style hot baths.