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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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# Hospitality and Home

PAULA HOHTI ERICHSEN

In his poem, ‘Veglia carnevalesca’, the sixteenth-century Italian writer and the son of a Bolognese blacksmith, Giulio Cesare Croce, provides a dynamic picture of an evening’s domestic social gathering. Describing the processes and actions that were associated with hospitality, he demonstrates how, at the beginning of the party, the house is in full motion. The host and his servants are busy, as they bring chairs for the guests, moving them close to the fireplace and further away from the fire; they bring lights and food into the room and place more firewood on the fire, while the host greets the arriving guests (Croce 1620: 3r–v). The short text conveys the excitement and, perhaps even the anxiety of the host, as he attempts to master the preparations of the event and make his guests as comfortable as possible.

Croce’s poem did not grow out of just his personal experience and fascination with domestic social entertainment. The importance of home-based hospitality gained prominence in the lives of Europeans in the Renaissance period, resulting in a growing range of social activities at home that ranged from formal business negotiations to informal evening gatherings, games, theatrical and music performances, and elaborate wedding banquets and childbirth receptions (Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis 2006; Preyer 1999; Hohti 2010a; Cohen and Cohen 2001–2; Kent 1987).

The importance of hospitality in the Renaissance period, together with the varied forms of social entertainment at home, was also reflected in the ways in which the home was arranged, furnished and decorated. On the occasion of an important family event, reception rooms and even private spaces were turned into festive spaces by setting portable tables and benches, and displaying art works, wall hangings, tablecloths, elaborate candle-stands, silverware and other

family valuables in the house (Thornton and Syson 2001; Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis 2006; Goldthwaite 1993 and 1987; Jardin 1996).

The wide range of new cultural practices, together with the range of material objects that were associated with domestic sociability, made hospitality at home in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europe a socially and culturally significant activity and a defining feature of Renaissance culture, that was invested not only with expectations of entertainment and friendliness, but also with sets of socially and culturally defined ideals and rules about behaviour and decorum.

### THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HOSPITALITY

In his treatise written in 1490s, the Renaissance humanist, Giovanni Pontano, outlined hospitality as one of the five important social virtues of spending money (Liefkes 2006: 254; Lindow 2007: 110).

Pontano's concern for social activity and entertainment at home was not just simply to enjoy informal evening gatherings or elaborate meals in a familiar and friendly atmosphere with relatives, friends and acquaintances. Instead, dinners, banquets, games, theatre performances, poem recitals and other social occasions that were organized at home were tied to the social ideals of the time, and played a key role in the construction and cultivation of the family's social life and public identity.

The social significance of hospitality was especially important for the wealthy European elites, because the ability to host guests was associated closely with family honour and reputation (Heal 1990). Contemporary sources demonstrate the extent to which status, power and success of families was measured by their capacity to invite, entertain and impress guests. The Italian writer and fencing master, Torquato Alessandri, for example, articulated the strong connection between nobility and hospitality, stating that anyone who wished to be legitimately and honourably called with the title of 'gentleman' should have 'a large well-furnished house always open to guests' (Guerzoni, 2011: 30). Giovanni Rucellaio, borrowing from Cicero, emphasized the duty of the gentleman of honour to treat guests with generosity: 'In the house of a rich man,' he said, 'numerous guests should be received and they should be treated in a sumptuous manner; if one did otherwise the great house would be a dishonour to the owner' (Preyer 1999: 362).

Stories of good hosts were circulated in contemporary literature and letters. In 1523, the Venetian ambassadors praised their compatriot, Cardinal Cornelio, for always having a house full of Roman gentlemen. 'Not a week goes by,' they said, 'without two or three cardinals dining at his table, on two or three occasions' (Fletcher 2015; Lindow 2007: 102). Similar compliments were expressed in England, where George Abbot, the future Archbishop of Canterbury,

praised the Earl of Dorset in his funeral sermon for 'keeping a great house' and 'providing generous entertainments' (Heal 1990: 6, 23, 156).

Although social and cultural associations between hospitality and honour were most pronounced among the leading families of the European elites, the significance attributed to generous hospitality transcended social boundaries, extending all the way to ordinary European artisans, small-scale traders and labourers, in both the city and the countryside. Several archival records and literary commentaries suggest that at least the wealthier sections of society further down the social scale shared the belief that keeping a household, even a modest establishment, involved giving and openness within one's capacities. In England, generous behaviour and hospitality were often outlined as one of the prime virtues for artisans and farmers. A farmer argues in John Norden's *The Surveior's Dialogue* (1607), for example, that his 'sort' had traditionally maintained 'good houses and hospitality', lamenting only that rising rents now imposed limitations on this behaviour (Heal 1990: 377; Norden 1607 :13). According to one Thomas Fuller, the good yeoman 'is bountifull both to strangers and poore people' and keeps a table that has 'good honest food' (Heal 1990: 377; Fuller 1642: 117). As among the ruling elites, good hosts were well regarded in the community. An old farmer was complimented in the 1650s as an example of good behaviour for all the rest of his kind in Devonshire and Cornwall, because a feast was celebrated at his house in the company of the poor, and all were seated 'at the upper end of the table and [everyone] had good cheer and free welcome' (Heal 1990: 377). Some popular social occasions, such as the wedding celebrated at Joan Colby's house, made such an impression on the guests that a detailed account of the feast was provided by a witness still nineteen years after the event (ibid.: 370).

The social significance associated with hospitality at various levels of society made the private house an object of public gaze. Neighbours often gathered on the street, watching not only the guests as they arrived in the house through the narrow streets, but also how they were greeted by the host, what kinds of garments the hosts were wearing and how the house was set up for the occasion. Sometimes, crowds of spectators stood outside grand houses, trying to get a glimpse of the elaborate displays and service of food, to the extent that occasionally special measures had to be taken to control the crowds (Waddy 1990: 57).

The social and public importance attached to home-based hospitality made the boundary between the domestic and the public flexible and subject to conflicting pressures, transforming the home, during social occasions, to an open and socially and culturally contested site, whose status and social and cultural meanings had to be constantly negotiated and redefined between family and friends, relatives, neighbours, business partners, political allies, enemies and others who visited the house (Cohen and Cohen 2001–2: 71; Ajmar-Wollheim 2006: 207).

## HOSPITALITY, HOME AND IDENTITY

Home as a site for hospitality in the Renaissance period had an important symbolic significance; it provided the immediate framework within which the family's reputation and status was determined and evaluated. Several Renaissance authors compared the house to the 'face' of the family, suggesting that the family's house not only stood for, but embodied the family's reputation, qualities, character and social status (Fortini Brown 2000: 304–17; Frigo 1985: 122; Cohen and Cohen 2001–2: 70; also Heal 1990: 6–7). In his treatise on architecture, Filarete, for example, compares the variety of domestic buildings to men: 'Buildings are made in the image of men . . . You never see buildings . . . that are exactly alike . . . some are big, some are small, some are in the middle, some are beautiful, some are less beautiful, some are ugly, and some are very ugly, just like men' (Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis 2006: 12). The association between the family and its dwelling was reinforced by terminology. The Italian term *casa* for the house, for example, as Thomas and Elizabeth Cohen have pointed out, referred not only to the physical structure of the building but also to its occupants, including the family, kin and the household (Cohen and Cohen 2001–2: 65).

The analogy between the family status and the quality of its dwelling was extended in the Renaissance period to include furnishings, interior decoration and other material possessions as well. Household goods, from chests and sculptures to textile decorations and silverware, embodied the family's honour, status and pride, and contributed to creating a sense of hierarchy between those individuals, groups and communities who owned, used and saw them.

The arrangement of the home was crucial, especially during hospitable occasions, because house visits made the interior and the furnishings visible to the public. 'Worthy and elegant furnishings and abundant ornaments,' says Pontano, bring 'pleasure and prestige to the owner of the house, when they are seen by the many whom frequent his house' (Lindow 2007: 110–11). The importance of sumptuous decorations in social occasions of Renaissance men and women becomes evident in several writings. In his memoranda, Giovanni Rucellai, for example, describes in detail the 'very beautiful furnishings' that accompanied the celebrations of his son Bernardo's marriage to Nannina de' Medici in June 1466. The ornamental objects, ranging from a richly decorated sideboard to various types of tapestries and wall hangings displaying the arms of the Medici and Rucellai families, were seen by several hundred onlookers, including 'kinsmen, friends and neighbours' (ibid.: 103).

As ideas of how status could be reflected by the dwelling families lived in spread and became common, the family house and its interior became a subject of debate. Several advice manuals were produced in the Renaissance period to provide instructions on how to set up dining rooms, corridors and chambers for social occasions. Alberti, writing on Vitruvian lines, for example, emphasized the importance of decoration in the house, stating that:

it is preferable to make the parts that are particularly public or are intended principally to welcome guests, such as a façade, vestibule and so on, as handsome as possible. Although I may think that any excess must be censured, yet I feel that those who spend so much on the bulk of their buildings that they cannot afford to adorn them deserve even greater censure than those who overspend slightly on ornament.

—[1443–52] 1988: 292–93

The importance of adornment and household decorations was also emphasized in English works, such as in Henry Wotton's *The Elements of Architecture* (1624). He writes:

Every Mans Proper Mansion House and Home,' he writes, 'being the Theater of his Hospitality, the Seate of Selfe-fruition, the Comfortablest part of his owne Life, the Noblest of his Sonnes inheritance, a kinde of private Princedome; Nay, to the Possessors thereof, an Epitomie of the whole World; may well deserve by these Attributes, according to the degree of the Master, to be decently and delightfully adorned.

—Heal 1990: 6; Wotton [1624] 1903: 15

## HOME AND THE VISUAL DISPLAY OF HONOUR

Since hospitality and social events at home were, in part, designed to impress and amaze the visitors who were connected to the family by social, economic or political reasons, it was important to prepare the home well for social events (Thornton 1991: 13). Rich households were decorated with carefully designed cultural signs, including tapestries, wall hangings, painted and carved chests, sideboards and cornices that were, in the Venetian writer Francesco Sansovino's words, 'loaded with gold' (Fortini Brown 2000: 296). Often, heads of households themselves supervised the appropriate display of their private spaces in order to satisfy culturally determined requirements for luxury and good taste. The Florentine ruler, Piero de' Medici, for example, had his chamber prepared 'in a manner worthy of emperors and queens, for the great unconquered fighter, with a canopy of silk with fringed curtains, and on the bed a cover of Alexandrian velvet, embroidered with silver and fine gold' (Lindow 2007: 108).

Visitors were often taken around the house to view the art works, expensive furnishings and other family valuables that were put on display during house visits, demonstrating how important it was to make family possessions visible to the public eye. Describing in a letter addressed to the Milanese duke, Francesco Sforza, the visit of his 15-year-old son, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, at Cosimo de' Medici's palace on his way to meet Pope Pius II in 1459, the counsellor, Niccolò de' Carissimi, for example, recalled how, after dinner, the

young prince Galeazzo and his entourage were invited on a tour to the noblest parts of the palace, including 'the studies, chapels, halls, chambers, and garden'. He further noted that all of these spaces were: 'constructed and decorated with admirable mastery, decorated on every side with gold and fine marbles, with carvings and sculpture in relief, with pictures and inlays done in perspective by the most accomplished and perfect masters even to the very benches and floors of the house' (Lindow 2007: 108; see also Ajmar-Wollheim 2006: 209).

Surviving letters and descriptions, written by impressed guests who admired a range of household ornaments and material possessions in chambers, studies and halls when they were visiting wealthy households, provide valuable evidence of how decorations in the house were perceived by guests. After his visit to the Florentine palace, Galeazzo Maria Sforza wrote a letter to his mother, praising:

the tapestry decorations, chests of inestimable workmanship and value, noble sculptures, design of infinite kinds as well as of priceless silver – the most beautiful I may ever have seen, or believe it possible to see. For, to tell of this house, for whomever might want worthily to discuss it and describe its parts, not my tongue, not the space of one day, and not of one month, but many . . . would be necessary.

—Hatfield 1970: 232

In a similar tone, the Bolognese humanist, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, praised the features of the Ferrarese palace of Belfiore, recalling that, 'all the rooms of this palace take light from glassed windows. The joy of seeing the ornaments of the delicate and splendid beds and coverings makes this habitation appear like an earthy paradise' (Lindow 2007: 108–9). Both of these accounts convey a sense of a genuine amazement at the richness of the interior.

Although wealthy Europeans demonstrated great interest in the material splendour of their homes, the importance attached to the public display of the private home and elaborate family possessions was not exclusive to cultural centres such as Florence, Rome, Paris or London. In Scandinavia, rulers and heads of noble households furnished their estates by the second half of the sixteenth century in the continental style. Interest in the European style of hospitality and ceremonial behaviour becomes evident from works such as the *Oeconomia*, written in the 1580s by the Swedish councillor, Peter Brahe ([1585] 1971). Writing instructions to the young noblemen, the author emphasized how important it was for young noblemen to go abroad and learn about foreign customs and people, including how they organize feasts and ceremonies (Pylkkänen 1956:19). Even in as remote places as Finland, then a part of the Swedish kingdom, extensive decoration schemes were introduced to present the princely interiors in Renaissance style during weddings and other social

occasions. The interiors were furnished with oriental rugs, Flemish-figured tapestries representing classical subjects, art works and libraries containing classic works in Greek and Latin (Hausen 1909; Pylkkänen 1956: 4–5).

Such emblems of wealth and good taste had a profound influence on how hierarchies were created and understood. However, ideas associated with domestic luxury and material display in the Renaissance period became widespread and extended beyond the wealthy ruling families and aristocracy. The inventory of 1604 of Francesco Vrins, a Flemish merchant, for example, demonstrates that it was important for the businessman to appear cultivated, learned and international through the display of his furnishings. He had no less than twenty-two paintings and a large, framed *mappamondo* on his walls. In addition, his corridors and reception rooms were furnished with a wide range of cultural status symbols, such as a credenza, a harpsichord, a mirror with an ebony frame, a large gilded lantern, two tables, nineteen chairs and twenty-two stools and benches (Fortini Brown 2000: 311; da Castiglione 1554).

Renaissance sources suggest that similar furnishings were displayed in households even further down the social scale. According to the Italian sculptor and architect, Sansovino, there was no one in sixteenth-century Venice ‘with a furnished abode so poor who does not have walnut chests and bedsteads, green woollen wall hangings, rugs, pewter and copper vessels, gold chains, silver forks and rings, such is the constitution of the city’ (Allerston 1998: 33). Although economic hardship and, sometimes deliberate, cultural resistance to the aristocratic mode of consumption imposed limitations on material abundance and hospitality at the lower social levels, sixteenth-century inventories of artisans convey an increasing sense of refinement associated with the most public areas of their house where the material props could be seen by visitors. By the mid-sixteenth century, it was relatively common to find the artisans’ reception room (*sala*) decorated with objects that were characteristic of the general way of living in urban houses, such as wooden cornices, *spalliera* hangings that were placed behind the dining table, as well as paintings, small statues of saints and portrait busts (CDP/733/273, 1549: 6r–v; CDP/733/215, 1549: 1r; CDP/746/457, 1551: 2r; Penny 2006; Hohti 2010b). Some artisan families, such as the Sieneese barber Cesario di Albertino, had various ornamental elements to provide a decorative appearance of the reception room, including three ‘beautiful’ lacquered vases, an elaborate gilded, rectangular mirror and a roundel decorated with coats of arms (Hohti, 2010a). The shoemaker, Girolamo, had placed a credenza in front of an elaborate, framed hanging that included familial coat of arms, and set the ‘beautiful, decorated basin’ specifically designed for the credenza, mentioned above, on a decorative tablecloth. He also had steps or shelves on which further dinnerware was placed on display, including an ewer, a large plate and other tableware, four candleholders and some lamps that he may have kept in the cupboard below (CDP/725/70, 1547:



1r–v). In Flanders, a moderately well-off Dutch tailor, ter Hoeven, had among his other household goods, five paintings, three tables, and some books, Delft pottery and tiles, seven lace curtains, two mirrors, about twenty chairs and forty-nine napkins, while Andrea Faentino, a Venetian sculptor had several books in his library, including Alberti's treatise on architecture (Sarti 2002: 123; Palumbo-Fossati 1984: 132–4).

This evidence demonstrates not only that the relationship between social rank, domestic space and cultural practices associated with hospitality was complex, but also confirms, as Elizabeth and Thomas Cohen have pointed out, that the codes about honour and propriety, as manifested through refined objects and behaviour within the domestic space, were understood and manipulated by individuals and families across the social spectrum (Cohen and Cohen 2001–2; Hohti 2010b).

## HOSPITALITY AND SOCIAL ENTERTAINMENT

Hospitality at home provided an important means to meet friends and celebrate special occasions, but it was also one of the principal means to secure friendships, establish new networks and connections and protect one's reputation and place in the community. Individuals who had fallen out of favour were pitied, because 'few frequented his house and they were men of little consequence . . . He remained cold and alone at home, and no one visited him to talk about political affairs – he who used to have his house full of every kinds of person' (Lindow 2007: 102).

In addition to securing one's place in the broader community, hospitality helped to reduce conflicts, express loyalties and maintain good social relations with friends, neighbours, employers and business associates. Many Europeans shared the belief that hospitality could be employed as a means to reduce social conflict and enhance solidarity in communities. This social function of hospitality was seen as so significant that in England, for example, the corporation of York decided to retain its feasts and dinners even during the severe economic crisis in 1557–8, because the 'meeting of neighbours at the said feasts and dinners and there making merry together was a good occasion of continuing and renewing of amity and neighbourly love one with another' (Heal 1990: 303).

Household inventories provide evidence that there was a great deal of socializing in Renaissance homes. One indication of this, noted by material culture historians, is the general evolution of the reception room (called *sala*, *portego*, parlour or hall) in the Renaissance period from a multipurpose functional space into a specialized room furnished for social gatherings and dining. This room functioned as a space where families ate, weddings were celebrated, men got together for drinking and games and women gathered for

poem recitals and music (Sarti 2002: 133–4; Heal 1990: 159–61; Palumbo-Fossati 1984: 139). Sometimes, the houses of the rich and influential individuals included several reception rooms that could be set up for large-scale social entertainment. The *portigo* of the Venetian Donado di Michele da Lezze, who lived in the second half of the sixteenth century in the parish of Santa Maria Formosa, included, for example, twenty-four walnut benches, some decorated and some plain, twenty-two chairs, two tables, a walnut credenza, five chests of various types, a copper bucket and three stools (Fortini Brown 2000: 310).

Although houses outside the wealthy ruling elites were rarely large enough to organize events of this magnitude and scale, the cultural shift towards creating domestic spaces that were suited for hospitality and home-based social activity is visible also outside the classes of the wealthy elites. The son of the miniaturist, Cristoforo, called Gasparo Segizzi, who died in Venice in 1576, for example, had a house with two reception rooms, the larger of which was in the principal floor and contained eleven benches as well as a table ‘to dine’ (Palumbo-Fossati 1984: 138). In Siena, many houses inhabited by craftsmen such as barbers, bakers, innkeepers and shoemakers, included a space specifically designated as *sala*, and listed benches, chairs and a long folding-table ‘for dining’, as well as a number of embroidered linen towels, tablecloths and linen napkins that were used in dining. Some artisans and shopkeepers also had an ewer and a basin near the dining table on the sideboard, which were used for washing hands before and after the meal (Piponnier 1999: 343). The shopkeeper Benedetto di Bartolomeo’s reception room, for example, included a basin and two ewers on the sideboard, covered with a linen tablecloth, while the barber Cesario di Albertino had a bail ‘to wash hands’ in his *sala* (CDP/684/10, 1532: 3r; CDP/733/240, 1550: 5r).

Raffaella Sarti has noted that, compared with peasant interiors, the urban interior generally appeared rich in furniture and objects that were often new and sophisticated in the early modern period. She highlights especially the visible presence of a large number of chairs, stools, footstools, armchairs, settees and folding tables in homes across social classes as evidence of an increasing home-based social activity in cities like Paris and London; the number of seats, as she demonstrates, is far greater than the inhabitants of these households (2002: 123–4).

The rich evidence concerning the lifestyle and material conditions of both high-ranking as well as ordinary men and women suggests that, although Vitruvius and other classical authors who provided guidance for Renaissance living, insisted that the ‘person of common fortune’ did not have the need for social space at home because they have a social obligation to visit their superiors, not to receive visitors in their house, hospitality and social events at home were an increasingly common feature of Renaissance everyday life across most social classes.

## FORMS OF HOSPITALITY

Hospitality at home in the Renaissance period took many forms, and involved a range of occasions, from the informal entertainment of neighbours, friends and occasional visitors to the public ceremonial occasions organized for important guests. The Sienese, Girolamo Bargagli, provides a long list of different circumstances that demanded visits, which included, for example, visits in case of illness, to present condolences for a death or congratulations for a marriage, a newly acquired dignity or fortune, or to greet someone on their return from a long journey or a military campaign (Ajmar-Wollheim 2006: 208).

The most common occasions for hospitality were the numerous visits that were paid by relatives, friends and other guests who visited the house on various business or social matters in daily life, such as craftsmen, traders, workmen, ambassadors, bailiffs, auditors of land, clerics and travellers. These guests, including 'strangers', were often provided with food, and accommodation in the house while they were performing their tasks. On a typical January day in 1531, for example, one Sir Hugh Hastings, who had a modest household at Norfolk, had one unnamed stranger to dinner and four to supper, as well as three workmen at each meal (Heal 1990: 52). In many places, such as in England and Sweden, large households kept careful records of the guests who visited their homes, including their numbers and the provision of food. The account books reveal that in Häme castle in Finland in 1569, for example, 217 guests altogether dined in the household, of which 173 ate at the governor's table and 44 at the servants' table. These guests included masons, pot-makers, tailors, builders, glass masters, weavers as well as men of high standing, and they were provided with food prepared from ham, fat, butter, beans, cereals, game and different types of fish, depending on the occasion, the season and the rank of the guests (Vilkuna 1998: 238–9 and 250).

In addition to hospitality associated with the daily household economy, the weekly cycle offered many occasions for home-based entertainment. Families invited guests for dinners at home on particular weekdays. Drawing on household accounts, Felicity Heal has shown that Sunday was commonly regarded as a feast day and may have been a particularly favoured day for the reception of visitors. Household books of wealthy English families demonstrate that many families spent more money on food on Sundays than on other days, and it was also the day when meat might be available (Heal 1990: 79).

In addition to dinners, informal evening gatherings, known in Italy as *veglie*, as Marta Ajmar-Wollheim has demonstrated, were also a common aspect of domestic social life and entertainment. These events, organized for friends and neighbours involved playing board-games and cards, singing, drinking, storytelling, dancing and theatrical performances, and might be accompanied by refreshments and candied fruits, almonds or other snacks (Ajmar-Wollheim 2006: 209–15; Dennis 2010). The popularity of such events is demonstrated by

the fact that, in the Renaissance period, a number of printed works dedicated to the rules of parlour games appeared on the market. One of the popular editions was, for example, Girolamo Bargagli's *Dialogo de' Giuochi*, published in Siena in 1572, which described the rules for 130 parlour games (Bargagli 1572; Ajmar-Wollheim 2006; Valenti 1992: 261–2).

Home visits in daily life, such as dinners, *veglie* and other evening gatherings organized for friends or neighbours, were often informal and integrated in the activities of the household. But when guests of high rank visited the house, such as ambassadors, princes, magnates, bishops or country gentlemen, hospitality usually involved extravagance and complex rituals. In the letter by Niccolò Carissimi to the Duke of Milan, referred to above, the Milanese counsellor recalls the ceremonies that surrounded the Galeazzo Maria's visit in Florence. Following the greetings and orations that had taken place in front of the Palazzo Signoria, the young prince continued to the Medici Palace, where he was hosted by Piero di Cosimo. 'I went to and dismounted at the palace of Cosimo,' writes Niccolò,

and first I found Piero di Cosimo all in state at the top of the first stair, who embraced and kissed the aforesaid Count with great lovingness, and took the hands of and welcomed the whole entourage as pleasingly as he could. Then the aforesaid Count went immediately into the little chapel of the aforesaid Cosimo. He was waiting for him there . . . And he threw himself forwards with reverences, and the said magnificent Cosimo gathered him to his bosom.

—Lindow 2007: 107

The rules of decorum were pronounced and guided the social behaviour of the ruling groups, but assumptions about order, hierarchy and decorum associated with hospitality were also understood at the lower social levels, although they were articulated with slightly different sets of principles. This became evident from an account written by the French gentleman, Jouvin de Rochefort, where he described his visit one evening to an Alpine hut in South Tyrol during his travels around Europe in 1672. The cowherds, embarrassed to have such a noble and well-regarded visitor, tried to make him comfortable by offering him immediately 'the very best of their chairs, namely an upturned basin', and setting the table with the best food they had: with turnips cooked 'in a pot with flour, salt, butter and milk', six eggs, half a cheese, a few pieces of bread, a plate of small fruits and a little 'tasteless wine'. The family sat down on the floor around the table. The head of the family handed over the plate with the eggs and the turnips to the guest. 'I immediately put my hand in,' recalls the gentleman, 'and the rest of the family did the same. No one dared take another until I took one' (Sarti 2002: 148).

## FEASTS AND LARGE-SCALE SOCIAL ENTERTAINMENT

The yearly calendar offered several occasions for feasts and generous hospitality. Felicity Heal has demonstrated that the Christmas season in England, especially Christmas Day, the Feast of the Innocents, New Year and Twelfth Night, were favoured by all social classes for grand entertainment, including kin and influential guests so that even among the villagers, 'every family is provided with goose pies, minced pies and ale' (Heal 1990: 71–6 and 355–6). Further down the social scale, among farmers, the feasts of the agricultural year, such as the times of harvest and sheep-shearing, were also important occasions of generosity. Henry Best described in the 1640s the invitation of 'all the work folkes and their wives that helped them that harvest' to a meal of boiled beef, apple pies, hot cakes and ale (*ibid.*: 357).

The most important and excessive form of hospitality, however, was associated with rites of passage: weddings, christenings and funerals. These public family events, organized for relatives, neighbours and influential guests, represented moments when it was especially important to appear generous and demonstrate social power, good behaviour and powerful family connections. Wedding banquets especially were often elaborate occasions and usually involved the provision of a wide range of food courses within a luxury setting for an extensive number of guests, as well as music and dancing (Figure 7.1).

Other family events, too, such as the birth of a child, were also important occasions of social activity. Mothers and newly born babies were visited in the bed chamber by women of the community who brought gifts, while christenings might involve neighbours, guests and godparents of high rank who might spend 'the whole day, and a good part of the night, in feasting' (*ibid.*: 61). Sometimes, on the occasion of the birth of the child, the bedroom was turned into a festive space, with food, music and dancing (Figure 7.2).

The importance of generosity on these occasions even at lower social levels becomes evident in one Ralph Josselin's statements. He noted with pride in the celebrations that followed the birth of his eldest child that he 'entertayned my neighbours all about it cost me 6li and 13s 4d at least' (*ibid.*: 368).

Not even funerals were spared from excessive spending. Burials were often accompanied by elaborate and generous hospitality. We learn that the guests at the funeral of Isabel, the wife of Maurice, Lord Berkeley, who died in Coventry in 1517, were given a 'drinking' with cakes, ale, claret, wafers, sweets, and 'Blanch powder'. At another funeral, that of Lady Katherine Berkeley, held in 1596, it was claimed that just the leftover food was sufficient to feed more than 1,000 poor folk in the afternoon. At lower social levels, the Lancashire Presbyterian minister and a son of a yeoman and builder, Adam Martindale, noted in his diary of the 1650s and 1660s that, when his father died, all the men who came to the house to fetch his father's corpse, including beggars, 'were entertained with good meat, piping hote, and strong ale in great plenty' (*ibid.*: 82, 120).





FIGURE 7.1: *Marriage Feast at Cana* attributed to Damaskinòs Michele, 1561–70. Museo Correr, Venice. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.



FIGURE 7.2: *The Birth of Caterina Cornaro*, anonymous, Italian, Venice, sixteenth century. © Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

The celebrations of marriages and other grand occasions could last for many days. 'For several days,' wrote Vespasiano da Bisticci, following a grand reception in Florence in 1462, 'Piero (de Medici)'s house was like a "corte bandita"' (Preyer 1999: 371). Important events such as weddings were held on a large scale even at lower social levels. Recalling his experience at a popular wedding that he had attended in France, one man named Menetra wrote that, after he had arrived 'just in time to sit down at the table' and enjoyed the meal, toasts, dancing and jokes, 'the wedding feast lasted three days' (Sarti 2002: 72–3). The number of guests was often also high. An attempt was made in England in 1575 to limit the numbers attending the bridal feasts at popular levels to 80 persons (Heal 1990: 370).

Rites of passage were often ritualized occasions that were accompanied with a number of gifts and commemorative objects. Families commissioned a wide range of specialized wares and art objects to celebrate marriages and childbirths, such as 'betrothal goblets', wooden birth-trays and painted roundels, which were often decorated with the family of arms (Musacchio 1999, 2008; Matthews-Grieco 2006: 117). Even ordinary families seem to have valued the custom of commissioning objects and giving gifts at births. Several inventories belonging to ordinary men from artisan classes included objects, whose nature and decoration point to the potential celebratory and ritual function of the objects. The possessions of the Sienese carpenter, Christofano di Bartholomeo, for example, included among other valuables a glass goblet that bore his coat of arms. Many artisans and shopkeepers, from shoemakers to grocers, were also in possession of roundels and other birthware, designated in Italy by the terms *da riscappato* or *da parto*, that were presented as symbolic gifts to the new mother (CDP/722/13, 1546: 1v; CDP/682/38, 1531: 1r; Hohti 2010a: 667).

## BANQUETS

Commemorative objects and domestic furnishings, as we have already seen, played a key role in supporting and enforcing the family rituals and events, and were designed to secure the reputation and honour of the host. However, perhaps the most important context for expressing social aspirations and guaranteeing a good reputation among neighbours was to treat the guests with elaborate meals.

Renaissance Italians were already familiar with Christian notions of hospitality, which tended to emphasize the charitable notion of hospitality towards one's neighbours. Although many occasions, such as funerals, involved giving alms and food for the poor, it became more and more important for status-aspiring Renaissance families to create impressive banquets on a lavish scale in order to entertain their social peers, business partners and political allies.

Surviving printed descriptions of festive banquets reveal the luxury associated with the tables on important occasions such as weddings. According to Allen Grieco, festive meals consisted traditionally of a first course and two to three main courses that were prepared using refined ingredients such as candied lemons, walnuts and ginger, sweet wine, biscuits, mixed salads, fresh cream, liver with a red sauce, a wide variety of refined meats, like veal, fish, fowl and partridges, and ended up with a marzipan cake, raw fruit or cheese. In the Renaissance period, however, banquets and upper-class meals underwent an evolution and cookbooks written by cooks such as Cristoforo Messisbugo (1540s) and Bartolomeo Scappi (1570) suggest that, by the 1540s, the number of food courses in houses of the rich could increase to as many as seventeen, including seven to nine dishes for each course (Grieco 2006: 247–50).

The growing luxury at the table was also reflected in the large number of new specialized dinnerware. As the festive meals became more complex in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, new types of wares in growing numbers were needed to get through a meal. In his study of Italian majolica, Richard Goldthwaite has shown that the number of dishes required by high-ranking wealthy families, such as the Este, to get through an extravagant meal grew from a service of about fifty plates, two bowls and four pitchers in the mid-fifteenth century, to close to over four hundred pieces in the late sixteenth century (Goldthwaite 1989: 21).

Sets of sumptuary laws were passed from the fifteenth century onward in a number of European towns to curb the conspicuous display, luxury and excess of the extravagant meals. In Venice, the legislation set a maximum cost per each guest in the 1460s, stating that a maximum of half a ducat per guest could be spent during wedding banquets, with the substantial fine for offenders of 200 ducats. Informants were promised half the fine, and if they were slaves or servants, they were given their freedom as a reward. In the 1470s, in both Venice and Florence, the banquet regulations extended to the number of food courses offered at meals, allowing in Venice only three courses and in Florence only two, one of boiled meat and one of roasted meat (Grieco 2006: 247–8; Fortini Brown 2000: 320).

Although excessive luxury was restricted to the wealthiest sectors of society, banquets organized for kin, friends and neighbours were also central to popular weddings. Describing the celebrations for his sister Caterina's wedding in his *Ricordanze* (1478–1526), the Florentine coppersmith, Bartolomeo Masi, for example, reported that right after the bride had received the ring, more than thirty guests were invited for a banquet, organized on the ground-floor reception room (*salotto*) of his house (Corazzini 1906: 245–6).

Funerals tended to include meals as well. Some surviving testamentary bequests demonstrate that men and women often left money in their wills, in order to have a dinner held at their own funerals. One Robert Robinson, for



example, left a large sum of £30 'to be spent upon a dynner . . . amongst my good neighbours, that accompany my body to the buryall'. Robert Jennings, a London draper, left money to his company, not only for a dinner at the time of his funeral, but also for two or three after the event (Heal, 1990: 371–2).

The food offered at popular celebrations was, of course, much less complex than the refined dishes consumed and served among the high-ranking European elites. The most basic meal at the lower social levels consisted of beans, salt, bread, onion and garlic (Grieco 2006: 251). However, wedding banquets, religious holidays and harvest-time feasts were moments of relative abundance among lower social ranks, and provided occasions when even ordinary men and women had a variety of food courses available. One English account claimed that husbandmen 'do exceed after their manner (in feasting); especially at bridals, purifications of women, and such odd meetings . . . it is incredible to tell what meat is consumed and spent' (Heal 1990: 353). The generosity associated with food in popular festive events is suggested also by an account from Yorkshire from around 1640, where some noted that:

It is usual, in most places, after they get all the pease pulled or the last grain down, to invite all the workfolks and their wives (that helped them that harvest) to supper, and then they have puddings, bacon, or boiled beef, flesh or apple pies, and the cream brought in platters, and every one a spoon; then after they all have hot cakes and ale; for they bake cakes and send for ale against that time: some will cut their cake and put it into the cream, and this feast is called cream-pot, or cream-kit.

—Sarti 2002: 187

According to Felicity Heal, the costs of the food at popular weddings might have been shared by the fathers, and it seems that at least in some rural areas, it was common to finance the wedding by brewing and selling a special ale as a way of raising money towards the hospitality at the wedding. In Scotland, if the couple was poor, social occasions such as christenings were sometimes funded by inviting a great number of people and then having a collection of money to cover the cost of the feast (Heal 1990: 367–76).

Although dinners and drinking connected to popular weddings, childbirths and funerals were sometimes held in taverns, it seems that the homes of urban artisans were sometimes well equipped to organise a banquet of some sort in their house. Pietro, the tailor, for example, had a dining table and seats for thirteen people in his reception room (*sala*), together with fourteen serving bowls, eighteen metal plates, twenty-four drinking or wine glasses, some jugs and a wine-cooler, six large tablecloths, eight linen towels and seventeen napkins, that made it possible to serve food and drink to many guests (CDP/733/273, 1549: 6r–v). He also owned a number of serving dishes of refined quality,

including a fine gilded marble bowl, a gilded *all'antica* cup, two gilded knives, one fork and a silver spoon, which allowed him to perform slightly more elaborate dining rituals. Several artisans also owned specialized table ware, such as spittoons, salts, flasks, wine glasses, coolers, carafes and plate racks, some of which were valued pieces and made from fine materials, including novelties such as maiolica and *cristallo* glassware (CDP/746/ 457, 1551: 2r; CDP/733/273, 1549: 6r; CDP/684/10, 1532: 3v). Dinnerware could also be borrowed or rented (Thornton and Syson, 2001).

Sumptuary laws were much more relaxed when it came to lower-class entertainment, for the obvious reason that economic hardship and social status prevented families of modest means from celebrating on a magnificent scale. However, heavy drinking and drunken behaviour at popular feasts were severely condemned by authorities. In England, the Kendal corporation insisted as part of its programme for the reform of the poor in 1575 that there should be no general drinking at churchings. The same authority also tried to limit the consumption of 'bridal-ale' at weddings, ordering that no wedding should be accompanied by general or public drinking before or after the marriage. The severe tone of the orders suggests that popular parties, even funerals, were often characterized by heavy drinking. A few town councils also tried to restrict the wasteful behaviour and superfluous spending of the populace by imposing limits on the sale of bridal-ale, the number of gifts and guests at childbirth celebrations, and the cost of food and drink brought to women lying in childbed, making it forbidden in 1568 for ordinary folk in Leicester to host a feast at any churching (Heal 1990: 366–70).

## HIERARCHY AND ORDER

Dining rituals, like other public social occasions at home, were often informed by socially determined rules that were governed by principles of hierarchy and decorum. 'Can there be anything more inappropriate,' asked Giovanni Pontano, 'than watching a peasant drink from a glass ornamented with gems?' (Lindow 2007: 140). In wealthy households, the most important guests were greeted with ceremony and ritual upon entrance in the house, and offered the finest food, the best dinnerware and the most comfortable seats, with backs and velvet or leather coverings. Guests of lower rank ate simpler meals in a separate table and were not invited into the reception room.

Rules of decorum were especially prominent in high-profile occasions marking rites of passage such as births and weddings, and conspicuous dining rituals that were associated with the occasions were closely associated with Renaissance ideals of civility, good table manners and polite conversation. Several works in the Renaissance period were dedicated to social skills and good manners in social situations, providing advice and guidelines to Renaissance

elite men and women on how to pay visits or get through social occasions as a host (Ajmar-Wollheim 2006: 208–9).

Celebrations at popular levels of society, including weddings, were generally celebrated in a much more relaxed and informal atmosphere, with men and women mingling freely in a mixed pattern of eating, drinking and dancing (Figure 7.3).

However, a sense of hierarchy and decorum may have occasionally guided the most important social events of the lower-ranking families, too. In the account of the artisan wedding banquet referred to above, organized by the Florentine Masi at his house, the coppersmith records in his diary that more

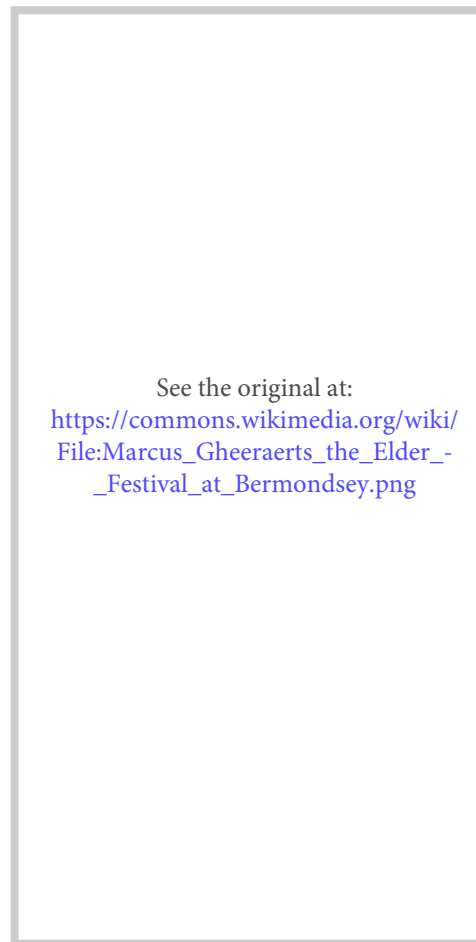


FIGURE 7.3: Detail of *A Marriage Fete at Bermondsey* (also called *A Wedding Feast at Bermondsey*) attributed to Joris Hoefnagel, c. 1569. © The Picture Art Collection/Alamy Images.

than thirty people were seated at the 'first table' (Corazzini 1906: 245–56). However, at least in the village communities, the crucial factor that determined seating or influence of the guests in the feasts may not have been wealth but age, 'so as the younger rich reckoneth it a shame sooner than a grace to step or sit before the elder honest' (Heal 1990: 363).

Hospitality at the lower social levels, then, was partly governed by its own specific rites and customs. Although economic factors explain some of the differences of social practice between social classes, the differing customs and rules of behaviour at social events was also a cultural issue. Sometimes confusion might arise when cultural rules were misunderstood or transgressed. This is well illustrated in a fifteenth-century novella, written by Gentile Sermini (1975). The author tells the story of Mattano, a young man from the countryside. In an attempt to gain social prestige, he sets himself amongst rich men in Abbadia a Isola, a small town outside Siena, and starts spending money on clothing, furnishings and food in the same way as the urban upper-class men of the town. However, Mattano's attempts to impress his social superiors fail. Unaware of the urban cultural etiquette and the type of food he should serve for his upper-class guests, he prepares dishes such as goose, warmed-up cabbage and soup with vast amounts of garlic, all of which were considered unrefined foods in the period. Garlic, in particular, was associated with the lower classes, to the extent that it was called 'the spice of the poor' (Grieco 2006: 251; Hohti 2010a: 663).

Thus, what emerges from the story of young Mattano is that families at each social level were expected to follow the rules and customs of their own social group. However, as we have seen from the rich Renaissance visual and written records that have survived up until our day, the social and cultural significance associated with hospitality was shared across social classes. Domestic social events, from informal evening gatherings to formal wedding celebrations, were not only an important means to meet friends and celebrate rites of passage, but they also provided crucial occasions for people from different ranks to secure solidarities in the broader community of neighbours, relatives, business associates and political allies, among rich and more humble families alike.

The high social importance attached to hospitality by most Renaissance families placed the home at the centre of public attention, making it an important cultural mediator of the host's status, wealth, power and honour. The complex messages that were transmitted and negotiated through the behaviour of the host, supported and enhanced by a wide range of interior decorations, food and the commissioning of commemorative objects, made hospitality and home important social and cultural players in defining what it was like to live and conduct daily life in Renaissance Europe.

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