

Medieval Marriage and Family

The wedding of two families was symbolized by the groom's passing a ring to the bride. The witnesses would sometimes hit one another to impress the occasion on their memories since, in the absence of formal records, they might be called upon to attest the marriage. The couple was covered by a marriage pall; if either party happened to possess any natural children, these were huddled under the pall¹ and thus legitimized. During mass bride and groom shared a piece of bread and a sip of wine; then the bride might take a distaff² and demonstrate her skill in spinning. Afterward, friends crying, "Plenty! Plenty!" showered them with seeds, a fertility symbol that has been succeeded by rice or innocuous³ confetti. Then dancing; and then the vicar⁴, with holy water and incense, blessed the nuptial⁵ couch; and so to bed.

The newly married couple lived in a crowded turmoil that would offend a present-day recipient of relief. Few nobles possessed more than two or three rooms, and these swarmed with family and retainers⁶. Even the English king was known to hold royal court in his bedroom, with his queen sitting on the bed for lack of other retreat. All ate together in the hall. Waifs⁷ lived under the stairs, and at dinner stood in "beggars' row," disputing their pittance⁸ with the dogs. Children slept with their parents or with the servants on the floor of the hall. Privacy is one of the greatest of modern inventions.

VOCABULARY

pall a heavy cloth

distaff staff for holding the wool in spinning

innocuous harmless

vicar clergyman

nuptial relating to marriage

retainers servants

waifs homeless child

pittance small portion

dower part of dowry

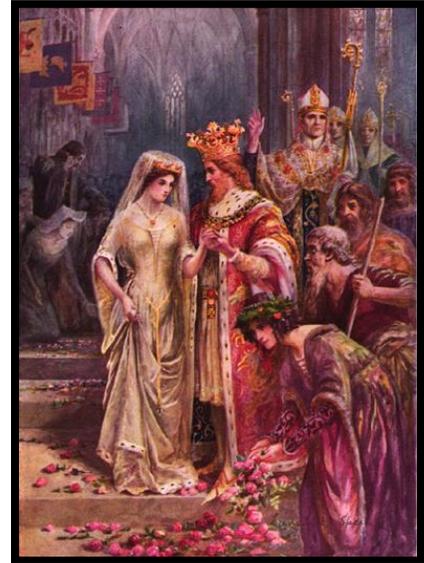
seigneury land of a lord

virago loud, overbearing woman

brought to bed

prepared for the birthing process

ermine white weasel fur



The noble lady had her importance in the scheme of things, for she retained feudal rights over her dower⁹ land, and she could possess and administer a seigneury¹⁰ or rule an abbey. In her lord's absence she was mistress of the castle, defended it at need, rode to rousing hunts with the men. Her duties were exacting since everything had to be planned long in advance; no hasty shopping was possible. But she was legally a minor, in the custody of her husband. He was permitted, nay, encouraged, to beat her for her own good. He was likely also to support one or more concubines and to bring his bastards into the castle for their education. Accepting the general code of behavior, the noble lady dealt generous blows and slaps to her companions and inferiors. She was very often a virago¹¹. And sometimes she loved her husband and was loved by him.

When the lady was brought to bed¹², the bells of the village church rang clangorously to invoke the aid and favor of the saints. After a happy delivery the midwife washed the babe in a tub of warm water and worked the fingers and limbs to chase any evil humors. She rubbed him with salt and honey to dry and comfort his members, and laid him on a bed of rose leaves mashed with salt. She dipped her finger in honey and cleaned therewith the infant's palate and gums. She filled her mouth with wine and expelled a few drops into the little complaining mouth. Then she wrapped the newcomer in the softest and warmest materials in the castle's wardrobe -- silk, furs, or ermine¹³. For obvious reasons these were very soon replaced by swaddling clothes of linen.

The christening took place at the earliest possible moment, for fear that the devil might carry off the tiny, undefended soul. At the font one godparent held the body, two others each took one leg. The priest immersed the child completely to allow the Evil One no handhold. The godparents vowed to keep him seven years from water, from fire, from horse's foot, and from hound's tooth.

Most gentlewomen breast-fed their babies since it was thought that a common nurse's milk would contaminate noble blood. Blanche of Castile, mother of Saint Louis, found a woman of the court giving such to a royal infant; she held up the baby by the heels until he vomited.

The life of noble children was that of all infants since the world began. They were caressed, reproved, and taught by parents and nurses; they played ancient games of chasing, hiding, and fighting; they had their dolls, wooden soldiers, toy windmills, jumping jacks, and as they grew older, little bows for killing birds and mice. They played with castle pets—lap dogs, tame squirrels, magpies, parrots. (Cats were regarded askance as witches' familiars¹⁴.) They might learn their letters from the chaplain¹⁵, who had also the duty of reading the mail and composing fine answers in Latin. Girls and little boys lived mostly with the women of the castle, learning household tasks, such as bedmaking and waiting on the table, and therewith the elements of polite behavior.

For fear that the boys would be softened by feminine care they were often sent off, as early as in their eighth year, to be pages in another castle, generally that of the overlord or of a carving meat, kneeling to present the winecup, dancing, playing chess and backgammon. At this time their military training began. They fenced with blunt swords, tilted against manikins, hawked, rode to the hunt, and practiced killing.

Girls likewise were often sent to another castle, as though to a finishing school. Hence the bevy¹⁵ of beautiful maidens who appear as a chorus in the romances of chivalry. The girl learned embroidery, weaving, and music. If her tastes were domestic, she might practice cooking and sewing. She prepared for handling castle finances, selecting and controlling servants, supervising the cooking and housecleaning, the making and care of upkeep of the kitchen garden. She learned also the elements of hygiene, first aid, and household remedies, for she was likely to become the castle's doctor and pharmacist, as the mistress of the house was to be on the plantations of the American South. If her tastes so inclined, she might learn to read and write. A literature of poetic romance developed, directed toward bored ladies whose husbands were far away at the wars, or, perhaps, nearby, pursuing comely¹⁶ wenches in their villages.

VOCABULARY

familiars a spirit embodied in an animal

chaplain a priest

bevy a large group

comely beautiful

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS ON A SEPARATE PIECE OF PAPER

1. **What is a social custom that has changed since this time period? Why do you think this has evolved in the way that it has? Explain.**
2. **What is a social moray or custom that has NOT changed since this time period? Why do you think that this has NOT evolved? Explain.**
3. **How does this information relate to *Le Morte D'Arthur*? What does it tell you about the way women were treated in Sir Thomas Malory's day? Explain.**