

**Le Menagier de Paris:
A Parisian Bourgeoisie Household in 1400**

By Courtney Luckhardt

In about the year 1400, an older bourgeoisie man of about sixty living in Paris married a young girl of good family and brought her into his household. At about fifteen, she had no real experience of running a household, and so her husband kindly wrote a manual to instruct her upon her duties as his wife and mistress of the household, dealing with domestic life in the late fourteenth century. This manual is a unique source for the study of domestic life, describing the young wife's responsibilities in the home, her duties to her husband, and giving the reader a picture of her home and the medieval Parisian world in which she lived. The young wife's existence was very different from what is seen today, six hundred years later. The material world in which she lived was filled with discomforts that have largely disappeared in western societies. Insects plagued people in their clothes, their bed, and their food. Smells were everywhere; inescapable odors of excrement draining down the middle of the streets, unwashed humanity, and rotten meat. Human labor was absolutely necessary for the smooth operation of an average-sized upper class household such as the young wife's. Domestic servants, now seen as the purview of the wealthy, were not thought of as a luxury, but a necessity in a world without running water, plumbing, any machines¹ to clean, or even carry things. Through the eyes of the author of the book, *le Ménagier de Paris*- the Goodman of Paris- and his young wife, this paper will explore the home of an upper middle class bourgeoisie, their conditions of life, and the late medieval Paris that they describe to us in staggering detail.

The House

The house was three stories, consisting of a ground floor or a basement, and two floors above that.² While the text refers directly to an upstairs and a downstairs, the author also describes a storage area for keeping wines and other foods, such as grain, oil, nuts, peas, and beans.³ These were most likely kept in a basement or ground floor, and based on floor plans of medieval houses still surviving in Cluny⁴ in Bordeaux, a ground floor seems likely. One reason that a well-to-do family might want a ground floor in addition to two other floors was also the issue of the smell of the street itself. The streets of medieval Paris did not have sewers or underground drainage pipes. All rainwater, wash water, and liquids of all kinds, including excrement drained downhill into the Seine. All the streets sloped towards the middle to provide this drainage ditch, and also downhill to facilitate some removal to the river. This made for wet and smelly streets however, that the well to do could afford to lift themselves out of by building multiple story houses, with the ground floor on the street itself used as storage and servants' areas.

These servants' areas include a dining room just for the servants, who would not of course eat with the master of the house. Servants were to be treated as small children, not allowed to indulge themselves, but given some leisure time to keep them happy. As the author says, "And do bid them to eat well and drink well and deeply, for it is reasonable that they should eat at a stretch, without sitting too long over their food and without lingering... and if the weather be cold let them warm themselves and take their ease."⁵ The servants are taken care of, and given enough to eat, without extravagance.

The issue of warmth, even for the servants, should be emphasized. There were fireplaces in every room of the house, and during the winter months, they were constantly kept lit. Winter in Paris circa 1400 was cold and damp, and fires provided some measure of protection from both the cold and the damp. They also were nasty smoky things that could fill a room with acrid smoke. The author mentions a "smoky fire"⁶ as one of the banes of man's existence and specifically tells her that a way to keep a husband happy is make certain the fire does not smoke. In the course of fourteenth century significant changes in domestic architecture took hold, namely, the flue fireplace. This type of fireplace allowed for a narrower passage of air through the chimney, causing the fireplace to have a stronger draw to pull the smoke up the chimney. The author does not mention this type of fireplace, possibly because it was too new and expensive for him to own. Fires were covered and extinguished for the night, and the author's wife was in charge of looking after this in the evenings, as well as sending each member of the household off to bed with a candle and strict instructions on how to properly put it out, most likely to guard against

² *The Goodman of Paris* (Eileen Power, New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1928), 218: "the one upstairs, the other downstairs."

³ Ibid. 216, long list within the text.

⁴ Jean-Pierre Leguay, *La Rue au Moyen Age* (Paris: Ouest France, 1981), 113.

⁵ *The Goodman of Paris*, 218-219.

⁶ Ibid. 173.

unintentional fires.⁷ The hazard of fire was important in the close quarters of the city, with most every building constructed of wood. Fires could rip through an urban area, destroying homes and property in a very short time. The smoke from these fires in every room should be multiplied by every other house or apartment in Paris, and the picture of this late medieval city has smoke in the air constantly, staining the buildings black, although not as bad as northern European urban centers would look in the nineteenth century from the coal smoke.

On the first floor of the house was the main reception and gathering area of the house. Guests would come up the entrance steps, their importance underscored by the fact that they were swept daily by servants, to the main floor.⁸ People entered through the main hallway, which was lined with benches with cushions upon them, known from instructions to the servants about how to clean these benches.⁹ They often stayed to speak to one another in this hallway, as a sort of casual gathering area. More formal gathering occurred in the main dining hall, which was the “living room” of the Middle Ages. In the main hall, people would not only eat the elaborate prepared meals, but also converse, mingle, do business, tell stories, all the things that modern people do, albeit at a slower pace. One did not just have people over for a cocktail, but for a five-course meal; family did not just visit on Christmas Day, they arrived at the beginning of Advent and stayed in one’s home until Twelfth Night. Travel was complicated and slow, and so if one managed to travel, one stayed for a while. This room would have no doubt have had a large fireplace, both for warmth and for atmosphere, which presumably served as the focal pint of the hall. It also would most likely have had low windows that faced the street. They would likely have had glass, as due the richness of an upper-middle class household, although the author does advise his wife not to let the servant girls hang out the windows and call to people on the street, which leads us to believe that some may have opened, or not had glass.¹⁰ On all the windows was drapery, which the servants cleaned with lye soap.¹¹

The great dining hall would have been serviced from the kitchen directly, and therefore the kitchen cannot have been too far away. Some kitchens in the late middle ages were inside the house or attached to it, but it was just as common was for the kitchen to be behind the house, fully detached from it, so that the heat of cooking did not fill the house in the summertime. The author does not say where his kitchen is located in relation to the house, so for the purposes of trying to reconstruct this house, I have chosen to make it detached from the house. This allows the kitchen to have its own independent fireplace, one large enough to roast an ox, and not worry about the location of the chimney. With an outside staircase, it would not have been a large inconvenience for the servants to bring food from the kitchen to the dining hall, and the kitchen would also have easy access to the storage areas on the ground floor of the house, and the garden behind the kitchen, which we will come to later.¹²

The upper floor of the house contained the bedrooms and main living quarters for the author and his wife. On this third floor lay the master bedroom, which is described in some detail, including some furniture, as compared to the rest of the house. The master chamber contains a bed with bedding; white sheets most likely made of linen, fur covers, and coverlets.¹³ The bed also had “tassels” on it, perhaps to draw the canopy closings around the bed.¹⁴ It was essential that these linens and bedding be periodically aired to keep all types of vermin away, from moths, to mice, to the ubiquitous fleas.¹⁵ The manual provides many remedies for ridding or protecting oneself of unwanted pests that infested the house and the bedroom. Some of these are common sense, others seem to be practical home remedies, and others still seem to be composed of rumor and imagination, with no real basis in fact. Mosquito netting was used as a common sense remedy to flying insects that bother people at night, especially in the summertime. Perhaps a practical method of attracting insects, fleas included, the author gives as putting a bit of bread out with some glue, and a candle in the middle,¹⁶ or the string coated with honey to which insects would stick, like modern day flypaper. Another practical remedy was a recipe for fly-poison, milk and hare’s gall, which most likely did produce a toxin that might cause flies to die.¹⁷ An ineffectual notion for getting rid of fleas was to spread a white cloth on the bed, waiting for the fleas to jump on it so one could see them, and then kill them with one’s hands!

⁷ Ibid. 219: “make certain that ...they have been wisely taught how to extinguish [the candle] it with mouth or hand.”

⁸ Ibid. 211 “bid the chambermaids very earth to sweep out and clean the entrances to your house”

⁹ Ibid.211 “let them dust and shake out the covers and cushions which be on the benches”

¹⁰ Ibid.219-220 “there is no dormer window or low window looking onto the road”

¹¹ Ibid. 215 “cause full clean lye, which hath been used on drapery”

¹² Ibid. 217-218 passage about the kitchen

¹³ Ibid. 41, 171, 214, direct copy of text words “white sheets...”, “fur covers...”, “coverlets...”

¹⁴ Ibid. 174: “tassels.”

¹⁵ Ibid. 214, long passage on insect removal.

¹⁶ Ibid. 173, direct paraphrase of longer text.

¹⁷ Ibid. 175, direct paraphrase of longer text.

There was also an armoire for the master's and mistress' clothing, and probably more than one, although the author does not state so for certain.¹⁸ Keeping the clothing clean and repaired was as great a task as rooting out vermin within the house. The author lists clean linens as one of the key issues in keeping a husband happy and content, saying, "Wherefore love your husband's person carefully, and keep him in clean linen... well-bedded in white sheets and nightcaps, well covered with good furs... And the next day fresh shirts and garments."¹⁹ Linen undergarments and sheets could be washed, but fancy wool dresses and clothes could only be aired, and beaten with rods to get the dust out. Cotton was as yet unknown. The author also offered several recipes for removing grease stains from clothing, some of which seem to be tried and true home remedies, but some of which seem of doubtful value.²⁰ Fur apparently presented its own problems for there are also solutions for how to fix fur that has either dried out and become brittle and hard, or become damp and mildewed.²¹ Clothing was quite expensive, and in order to look proper and not spend lavishly, clothing was repaired and maintained for as long as possible. Obviously imported fabrics such as silk, camlet, and damask must have been sought after by members of the burgeoning wealthy professional class, and kept up in good condition once obtained.

Next to the master bedroom is a small room for the serving girls to sleep in so the mistress of the house might keep a close eye on them. The room was to have no windows so that the girls could not get into trouble with the young men outside.²² The author does acknowledge the irony of having his fifteen year old bride look after chambermaids of fifteen or twenty years, the same age or older as she herself. He says, "Let them [the chambermaids] go to bed and arise at your own time, and do you yourself (who, if God please, will be wise ere this time) be near to guard them."²³ It is somewhat surprising to have servants directly next to the master bedchamber, but understandable given the obvious concern that people will take advantage of young women if given an opportunity, or that young women might go astray easily. To this effort of keeping young women safe and protecting the house, the wife and her trusted servants locked up the house every night before bed, with either the housekeeper or the steward keeping the keys for the night.²⁴

Also on this top floor was a solar. This room was a sun parlor made to catch whatever sun there was as a pleasant room for female pursuits and socialization.²⁵ There is no doubt that this room would have been on the topmost floor of the house, and also presumably would have been located on the south side of the house in order to catch the sun especially in the wintertime, when it does not go across the Paris sky, but stays in the south end due to the extreme northern latitudes. The excellent light in this room would have made it ideal for needlework and even reading, since the author's wife was literate in French, since he instructs her to read books in the language, and she was also presumably fluent in Latin as well, as is suggested by the many Latin phrases employed throughout the book.

This book survives in three separate copies, all of which date from the early fifteenth century. Manuscripts "A" and "B" were preserved in the library of the duke of Burgundy, and "A" is mostly likely the original presentation copy from the author himself to the duke, since it contains at its beginning a rare miniature of the presentation of the manual to his wife in a sitting room of sorts.²⁶ While we cannot know whether this is in fact a true depiction of the author's house, or what room it might be in, it is fair to assume that they would not have painted a house vastly different in size or wealth or quality from his own house. This painting gives new insight to the interior of the house, and this room was most likely a solar in my opinion, due to its prominent windows, occupants seated on a couch or covered bench, rather than at a table, as would befit the dining hall, and the lack of a bed, as would be in the bedroom. The couch has a pillow upon it with a subtly placed hint of the author's status. It displays a fleur-de-lis, the emblem of the royal house of France, and only available for use by the royal family, or their most important servants. The author could not have created a coat of arms with the fleur-de-lis, but he had the right to use it in wall hangings or pillows because he was one of the most important servants of a royal personage. Which royal person he served we cannot know, for he mentions the Duc de Berry several times within the manuscripts, but all extant copies of the manual come out of the Duke of Burgundy's personal library. Both of these men were the sons of the previous king, and the brothers of the current king of 1400. Also shown in the miniature

¹⁸ Ibid. 50, long discussion of clothing within the bedchamber.

¹⁹ Ibid. 171-172.

²⁰ Ibid. 214, long discussion of fixing clothing.

²¹ Ibid. 215, discussion on fixing furs.

²² Ibid. 219-220: "chambermaids...do cause them to sleep near you, in a closet or chamber, where there is no dormer window or low window looking onto the road."

²³ Ibid. 220.

²⁴ Ibid. 219: "let your house be closed and shut up by master Jehan the Dispenser or by the Béguine, and let one of them keep the keys."

²⁵ Ibid. 218: "the other [servant] in the solar."

²⁶ Georgine Brereton and Janet Ferrier, *Le Ménagier de Paris*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), xiv-xviii- discussion of the surviving manuscripts.

are the windows, which do have glass, small medieval panes with cross-hatching of lead to keep all the small pieces together, since they had not yet developed the technology to make large sheets of glass. They also have shutters on the interior of the windows as well, probably to keep in the heat during the winter months. The room has a large fireplace with chimney that takes up much of one side of the room. The floors in the painting are made of alternating blue and beige tiles, without any rushes or carpets. The floors were never mentioned in the manual, other than for sweeping, so we can see that a tiled floor as depicted in the miniature is a reasonable surface for the author's house, well-to-do and expensive. The ceiling, made of three barrel vaults, coinciding with the three windows, giving more credence to the notion that is the solar, which would have been on the top floor, allowing vaulting. The colors of the miniature are dramatic, with bright green walls, a red cloth over the bench, and the master and mistress in their finest robes. This use of color in the decoration is never mentioned in the text. The picture indicates vividly what this house might have looked like, not just dull browns of wood and plaster, but bright paint to reflect light from the large windows.

Greater Servants

Despite the seemingly endless listing of household chores given to her as part of her wifely responsibilities, they young wife did have leisure time, and time for devotions. Part of the difference between the author's wife's idea of housework and perhaps a twenty-first century idea of housework is that she supervised not only a staff of permanent domestic servants, but also delegated much of the responsibility of supervision to two head servants of the household mentioned many times by name. "Agnes the Béguine" and "Jehan the Dispenser" were the housekeeper and steward, respectively, of the author's house. While the names of the master and mistress of the house are never mentioned, these two servants are mentioned numerous times, with extremely varied responsibilities and overseeing the entire staff, professionally seeing to all the needs of the house and its occupants, only needing the mistress for decisions or for another person to supervise the needs of the house. The housekeeper and duenna, Agnes, was a béguine, which was a secular order of women who took vows like a nun, but lived in the world to make a living of some sort. She is more experienced at household management than the mistress of the house, a mere fifteen-year-old girl. Whenever the young wife has a question or does not know what should be done, the author's standard response is, "Consult the Béguine."

Jehan the Dispenser is an equally indispensable figure, for both the mistress and the master of the house. John is literate and keeps the account books. He also oversees all of the wine and food storage in the cellar, he also deals with the horses, and other sundry household tasks, plus he oversees all the money that runs in and out of the house account books. One may conjecture that this position of steward and house overseer is the occupation of the author himself at the noble household of the Duc de Berry, whom he mentions frequently, or perhaps even the Duke of Burgundy. The author knows a great deal about the practical aspects of household management, but does not appear to practice it within his own house, but for another higher in class than he, a standard hierarchal practice that leaves Jehan the Dispenser to care for the needs of a the author's own upper-middle class household.

Lesser Servants

The hierarchal nature of this society is made eloquently clear even by the division of labor among the servants, and the classes of servant working within a house at any given time. Highest up on the servant hierarchy is of course, Agnes the Béguine and Jehan the Dispenser. Below these two are the domestic house servants who live within the household year-round and contribute to it a constant fashion. These people would be the cooks, grooms, chambermaids, and scullery maids. Character is most important reference for these types of workers, maid- servants should be good girls, not ones who have gotten into trouble at home or in the country somewhere, and now run away for work in the city.²⁷ The master and mistress required good behavior from their servants at all times, allowing no gossip, swearing, drunkenness, or any other form of bad behavior.

Next in the hierarchy are those skilled servants who were hired with a special skill for a specific task. These include dressmakers and tailors, furriers, bakers, butchers, shoemakers, tallow-candle makers, spicers, blacksmiths, and wheelwrights.²⁸ These people were generally artisans or people with independent shops that rely on apprenticeship to learn the skill, and a trade union to keep the occupation up to high standards. This was somewhat of a vertical move down due to the lack of contact with members of the upper class, but it was also in some ways a horizontal move from that of domestic servant, these types of people were highly regarded as productive members of the society.

²⁷ *The Goodman of Paris*, 208-9 long passage upon domestic servants and their hiring.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 205, copied the exact list from the text.

The last and lowest type of servant were those people hired for some type of seasonal or short-term work, such as harvesters, packers, wheelbarrow men, reapers, mowers, threshers, vintagers, basket bearers, wine pressers, coopers, and porters. Many of these jobs have largely disappeared today due to industrialization and the advent of modern technology, none more so than the porter. A person today can barely imagine a world in which everything must be carried. Not just groceries home from the market, but all water in the house was brought in by porters, drawing from a local well that was not on the property, since there is no mention of one. Water for cooking, drinking with wine, bathing (albeit rarely), had to be carried in manually. The wood for the fireplaces in every room of the house needed to be carried in, and then the ashes from the fireplace needed to be carried back out. All sewage, waste-water, and garbage also had to be carried out manually. This lack of mobility of basic items and goods is something unfathomable to us, who are accustomed to cars, shopping carts, running water, and the conveniences of the modern age.

House Property

The house probably sat on a good-sized piece of land, judging from what we can glean from manual regarding the outside of the house. I have already placed the kitchen as detached from the house, but near it in the yard. The master also speaks about horses and stables, which would be behind the house, entered through a corridor on the ground level.²⁹ Also mentioned is a listing of dogs that the author finds to be honorable or noble animals, namely the “greyhound or mastiff, or little dog...always has his eye and his heart upon his master.”³⁰ This list implies that the master might have had dogs, and would therefore need a dog kennel to house them in on the property, most likely near the stable. There is a discussion of different types of farm animals, their care, the servants in charge of the animals, and the barns; however, it seems extremely unlikely that there would be enough room on this estate in the middle of Paris to have a farm.³¹ It is therefore most likely that the author owned property outside the city somewhere, rather than having all these holdings within Paris itself.

Food and Shopping in Paris

Obtaining and preparing food was a major issue within the manual. In fact, the most likely reason that this little manual was preserved in three copies was probably due to its use as a cookbook, rather than as an appreciation of all his household wisdom that tells us so much about the author’s life. The household grew much of its food in a kitchen garden throughout the year; the garden was a source of fresh vegetables and fruits in the city. The summer found the household rich in foodstuffs from the garden, including peas, beans, leeks, parsley, and various “greens” of unknown variety. Winter found them eating mostly cabbage out of their garden, along with different types of squash as well.³² The author was rich enough to buy much of his food from the markets around Paris as well. All of his meat was purchased in the city from butchers, and all of the bread was baked by bakers rather than at home, as it would have been the case had they lived in the countryside. While herbs were grown in the garden, presumably for their taste as well as some medicinal properties, the household also purchased spices from abroad (that is, beyond Paris) at specific shops called “spiceries”.³³

The spices used in the household not only speak to its affluence, but also to its fairly broad horizons in the medieval period. Things that are commonplace today were rare, and had traveled many miles along trade routes before finding their way to a market in Paris. Exotic items included almonds, powdered ginger, ground cinnamon, saffron, cloves, pepper, and bay leaves.³⁴ These spices attest to the expanding horizons of an upper-middle class household eager to sample all that its money could afford. There were small, local markets all over Paris, selling mostly fresh, local produce to the townspeople. Presumably, there were spiceries in many of these small marketplaces, as well as in the large, wholesale market at Les Halles. For the author’s wife, all of Paris was familiar to her as a place of travel or business. In 1400, a little less than 200,000 people lived within the wall of Charles V, a vast number according to medieval standards. However, all of these people were living in an area whose longest streets stretching across the city from north to south and east to west was only about a mile and a half long each. Therefore, in this small space, Paris itself could be walked from end to end in a short amount of time. It was not divided into boroughs as the large cities of today are, but it was a borough itself. This intimate feel of the city is borne out by the fact that the markets the author recommends to his wife run the length and breadth of the city. He tells her of the butchers all over the city, from Porte-St-Martin and The Temple in the north, Porte-St-Germain and

²⁹ Ibid. 176: “they cause their horses to be given fresh litter up to their bellies; these horses be unharnessed and made comfortable...”

³⁰ Ibid. 108.

³¹ Ibid. 211-213, long discussion of the farm and its environs.

³² Ibid. 195-204, contains extensive listing of what types of plants are grown and harvested in the garden at different types of the year.

³³ Ibid. 24: “from the spicer...”

³⁴ Ibid., direct list from text of book.

in the east, Porte-Ste-Geneviève in the south and the largest butcher at Porte de Paris just on the right bank of the Seine. He also sends her to the milk market at Pierre au Lait, further north on the right bank, and the Place-de-Greve, where she could buy coal, wood, and kindling as well.³⁵ The young wife did not carry any currency when she went on these shopping expeditions for household supplies, she merely charged all purchases to a credit account held with these particular merchants, and the steward Jehan the Dispenser would go round and pay her bills later.

Wife's role within Society

This manual is by no means a “liberal” treatment of women, but the husband and author of this work is a reasonable product of his times, quite kind and tender with his young wife. He expects the typical wifely behavior of the fourteenth century, which is to be expected. He lists four ways to treat a husband, foreign to the modern relationship (or at least hopefully so). He says first that she must be obedient to his wishes and commandments. Second, that if he has given no express command about the household, she may do as she sees fit, but keep in mind his general preferences. Third, she must never do anything he forbids, even if it sounds like he is joking when he says it. Lastly, she must never be arrogant or answer back, and never contradict him in front of other people.³⁶ This being said however, he does mention that he does not expect the perfect love and obedience of Griselda, on whom he gives a long parable on wifely duty. “I have set the text here merely to lesson you, have not set it here to apply to you, nor because I would have such obedience from you, for I am not worthy thereof.”³⁷ Therefore, while he is a normal medieval husband in that he expects his wife to be obedient, the expectation is not out of bounds. He even says directly, “And excuse me if the story [of Griselda] telleth of cruelty too great (to my mind) and above reason.”³⁸ The fact that even he looks upon the tale as an extreme cautionary parable which is well know, but not a moral absolute of how women ought to behave towards their husbands, and vice versa. In fact, he is eminently reasonable on the subject, as he says,

And all their special pleasures, their chief desires and their perfect joys be to do pleasure and obedience unto each other, and if they love each other, they care naught for obedience and reverence beyond the common, which is too small for many.³⁹

This is an idea even a modern relationship can appreciate; love and respect go hand and hand, and that he who respects and loves his wife shall get love and obedience in return. While the marriage between the sixty-year-old author and his fifteen-year-old bride may not be ideal in age, it appears from this manual that she was treated well, and cherished as a wife, and almost a daughter figure at the same time.

The unique view of this manuscript has given us a view into a world long vanished; life in Paris for an upper-middle class man and his wife. Through studying the text, a clear portrait of their house and their city has emerged from something that was never meant for twenty-first century eyes at all. At the time, it was a manual for an inexperienced wife to learn from, and perhaps a cookery book for a nobleman such as the Duke of Burgundy. Now we can use it as a tool for trying to understand what life was really like for medieval people; the bugs, the stench, the class distinctions, the inconvenience of movement. The husband and wife's physical horizons do not extend out of northern France, but through trade and goods, we see those horizons expanding to the south of France for wine, and then outwards across Europe, to the Middle East for spices and luxury items. The unique interior view of this manuscript has made it an ideal source for studying the individual and in specific, the house of one man and his wife, but also showing us a man and his wife in the context of the larger European innovations of the fourteenth century. France and the rest of northern Europe are on the brink of massive change, sweeping its way from Italy north, arriving in northern Europe about one hundred years after the author composed this manuscript. The bourgeoisie, such as the author, will be caught up in the intellectual pursuits of the Renaissance, but the standards of living described in this text were still valid for many years to come.

³⁵ Ibid. 221, direct list from text of book supplemented by map locations discussed with Dr. Rouse.

³⁶ Ibid. 110-111, long passage paraphrased.

³⁷ Ibid. 137.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.