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Home and family

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Chapter 5
Home and Family
James Davis

Across medieval Europe, the basic economic unit of both consumption and production was the family. As such, the needs, desires and practices of the family are integral to our understanding of medieval shopping. In urban communities, in particular, families might work as a unit within artisanal households, with the wife and children fronting the retail side of the business. As consumers, wives and servants probably undertook much of the necessary and non-essential purchases. How they undertook this, and the expectations they operated within, can tell us much about patterns of domestic consumption, which in turn drove certain forms of demand. Unfortunately, much of the trade and shopping undertaken by the family and for the home is hidden from view, particularly for women who were often legally disenfranchised and had a limited court presence. We know more about their role as traders through disputes and regulation, but trying to piece together familial consumption is much more problematic. Often we are reliant upon fragmentary evidence of letters, testamentary evidence for material wealth, advice books for bourgeois wives, and literary insights into market expectations. Much of this material is for the later Middle Ages, with only rare examples from earlier. However, even this glimpse reminds us how much consumption was for domestic purposes, and how the practices of shopping were shaped by perceived household divisions of work and gender relations.

The Family and Family Structure

The story of the medieval family has been traditionally viewed as a gradual journey towards the nuclear family, associated with urbanisation and modernization. As Philippa Maddern (2010: 66) stated, "in its strictest form, a nuclear family may be defined by two main factors: co-residence and a certain limited set of blood relationships." However, the actual make-up of medieval households could be quite varied throughout the medieval period. It might be not just a husband, wife and children, but also other kin, as well as servants and apprentices. Due to death or desertion, you would also have single-parent households or else various stepchildren through remarriage. Households, of course, also varied in social and economic status, and may have had differing urban and rural experiences. Consequently, it is perhaps too neat a categorisation to assume the predominance of the nuclear family by the late Middle Ages, particularly given the mortality rates that led to many composite or broken families.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that family size did generally fall by the end of the Middle Ages. Diane Hughes (1978: 106) notes that in Prato, the average rural household fell from 5.6 members in 1298 to 5.0 in 1427, and in towns from 4.1 to 3.7 members. Rural families remained larger than urban, suggesting the former contained more extended family members; while a similar survival of extended family also appears among the elite. Similarly, the general trend in northern Europe was towards smaller, non-extended families, perhaps even more so than in southern regions, while other connections developed through fraternities and guilds.

The demographic make-up of towns was different to the countryside due to a combination of higher urban mortality and a steady flow of immigration from hinterlands. Urban society tended to have a lower number of children per household and a higher number of single people (Goldberg 1992). The latter profile was boosted by the number of young women and men who entered towns to work as domestic servants or apprentices as part of their life-cycle. The stratification of urban dwellings was also not the same from town to town, but a common late medieval pattern, as seen in tax records such as the catasto of Florence, was for wealthy households to occupy the central locations, while the poor were relegated to the walls and suburbs (Nicholas 2003: 79; Hughes 1978: 108). As Justin Colson (2016) has demonstrated for London, some commodities were located in specific commercial zones and all potential buyers had to look to those areas, but sellers of more quotidian products (such as bread and ale) were spread across the city, suggesting a localised and regular pattern to their customers. Such zoning did decline in some cities by the fifteenth century, such in the Low Countries, but hygiene and ecological issues might still locate certain crafts (Blondé *et al* 2018). This not only affected shopping patterns; since many urban families undertook production and economic activity within their own household, then such clustering had a bearing upon their urban residence.

The Household Division of Tasks

Any consideration of the family has to consider women's place in the medieval household economy. This was a strongly patriarchal society, with the male clearly identified as the head of household. As widows, women could also take on this status, but if they remarried then the new husband took over legal authority. The reality of female experience is that they faced significant disadvantages in a patriarchal society – publicly subordinated to men (Bennett 1988). In common law, married women were designated 'coverte de baron' or 'femme covert', meaning their actions and business were the legal responsibility of her

husband. Wives could thus not make their own contracts without their husband's knowledge and permission. A legal text from the beginning of the sixteenth century, mirroring perceptions from earlier, stated: "my wife can buy something for her own use and I can ratify the purchase. If I order my wife to buy necessities and she buys them, I shall be held responsible because of the general authorisation given her. But if my wife buys things for my household like bread, etc, without my knowledge I shall not be held responsible for it even if it was consumed in my household." (Lacey 1985: 41). Within this patriarchal carapace was an assertion that it was the wife's duty to purchase the household's daily necessities, even while she remained dependent on her husband's permission.

There were some exceptions to these constraints on female work and opportunity. The most commonly cited is 'femme sole', which usually referred to unmarried women, for whom the common law allowed them to sell and own property. However, married women could be given this status in certain towns, meaning that they had to answer in court for their trade (Beattie 2008: 334; McIntosh 2005a; Blondé *et al* 2018). Caroline Barron (1989: 40) gives the example of Katherine Frank, wife of Edward, who was able in London in 1444 to deny a debt of 10s 10d for four barrels of beer by "waging her law", which meant that she could call upon a number of people to pledge her innocence. We see a range of urban women, from brewers and embroideresses to artisans and hucksters, claiming 'femme sole' status as a means to help run their own business. Historians, such as Marjorie McIntosh (2005a) and Cordelia Beattie (2008), have noted how custom nevertheless created an ambiguity in status for some married women, which they might use to their advantage in order to avoid their debts. In London in 1305, for example, Mabel le Heymogger claimed she could not answer Gilbert le Brasour in a debt of 13s 10d for ale because her husband was not mentioned. Gilbert argued that she kept an inn and traded as a 'femme sole' and so was liable, to which a jury agreed (Thomas 1924: 214-15).

It has long been recognised that urban households were also the basic pre-capitalist unit of production, whether urban or rural (Howell 1986: 32-3). Craft enfranchisement often remained in the family via the male line (Farr 2000: 195-202). Guild records remind us of the working contribution of urban wives and children, even as they were often excluded in favour of male masters. For instance, the guild records of the Bristol weavers, 1461, recognised that "various persons of the weavers' craft of the town of Bristol employ, occupy, and hire their wives, daughters and maids, some to weave on their own looms and some to hire them to work with other persons of the craft." However, the weavers now sought to curtail such female involvement in favour of men who were otherwise unemployed (Bickley 1900: 127-8). In Shrewsbury, butchers' wives were regularly amerced for leaving entrails and dung in the

streets, and it was common for them to take over the business upon their husband's death (Hutton 1985: 95). There is also the evidence of provision in wills and the tenancy of shops that many widows carried on trading after their husband's death (Keene 1990: 40-1).



Figure 5.1. Jean Bourdichon, *The Four Conditions of Society: Work*, c.1440.

Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts; New York, Pierpoint Morgan Library, MS M.917, p.149.

The urban family was thus integrated via the workshop that was part of the home, with examples of wives aiding husbands in manufacture and retailing (Goldberg 1992: ch.3). The late fifteenth-century French artist, Jean Bourdichon, viewed the workshop as a shared space for the family (see Figure 5.1). Although this was clearly an imagined space, it is also a cultural depiction of wives as economic partners, alongside children contributing (Goldberg

2011: 227). Not only were the workshop and domestic dwelling part of the same premises, but the shop might only be the frontage opening onto the public street. With all these activities operating from the home, it is unsurprising that all family members worked together and relied on each other (Lacey 1985: 24). It is possible that women looked after the retail side of business in shops, while simultaneously handling domestic duties such as the care of children.

All family members were thus expected to partake in the household trade, with wives often acting in sales and handling deliveries (Laughton 1994: 99). Indeed, women were commonly at the front of shop, selling mercery, silk, foodstuffs, and similar (Dale 1933; Sutton 2005). Derek Keene (1990: 41) noted that in three shops in Soper Lane (London), where mercery was a common trade, 56 percent of the shopkeepers were women from 1369 to 1418. There is also a range of evidence that husbands and wives shared the business of inns and shops (Rosser 1989: 128; Davis 2012: ch.3), including in images such from a French fifteenth-century book of hours depicting a baker and probably his wife working together (see Figure 5.2). Even through transgressions we see families working together: in a London Mayor's Court of December 1305, Robert Dosing, his wife and two daughters Holide and Felice were accused together of forestalling poultry on its way to the city (Thomas 1924: 231). The expectation was clear for the extent of familial engagement in commerce. Indeed, John Paston III was rather disparaging about Margery Paston's clandestine marriage in 1465 to their agent, Richard Calle: "he shold neuer haue my good wyll for to make my sustyr to selle kandyll and mustard in Framlyngham" (Davis 1971: i, 541).

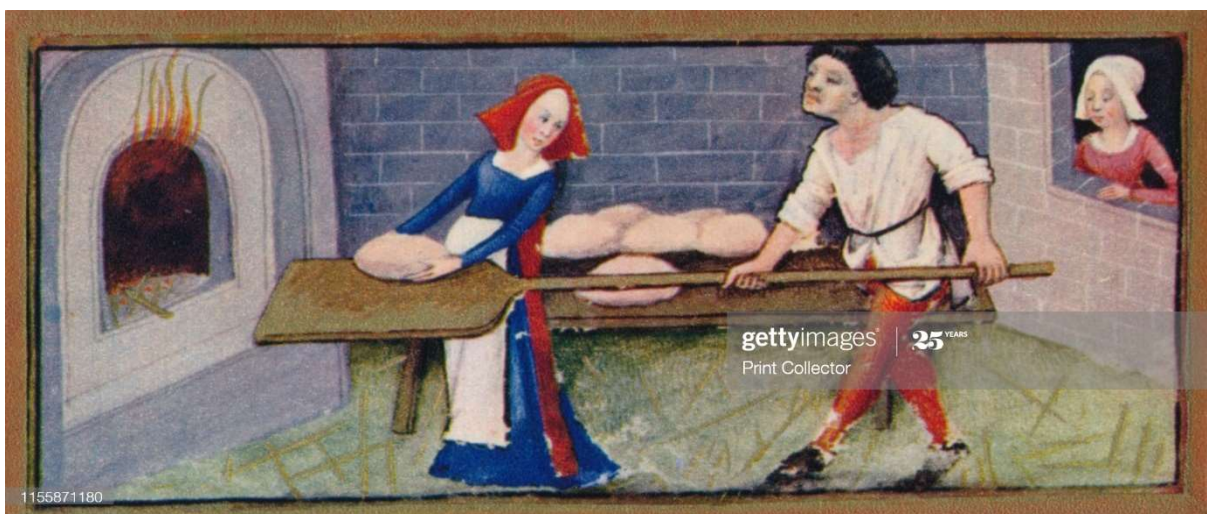


Figure 5.2: A medieval bakery, late fifteenth century. Heures de Charles d'Angoulême, illustrations by Robinet Testard. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

More broadly, medieval households were also nodes of petty production, with the ad hoc production and sale of ale being one of the most ubiquitous activities across the Middle Ages (Bennett, 1996). Most families had the basic equipment required and the skills were well-known. It was more efficient, particularly in terms of fuel, for wives to produce a large batch of ale and sell the surplus for ancillary household income. However, this activity was time-consuming and ale soon soured, so in many local communities a number of households appear to have alternated in producing only occasionally and buying regularly, as indicated by the regular lists of alewives in assize of ale presentments (Bennett 1987: 120-4). In Lincolnshire, 1375, it was stated that “Margaret, wife of Richard Soutere, an ale-wife, has sold her ale for the last two years in her own house, and not to men passing through the district nor to her neighbours outside her house; and she has sold it in bowls and cups [*discos et ciphos*], at her own will, and not in sealed measures.” (Sillem 1936: 22). Much work has been done on women’s work, which was usually low status and poorly remunerated in the Middle Ages (McIntosh 2005b; Goldberg 1992; Charles and Duffin 1995; Hanawalt 1986b). This work included the regrating of petty produce – buying in order to sell in the same market at a slightly higher price. This might incur legal censure, as seen in a Norwich court in 1390-1 which recorded that the “wife of Henry Lant is wont to buy fowl, hens, capons and other things in the market on Saturdays and sell them on Sundays at the gates [of the church] of the Holy Trinity.” (Hudson 1891: 72). In general, wives and single women were a common sight as hucksters in the marketplaces, selling the produce of their home, whether dairy products, eggs, fruit, or fish (Hilton 1984). The sale of fish in London was a predominantly female business, with women occupying all eighteen fish-stalls in Cheapside in 1379 (Riley 1868: 435). In comparison, the selling of manufactures and bulk commodities, including cloth and grain, was dominated by men (Bennett 1987: 119; Hilton 1984). Engagement in commerce for medieval women may have been as much necessity as choice, and the options would have differed between urban and rural settings, and between those of different wealth and status. However, the supplementary income that wives brought to a family through such activities as alebrewing, as well as through spinning and the selling of dairy and garden produce, may have offered some socio-economic status within the household, even if the profits were ultimately controlled by the husband (Bennett 1987: 127).

The fifteenth-century English *Ballad of the Tyrannical Husband* satirically recounts the broad range of tasks expected of a good housewife, including domestic production of bread, ale and clothes: “Either I make a piece of linene and woollen cloth once a year, so as to clothe ourselves and our children in together, or we go to the market and buy it at great expense.” (Goldberg 2002) The humour of the ballad derives from the husband’s inability to

undertake tasks associated with 'housewifery', thus reinforcing the clear gender division in work. It is the wife's role to maintain the household and resort to the market as necessary. Medieval normative texts proposed a strict gender division, with women seemingly tied to the domestic home (Goldberg 2011). It is a mistake to see the *Ballad* as social realism – these are narrative devices. Nevertheless, there is a realisation in the *Ballad* that the woman is often taken beyond the home (Goldberg 1991). Goldberg (2011: 212) argues that this is a bourgeois text about peasants, laughing at a rustic couple, but demonstrating conservative anxiety. "It is precisely this sort of London mercantile context, for example, that Felicity Riddy (1996: 85) has suggested the conduct text *How the Goodwife Taught her Daughter* was used by mistresses to socialize their servant girls, some of whom would be rural migrants." Indeed, in general, women's work was considered to be less valuable and less hard than men's work, and they were often confined to servanthood, victualling, minor agricultural tasks and aspects of the cloth trade. Even their dominance of the brewing trade was displaced by men by the end of the fifteenth century as the urban trade became more capital-intensive, assisted by the introduction of hopped beer (Bennett 1996). Women were instead more commonly seen as ale-sellers, whether in the street or from the alehouse.

Family Consumption

Families had to make decisions about purchases depending on their economic status and the state of the broader economy: what they purchased, where they shopped, and who they purchased from. One question raised by the underpinning patriarchal structures is the balance of decision-making and how household funds were administered between husbands and wives. In law, the conjugal fund was in the hands of the husband and women had less autonomy, but in reality successful households needed to work as a partnership for mutual gain (Bennett 1987: 115). Thus, informally, women probably had a say in how familial resources were spent. It is clear that even by the fourteenth century, as markets grew in number and size, wives were producing less and buying more, including bread, ale and cloth (Bennett 1987: 117). More specialised food processors begin to dominate markets and towns, while the cloth industry expanded in its supply and variety for the lower classes.

There have been many attempts to reconstruct the consumption habits of medieval families, but these are often hampered by the lack of sources for the lower classes. The better-off and urban are disproportionately represented, whether in sources such as wills or in the archaeological record (Goldberg 2011: 212-13). Christopher Woolgar's (1999) work on aristocratic household accounts allow us to see extensively how the elite spent their money and were a particular important source of demand for luxury items such as spices, wine and

furs. Recent work on late medieval English escheators' records shows the forfeited goods of felons and debtors, which perhaps provides a broader social range (Jervis *et al* 2015; Briggs *et al* 2019). However, the range of items listed is often meagre, with tables, chests, brass utensils and tools to the fore, alongside agricultural produce. There are just occasional hints of non-utilitarian goods like weapons, armour, basins, pewter dishes and cushions (see also Dyer 2013).

The historical consensus is that rising wages and falling rents meant that living standards tended upwards in the century or more after the Black Death (1347-50), particularly from the 1370s. Even though aggregate demand fell, particularly for grain, there was an increased interest in better-quality foodstuffs, such as meat and ale, and inexpensive manufactures, like clothing, furnishings, and metal utensils. In essence, households had more spare cash. Family homes, both urban and rural, may well have been more substantially furnished and equipped as a result (Dyer 1989b: 261-8; Kowaleski 2006). Wills record those possessions deemed appropriate to bequest, and notable by the late Middle Ages are the increasing items of clothing, cushions and silver spoons amongst groups we might consider 'middling' (Goldberg 2011: 220-2). Goldberg (2019) argues that a distinctive bourgeois ideology of domesticity was projected through such material culture in the later medieval city. It was by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that urban inventories reveal more furnishings such as chairs, benches, wall hangings, bed linen, cushions and silver spoons. In wealthier merchant households, particularly, the shift to more private chambers and comfortable parlours meant more investment in such goods, as well as in finer tableware (Kowaleski 2006: 252-4). Goldberg (2008) also posits that this was indicative of a set of urban values that encouraged more liberal spending in the marketplace, compared to their rural counterparts. Peasant families were more likely to spend on the essentials for their households, relating to eating, sleeping, and a few supplementary economic activities like brewing or spinning. A bourgeoisie home, on the other hand, was both a residence and a place of work, often with a range of servants, apprentices and journeymen, and the need for more privacy for the household might have led to more curtains, screens and separate chambers that needed furnishings. This was certainly a trend that we see across north-western Europe (Baatsen *et al* 2018).

The sumptuary laws of the late middle ages were intended to reinforce social differentiation in consumption (*Statutes* (1963): i, 280, 380-2, ii, 399-402, 468-70) and, although they appear to have been short-lived and largely unenforceable, they do indicate the growing availability of higher-quality clothing and food. In the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer portrays urban artisans (haberdasher, carpenter, weaver, dyer and

tapicer) and their wives as aspiring to higher social status through their clothing and accessories, which were in breach of the sumptuary legislation (Benson 1987: 29 – GP.361-78):

“An Haberdasshere and a Carpenter,
A Webbe, a Dyere, and a Tapycer –
And they were clothed alle in o lyveree
Of a solempne and a greet fraternitee.
Ful fressh and newe hir geere apiked was; [geere – equipment; apiked – adorned]
Hir knyves were chaped noght with bras [chaped – mounted]
But al with silver, wroght ful clene and weel,
Hire girdles and hir pouches everydeel.
Wel semed ech of hem a fair burgeys
To sitten in a yeldehalle on a deys. [yeldehall – guildhall; deys – dais]
Everich, for the wisdom that he kan, [kan – knows]
Was shaply for to been an alderman.
For catel hadde they ynogh and rente, [catel – property; rente – income]
And eek hir wyves wolde it wel assente;
And elles certeyn were they to blame.
It is ful fair to been ycleped ‘madame’,
And goon to vigilies al bifore,
And have a mantel roialliche ybore.”

Peter Idley similarly complained in the fifteenth century that it was hard to tell “a tapester, a cookesse, or a Hosteller’s wife from a gentilwoman” (D’Evelyn 1935: 163). Undoubtedly, some of these items were purchased through secondhand markets, but there were also new clothes and styles in circulation. This is all a reminder that consumption and goods were a means to express personal and familial status and identity. This was the case not just among the elite (Woolgar 1999; Mertes 1998), but across the social spectrum. Particularly after the Black Death, a general growth in consumer purchasing power allowed for people to indulge in new clothing fashions and accessories, whether through the primary or secondary market (Kowaleski 2006: 246-50). In a similar manner, another form of consumption that was perhaps on the rise was devotional consumption, of which silver spoons might be considered part given the liturgical references in their design. This growing form of consumption in pious items can be similarly seen in the mass production of pilgrim badges and wax votive offerings (Sear and Sneath 2020: 182-203; Kowaleski 2006: 255-6).

It is very difficult to discern how the poorest families engaged in consumption since they left few records. We should certainly not assume they were self-sufficient, particularly after the eleventh century as markets expanded in number and scope and we see more transactions of bread, ale, dairy, eggs and clothing among all social groups (Britnell 2001). In literary sources, poor families were often characterised as victims of deceptive traders. In the early fourteenth-century complaint poem, *The Simonie* (Embree and Urquhart 1991: 98-100, B427-480), it is bakers and brewers that profit at the expense of the poor hard-working labourer and his family of a wife and two or three children. William Langland drew upon similar themes in his late fourteenth-century *Piers Plowman* (Pearsall 1994, 69-70, C.III.79-82): “bakers and brewers, bouchers and cokes – For thees men doth most harme to the mene puple, Richen thorw regratrye and rentes hem byggen [buys]. With that the poure puple shoulde putten in hure womben.” The poet suggests these retail traders “haue no pite of the puple that parcel-mele [piecemeal] mote biggen”, reminding us of the hand-to-hand purchases of small lots that most poor families relied upon.

Evidence of Shopping

Christopher Dyer (1989a) highlighted how there was a hierarchy of consumers in terms of which markets they would frequent. Their choice of market was based on price, quality and convenience, but also their means of transport and purchasing power. Those at the lower end of the social scale relied on local markets either to sell some produce in order to pay lordly dues and taxes, or to buy food for sustenance. More well-off peasant tenants might circulate around a broader circuit of markets in order to seek out the best price for their surplus and meet their purchasing needs. At a basic level, rural families across Europe needed to purchase agricultural goods that they could not produce at home, whether seed, stock or tools. They might also look for household items such as pottery, or even a few petty luxuries for their meals (Hanawalt 1986a: 116). Magnates, gentry and ecclesiastical institutions were more likely to by-pass local markets to sell their produce, and they would seek out goods in more substantial towns or fairs.



Figure 5.3: Women trading butter bread, *Tacuinum sanitatis*, fourteenth century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

However, internal trade and domestic life generated comparatively little documentation in the medieval period, so it is very difficult to find quantitative evidence for the amount and make-up of family purchases. Women undoubtedly undertook most of the shopping, alongside selling petty household produce in the market (see Figure 5.3). Judith Bennett (1988) suggested that: “Wives in medieval towns could purchase prepared foods and finished clothing with perhaps as much ease as modern wives.” There are many late medieval visual representations of women shopping within shops, often for items that might be considered feminine. In the image from the fourteenth-century Egerton Genesis (see Figure 5.4) - a Flemish manuscript for a probable English patron - depicting the purchase of small leather and metal items at a market stall, there is an assumption that wives, daughter and female servants undertook a significant amount of daily or weekly shopping. This, of course, was meant to represent Jacob’s daughter Dinah (Genesis, ch.4), and Derek Keene

(2006: 138-9) suggests that this might raise connotations of the sexual banter and harassment in shopping given the subsequent Biblical rape of Dinah.

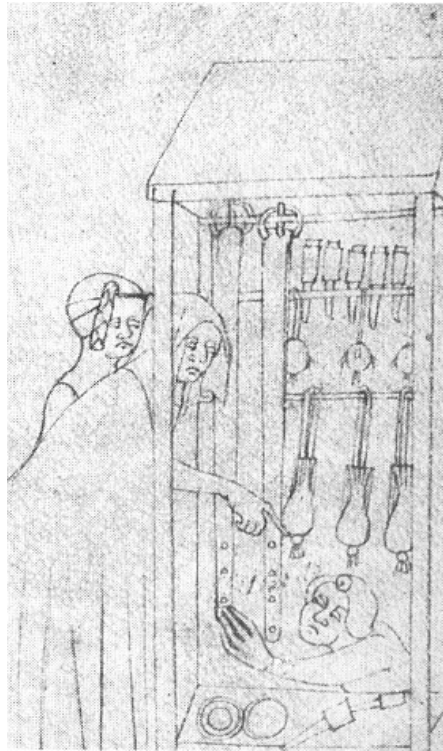


Figure 5.4. A booth or stall. *Egerton Genesis*, England, c.1350-75.
British Library, Egerton Ms. 1894, fol. 17.

There are also occasional glimpses of shopping activity in letters, from gentry or noble families such as those of the Pastons, Celys and Stonors. The Pastons were a gentry family from Norfolk in the fifteenth century, and their correspondence includes requests to kin for certain purchases. In 1448, Margaret Paston asked her husband John to buy while in London almonds, sugar and freize [a coarse woollen cloth] for their children's gowns: "You will get the cheapest and the most choice from Hay's wife, so I am told." She also requested that he look for yard of black broadcloth for a hood of her own at 44d or 4s a yard "for there is neither good cloth nor good freize in this town [ie. Norwich]." (Watt 2004: 53). Their concerns about quality and good value were clear. In comparison, on September 20, 1465, John wrote to Margaret: "I pray you that you will send me here two ells of worsted for doublets, to help me this cold winter. Will you enquire where William Paston bought his tippet of fine worsted, which is almost like silk, and if that is much finer than what you can buy me for seven or eight shillings, then buy me a quarter, with the nail [a small strip of cloth] of it for collars, even though it is dearer than the other, for I would make my doublet all

worsted for the worship of Norfolk.” (Virgoe 1989: 147). Considerations of differential prices between markets also played their part. In 1471, Margaret wrote to her son John, sending him 5s and asking for purchases of sugar and dates. She also enquired about the availability of almonds, currants, raisins, rice and a range of spices (pepper, cloves, mace, ginger, cinnamon): “Send me word the cost of a pound of each of these, and if it is cheaper in London than it is here I will send you money to buy what I want.” (Watt 2004: 102).

The Celys were a fifteenth-century family of wool traders, and their letters are full of insights into the negotiations involved in their dealings, including credit, the use of sample, and grading wool. As Robert Coldale indicated in his letter to George Cely in September 1479: “Ryght wyschypfull cossyn, I commaunde me to yow, praying yow to send me halfe a doson quysschyns and viij yerdys ov bankerys accordyng pareto, of Ynglyssche yerdys, verdure þe colour; and a fur of bugyschankys ffor my dame, and a fur of calabyr ffor mysselfe yf yt be gode cheper þare.” (Hanham 1975: 56). Further up the social scale, the household book of Dame Alice de Bryene of Acton Hall (Suffolk), 1412-13, includes such purchases as wine from London and Ipswich, spices from Stourbridge Fair, and 100 oysters for 2d and 100 smoked herring for 14d (Redstone and Dale 1931: 4, 103, 119).

Jeremy Goldberg (2019: 168) provides an example of shopping scene from a York deposition given by Joan Scharp in 1430. In this account, Margaret Harmon was purchasing a significant quantity of candlewick in the Petergate shop of Robert Lascelles, for her own chandlery trade. Also present at the deal were Robert’s wife and servant, Alice, and Margaret’s own female servant. Some regulatory evidence suggests that shopping might entail taking raw materials to traders in order for them to process, whether dough for bread, material for clothing, or leather for shoes. This must have been particularly the case for poorer families, while the better-off urban residents might have had their own kitchens to cook certain foods (Carlin 1995). For most, however, the main source of hot food was from commercial bakers and cooks. In 1379 in London, the pie bakers were ordered to “bake pasties of beef at one halfpenny, just as good as those at a penny”, in order to serve the lower strata of the city (Riley 1868: 157, 432; Sharpe 1899-1912: G, 150; Carlin 1998: 48).

To what extent was shopping mostly functional, for essentials, or do we see evidence of shopping for pleasure and leisure? There are hints that by the fourteenth century, as shops become more common in medieval towns, that the urban middling classes were shopping as a pastime. Derek Keene (2006: 145) notes that some of London’s shops, selling more luxury or semi-luxury goods, were becoming more spacious and decorative in order to attract those with spending power. In this vein, Jean de Jandun (c.1285-1328) (2002: 11-12),

a scholar from Paris, extolled Paris's stone market halls (the Halles) and all the enjoyment of perusing its merchandise of cloth, silks, furs, braids, caps, ivory combs, belts, purses, gloves and necklaces:

“In these places of display, the strollers' gazes see smiling in their eyes so many decorations for wedding and great festival entertainments, that, after having half-scorned one range, an impetuous desire carries them to the other, and after having traversed the entire length, an insatiable fervour to renew this pleasure – not once nor twice, but almost indefinitely, in returning to the beginning – makes them recommence the excursion, if they wished to follow their desire.”

Similarly, in *Mirour de mariage*, the French poet Eustache Deschamps (1346-1406) describes a young wife who enjoys shopping at length and haggling with the dealers in search of the best bargain (Deschamps 1894: 117-21; Carlin 2014: 87). She buys a range of goods, from spindles and pins to fine furs and buttons, silk and coral paternosters. Martha Carlin suggests that this was partly a representation of personal freedom and partly about sensory pleasures in seeking out the latest consumption fashions.

Household Advice

Le Ménagier de Paris offers a bourgeois guide to the expectations of a 'good wife', including suggestions on shopping (Greco and Rose 2015). Written in Middle French in c.1392-4, it ostensibly outlines the advice of an ageing husband to his young, fifteen-year-old bride on how someone of her now affluent status should behave in the household and city. Clearly, it was an idealistic model for behaviour based on literary tropes, reinforcing husbandly control, but such patriarchal guides were still intended to be read seriously. It includes advice on how to manage market transactions and to spend with thrift. The wife is warned that tradesmen are potentially deceitful and need to be approached with care. It is a reminder that households have to be careful when entering the market, alongside suggestions that competition and comparison might reveal the best prices. Indeed, *caveat emptor* was consistently promoted in such pastoral and literary sources.

The guide includes a detailed breakdown of different cuts of beef, as well as advice on telling apart young poultry from old through inspection of their feathers. For mallards, it suggested looking at: “the quills of the feathers, which are more tender in young birds than in old”, while for partridges, its “feathers are tight and closely affixed to the flesh” (Greco and Rose 2015: 256). The freshness of fish could be discerned by the colour and shine of their

scales and the size of their eyes; “if you want to carry a live carp a whole day, wrap it in damp hay, put it in a pouch or sack, and carry it belly up without giving it air.” While the advice for recognizing a good cheese constituted a mnemonic (Greco and Rose 2015: 281-2):

“Not white like Helen,
Nor weeping, like Magdalen,
Not like Argus, but rather all blind,
And also heavy as an ox.
It stands up to the thumb’s pressure,
And it should have a scaly rind.
Eyeless and tearless, and not white,.
Crusted, firm, and heavy.”

Such advice was proffered as a means to avoid poor purchases through ignorance. Indeed, the guide suggests that many sellers might try to misrepresent an item by deception (Greco and Rose 2015: 75-6). The exterior of the item might look fine, and the vendor might “swear that the object is fit and true”, but they are often false and know full well that the object is “the worst underneath”. The guide thus stresses the importance of bargaining, whether in the agreed conditions of hire for servants and labourers or for the price of an item.

As an exemplum of a wealthy urban household, considerable expense was expected to be incurred in enhancing meals, whether with spices or fine meats. A specific list of Paris butchers’ shops is thus given in *Le Ménagier*, reminding the wife of the extent of the meat trade in the French capital. For instance, “At the Porte-da-Paris there are 19 butchers who by common estimate sell weekly, if you average the busy season with the slow season: 1,900 sheep, 400 beef cattle, 400 pigs, and 200 calves.” (Greco and Rose 2015: 253). Further on, further detailed advice is provided about other retailers and the prices of their range of goods, whether bakers, vintners, spicers or poulterers, with a number recommended at Paris’s largest public market, the Halles, but also those from other markets, suggestive of either long associations with the household or reputations for quality and good value.

A fifteenth-century English conduct text, *How the Good Wife Taught his Daughter*, similarly provides an idealised version of female behaviour, possibly composed by a cleric rather than the eponymous ‘good wife’ (Amt 2001: 410-17). It espouses modesty and frowns upon frivolity and excess: “Make not thy husband poor with spending or with pride”, and instead recommends that wives should be careful in their use of household resources. They should borrow only when needed and not pretend their credit is greater than it is, spending

only what is necessary: "Therefore spend thou never a farthing more." A companion poem, *How the Wise Man Taught his Son*, also encouraged seeking prudence in prospective wives (Amt 2001: 417-18). The importance of reputation and social credit was writ large throughout these poems. So too was the sense that thrift and saving was of greater satisfaction than the process of shopping.

Servants

A common constituent of medieval households, both rural and urban, were servants. Significant numbers of single men and women immigrated into the cities, part of an urban society that was notably mobile, and many became servants (Klapisch-Zuber 1986). This was a common life-cycle experience for many young people across the social spectrum. They were considered very much part of the household, particularly domestic servants, though Susan Mosher Stuard (1986) likened their status to domestic slavery.

Le Ménagier hints at the likelihood that prosaic market dealings would be undertaken by servants: "you can send Master Jehan to the butcher"; "a clerk or valet is needed to purchase greenery, violets, garlands, milk, cheese, eggs, firewood, coal, salt, vats and washing tubs ... verjuice, vinegar, sorrel, sage, parsley, fresh garlic, 2 brooms, a shovel, and suchlike.² (Greco and Rose 2015: 253); "The other kitchen steward or his helper will accompany the cook to the butcher, the poulterer, the spicer, etc, to haggle for and choose the supplies and arrange and pay for delivery." (Greco and Rose 2015: 268). However, the specific instructions imply that a bourgeois wife was still expected to deal with a fair number of traders. In *Le miroir de mariage*, the young wife is encouraged to go to market for herself in order to learn how to shop and then be able to judge more effectively the honesty of her servants (Dechamps 1894: 114-15; Carlin 2014: 82).

In comparison to servants, it is difficult to determine to what extent children within the family were given shopping tasks, as the evidence for their work is limited. Even the cases from the coroners' rolls analysed by Barbara Hanawalt (1986a) were relatively small in number. However, children were undoubtedly learning skills within the family, including brewing, baking and other domestic trades (Müller 2019: 170-1).

Credit

An important aspect discussed in *Le Ménagier* was keeping proper accounts of transactions and credit dealings, including the use of 'tallies', since tradesmen's memories could not be

trusted: “tally or written accounts are still better than keeping everything by memory, for the creditors always imagine the total is more and the debtors less, and from this are born disputes.” (Greco and Rose 2015: 216). The best advice was to pay debts as often as possible, rather than allow long lines of credit to build up, thus keep strong reciprocal relations: “be kind to them so they do not leave you for another.”

The extent to which women had independent access to credit would have a notable effect on consumption and shopping. Even in substantial medieval towns, such as Montpellier and Ghent, married women could be restricted in their economic activities (Reyerson 1986; Nicholas 1985). We can glimpse the extent of credit transactions through debt litigation in court rolls, both in towns and villages, with specific indications in a fair proportion that these were sales credits; though this, of course, only represents debts that went to dispute (Clark 1981; Briggs 2006). Richard Britnell (2006: 120) found evidence of a range of credit dealings that were contracted within the home itself (*ad domum* or *ad mansionem*), such as Roger Barker of Colchester who sold leather on credit from his house in 1394 to Reginald Brakle. However, very few women appear in the studies undertaken for English debt records, often less than 10 percent of litigants, but this may be related to the legal restrictions, which made husbands responsible for the household finances (Briggs 2004: 13-15). This does not mean that married women were not engaging in credit in practice, though there were apparent concerns from lenders that repayment might be delayed; this might be particularly acute for widows and single women who might get married in the interim between credit and repayment (Bennett 1996: 53-4). In a society where so many transactions were credit-based, and there were few written instruments of surety, then trust was integral. Affinal and other kin relations might have aided commercial transactions and the securing of credit. However, it is likely that most rural women found it easier to shop in local, small-scale markets, even though it would be more difficult to find specialised goods. Chris Briggs (2004: 36-7) argues that women still remained marginalised in most rural credit relations. However, it does appear that the extended role of women in credit networks from the sixteenth century, along with new equity courts, was an important factor in driving new consumption patterns (Muldrew 1998). There were perhaps changing perceptions of female ‘creditworthiness’.

Nevertheless, some urban married women had the opportunity to undertake business under the status of ‘femme sole’. This meant that they were responsible for any debts “which concerns her trading and merchandise” (Riley 1861: 205-6, 218-19). Kay Lacey (1985: 43) highlighted a chancery case from fifteenth-century London, which encapsulated this idea: “Because of the commune of the city, it was ancient practice that the wives of worshipful and

thrifty men that were not free of the city, by the allowance of their husbands and without their help, used to buy and sell all types of merchandise, which helped towards increasing their wealth and standard of living. The duty of the same bargains coming or going were always satisfied by the wives, without the husbands paying their debts.”

Public Spaces

A continual problem that medieval women faced was their legal and credit status, both of which usually resided in their husbands' status and reputation. There was an undercurrent of prejudice against women and their honesty, reflected in an entry in the Coventry Leet Book of 1492 (Harris 1907-13: 545) in which no one in the city was to “fauour eny Tapster, or woman of evell name, fame or condicion to whom eny resorte is of synfull disposicioun, hauntyng the synne of lechery.” The ability of women to move around the marketplaces was also seemingly circumscribed by cultural restraints. *How the Good Wife Taught his Daughter* (Amt 2001: 410-17) admonished those who did not move about with decorum:

“And when thou goest on thy way, go thou not too fast,
Brandish not with thy head, nor with thy shoulders cast,
Have not too many words, from swearing keep aloof,
for all such manners come to an evil proof.

...

Go thou not into town, as it were, agaze.
From one house to another, for to seek the maze;
Nor to sell thy cloth, to the market shalt thou go,
And then to the tavern to bring thy credit low.”

Similarly, in *Le Ménagier* women entering public spaces, including the marketplace, are advised to dress with care: “be mindful that the collar of your shift, of your camisole, or your robe or surcoat does not slip out one over the other, as happens with drunken, foolish, or ignorant women who do not care about their own honour or the good repute of their estate ... make yourself any example of good order, simplicity, and respectability to all others.” (Greco and Rose 2015: 57-8). This meant keeping you head up, but your eyes downcast, and only gazing ahead so as not to speak to others in the street. Hutton (2011) suggested that women in fourteenth-century Ghent were likely to be hassled, ogled and propositioned while shopping, and that gender differences in market dealing could risk their reputations.

How much this played out in the real market space is difficult to ascertain. Admittedly, many better-off women sent their servants in their place, but many other women would have

had to enter the marketplace on a regular basis, either to buy or sell. The development of 'femme sole' and the ubiquity of women in medieval markets suggests there was a reasonable freedom of movement for them. The market scenes on the fifteenth-century fresco at Issogne Castle in northwest Italy depict men and women mixing in this space as both sellers and buyers (see Figure 5.5). Marketplaces were spaces in which people of both genders could meet and talk, enjoy festivities and entertainment, hear political news and partake in religious rituals, meaning that a trip to the market involved more than just shopping (Masschaele 2002). It was in the markets and shops where the socio-economic lives of many people were played out, forming relationships and negotiating their identity (Blondé *et al* 2018).





Figure 5.5: Marketplace interactions, details from fresco, c.1495, Castello d'Issogne, Italy.

Conclusion

The medieval family and home was undoubtedly a prime generator of consumer demand, across the social spectrum, though the extent of such demand changed according to broader economic circumstances. For most families, in the lower echelons of society, entry into markets before the Black Death was primarily about consumption needs. However, in the later Middle Ages we see glimpses of shopping undertaken by various families for domestic semi-luxuries and in relation to bourgeois aesthetics. There clearly remained differences in familial shopping choices according to their financial circumstances and location, particularly whether rural or urban. However, the patterns of family shopping, and the options available, were noticeably undergoing a noticeable change.

One underlying constant, which shaped family consumption and acquisition in a variety of ways, was the dominant patriarchal structure of medieval society. Nevertheless, despite legal handicaps, it was the wife who took on much of the burden of buying, or else she delegated it to domestic servants (often female). Medieval venues for shopping were thus spaces that allowed for a heady mix of gender, age and status, each of which undoubtedly affected bargaining power and access to credit. Unfortunately, the medieval

evidence only provides scattered insights into the ways that non-elite families purchased goods, with much more documentation on how the family acted as a unit of production and women operated as retailers. Nevertheless, there was a clear expectation that wives would know where to find the best products and how to enter effectively into a bargain. It is thus likely that women shaped much domestic consumption, as well as the patterns of and reasons for familial engagement with the market and shops.

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