

The Duty of Hospitality

*What Medieval Hospitality Was, Who Performed It,
and What It Required of a Noblewoman*

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Part of the Immersive Hospitality Series

Introduction

We use the word hospitality casually now. It names an industry, a career track, a department in a hotel. But in the medieval world, hospitality was not a service sector. It was a moral obligation rooted in theology, codified in chivalric ethics, and enforced by communal reputation. To fail at hospitality was not merely rude; it was sinful, shameful, and potentially dangerous to the soul of the host and the body of the guest.

This paper examines what hospitality actually meant in Western Europe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries: where the obligation came from, what it required, who performed it, how the labor was organized, and what happened when it was done well or badly. It gives particular attention to the role of noblewomen, who were, in practice, the primary managers of domestic hospitality and whose work has been consistently underexamined in favor of the more visible, more martial activities of their husbands.

This is the foundational paper in the Immersive Hospitality Research Series. Everything else in the series, from the collation table to the dressed pavilion to the themed tournament experience, sits on top of what is described here. Before we can understand how medieval people decorated a table or furnished a tent, we need to understand why they did it, what they believed they owed their guests, and what was at stake when they got it right.

I. Where the Obligation Came From

The Sacred Root

The theological foundation of medieval hospitality is older than the medieval period itself. Chapter 53 of the Rule of St. Benedict, written around 530, established the principle that would govern Christian attitudes toward guests for the next thousand years: *"Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, for He will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me."* The instruction was not metaphorical. Benedict meant that in the person of every guest, however lowly, the host encountered Christ. To turn away a stranger was to turn away God.

The Rule prescribed specific practices. The abbot or his deputy was to meet guests with courtesy. A dedicated monk, the guest master, was appointed to oversee their care. The abbot was to eat with guests, breaking the monastery's communal routine to honor the visitor. Guests were to be given water for washing their hands and feet, a practice drawn directly from Scripture and from Roman custom. The monastery was to maintain a kitchen specifically for guests, separate from the community's own, so that the arrival of unexpected visitors would never disrupt the provision of food.

These were not suggestions. They were rules for an institution that would become the most widespread organizational model in Western Europe. As Benedictine monasteries spread across the continent, particularly after Charlemagne mandated the Rule as the standard for monastic life, the practices described in Chapter 53 became the baseline against which all Christian hospitality was measured. The great monasteries of the high medieval period, from Cluny to Reading to Bermondsey, were famous (and sometimes financially crippled) by the sheer volume

of guests they received. The Cluniac priory at Bermondsey, situated on the London-Dover road, was so popular a stopping place that its hospitality obligations contributed to chronic debt.

The Chivalric Overlay

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the sacred obligation of hospitality had acquired a second, complementary framework: the chivalric virtue of largesse. Largesse, generosity made visible, was one of the core virtues expected of a knight and, by extension, of any person of noble rank. It was not simply a matter of giving things away. Largesse was a public performance of abundance. It demonstrated that the giver possessed more than enough and was willing to share without calculation or restraint.

The chivalric codes, as they were articulated in conduct literature and romance, placed hospitality alongside valor, loyalty, and courtesy as a defining quality of noble character. Ramon Llull's *Libre del Orde de Cavayleria* (c. 1275) lists generosity as essential to knightly virtue. The composite ideal expected a knight to be generous as he was able, to show hospitality to strangers, and to be able to support his rank through visible provision. A lord who feasted his guests lavishly gained honor. A lord who failed to do so lost it, regardless of his prowess in battle.

This is the context in which tournament hospitality must be understood. When a captain at a tournament provided "wine and spices on the other days," as René d'Anjou required, or when Boucicaut offered food and drink to all challengers at Saint-Inglevert, they were not merely being polite. They were performing a virtue that was as central to their identity as martial skill. The provision of food, drink, and shelter was an act of chivalric self-definition.

The Political Instrument

Hospitality was also, and increasingly through the later medieval period, a political tool. The ability to host was the ability to project power. The scale of one's hospitality communicated the scale of one's resources, alliances, and ambition. The Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, where Henry VIII and Francis I competed not through combat but through the sheer spectacular excess of their hospitality, is the most famous example, but the principle operated at every level of noble society.

A lord who hosted well attracted followers, consolidated alliances, and demonstrated his fitness to govern. A lord who hosted poorly, or worse, who was unable to host at all, signaled weakness. Hospitality was a language of power spoken through food, textiles, precious metalwork, and the choreography of welcome. To read it correctly was a political skill. To perform it well was a political necessity.

II. What Hospitality Required

Medieval hospitality was not a single gesture. It was a structured sequence of obligations that began at the threshold and extended through the guest's entire stay to the moment of departure. The hierarchy of duties, drawn from both monastic practice and aristocratic custom, can be described as a series of escalating provisions, each building on the one before it.

Shelter

The first and most basic obligation was shelter. A host was expected to provide a safe, enclosed space for the guest to rest. In monastic contexts, this meant a dedicated guest house. In a noble household, it meant a place in the hall, or for guests of rank, a private chamber. At a tournament, it meant access to the pavilion, the camp, the covered space near the field. The obligation of shelter carried with it an implicit guarantee of physical safety: to invite someone under your roof was to promise their protection.

Food and Drink

The second obligation was sustenance. A guest was to be fed and given drink, and the quality of the provision was expected to reflect the host's means. A wealthy lord who served poor food shamed himself. A modest host who offered what he had with generosity honored both himself and his guest. The key principle was not extravagance but sufficiency and willingness. The symbolism of bread and salt, offered at the threshold, represented this compact: the host was sharing the essentials of life, and in doing so, was binding guest and host in a relationship of mutual obligation.

The provision of food was not limited to the formal meal. As explored in the companion paper on the collation and the feast, medieval hosts at multi-day events provided ongoing refreshment throughout the day: wine, bread, cheese, fruit, cold meats. This ambient hospitality was as much a part of the obligation as the evening banquet. A host who fed his guests brilliantly at dinner but left them hungry during the day had fulfilled the letter of the obligation but missed its spirit.

Protection

The guest was under the host's protection for the duration of the stay. This was not a gentle courtesy. It was a binding obligation with serious consequences for violation. To harm a guest, or to allow a guest to come to harm under your roof, was among the most serious breaches of honor in medieval society. The violation of guest right could bring shame to an entire family, provoke feuds, and damage a reputation for generations. The law of hospitality functioned as a mutual security pact: the guest agreed to respect the host's household, and the host agreed to defend the guest's person.

Entertainment and Company

Beyond the physical necessities, a host was expected to provide company and diversion. Guests were not to be left alone (unless they desired it). Music, conversation, games, storytelling, and the social rituals of the household were all part of the hospitality obligation. At tournaments, this extended to the full spectacle of the event: the host was responsible not just for feeding and sheltering guests but for ensuring they had a worthy experience.

Parting Gifts

The final element of the hospitality sequence was the gift upon departure. Parting gifts ranged from modest tokens to substantial presents of clothing, horses, or money, depending on the social

level of the exchange. The gift sealed the relationship and created a reciprocal obligation: the guest who had been well received was now bound to offer the same courtesy if the situation were ever reversed. This reciprocity was the engine that kept the entire system running. Hospitality was not charity. It was a network of mutual obligation that connected households, families, and communities across distances and generations.

III. Who Did the Work

Medieval hospitality, at any scale beyond the peasant household, was a collective enterprise requiring specialized labor. The visible generosity of the lord, standing in his hall greeting guests, depended entirely on an invisible infrastructure of servants, officers, and systems operating behind and below his line of sight. Understanding this infrastructure is essential, because the noblewoman's role, which is the heart of this paper, only makes sense when set against the full organizational picture.

The Household Officers

A large medieval household, whether attached to a castle, a manor, or a traveling retinue, was organized around a set of defined offices. The **steward** (or seneschal) was the highest-ranking domestic officer, responsible for the overall management of the household, its finances, its legal affairs, and its staff. By the thirteenth century, the role was demanding enough that training colleges existed at Oxford to prepare stewards in accounting, letter writing, and law.

Below the steward, a series of specialized officers managed the daily operations of hospitality. The **butler** oversaw the buttery and the supply of wine, ale, and beer. The **pantler** managed the pantry and the provision of bread. The **cook** directed the kitchen, assisted by undercooks, spit-boys, sauce chefs, bakers, brewers, and other specialists. The **ewerer** maintained the vessels and linens for handwashing, the ritual that opened every formal meal. The **marshal** supervised the stables, horses, and in some households, military discipline and logistics. The **chamberlain** managed the private chambers, bedding, and the lord's personal comfort.

Each of these officers had assistants: valets, grooms, and pages who performed the physical labor of carrying, cleaning, serving, and maintaining the household's material infrastructure. In a large castle, the total domestic staff could number fifty or more. Even a modest noble household required servants dedicated to the procurement, storage, preparation, and service of food, the maintenance of textiles and furnishings, and the care of animals and equipment.

The Choreography of Service

Hospitality was not simply the provision of goods. It was a choreographed performance in which every gesture carried social meaning. The formal meal, the most visible expression of hospitality, followed a precise sequence: the laying of the cloth, the setting of the salt, the ritual handwashing (in which water was offered to guests in order of rank), the carving of meat (a skilled, public performance by a trained carver), the service of courses, the presentation of entertainment between courses, and the concluding voidée of hippocras and wafers. Each step was managed by

a specific officer or servant. Each step communicated something about the host's wealth, taste, and attention to the guest's comfort.

This choreography extended beyond the dining hall. The greeting of arriving guests, the preparation of chambers, the provision of fresh clothing, the arrangement of entertainment, and the formal departure with gifts were all scripted elements of the hospitality performance. The lord's visible role in all of this was important but circumscribed: he appeared, he spoke, he presided. The actual management of the systems that made his appearance possible fell to his officers and, as we shall see, overwhelmingly to his wife.

IV. The Lady of the House

Here is the center of this paper, and the part that is most often left out of the story.

When we imagine medieval hospitality, we tend to imagine the lord: the man at the head of the table, the captain who provides wine and spices at the tournament, the knight whose largesse is praised in chronicles. But the daily reality of hospitality, the planning, provisioning, supervising, and sustaining of a household's ability to welcome guests, was the noblewoman's work. She was not merely a participant in the hospitality system. She was, in most practical respects, its manager.

What the Sources Tell Us

The most explicit surviving source for a medieval wife's hospitality duties is *Le Ménagier de Paris* (c. 1393), a household manual written by an older Parisian bourgeois husband for his young wife. The book is sometimes dismissed as merely a cookbook, but it is far more than that. It is a comprehensive guide to everything a wife was expected to manage: moral conduct, religious duties, the supervision of servants, the procurement and storage of food, the planning of meals for gatherings ranging from six to sixty guests, the maintenance of household linens and furnishings, the care of gardens, and the management of household finances. The wife described in the *Ménagier* was not expected to cook the meals herself. She was expected to ensure they were cooked well, served correctly, and provisioned without waste.

Christine de Pizan's *Treasure of the City of Ladies* (1405), written by a woman for women, provides the most authoritative period voice on these responsibilities. Christine addresses women of every social level, from princesses to the wives of merchants, and her advice for noblewomen is detailed and pragmatic. A wise noblewoman, Christine writes, must understand her estate's finances, divide her income into portions for different needs (including almsgiving), manage her servants firmly but justly, practice measured generosity that avoids both avarice and reckless extravagance, and be knowledgeable in legislation, customs, and the management of property. In her husband's absence, she is to take full responsibility for the estate's governance, including its hospitality.

The household accounts of Lady Alice de Bryene (c. 1360-1435), an English noblewoman who managed over 6,000 acres of land for nearly fifty years after her husband's death, provide documentary evidence of what this management looked like in practice. Her surviving Household Book, covering expenses from 1412 to 1413, records the daily details of provisioning, staffing, and

feeding a household that regularly entertained guests. Alice was not exceptional in her responsibilities; she was exceptional only in that her records survived.

The Two Roles

The noblewoman's hospitality work operated on two levels that were distinct but inseparable.

The first was visible and ceremonial. The lady of the house greeted guests personally. She offered the welcome cup, a gesture with deep roots in both Christian and pre-Christian tradition; the image of the woman offering drink to an arriving guest appears in sources from *Beowulf* (where Queen Wealhtheow carries the mead cup through the hall, offering it first to the king and then to his warriors in order of rank) through to the courtesy literature of the fifteenth century. She oversaw the hall during meals, ensuring guests were properly seated according to rank, properly served, and properly attended. She presided over entertainment. She distributed favors and gifts. At tournaments, the lady or queen of the tournament awarded prizes to the victors. Her physical presence in the hall was itself a statement about the household's honor and the host's attentiveness to his guests.

The second role was invisible and administrative. This was the larger work. The noblewoman directed the servants who cooked, cleaned, served, and maintained the household. She managed the stores of food, drink, and household goods. She supervised the quality and cleanliness of linens, the condition of the hall and chambers, the readiness of guest accommodations. She planned meals, not only for daily consumption but for the feasts and gatherings that were a regular part of noble life. She managed household finances, tracked expenditures, and ensured that the household's resources were allocated wisely enough to sustain its hospitality obligations over time. She hired, trained, evaluated, and dismissed servants. She was, in modern terms, the chief operating officer of an enterprise whose primary product was generous welcome.

The Invisible Made Visible

The tension between these two roles is important. The noblewoman's ceremonial presence was visible and valued; chroniclers mention ladies greeting guests, offering cups, and presiding over feasts. But the administrative work that made those ceremonies possible was largely invisible, because it was supposed to be. The appearance of effortless abundance was itself the goal. A hall that seemed naturally to overflow with food, a chamber that was always ready for guests, a household that could absorb unexpected visitors without disruption: these were signs that the lady was doing her work well. The better she performed, the less her effort showed.

The *Ménagier de Paris* captures this expectation directly. The husband instructs his wife on how to manage servants, provision meals, keep linens clean and ready, maintain the household's stores, and present food attractively, all so that when guests arrive, the hospitality appears spontaneous and abundant. Christine de Pizan echoes the point from the other direction: a wise princess, she writes, should practice *measured generosity*, extending goodwill through thoughtful gifts, supporting deserving individuals, and maintaining her reputation, all while keeping her household's finances stable enough to sustain that generosity over the long term.

This is the work that made medieval hospitality function. Not the lord's speech at the head of the table, though that mattered. Not the herald's announcement, though that mattered too. But the daily, unglamorous, skilled labor of a woman managing a household so that it could welcome the world and make it look easy.

When the Lord Was Away

The noblewoman's hospitality role became even more prominent when her husband was absent, which, for many noble wives, was much of the time. Lords went to war, went on crusade, traveled to attend court, and spent extended periods away from their estates. In these absences, the lady assumed full governance, including the hospitality obligations that came with it. She received guests, managed alliances, provisioned the household, and maintained the estate's reputation for generosity and good order. The Met Museum's research notes that noble ladies in their husbands' absences sometimes even defended their estates militarily, but the more common and more sustained responsibility was the daily maintenance of a household that continued to function as a center of hospitality and governance.

Christine de Pizan is explicit about this. She instructs that a noblewoman must be knowledgeable enough to manage her estates independently, to understand her finances, to supervise her servants, and to make decisions about household operations without requiring her husband's guidance. This was not emergency preparation. It was the expected norm. A noblewoman who could not manage hospitality in her husband's absence was failing at her primary duty.

V. Hospitality as Public Performance

One of the most important things to understand about medieval hospitality, and one of the things that separates it most sharply from modern notions of entertaining, is that it was public. Hospitality was not a private kindness performed behind closed doors. It was a visible, communal event observed and judged by the community. The quality of your hospitality was a direct reflection of your character, your wealth, your piety, and your fitness to hold your social position.

A lord who feasted his guests lavishly was praised in chronicles, celebrated in poetry, and rewarded with loyalty and alliance. A lord who was stingy, or who provided grudgingly, was mocked, criticized, and eventually abandoned by those who might otherwise have supported him. Froissart's chronicles are full of such judgments; when he describes the hospitality at a tournament or a court, he is not merely setting the scene. He is evaluating the host's worthiness. The same is true of the biography of William Marshal, which carefully notes the generosity Marshal offered to fellow tournament participants and the alliances it secured.

This public dimension gave hospitality its moral weight. It was not enough to provide for your guests in private. You had to be seen doing it, and you had to be seen doing it well. The dressed hall, the laden table, the quality of the plate on display, the abundance of the food, the skill of the entertainment, the richness of the textiles: all of these were messages broadcast to everyone present. And everyone present was, in a sense, keeping score.

For the noblewoman, this meant that her invisible administrative work had deeply visible consequences. A hall that was poorly maintained, food that was badly prepared, linens that were

stained, servants who were disorganized: these were not private embarrassments. They were public failures that reflected on the entire household. The lady's competence, or lack of it, was on display every time a guest crossed the threshold. Her reputation as a manager of hospitality was inseparable from her family's reputation for honor.

VI. Implications for Practice

What does all of this mean for those of us who practice hospitality in the Society for Creative Anachronism?

First, it means that what we are doing when we set a table, dress a pavilion, and welcome guests into our space is not a modern invention overlaid on a medieval setting. It is a continuation of one of the most deeply held values of the medieval world. The obligation to welcome, to feed, to shelter, and to provide for others was sacred, social, and political all at once. When we open our tents and offer food and drink to the people around us, we are doing something that a medieval noblewoman would have recognized immediately, even if our materials and methods differ.

Second, it means that the noblewoman's role deserves far more attention and respect than it typically receives. The woman who plans the menu, packs the supplies, sets up the space, directs the work, greets the guests, and makes it all look effortless is not performing a supporting role. She is performing the central role, the one that the entire system depended on. Every pavilion hospitality display, every grazing table, every themed interactive experience in the Immersive Hospitality practice is built on the same foundation: a person, usually a woman, managing a household's capacity to welcome the world.

Third, it reframes what we mean by "immersive." The most immersive thing we can do is not to get every material detail right, though that matters. It is to embody the values that made medieval hospitality what it was: genuine welcome, attentive provision, visible generosity, and the willingness to make the work invisible so that the guest experiences only the gift. That is the ethic at the heart of this practice, and it is as old as Benedict's Rule.

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Open Questions for Further Research

The relationship between the noblewoman's ceremonial role (greeting, offering the cup, presiding) and her administrative role (provisioning, managing, directing) deserves a dedicated study drawing on household accounts, conduct literature, and romance to trace how these two functions interacted and how they were perceived by contemporaries.

A comparative study of hospitality obligations across different regional traditions (English, French, Burgundian, Iberian, German) would reveal whether the noblewoman's role varied significantly by culture or remained broadly consistent across Western Europe.

The transition from sacred obligation (Benedictine hospitality) to chivalric virtue (*largesse*) to political instrument (diplomatic hospitality) represents an evolution in the meaning of the same set of practices. Tracing this shift through specific case studies would illuminate how the values behind hospitality changed even as the external forms remained similar.

The experience of hospitality from the guest's perspective is underexamined. Conduct literature tells hosts how to behave, but what did guests expect? What did they notice? What did they judge? The courtesy manuals offer some clues, but a systematic study of guest accounts would enrich the picture considerably.