

The First Book of Courtesy

From Sloane Ms. 1986 in the British Museum

1430-1440

Here begineth the first book of courtesy:

Thou will of courtesy learn,
In this book thou may discern!
If gentleman, common or knave thou be,
To have nurture is thy need.
When thou comes to a lord's gate,
The porter there he does wait;
Thy weapon shall thou give to him,
And ask him leave to go in.
 To speak with lord, lady, squire or
cook,
There thou needs to take this book;
For if he be of low degree,
Then out he shall come to thee;
 If a gentleman of the king is he,
To him the porter will lead thee.
When thou come the hall door good,
Then he shall take thy gloves and hood,
 If the first meal for thou is set,
This lesson must thou not forget:
The steward, controller and treasurer,
Sitting at the dias, thou hail most fair.
 Within the hall set on either side,
Sit other gentlemen as at that tide;
Include the bow to them also,
First to the right hand shall thou go,
 Sitting to the left shouldst thou cast;
Thy bow to them without a twist;
Take heed of the yeomen on thy right hand,
As there before the screen thou stand
 Amid the hall upon the floor,
While marshal or usher comes from the door,
Go to the table and take thy place.
Be stable of cheer and quite sedate;
 If thou sit at the gentleman's board,
Be thou kind and little of word.
Carve thy bread in two thee must,
The Bottom from the upper crust;
 In four cut thou the upper dole,
Set them together as they were whole,

Then cut the bottom crust in three,
And turn it down, learn this from me.
 And lay thy trencher thou before,
And sit up straight if thou be sore.
Save bread or wine, drink or ale,
'Til thy mess from kitchen be set in sail.
 Lest men say thou art by hunger set
Or else a glutton will be their bet.
See that thy nails are clean and bright.
Lest thy fellows do loathe their sight.
 Bite not thy bread and lay it down,
Those are no manners to use in town.
But break as much as Thou will eat,
The rest the poor shall have as meat.
 In peace thou eat, and never eschew
To fight at board, that may thee rue.
If thou makes faces no matter the reason,
A villain be thou called in every season.
 Let never thy cheeks be made too great
With morsels of bread that you shall eat;
An ape now men will say thee makes,
If thou bread and flesh in thy cheeks takes.
 If any man speaks then to thee,
You may not answer, it shall not be
But wait and abide thou must;
for that brings shame to all the guests.
 In both halves of thy mouth, if food
thou sets,
Great is the scorn that thou shall get.
Thou shall not laugh or nothing speak
While thy mouth is full of drink or meat.
 Nor eat thee with great sounding
Neither thy soup nor other thing.
Let not thy spoon stand in thy dish,
When thou art served with flesh or fish;
 Nor lay it not on thy dish side,
But cleanse it with out pride.
Let no dirt from thy fingers soil
The cloth before thee they shall spoil.

Once thou has bit thy bread,
Do not allow thy self be led
To dip again the dish in to
Thou are unkind if this you do.

Dry thy mouth all well and fine
When thou shall drink ale or wine.
Nor call thou out a dish again
That from the board has been taken.

If thou spits on the board or right near
Uncourteous names shall thou hear;
If thy dog thou scratch or rub,
Virtuous men shall thee snub.

If thy nose thee blow as may befall,
See that thy hand thee clean withall
And with thy skirt wipe it away
Or with thy tippet that is so gay.

Pick not thy teeth at board sitting
With knife nor stick nor wand nor string.
While thou has meat in mouth beware
To drink, that is an honest care.

And also fish, drink not with it
Thou may be chocked by that bit
And if by this thy throat be filled
'Twill stop thy wind and thee be killed.

Nor tell thou never at table a tale
To harm or shame thy fellow in sail;
For if he then withholds his wrath
Ofttimes he will forecast thy death.

When thou sits for meals at table,
Avoid the cat if you are able,
For if thou stroke the dog or cat
Thou art like an ape tied to that.

Also avoid without any strife
To soil the table cloth with thy knife.
And blow on thy meat and drink not
Never for cold, never for hot;

Bear not with meat thy knife to mouth,
Whether thee be strong or couth;
Nor with the board cloth thy teeth thou wipe,
Nor be they red wipe not thine eyes.

If thou sit by a good person,
Think thou well on this lesson:
Under their leg place not thy knee,
It would be quite lewd if done by thee.

Nor backward sitting give thy cup,
Never to drink, never to sup;

Bid thy friend to take cup and drink,
An honest thing that is, I think.

Lean thy elbow on the board not,
Never for cold never for hot.

Dip not thy thumb thy drink into.
Thou art uncouth if this you do;

In the salt sellar dip not thy food
Either flesh or fish for that is rude,
As men say, that is a vice,
'Tis not a wonder this is not nice.

After a meal when thou shall wash,
Spit not in the basin, nor water thou slosh;
Nor spit the not onto the earth,
Before no man of God and the church.

Whoever despise this lesson of light,
At the board to sit he has no right.
Here ends now our first time talking,
Christ grant us all his dear blessing!

**Here endith the book of
courtesy**