Gender, Domestic Service and Great Households in Late Medieval and Early Modern England

by

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ABSTRACT

GENDER, DOMESTIC SERVICE AND GREAT HOUSEHOLDS IN LATE MEDIEVAL
AND EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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This thesis examines servants who were employed to work in aristocratic households from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries in England. It explores changes made to both royal and noble households as the result of cultural, political and economic forces that altered domestic operations and servants’ responsibilities. The thesis examines a shift from predominantly male to female groups of servants hired by noble and gentle families that occurred over the course of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. Over time, as the wealth and political power held by the English elite destabilized, these occupations became less prestigious as household departments became more private and hired fewer servants. By the seventeenth century, women were hired to occupy positions that were abandoned by men. The thesis demonstrates that this change from predominantly male to female bodies of servants was largely the result of a loss of privileges that were reserved for male servants.
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INTRODUCTION

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, noble servants were deeply intertwined in the personal and public affairs of their masters, and were expected to act as physical, living vessels of their household’s involvement and impact in English society. The ability of male servants to exercise authority in both political dimensions and over their lower-ranked counterparts appealed to patriarchal ideologies of control and subordination. At the same time, it provided men of somewhat notable social ranks to observe and be involved in influential political factions, which also strongly related to notions of male social control. However, servants had to adapt to the different needs of households, and their positions were largely determined by their access to important household divisions and personal information. As masters secluded themselves more into private spaces and withdrew from their servants, those occupying domestic positions became less involved in the management and display of power. Consequently, such positions reflected fewer concepts that upheld masculine authority and patriarchal control, and this once prestigious line of work no longer gave domestic men distinct social and economic privileges over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Servant women appear to have largely benefitted from this fall of masculine prestige, and were able to take on positions that had earlier been restricted to them. Changes in political and financial affluence in relation to service also appears to have altered common perceptions of gender and domestic labour, namely the ways that it applied to responsibilities that were seen to suit masculine and feminine traits. On the other hand, when servants became less involved in the political and personal departments of wealthy households, their more practical aspects became emphasized and valued for their ability to keep daily life more easily functional and comfortable. The nobility endorsed more feminine models of domestic servants after great households focused
less on the constant display of wealth. There are strong connections between depleted noble wealth, a desire for privacy in great households, and an increase in female domestic staff. Overall, the gendered nature of servanthood was more than a matter of convenience for noble homeowners. It reflected the manner in which labour and domesticity aligned with hierarchical structures, social prestige and acquisitions of authority, and the ways power and subservience were divided amongst the men and women that tended to the needs of households.

Prior to the mid twentieth century, the history of household servants had been pushed to the side as historians were largely preoccupied with studies on modern working classes. Court history in Europe had also been placed on the margins of historical study, and did not appear to have appealed to many modern historians.\(^1\) However, since the 1970s studies of royal courts in relation to personal monarchies, along with other powerful noble families and their households, have become more common. As these analyses delved further into the nature of these establishments, servants became a central part of these historical studies on households and domestic operations. Little was known about the English court as a political institution, and even less was known about its social functions. Evidence on servants’ work and lifestyles has helped modern historians to understand the ways the royal court and wealthy households in England operated, and have provided more depth into the socio-political significance of wealthy and politically influential estates.\(^2\) Recent studies on the role of the court and great households have raised more questions on the roles of servants that worked within them, and the wider significance of their titles and roles.\(^3\)

Historians of later medieval and early modern England differ over the importance and

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\(^2\) Asch, “Court and Household,” 2.

\(^3\) Gunn, *The Court as a Stage*, 2.
influence of the royal court and the significance of reforms made under specific monarchs. One aspect of royal courts and other politically influential estates that has been explored more recently is the involvement of personal servants.\textsuperscript{4} In particular, the manner in which servants were categorized has sparked discussions about divisions of power and social value within individual households. Recent scholarship has largely agreed that servants of a notable background, referred to as noble servants, partook in politically, socially and economically significant activities within influential households on behalf of their masters. The worth of these servants depended on the nature of their domestic responsibilities.\textsuperscript{5} Such positions had been strictly reserved for men, particularly those of a high social status, whereas women were mostly barred from providing work in these estates. However, the changing nature of noble and royal households over the early modern period, namely in their wealth and political prominence, also determined the power and privileges that were available to these male servants. Historical studies on the nature of aristocratic houses agree that domestic service became more distinctly feminized by the end of the seventeenth century, but the reason as to why this is has not been clearly addressed in one cohesive analysis. By incorporating both a class and gender based approach into a chronological and comparative structure, this thesis will examine the reasons for the change in gendered ideas of domesticity and service that occurred in England from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries.

Over the past fifty years, as more historians have delved into England’s great estates, households owned by monarchs and wealthy aristocrats and landlords they have focused on one of the main aspects behind the functions of these massive households: the servants within them, how they were categorized, and how their duties were laid out between them. Historiographical

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid, 4.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 5.
analyses by Elizabeth Rivlin in 2005, Rafaella Sarti in 2014, and Jeane Clegg in 2015 have articulated the ways modern scholarship looks at profound changes in the nature and meaning of domestic service. They agree that the topic has reached a certain point of maturity since the mid-twentieth century, and has since become a widely recognized topic of study. They take into account broader trends in both Marxist and gendered approaches in examinations of British households, domestic servants, and categorization of peoples based on their social and occupational backgrounds. For the most part, many studies that are wholly or partially focused on the topic of servants aim to examine their involvement in social, economic and political shifts during the transition from the late medieval to early modern era.

An increased interest in the historical analysis of servanthood in wealthy households became more apparent around the 1960s, with most publications devoted solely to the topic of domestic servants coming out in the past fifteen years. From the 1960s onwards scholars have published more systematic studies on English servants amidst growing interests in related historical topics, such as: social history, the history of the family, demographic studies, gender studies and women’s history. British social historians largely neglected the lives of late medieval and early modern servants up until the 1970s, when demographic analyses showed that many youths across various social ranks in England shared similar occupational experiences in a phase that was later referred to as “life-cycle service.” In the 1970s more works were centered on the impact domestic service had on patterns of migration and instances of social mobility.

During these decades, particularly in the 1960s, Marxist thought became more deeply involved in discussions on distributions of power in Europe, and the manner in which sources of

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8 Sarti, “Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers,” 292.
power defined one’s status and position in broader socio-political contexts. Norbert Elias’ influential work *The Civilizing Process* from 1939 utilized this approach and presented a survey for courtly society in Europe, though this study would have more of an historiographical impact after it was translated to English in the late 1960s. Elias discussed the manner in which social competition and the monopolization of land and money defined the balance of social and political authority within “units of rule,” defined as centralized forces of medieval power in France, Germany and England. This analysis of status-based competition left historians another issue to tackle: the manner in which status itself was defined based on the accessibility to sources of political and social influence, along with other significant cultural and economic factors.

Lawrence Stone’s *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* is considered to be among the first comprehensive studies of the English aristocracy as a distinct, status-based group. More importantly, his work showed long-term social changes, a rearrangement of social and political privileges that threatened the power of England’s aristocrats, and a lack of consistency in authority dispersed among powerful figures ranked beneath the Crown. Peter Laslett’s *The World We Have Lost*, presented a more inclusive study of family and class-based structures after the Middle Ages, and proposed a hierarchical scheme in which prominent social groups were organized based on wealth, political networks, kinship/lineage and occupation. Ronald Asch’s publication *Nobilities in Transition, 1550-1700* also tackled this issue of status in his comparative study of European nobilities, and concluded that England’s nobility, particularly the gentry, was more easily accessible to lower social status individuals than were other elite groups in Europe. One simply had to meet expectations in wealth, political involvement and social

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presentation to be considered an acceptable member of England’s higher status groups.12

Increased interests in gender studies and women’s history have also shaped recent scholarship on the topic of servants in relation to family structures, patriarchal control and domesticity. From the 1960s onwards, a greater significance placed on gender studies helped to bring both women’s and servant’s history into the forefront of historical discussion that involved working classes.13 During the 1970s, demographic studies revealed that domestic service prompted migration and social mobility that became a crucial channel for young people who wished to find a source of work, which in turn altered life-cycle patterns.14 Twenty years later, these demographic patterns and findings on rates of marriage and familial structures were used to enhance the discussion of gendered divisions in domestic settings. Susan Amussen’s An Ordered Society combined a gendered and class-based approach in her analysis of domestic settings, household economies and structures of power within the family in early modern England.15

Anthony Fletcher’s Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800 looked at the manner in which female subordination and male superiority were implemented into gendered identities and understandings of authority and behavioural control.16

Studies that have been conducted on feminine concepts of work include Marjorie McIntosh’s book Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620 and Jane Whittle’s article “Housewives and Servants in Rural England, 1440-1650.”17 Both of these publications discussed practical work women tended to, most of it based in husbandry or very particular tasks such as

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13 Sarti, “Historians, Social Scientists, Servants, and Domestic Workers,” 279.
14 Ibid, 292.
dairying and weaving. These historians have had to employ a wider variety of evidence, since sources that discuss the work of female servants are scarcer up until the late sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. Although these studies may not clearly relate to service in great households, they can help to give an idea of what women’s work constituted, and how it found a practical purpose and new values in homes owned by the aristocracy during the early modern period. Tim Meldrum’s work *Domestic Service and Gender, 1660-1750* focused more on the social and cultural history of male and female servants in London, and through evidence provided in witness depositions by servants at church courts, Meldrum analyzed the ways their identities were altered under shifting social relations, changing cultures of work, and what he defined as “the moral economies of service.”

Many of these works mentioned how gender comes into play in domestic labour, but are not focused on the shift from masculine to feminized forms of domestic service. This gap in the historiography may be due partially to the range of these studies. Few of these works have straddled both the late medieval and early modern periods when this gendered shift occurred from predominantly masculine to feminine forms of service. Scholarship that has discussed where servants worked, such as great households where large numbers of servants were employed throughout the late medieval and early modern eras, has left little room for discussion of this gendered shift. Despite this, the findings in these studies contain crucial information on the duties, lifestyles and identities of servants. Kate Mertes’ *The English Noble Household, 1250-1600* and Chris Woolgar’s *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* are primarily focused on wealthy English households themselves, but have also delved into the social and

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political significance of noble or personal servants and outlined the duties of menial servants.\textsuperscript{19}

Overall, both of these authors agree that the organization of these households imitated broader social schemes that kept power in the hands of the homeowner, and simultaneously kept the servants ranked in less authoritative positions.

Such schemes and the organization of domestic servants in aristocratic households were inspired and promoted through the construction and presentation of royal estates and English courts. Rosemary Horrox’s \textit{Richard III: A Study of Service} and Gerald Aylmer’s \textit{The King’s Servants: The Civil Service of Charles I} are focused on service and politics during the reigns of specific kings.\textsuperscript{20} David Starkey’s \textit{The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War} and David Loades’ \textit{The Tudor Court} are centered on the operations and alterations made to the English court, and how this impacted the private lives of England’s royalty.\textsuperscript{21} Felicity Heal’s book \textit{Hospitality in Early Modern England} provided more detail into the prestige of personal servants, and how the social privilege they had earned through their association with wealthy estates and families diminished as their masters became more secluded into private chambers, and less invested in magnificent displays of wealth and lavish hospitality in the public quarters of the household.\textsuperscript{22}

Historians have also employed drama, literature and artwork in order to examine fictional portrayals of servants, and the ways these sources have represented popular ideas and perceptions of domestic workers. Mark Burnett’s \textit{Masters and Servants in English Renaissance}

\textsuperscript{21} David Starkey et al., \textit{The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War} (New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1987); David Loades, \textit{The Tudor Court} (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987).
Drama and Culture encompassed a wide variety of material, and argued that fictional representations of servants not only questioned exercises of power in domestic settings, but they also created a significant portion of “servant culture” through discussions of social change and political resistance. Diane Wolfthal’s article “Household Help: Early Modern Portraits of Female Servants” examined various paintings of European domestic women, and suggested that the portraits themselves represented a greater prominence of female servants within wealthier households after the sixteenth century. In his book Household Servants in Early Modern England R.C. Richardson also employed fictional representations of servants, and incorporated real household accounts and documents in order to provide a comparative analysis of domestic work, and the manner in which such sources shaped images and ideas of what service was, and who servants were.

Clear set definitions and methods of differentiation of status-based groups ranked beneath the Crown in late medieval and early modern England were a puzzling topic for contemporary authors and have remained an issue for modern historians. These groups were defined by status or ranks, which mainly involved the possession of a notably high status through lineage, land ownership and wealth. Higher status-based groups were defined as those who lived on profits based on lordship, including rents and other revenues such as court profits. These sources of revenue are what brought together groups from the gentry, comprised of gentlemen, esquires and knights, and the higher nobility comprised of dukes, bishops, earls and barons.

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23 Mark Thornton Burnett, Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).
27 Christopher Dyer, An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages (Oxford:
revenue were dispersed widely and unevenly between these groups, and one’s title did not necessarily equate to one’s exact level of income. These people were highly competitive with each other in search for more profits and political authority. Aside from their wealth, the status of aristocratic families was also based on political power measured through the number of seats they held in Parliament. For example in the House of Commons elite families held about 80% of seats.28

Although the gentry shared elements of authority with higher-ranked nobles, their separation into a distinct group shows that they remained in a lower position.29 The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are marked by a clearer definition of the gentry, comprised of those who were commonly elected to Parliament, and a subsequent growth in its membership.30 At the bottom of these ranks were gentlemen, who operated at the base of gentle society just below esquires and knights. The latter of these ranks was more heavily associated with territorial, economic and military formulation of status after the fourteenth century.31 As for the gentry, the wealthiest families were almost equal to the lower ranked members in the peerage, and the heads of gentle families were often selected by the king to be knighted. This meant that unlike their other noble counterparts, the gentry were mostly non-hereditary members of the elite, but they still had strong associations with land-based wealth.32

Great households in late medieval and early modern Britain were large estates that contained many members, and were exclusively owned by significantly wealthy and politically powerful families from prestigious backgrounds. These households served as physical reminders

28 Asch, Nobilities in Transition, 28.
32 Asch, Nobilities in Transition, 49.
of the power and wealth that were held by the elite, and tended to try and mimic the grandeur of royal castles. In order for one to maintain or share the status of other wealthy and influential nobles, wealth had to be flaunted in open display, thus the household itself marked a family’s social position. Those who wanted to compete for similar spots had to use similar economic tactics, and the rise of great households also marked a time when conspicuous consumption characterized a household’s wealth and magnificence. Political relevance and over expenditure in domestic settings went hand-in-hand throughout the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries in England. Social and economic competition among noble families was one of the main aspects that defined and characterized households that were “great” compared to other urban and rural homes owned by people in the lower orders of English society.\(^{33}\)

Typically, the majority of members in great households were servants since large number of them were required for the maintenance of these lavish estates. There were two basic categories of domestic workers: the menial servants, who were those that tended to basic upkeep, and personal or noble servants, many of who came from notable backgrounds and worked alongside their master in more personal matters. The menial staff members were normally comprised of grooms, pages and kitchen staff, and were largely responsible for necessary duties such as cleaning, repairs, and the preparation of food. On the other hand, noble servants were men that had managerial responsibilities; for example, treasurers produced household records and managed funds, and stewards monitored the other servants’ work within the household to ensure proper and smooth operation for daily life. Many personal servants, especially those in royal households, also communicated directly with the heads of the household and participated in their masters’ political affairs. Noble servants held an especially high prestige prior to the late

sixteenth century, and for the most part these positions were reserved for men. Women would typically be lumped in with other menial workers, and up until the late sixteenth century the only specific role reserved for women in great households was a laundress.

One of the most important household departments in royal estates was the Privy Chamber. This portion of the household emerged under Henry VII and was further refined under Henry VIII. The various departments operating within the Privy Chamber were the most private sections of royal estates, where only a small amount of humble staff were allowed to enter.\textsuperscript{34} This portion of the household contained chambers for private living spaces, such as bedrooms (also referred to as the bedchamber), studies, dining halls and lavatories. Henry VIII’s household ordinances, referred to as the Eltham Ordinances from the 1520s, officially labelled the Privy Chamber as a separate department from the remainder of the household.\textsuperscript{35} Under James I, more reforms were made to these private departments during the seventeenth century. The bedchamber became the most central room in private departments, and the Privy Chamber was referred to as privy lodgings. Servants were further restricted from access to these departments as the King sought to keep his personal rooms separated from other chambers.\textsuperscript{36} James’ successor Charles I cut down the number of keys to his private rooms given to servants.\textsuperscript{37} Both the Privy Chamber and privy lodgings had similar operations in royal households. The main distinction between them was the level of access granted to personal servants and the importance of the bedchamber.

The fourteenth century in England is largely characterized by the Black Death, which caused widespread demographic shifts due to the number of casualties and resulted in realignments of wealth and land. Landowners who had retained property reserved their sources

\textsuperscript{34} Starkey, \textit{The English Court}, 4.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 17.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 9.
of income, and bought up land that had been vacated. This dislocation in the aftermath of the Black Death began an important stage for the development of wealthy households over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Wealth flowed more into the hands of the aristocracy and gentry as they continued to buy more and larger lands. As a result, there were more demands for domestic labour as estates became larger and more intricate in their layout and daily operation. Households were peripatetic, and great households were main hubs that housed the majority of servants. Political instability in the fifteenth century led to nobles investing more in physical defence for their estates, which meant more servants were hired for protection. Political circumstances in these centuries were unstable, as the death of Edward IV and succession of Richard III, who was suspected of murdering the young Edward V in order to claim the throne, sparked rebellions among England’s elite. Tensions that resulted from this conflict of royal succession challenged the continuity of the Yorkist government.

The political climate of the sixteenth century was more stable under the Tudor monarchy. As Henry VII and Henry VIII began to centralize political power in their royal court, the social influence of great households began to diminish. England underwent a period of rapid demographic growth during the sixteenth century, which likely led to more people in the middling groups of society. Muster certificates of military units and subsidy rolls from the early sixteenth century suggest that the population had reached around 2.3 million people, and continued to expand in the 1540s. In the mid-sixteenth century about fourteen percent of the nobility was made up of newly established families. The impact of the English Reformation, which spanned 1530 to 1570, broke down the wealth and influence of the Church and its clergy.

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39 Heard, *Tudor Economy and Society*, 16.
Gradually, the King and his parliament’s authority forced noble families to move away from their private estates, and had them flow into the royal court. These events may have marked the beginning of a period of noble disintegration in a period that Sir Geoffrey Elton had termed “the Henrician Revolution.” Henry VIII’s interest in private quarters appeared as early as the 1530s. Based on the evidence of household ordinances and private accounts, the king occupied these lodgings more often, which suggests other public rooms had less significance in his daily routine. The rise of the Privy Chamber as a new household department not only transformed the organization of great households, but it also refashioned the instruments of household government in royal estates to the extent that it became a widely recognized centre of political power. The development of the royal Privy Chamber as an administrative force halted while domestic functions of the department became more prominent under Elizabeth I.

The monarchy continued with their attempts to subdue the power of England’s nobility during the seventeenth century. In 1615, James I began to compel the English gentry to take on more governmental roles in rural settings, aimed to halt urbanization of the gentry, along with the Duke of Buckingham under him and his successor, Charles I. As England’s court under Charles became increasingly involved with the standardization of noble culture and the political involvement of the gentry, men of high status competed for the monarch’s favour and fought over political association with the Crown. Tensions among noble groups who strove to lay claim to royal patronage was a significant cause of domestic unrest in the seventeenth century. The civil war in England during the 1640s exacerbated issues of political stability, and was followed

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41 Mertes, *The English Noble Household*, 188.
44 Starkey, *The English Court*, 71.
by a period of social turmoil in the aftermath of this conflict.\textsuperscript{46} James I’s inheritance of the English court displays some important trends in terms of the political layout of royal estates, specifically in the private departments. The Privy Chamber was no longer at the innermost sanctum of royal households, and privy lodgings were added and provided the King with further seclusion and privacy. Over the course of his reign, it was the bedchamber that became the most important department for political development and domestic operation.

\textbf{Sources}

One of the most valuable sources of primary evidence for great households are account books in which cheque rolls and diet accounts were listed. Household records, particularly diet accounts or lists of inventories, contain important quantitative information on the financial state of households and numbers of live-in members within them. Due to the extensive bookkeeping required to manage goods, labour requirements and finances, such sources typically contain more extensive details on the operations, inventories and staff members of massive estates.\textsuperscript{47} The Northumberland Household book from 1512, written for Henry Percy the 5\textsuperscript{th} Earl of Northumberland, is one of the earliest examples of an account book used in this analysis.\textsuperscript{48} The account book of the 9\textsuperscript{th} Earl of Northumberland, also named Henry Percy, pertained to his principal residences, Leconfield and Wressell in Yorkshire over the years 1564 to 1632.\textsuperscript{49} The account book of Robert Dudley, the 1st Earl of Leicester, from 1558 to 1586 provides some insight into the domestic routines and daily life during Elizabeth I’s reign.\textsuperscript{50} These accounts were

\textsuperscript{47} Woolgar, \textit{The Great Household in Late Medieval England}, 11.
\textsuperscript{50} Simon Adams, ed. \textit{Household Accounts and Disbursement Books of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, 1558-1561},
mostly focused on Leicester House, which was referred to as Essex House after 1593.\textsuperscript{51} Most historic accounts on the domestic nature of peasant households, which mainly include wills, work contracts and probate documents, are different from accounts generated by the nobility. Homes owned by those among lower orders did not require, nor could they afford to employ, large groups of employees meant for specialized labour.\textsuperscript{52} Thus account books for noble homes are crucial for understanding the ways aristocrats aimed to differentiate themselves from the peasantry and other groups ranked beneath them, specifically in the ways their homes and the servants in them functioned.

Household manuals that outlined work schedules, necessary tasks, staff members and their responsibilities in large estates are also very useful for historical studies on domestic servants. Edward IV’s \textit{Black Book} listed ordinances from 1445 and 1478 to be followed within his household, and contained instructions for a variety of servants that worked during his reign.\textsuperscript{53} Richard Brathwaite’s seventeenth-century publication \textit{Some Rules and Orders for the Government of the House of an Earl} outlined criteria for great households in order to showcase these estates as an essential component of elite experiences and lifestyles. The honour of the landed classes, according to Brathwaite’s text, was heavily associated with open entertainment and hospitality, thus wealth and large bodies of servants are described as a necessary dimension for lavish households that could still have afforded these luxuries.\textsuperscript{54} Hannah Woolley’s housekeeping manual \textit{The Compleat Servant Maid} from 1677 is based on her prior experience in

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid, 3.
\textsuperscript{52}Deborah Youngs, “Servants and Labourers on a Late Medieval Demesne: The Case of Newton, Cheshire, 1498-1520,” \textit{Agricultural History Review} 47, no. 2 (1999): 146.
intermediary positions of service in larger households. General domestic management and cooking are topics that served as the main focus for her various published works on domestic service.\textsuperscript{55} The guidelines listed in these manuals can help to determine the changing nature of domestic work up to the seventeenth century.

Letters are another important source base that can reveal certain operations carried out by servants and the relationships they had with their masters. Despite not containing a lot of information on household accounts, correspondence between noble families such as the Pastons from the fifteenth century, the Lisles from the sixteenth century, and their personal servants give more details on household roles and the delicate balance of authority between master or mistress and servant. These letters also provide more context on the external circumstances that shaped the lifestyles of these families and their household’s operations, which largely determined the nature of the conversations between them and their personal servants. Certain details can be drawn out from observations made by personal servants, which can be used to help determine the nature of their relationships with their masters, fellow servants and any guests that they tended to. Such observations can also suggest the importance of certain servants, and the significance of their position among the rest of their fellow workers.

This thesis will investigate the feminization of domestic service in the seventeenth century by comparing gendered concepts of service from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, in order to determine why men became less involved with domestic labour. By incorporating a variety of sources, this study intends to compare both real and fictional representations of servants in order to discuss changes in ideas of masculine or feminine concepts of servitude, behavioural norms in domestic contexts, and shifts in notions of prestige and privilege that

appealed to masculine ideals in occupational roles. Ultimately this prestige in male service was hindered by a growth in privacy, namely through the appearance of secluded quarters such as the Privy Chamber in royal courts, and a decline in economic competition that had been exacerbated by the unsustainability of conspicuous consumption. In order to support this argument, the paper has been arranged chronologically in order to show the circumstances that both households and domestic servants faced in each particular period, starting at the fourteenth century and ending just prior to the eighteenth. The first two chapters are primarily focused on male servants and their roles in great households, with an emphasis on the social significance behind their titles, and the privileges they received through their domestic labour. The end of the second chapter and the third chapter will explore the feminization of noble service in order to bring out any noticeable shifts from male to female concepts of servitude and domesticity, and what it was that drew men away from domestic work. At the same time, all of these chapters will aim to show significant changes made to household layout and operations in relation to broader political, social and economic pressures that also led to changes in servants’ roles.
CHAPTER 1: Servants and Great Households in the Late Medieval Period, c. 1340-1499.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England were characterized as periods that led to the increased prominence and influence of noble-owned or “great households.” At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the numbers and size of English towns expanded due to agricultural exploitation and growth in the commercial economy. As a result, the revenues of great landed estates rose, however the wealth of the upper classes fluctuated due to the impact of the plague. Political instability in the fifteenth century led to nobles investing more in physical defence for their estates, which meant more servants were hired to fill these positions. Through this military support, noble families were able to limit the amount of control the king held over them, and built up their own personal support network comprised of servants. Families that held significant wealth and local influence, such as the Pastons from Norfolk, depended on domestic servants for protection as shown in the attack on their household in Gresham in 1449 and 1450. Various economic and political circumstances led to an increase in household size of domestic membership. Criteria for personal and menial servants were set out more clearly as the nobility began to employ larger amounts of them. These guidelines for household categorization, as laid out in royal ordinances, were complicated by wider circumstances that determined differences between aristocratic and gentle status-based groups. In order for servants to acquire a more prestigious and honourable position in domestic service, they needed to have shared elements of aristocratic status and culture, thus such positions were reserved for workers of a gentle background. These positions were also almost always reserved for men, and servant women were mostly excluded from the majority of private and public activities in noble estates.

The economic and social dislocation in the aftermath of the Black Death began an
important stage for the development of wealthy households and the movement of servants over 
the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹ Poll taxes that covered the years 1377 to 
1381 reveal that although a small fraction of the late medieval population in England lived in 
towns, the wealth and size of noble estates had increased.² Aside from towns, economic growth 
halted after the impact of the plague; however the nobility and gentry still maintained large 
manors and high rent incomes. A small sample of households that existed before the onset of the 
plague had substantial resources listed in their diet and household accounts, especially among 
estates owned by the upper nobility which included dukes, bishops, archbishops, earls, ladies and 
countesses.³ Elizabeth de Burgh, also known as the Lady of Clare, produced a household book in 
the fourteenth century that addresses household members, inventories, as well as the cheque and 
livery rolls.⁴ In the 1340s she was regularly at her residence at Anglesey in Cambridgeshire and 
her residence at Great Bradfield in Essex.⁵ Her account book is especially useful in showcasing 
the wealth of great households, their layout, and the organization of domestic operations in the 
late medieval period, especially in regards to the manner in which she had ranked her personal 
and household servants. Servants could either be skilled or unskilled; their bargaining position 
had strengthened in relation to wealthy employers, who were faced with a labour shortage due to 
population decline. Their bargaining positions were further fortified by the necessity of their 
labour. Domestic servants were essential to the maintenance of large estates, and by the fifteenth

¹ Dyer, An Age of Transition, 1; Sarah Jones, et al., “The Later Medieval English Urban Household,” History 
² Dyer, An Age of Transition, 8, 24.
⁴ Livery rolls contain the amount of materials granted to each servant for their household uniform, whereas cheque 
rolls contain other household expenses and servants’ wages.
⁵ Jennifer Ward, ed. and trans. Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare, 1295-1360 (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2014), 
xviii.
century the demand for servants among masters of large urban enterprises increased.⁶

Demographic shifts caused by the plague led to a greater movement of labourers, largely comprised of domestic and rural servants, and gave them an advantage at bargaining positions for decent wages with employers. Increased mobility led to a greater desire to restrain the authority of working people among the lower-orders, which shaped noble and gentle struggles over social control. At the beginning of the fourteenth century England had a population of approximately six million. During the epidemics of 1348 and 1361 the decline in England’s population accelerated and dropped to about two to three million people, remaining at this number until the mid-sixteenth century.⁷ Lords bought up rural land and leased their demesnes to tenants due to a shortage of available workers that would have otherwise helped to maintain profits.⁸ Landowners provided higher rewards to those wage-earners that they were able to find, thus the period after the Black Death was marked by high individual incomes, improved living standards and new patterns of consumption that widely impacted the shape of England’s economy.⁹ High wages were the result of an increased demand for domestic servants when workers were scarcer. Labourers who sought work had to move around more in order to find available jobs, and this led groups of workers among the lower order to be more mobile.¹⁰ New social and legal definitions were implemented in order to define these groups, of “those who work,” and calls for stricter enforcement of social organization and control over workers are reflected in the Statute of Labourers released in 1351.¹¹ The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 also likely

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⁷ Dyer, An Age of Transition, 3.
⁸ Ibid, 33.
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid, 128.
fueled this perceived need to settle employment disputes, and to ensure that landlords maintained authority over their employees. Control imposed over labourers remained central to struggles to impose social order in the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{12}

By the fifteenth century reforms made in the royal court not only altered the overall nature of court society, but changed requirements in household management, as well as the roles and political significance of noble servants.\textsuperscript{13} These reforms were implemented by King Edward IV after his exile in Burgundy from 1470 to 1471.\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{Black Book} is a household manual that Edward wrote after he stayed at the court of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. Edward’s experience here served as a major influence for his organization of the English court. The architectural achievements and ordinances recorded in the \textit{Black Book} ultimately reveal Edward’s expressions in his pursuit of social and political magnificence.\textsuperscript{15} His role in the construction and operation of royal households, along with his brother Richard III who sought an equally extravagant set up for his castles, created many distinct features that were adopted by estates owned by the Tudors.\textsuperscript{16} Aside from his residences in the Thames valley, in 1463 to 1466 Edward concentrated on three other domestic building projects located in Fotheringhay and Nottingham, which he made the new domestic quarters for himself and his family, and a personal lodge in Dover.\textsuperscript{17} Other wealthy nobles may have aimed to imitate this style of living, and sought to match the scale or political effect of royal estates. This is a feature that united great households owned by a variety of wealthy and politically active families, and shows that the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{12} Ibid.
\bibitem{13} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 135.
\bibitem{14} Woolgar, \textit{The Great Household in Late Medieval England}, 5; Thurley, \textit{The Royal Palaces of Tudor England}, 16-17.
\bibitem{15} Thurley, \textit{The Royal Palaces of Tudor England}, 18.
\bibitem{16} Ibid.
\bibitem{17} Ibid, 19.
\end{thebibliography}
aristocracy in England aimed to portray a shared set of ideals through their domestic lifestyles. As a result, these households became the personal hubs of social and political affluence for different families, and power was diffused amongst them. Servants that worked in these settings were not only meant to support the lavish day-to-day lives of their masters, but they were also there to maintain and defend the household as a site of political authority.

Personal servants that worked in these powerful establishments were increasingly involved in struggles to showcase and validate political status. A rebellion led by the gentry that broke out against the crown in 1483, following Edward IV’s death and Richard III’s succession to the throne, challenged the continuity of the Yorkist government. When Richard was Duke of Gloucester he declared the young Edward V as illegitimate and unable to succeed to the throne, and by that summer it was suspected that Edward had been murdered. In January of 1484, the parliament passed an act that recognized Richard III’s title to the throne, and simultaneously aimed to attack Edward’s regime. One striking feature of this act is the list of Edward’s council of men; out of the 98 men who are listed, approximately one-third of them were his servants. Four of these household servants were accused of being rebels, which explains why Richard would question the position and reliability of his brother’s men as the basis of his political authority. As a result, Richard sought to restore his own authority after the rebellion, and in order to do so he re-established and secured a network of his own men, including personal servants, that would form a stable and trustworthy household presence. The household, it seems in this case, was regarded by both of these kings as the centre of their royal power, and their servants

21 Ibid, 179, 226.
were to protect and support political authority.\textsuperscript{22}

Both royal and noble estates also depended on servants for physical defence, which increased expenditures and the average numbers of membership in great houses. Correspondence from the mid-fifteenth century written by members of the Pastons, a gentle family based in Norfolk, contain examples of servants that were caught up in violent squabbles over property and other personal grievances between their masters and other nobles. John and Margaret Paston’s defence of Gresham manor against 3\textsuperscript{rd} Baron Robert Hungerford’s attack in 1449 and 1450 involved many of her servants who were armed with arrows, billhooks and javelins, and many of those who besieged the manor were servants employed by Hungerford.\textsuperscript{23} As far as correspondence and household records suggest, no servants were employed to specifically act as a bodyguard or house guard, rather it appears to have been a duty that was filled by servants of general domestic backgrounds that were prepared to provide defence when necessary.\textsuperscript{24} This helped to defend households and kept them smaller since extra personnel were not needed for protection, however large bodies of servants for great households were still a necessity and increased costs. In the mid-fifteenth century Edward IV spent 10,000 pounds on fortifications for his household in Dover.\textsuperscript{25} Records in his Ordinance of 1478 showed that Edward aimed to reduce numbers of household officials and allowances of food and fuel.\textsuperscript{26} Servants were a necessary force for both domestic and military purposes that also placed financial strain their masters.

The English elite used their households and the domestic servants that maintained these estates as physical evidence of their high status. The primary goal behind this display of wealth was to differentiate themselves from the lower orders of society. Sources of land-based income

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 226.
\textsuperscript{23} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 47.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 134.
\textsuperscript{25} Thurley, \textit{The Royal Palaces of Tudor England}, 21.
\textsuperscript{26} Myers, \textit{The Household of Edward IV}, 40.
that were available to the aristocracy varied widely in the late medieval period. Lower levels of rent paired with high rates of pay for servants and consumption of luxurious goods encouraged nobles to find more means of making profit. Different noble ranks were not defined by a specific income level, but large amounts of wealth were meant to support a noble’s position among the upper social ranks. Lineage and occupational background were equally important qualifications in gentle and noble groups. Elizabeth de Burgh was best known as the founder of Clare College in Cambridge, and was also a well-recognized member of the nobility and an influential figure in Suffolk at the time. She was the niece of Edward II and a cousin of Edward III, and a kinswoman of many noble families. Elizabeth de Burgh’s brother, Gilbert de Clare the Earl of Gloucester, had an income of six-thousand pounds. In the early fourteenth century Thomas the 2nd Earl of Lancaster had an annual income of 11,000 pounds. Both of these earls were among the wealthiest members of the nobility, and only four other earls in England earned more than three thousand pounds per year. Elizabeth herself earned around two-thousand pounds, plus she held a dower from two marriages. Annual charges in royal households also increased during the fourteenth century, such as Richard II’s household whose expenditures went up from about nine-thousand pounds in 1367 to 27,000 pounds by 1399. In the fifteenth century, the value of three dukedoms and eleven earldoms from 1436 hovered around 15,000 pounds.

Aside from the acquisition of massive households with large bodies of staff that served as physical displays of wealth, the elite also sought other goods that lower status groups, such as

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28 Ward, *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare*, xiii.
29 Ibid, xviii.
30 Ibid, xviii.
32 Ibid, *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare*, xviii.
34 Ibid.
artisans and merchants, could not have easily afforded. The use of specific furs for liveries displays one way the elite utilized resources for this purpose. A particular method used to enforce this categorization of status-based identities was through sumptuary laws that aimed to control dress and behaviour, which were first introduced in 1337. In Elizabeth de Burgh’s roll of liveries from 1343 her ladies-in-waiting received squirrel fur for their garments. Prior to 1400 squirrel fur was commonly worn in royal courts. By the fifteenth century artisans’ wives began to wear squirrel fur more often, so the elite aimed to purchase furs that were harder to obtain such as marten and sable. Liveries not only reflected the households that servants were employed in and the wealth of their employers, but they also represented the rank or prestige of their positions based on the appearance of their assigned clothing. Elizabeth’s roll of liveries lists clerks who received “fur of budge” and marbled cloth, whereas yeomen, grooms and pages listed at the bottom only received cloth for their liveries with no fur.

The Great Household

Elite medieval households and their owners relocated frequently for various reasons, such as the impact of warfare and disease. At the same time this movement would have displayed the amount of domestic servants that masters or mistresses had under their influence. The amount of travel between estates began to diminish after the fourteenth century, but during this time many nobles had households that were peripatetic. Great households were typically permanent establishments, but for travelling purposes lords and ladies also had riding or “foreign” households, and as they travelled between estates they were accompanied by personal servants.

34 Ward, Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare, 70.
35 Dyer, An Age of Transition, 134.
36 Ibid.
37 Ward, Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare, 69-70.
38 Woolgar, The Great Household in Late Medieval England, 8.
39 Ibid, 15.
According to the diet account of Elizabeth de Burgh’s journey from London to Clare that lasted from 10 to 25 of September 1338, wages were paid to four yeomen, twenty-eight grooms and five pages.\textsuperscript{40} In the \textit{Black Book} officers of the wardrobe, a financial department that contained valuable possessions, were required on moving days to set up liveries and waited upon other servants to move around furniture.\textsuperscript{41} When the destination was reached, the grooms of the chamber would take over this task.\textsuperscript{42} The number of servants that travelled with their masters typically represented just a fraction of the entire domestic staff that worked for a great household.

Due to the extensive amount of labour required for basic upkeep, management of domestic operations and finances, and for the personal well-being of the homeowners, servants were assigned to specific rooms or chambers based on their titles and specialized responsibilities. The number of servants in wealthy households was in general very large. The Duke of Clarence’s household in 1469 had around 299 to 332 servants.\textsuperscript{43} For royal households alone the calculated average of domestic workers was around 380 servants at the end of the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{44} Many of these departments were centered in the part of the household that was “below the stairs,” which allowed them to complete necessary duties and provided them living-quarters, so as they could work and live with minimal disruption for the homeowners.\textsuperscript{45} Out of all the departments reserved for service work, the kitchen was a central chamber common to all households in which necessary and preparatory-labour was conducted. Cellars and sculleries were also main hubs for prep work, typically tended to by cooks and cleaners. The pantry was

\textsuperscript{40} Ward, \textit{Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare}, 97.
\textsuperscript{41} Woolgar, \textit{The Great Household in Late Medieval England}, 17.
\textsuperscript{42} Thurley, \textit{The Royal Palaces of Tudor England}, 74.
\textsuperscript{43} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 186-188.
\textsuperscript{44} Woolgar, \textit{The Great Household in Late Medieval England}, 9.
\textsuperscript{45} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 32.
the portion of the kitchen where daily books were kept, in which bread, pastry and grain expenditures were recorded. The pantry was also where waiting servants, as in those who would serve food, would go to lay out bread and foodstuffs for daily consumption. The buttery was meant for the same purpose, but specifically to contain and serve ale and wine. 46

In regards to the rest of the household the open hall was the largest room and served as a space for socialization, where servants and homeowners presented the grandeur of the household. 47 Open halls would also sometimes contain separate chambers to hold coal, wood and other fuel for fireplaces, which had to be frequently attended to by menial servants. 48 The layout of Elizabeth de Burgh’s household was centered on the main hall where she displayed her books, artwork, candles and other fancy goods to visitors, but she also had chambers for privacy as well. 49 Nurseries and solars, which both contained private living and sleeping quarters, were popular household chambers in medieval England, and throughout the fifteenth century more departments were added for increased seclusion for the heads of household and their children. 50 These quarters typically contained more furniture than other areas, although households in the late medieval period had less furniture than ones from the seventeenth century. An account roll for Edward III’s Windsor household lists fireplaces, massive tables in the hall for eating, and lavish closets in the bedchamber. 51 Most noble households also had a chapel with at least one chaplain to serve it, and sizes of these rooms ranged from a closet to an average parish church. 52

The great household was a setting for hospitality and entertainment as well, and practices in hospitality allowed elite groups to place their wealth on open display through the designs of

46 Ibid, 19, 32-37.
49 Ward, Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare, xx.
50 Mertes, The English Noble Household, 42.
51 Thurley, The Royal Palaces of Tudor England, 8.
52 Mertes, The English Noble Household, 46, 140.
their household and the actions of their servants. Tournaments and jousting performed by knights played a big part in the formation of courteous and ceremonious social practices from the fourteenth century onward.\textsuperscript{53} Servants were needed in order to produce and provide aid for the household’s ceremonial display of their masters’ magnificence. During the period of Yorkist rule, kings increasingly formalized relations with their personal staff and some servants were given a significant amount of authority over their menial companions.\textsuperscript{54} These increasingly formalized relations also acted as an important political tool, since gentle servants would form an influential network of peers that could support their masters’ political worth in return for access to the benefits of the lord’s wealth and social affiliation with wealthy families.\textsuperscript{55} Given the political significance behind these tasks, such roles were assigned to male servants of a notable social background. The nobility could also use their servants to help organize political maneuvers, particularly through their messengers who were usually personal chamber servants, although any variety of servants could tend to this task.\textsuperscript{56} The Pastons’ letters were sometimes delivered by servants who also acted as couriers, such as John Bocking, who reported to John Paston and Sir John Fastolf on behalf of Archbishop Bourchier in 1456.\textsuperscript{57} Servants were an integral component of noble households, and played a significant role in their masters’ administrative duties, which encompassed parliamentary and social endeavours both at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{58}

Male servants of higher domestic rank were central to the upkeep and operations behind grand practices of consumption and expressions of power in noble estates. The prestige and

\textsuperscript{53} Woolgar, \textit{The Great Household in Late Medieval England}, 21.
\textsuperscript{54} Horrox, \textit{Richard III, a Study of Service}, 227.
\textsuperscript{55} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 121.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 121.
significance of their positions were defined and supported in fifteenth century royal household regulations. Menial servants were typically tucked away into their designated work-space, and it was expected that personal servants would know about the inner-workings of the home. Inevitably, noble male servants operated as the eyes and ears of their masters, which provided them with a position that could potentially be used to an advantage. The sharp contrast between menial labourers and servants held in high regard was outlined and supported in sets of provisions laid out by the king’s Commons in 1445.\(^{59}\) This set of provisions “necessary for a king’s household” itemized the ranks of servants in household offices, and aligned their labour procedures to secure the household’s operation and finances. George the Duke of Clarence, in a similar fashion to Edward IV’s ordinances, also published and implemented household regulations which focused on “the politic and good rule” of late-fifteenth century royal palaces.\(^{60}\) In a more practical sense these ordinances and regulations outlined the precise work schedule and duties of domestic servants. However, the wider purpose of these texts was to outline the ways servants were to participate in the promotion of good rule and the magnificence of their lord or lady.\(^{61}\)

The Lady of Clare’s household book provides a glimpse into the ways male domestic servants and her ladies of the household were categorized based on their occupation and relationship to their master or mistress. One of the most striking features of her household account and other personal records is the manner in which her servants were listed in accordance with their role or title. Both the roll of liveries from 1343 and her will from 1355 included sections of servants, all of whom are listed after members of the household who did not perform

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\(^{60}\) Ibid, 28-29.
domestic labour, such as knights and ladies-in-waiting. Clerks are placed in the same “rank” as the ladies, followed by esquires and sergeants. “Middle clerks” and “little clerks” each have a distinct rank in the household’s scheme, along with their own listed unique liveries, though there is no explanation as to why they hold separate ranks. Lastly, yeomen and grooms are listed, and the only servants not listed for a livery but otherwise mentioned are pages.\(^62\) The other unranked servants are women, who worked as laundresses and likely did their duties outside of the house.

Servants in royal households during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were also predominantly male. Edward IV’s household, according to the \textit{Black Book}, contained stewards, chamberlains, treasurers of the household and the chamber, controllers, cofferers, deans of the chapel, almoners, secretaries, keepers of the great wardrobe, and clerks.\(^63\) Many of these positions were filled by members of the gentry, whose families sent their sons to work in honourable positions in the households of their peers or superiors.\(^64\) Royal houses tended to divide stewards and chamberlains into two separate departments: the Lord Steward, referred to as \textit{domus magnificencie}, was assigned to the service side of the hall and kitchens and handled accounting and household management, discipline and order.\(^65\) The Chamberlain’s responsibility was to stage public ceremony and to provide private services to the king.\(^66\) Treasurers controlled stocks of household goods and money.\(^67\) Aside from tending to the chapel, chaplains could also have simultaneously worked as a household’s steward or treasurer.\(^68\) At the bottom of these more highly-esteemed positions in domestic service were squires and gentlemen, whose social rank was based on landownership. In order to attain position of gentlemen one usually had to have

\(^{62}\) Ward, \textit{Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare}, 87.
\(^{63}\) Myers, \textit{The Household of Edward IV}, 286-297.
\(^{64}\) Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 62.
\(^{65}\) Starkey, \textit{The English Court}, 4, 33.
\(^{66}\) Ibid, 4.
\(^{67}\) Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 23.
\(^{68}\) Ibid, 25.
one’s own tenants.  

Below these highly-ranked titles were the menial servants who came from less privileged social backgrounds, and usually performed more hands-on labour. Yeomen attended to general tasks around the stables, waited tables in the hall, and changed the lord’s bed, but more menial jobs such as scrubbing the larder and cleaning dishes were left for the groom. Clerks sometimes referred to as “serjeants” regulated and produced records of bills, day-books and receipts of expenses for the household. Kitchen clerks typically appear in households with a more complex layout, and had to organize duties of other servants involved with the kitchen and related departments. Edward IV employed a clerk of the kitchen who monitored the master cooks “taken hede that ther be no waste do by them in there offices.” He also hired a variety of other clerks for related departments in the kitchen, such as the spicery and the saucery. Practices in hospitality outlined in household ordinances largely determined the work that had to be done to provide as much comfort as possible. The path a guest would take into a household involved an intricate process in which they were greeted, led into the hall and chamber, and taken on a tour by ushers or marshals. Very large households were sometimes able to afford servants del ewery, who circulated basins of water with towels for the lord and guests to wash their hands during a meal. Overall these household members covered a wide spectrum of labour; however their positions were not heavily associated with their master’s social and political prestige to the same degree as noble servants.

While household manuals helped to provide a base by which domestic servants were

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69 Ibid, 27.
70 Ibid, 30.
71 Starkey, The English Court, 32.
72 Mertes, The English Noble Household, 34.
73 Myers, The Household of Edward IV, 64.
75 Mertes, The English Noble Household, 40.
categorized and how they acted in their roles, they also illustrate the difficult relationship between master and servant. Noble concepts and cultural associations of honour were present in the level of trust that masters attributed to their servants, thus honesty and reliability were significant aspects of social culture and domestic harmony in aristocratic households. Both masters and servants were bound to honesty and true intention, both of which were laid at the base of honourable relationships in elite domestic settings. More directly a servant in such an influential position could have threatened the livelihood of their master. Poisoning, for example, was a concern expressed by Edward IV, who outlined extra security measures for the porter in household offices near the kitchen. Household body-service, such as washing and use of the lavatory, was tended to by servants of gentle rank such as the groom of the stool in the fifteenth century. The identities of noble and gentle families shared a sense that the household was meant to be an honourable community and as a result public observation and judgement were sources of concern. The position of menial servants did not generally appeal to noble relations and concepts of honour, but higher-ranked servants who were usually more trusted by their masters had to be able to adhere to aristocratic ideals of honesty in their intentions. Servants heavily involved in their masters’ private lives would have been exposed to intimate secrets, and some were given access to restricted knowledge in the exchange of correspondence. Some employers chose to not have their servants involved in personal matters over concerns of inaccuracy and dishonesty. In 1471 Margaret Paston contacted her brother-in-law Sir John

76 Phillips, “The Invisible Man,” 144.
78 Ibid.
79 Woolgar, The Great Household in Late Medieval England, 89.
80 Ibid, 42.
81 Ibid, 363.
82 Mertes, The English Noble Household, 63.
Paston about wood sales, where she instructed him to send a response to this matter himself due to the “untruth in servants nowadays.”

Disputes with masters, quarrels with fellow staff, dispersal of personal information and an exertion of power in localities all fueled anxieties about the influence that male servants of gentle status held both within and outside the home. Those who sought more prestigious positions in domestic work were faced with competition from other gentle families, and even those who had managed to obtain a secure position would likely be subjected to harsh criticism and gossip from their peers. Correspondence between masters and servants in the Paston household showcases this competitive mentality expressed by some higher-up staff. It was common for the Pastons’ servants to consistently express their loyalty and honesty to their masters both in writing and in their daily actions. William Peacock was a personal servant to Margaret Paston, and he appeared to have clashed with other servants and some of Margaret’s family members, perhaps in an attempt to have reasserted his position as a noble servant, and showcased his loyalty to the household. One such case involved Peacock and Margaret’s nephew, Clement, who wished to work in Edward IV’s kitchen, but first wanted to gain some first-hand experience in his aunt’s home. Peacock instructed the sewer of the kitchen to not give the young nephew a dish “until the comptroller tells him to,” effectively prohibiting Clement from learning and performing certain tasks. Perhaps Peacock wished to test the capabilities and reliability of this new, young worker before he would be able to serve at the main table. Peacock also refused to allow Margaret’s cousin Robert Clere to temporarily occupy the Pastons’ pastures

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in 1478, which prompted her to address Peacock’s unkindness, and claimed “such servants may take trouble betwixt you, which were against courtesy.”\textsuperscript{86} Other servants in Peacock’s position may have also struggled with the balance between household loyalty and the task of enforcing discipline among other servants and guests.

Servants were increasingly involved in concerns over social order and the preservation of elite status at the end of the medieval period. The social symbolism of noble households also had to be represented and upheld by their servants, who reflected the wealth and extravagance of their masters simply by their sheer numbers and specific titles. Both masters and staff took part in these displays of social superiority fueled by the over consumption of luxurious goods that were unattainable by lower orders.\textsuperscript{87} The noble servant was a physical manifestation of the master’s power and prestige, in the same fashion as the grand scale of the household itself.\textsuperscript{88} Although there was a clear hierarchy set up to categorize servants of different ranks based on the nature of their work and relative social standing, the chain of command is less clear. For example the steward was considered to be a general manager of sorts, but it is unclear the extent of authority they had over kitchen clerks or chamberlains.\textsuperscript{89} Personal servants do not appear to have shared the same system that ranked other domestic staff that placed marshals over ushers, and yeomen above grooms.\textsuperscript{90} The lack of a stricter hierarchy made it so there was space for ambition and advancement among the upper domestic groups, which allowed some servants to advance into more prestigious positions. A sub-clerk named Robert Draper that worked in Sir Hugh Luttrell’s household in 1420 was promoted to steward in 1426.\textsuperscript{91} Gentle servants that sought

\begin{footnotes}
\item[87] Cooper, “From Family Member to Employee,” 281.
\item[88] Phillips, “The Invisible Man,” 143.
\item[89] Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 17, 21.
\item[90] Ibid, 30.
\item[91] Ibid, 71.
\end{footnotes}
income and honour through their occupation were able to integrate themselves into prestigious positions within this more open hierarchical system.

Noble manservants were also more likely to be provided an opportunity to participate in their master’s political activities. The value of their positions and personal input went beyond domestic management. Edward IV’s Draft of The Ordinance of 1478 was made “for the establishment of the king’s house by the advice of his council which his highness straightly charge[s] and command[s] every [of] his officers and other within his household to observe and keep.”92 Elizabeth de Burgh’s household council was comprised of her closest clerks and officials, and advised her on important policy decisions throughout the fourteenth century.93 Household councils became more of an executive body for noble families, and servants held in high-regard expanded its ranks. Most of these councils were attended by chief officers, such as stewards, chamberlains and treasurers, who became increasingly active counsellors by the late fifteenth century.94 Meetings held for Richard III’s council were mostly comprised of these household officials.95 The growing influence of these domestic councils, particularly in the royal court, reflects the authority and power that aristocratic households provided to these servants.

An Absence of Women

Women who worked as servants were practically excluded from wealthy households and the hierarchies within them, and if they were hired as servants in noble homes they were largely restricted from the household’s social and private chambers. It seems that no lodgings were made available to servant women in great households, and gentle manservants were expected to live

92 Myers, The Household of Edward IV, 203.
93 Ward, Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare, xx.
95 Ibid, 129.
away from their wives while on duty, so they were also kept out. This absence of women was intended. In great households women performed very few, if any tasks, and were generally not hired to work for wealthy families as a domestic servant. A treatise on kingship from 1326 written for Edward III, known as *The Treatise of Walter Milemete*, advised the young prince to not place trust in women and to keep them out of the royal household with the aid of his gentle servants. This may have also been the result of rampant prostitution in large households. A source from circa 1300 titled *Fleta*, a treatise on the common law of England, claimed the marshal of the household was responsible for keeping the common areas free of prostitutes, and judging by the penalties this was a common and persistent issue. For example, the penalty for a prostitute’s third offence was to have her hair cut off. Practically all managerial domestic roles were reserved for and occupied by men. Women were often kept out of the household hierarchy, and were stripped of any potential power or influence that would have allowed them to operate in the same ranks as men, with the exception of gentlewomen. In sources that were produced for or referenced late medieval households, both aristocratic and otherwise, female servants are inconspicuous figures who rarely spoke for themselves, or if they did had their words filtered through male hands in wills and court records.

Servant women typically worked as laundresses for noble households, however it seems that many laundresses came from outside of the home, and were not a part of the rest of the live-in staff. Elizabeth de Burgh hired and paid a laundress for “a visit” in May 1334. In order for clothing to have properly been washed, fuel was needed to heat up water and wash basins had to

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97 Ibid, 35.  
98 Ibid.  
100 Ward, *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare*, 87.
be kept clean. The only garments practical enough to have been kept washed with this set-up were linens and unlined clothing such as shirts.\textsuperscript{101} Laundry in Edward IV’s household appears to have been taken care of by yeomen and grooms in the late fifteenth century, and laundry soaps and ashes to heat water were kept in the spicery.\textsuperscript{102} Royal households strongly adhered to the idea that they could preserve an orderly following without the presence of women and their perceived mental incompetency and physical weaknesses.\textsuperscript{103} Women that were hired to serve in more intimate positions, such as chamberwomen, ladies-in-waiting or nursery servants could only have worked with the lady of the household as personal companions, or provided aid in child rearing.\textsuperscript{104} Domestic work in smaller, less politically charged households was considered to be sources of labour that suited women, whereas men were to be in managerial positions for supervision, exercise of patriarchal authority, and political or financial advice.\textsuperscript{105}

The wider demographic and economic impacts caused by the Black Death led to the redistribution of land and wealth during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Greater movement of labourers due to demographic shifts helped to supply great households with servants, who also supported the growth of these estates. New patterns of consumption that maintained lavish lifestyles in these households reflected the wealth of the families that owned them, and was used to validate the prestige of noble ranks. Important political and economic mechanisms that supported the grandeur and social significance of great households largely adhered to masculine concepts of authority, control and order. This also actively implemented a system that excluded women from major offices within noble establishments.\textsuperscript{106} Women were perceived to be

\textsuperscript{101} Woolgar, \textit{The Great Medieval Household}, 169.
\textsuperscript{102} Myers, \textit{The Household of Edward IV}, 227.
\textsuperscript{103} Mertes, \textit{English Noble Household}, 58.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, 50.
\textsuperscript{105} McIntosh, \textit{Working Women in English Society}, 45.
\textsuperscript{106} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 57.
unsuitable for male-oriented positions within household hierarchies; in fact women were unmentioned in larger social, political and occupational categories in late medieval society as well. This was a trend that carried on into the sixteenth century as social theorists aimed to explain and reaffirm people’s positions, while they struggled to keep the nobility and gentry distinct groups, based on their wealth and rank. Male servants became increasingly involved in these concerns over the value of social and occupational titles, while the authority they were granted in domestic positions fueled concerns over the stability of power in household hierarchies and master-servant relationships. Gender was not a significant factor in concerns over social or political stability within elite domestic settings during the late medieval period.
CHAPTER 2: Servants and Great Households in the Sixteenth Century

The sixteenth century has been characterized as a period when membership numbers in great households, particularly in the amount of servants, began to stabilize. As the Tudor monarchy began to centralize political power in their royal court, the social influence of great households began to diminish. Magnificent displays of wealth, lavish hospitality and separate living chambers that divided lords and ladies from their servants were all central to aristocratic domestic identity. The households of the nobility were physical representations of their social status, and validated their position in the hierarchy that encompassed all male titles and occupations in England. Conspicuous consumption, political shifts, changing economic conditions and social expressions of wealth all contributed to the stabilization in servant numbers and eventual disintegration of great households. As the growth of these households began to slow down, the social prestige and privileges shared among male servants of higher household rank weakened. In the meantime, while such domestic positions were still relevant, homeowners that hired men who held social and domestic prestige expressed concerns over the balance of power and household authority in master-servant relationships. Authors and playwrights worked with this dynamic to create fictional portrayals of servants as deviant, disloyal subjects who took advantage of their weakened masters. Towards the end of the century when Elizabeth I was in power, other literary sources were devoted to the changing nature of domesticity in terms of gender, and began to outline service as a position that was no longer prestigious, but rather demeaning, for men of gentle or noble status.

England underwent a period of rapid demographic growth during the sixteenth century,
which likely led to more people entering into the middling groups of society.\textsuperscript{1} Urban centres experienced a visible increase in population, mostly due to migrant labourers who sought work during the second half of the century, and as a result the urban population accounted for ten percent of all English people by 1600, compared to just five percent in the 1520s. In London alone based on manorial survey records, the population rose from fifty thousand to two hundred thousand people.\textsuperscript{2} Urban centres increasingly became a popular hub for workers to congregate in, and great households that had thrived in urban settings continued to offer reliable sources of income for noble families and gentle or menial servants. Demands for houses and plots of land increased amidst a growing population, which caused rents and prices of land to double around the country from 1500 to 1540. In 1561 epidemics of plagues and occurrences of “sweating sicknesses” stabilized the population, and kept it at around three million for the remainder of the century.\textsuperscript{3}

The sixteenth century is also characterized by important social and political reforms sparked by Tudor monarchs, which altered the power held by groups in the upper ranks of society and affected the prestige of noble manservants. One of the primary goals of the Reformation, which spanned the years from 1530 to 1570, was to break down the power of the Church and the influence of its clergy. Monastic property that had an annual value of about three million pounds was seized by the Crown.\textsuperscript{4} This movement was aided by the wider cultural and intellectual impacts of the Renaissance, and led to increased rates of literacy among elite families. As a result, the clergy’s involvement in educational practices had been greatly

\textsuperscript{1} Heard, \textit{Tudor Economy and Society}, 80; Amussen, \textit{An Ordered Society}, 1.
\textsuperscript{2} Heard, \textit{Tudor Economy and Society}, 17 - 21.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, 23, 25.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid, 90.
diminished, and simultaneously their influence in England’s administration and politics.\textsuperscript{5} The monarchy recognized that the nobility now had access to greater political and intellectual gain, so they implemented heavy fines and recognizances in order to financially subdue them. Gradually, the King and his parliament’s authority forced noble families to move away from the political climate of their private estates, which had largely been supported by highly-ranked servants, and had them flow into the royal court.\textsuperscript{6}

Political and cultural shifts also led to reforms in the construction of great households. Expansions and refinements in Tudor building came at time when affluence among the elites had increased in the royal court. A growing awareness of importance in public and private appearance as marks of status also gave them opportunities for greater privacy and comfort in both royal, or main, and private or “secondary” estates. Desire for seclusion in massive estates is shown in the elaborate set-ups of private departments and the subsequent decline of the great hall, a once central feature for social life and the flow of movement in late-medieval households.\textsuperscript{7} Contemporary descriptions of ceremonial practices in the Court support this claim, since there appears to be no mention of a Tudor king that dined in a great hall. In 1526, the Eltham Ordinances specified that great halls were to only be kept in greater or “main” houses, such as Hampton Court for the Tudor kings, while their secondary private houses had great halls removed.\textsuperscript{8} The growth of the Privy Chamber’s significance in royal estates during Henry VIII’s reign confirms that there was a more prominent interest in seclusion, comfort, and privacy. These chambers remained central in the King’s private life during the sixteenth century, and had a very significant impact on household ordinances and servants’ duties: 120 posts were reserved in

\textsuperscript{5} Alison Sim, Masters and Servants in Tudor England (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd.), 10; Heard, Tudor Economy and Society, 78.
\textsuperscript{6} Mertes, The English Noble Household, 1250-1600, 188.
\textsuperscript{7} Thurley, The Royal Palaces of Tudor England, 113.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 114.
Privy Chambers at the beginning of Henry VIII’s reign, and the position of gentlemen pensioners by the end of the reign increased this number of posts up to 200. Even at the end of the century, which marked a decline in the role of Privy Chambers, 175 posts were still reserved for gentle, personal servants.9

Modern historians of English households, politics and noble culture have pointed to conspicuous consumption and extravagant displays of wealth as the main culprit that posed a challenge to the nobility’s and gentry’s capacity for survival.10 In 1500 there were around fifty-five landed noble families, however there appears to have been very little or no growth as the number of nobles remained at this amount at the end of the century. The reason behind this is likely related to depleted funds that caused nobles to plummet in the social hierarchy.11 Families in the aristocracy and gentry were a miniscule fraction of English society in the Tudor and Stuart periods, but they owned most of the wealth and political power. The family, as the basic unit of social and political order, served as a metaphor for the English state.12 The expansion of great households and numbers of servants in the fifteenth century represented a drive among members of elite families to showcase their influence. England’s nobility was a more open and informally defined elite compared to other European countries in the sixteenth century. The ability to express one’s wealth and prestige was crucial to prove their worthiness in such a highly esteemed position.13 Sufficient requirements for membership in noble groups, such as appropriate lifestyle and landed wealth, were primarily presented in individual households. Thus elite households also had to appeal to the standards of order, wealth, and power that upheld the social, financial and political privileges of aristocratic and royal families.

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9 Loades, *The Tudor Court*, 185.
11 Heard, *Tudor Economy and Society*, 93.
Although the fortunes of individual elite and gentle families varied, due to inconsistent rates in income received from rents or other profitable enterprises such as commercial farming, their income shows that the gap between rich and poor groups widened during the sixteenth century.\(^{14}\) Marriage and patronage amongst these groups were the main methods to achieve social advancement, while inflated land values and rent provided them with more wealth. These methods that landed elites relied on to maintain high status and political connections fueled greater competition between them. In terms of numbers, it has been estimated that in 1500 there were eight-hundred esquires and knights, and five thousand gentlemen.\(^{15}\) Redistribution of land allowed more wealthy newcomers to gain a spot in higher ranks, and in the mid-sixteenth century about fourteen percent of the nobility was made up of newly established families that had taken over the positions of bankrupt nobles.\(^{16}\) In total, these groups who held most of the wealth and political authority only made up about two percent of England’s total population.\(^{17}\) Favourable economic conditions provided many benefits to already wealthy families, but it also meant they had to compete with people who could also acquire a spot amongst them.\(^{18}\) One way to out-do these competitors was through open displays of lavish lifestyles, a method reserved for the construction of extravagant estates. This method, while it proved to be temporarily effective, was unsustainable and led many noble families to constant turnover of land and bankruptcy over the course of the century.\(^{19}\)

With an increased flow of people both into and out of gentle and noble groups, some English authors preoccupied themselves with issues of order and degree. Some created schemes

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 93.
\(^{17}\) Heard, *Tudor Economy and Society*, 79.
\(^{18}\) Ibid, 91.
\(^{19}\) Ibid, 93.
or ranks of social categories. Their publications reveal an unclear distinction between principal status groups within the nobility, aside from their assigned titles. There was also no definitive blockade that could prevent movement upwards into the higher ranks. Sir Thomas Smith, a lawyer, attempted to define schemes or degrees of people in his book *The Commonwealth of England* published in the 1560s. First were noble gentlemen such as kings and earls, called *Nobilitas Major*, then lesser landowners like knights and esquires called *Nobilitas Minor*. Citizens, yeomen andburgesses followed in the third group. Lastly was the fourth sort of men: servants, labourers, merchants and husbandmen, simply described as “the sort of men who do not rule.” In 1577 William Harrison, a priest, also proposed a four-fold scheme of degrees of people in *The Description of England*. Harrison defined people’s status in English cities by their occupations and possession of personal freedom, which confirmed their place in the hierarchy. In 1600 new orders were still being rearranged and clarified in Thomas Wilson’s *The State of England*. The main reason why these theories and schemes had to be constantly updated was because they were formed on basic, simplified patterns that helped to track changes in different social statuses.

The nobility likely acted with individual rather than collective power based on the nature of great households and the diversity of their titles. By the 1550s concepts of the main orders of society were pretty well established, however the extent to which these concepts indicated any real alteration in the structure of elite society is unclear. To some degree certain aspects of social groups were more well-defined. The peerage, comprised of dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts

21 Ibid, 20.
and barons, was separated from the gentry by rank due to the former’s right to sit in the House of Lords, the upper house of England’s parliament. The lower or “landed” elite were mainly comprised of yeomen, who had to have an annual income of forty shillings for this position, and wealthy husbandmen. At the very bottom of the base was the peasantry, including labourers which also encompassed menial servants. In order to differentiate themselves in a physical sense, elites also sought luxurious materials, such as specific furs for liveries that were too expensive for people with low incomes. Royal families wore robes of gold, and velvet was a material meant for noble clothing. Sumptuary laws show the advantageous position of male servants and the status they achieved through their master. Their liveries not only represented the affiliation to a household, but they also emphasized the prestige of their social background and reaffirmed their rank in both domestic and public settings. These laws proved to be difficult to enforce. Wealthy nobles would sometimes pass down their worn clothing to their servants. A proclamation made in 1597 addressed this issue and, despite efforts made by the government, they could not have ensured that people wore appropriate clothing to indicate a specific social rank.

Great Households of the Sixteenth Century

Although household membership numbers appeared to have stabilized, compared to the rapid growth in great household membership during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, numbers in household servants were still high. By the end of the medieval period, the average number of members in a great household was approximately 150 for noble households and about

25 Ibid, 89.
26 Laslett, The World We Have Lost, 23.
27 Heard, Tudor Economy and Society, 84.
28 Mertes, The English Noble Household, 68.
29 Richardson, Household Servants in Early Modern England, 105.
30 Heard, Tudor Economy and Society, 84.
65 for the gentry’s households. The Northumberland Household in 1512 had about 163 servants in the main estate. The household of Edward Stafford the Third Duke of Buckingham had an increase from about 187 to 225 staff members from 1503 to 1511 and by 1521 he had hired over 500 servants. Henry Percy’s staff continued to increase after the sixteenth century; his household started with fewer than 50 servants in the late 1580s and jumped to 80 by the 1620s. It is unclear when exactly households stopped hiring extensive amounts of staff, or when membership numbers began to stabilize and decline. What is clearer is the manner in which servants were realigned in accordance to new ideals in domestic settings, namely a pursuit for more privacy in royal estates that relocated many personal servants to the Privy Chamber. This led to reforms in household management for private chambers and a decreased importance in ceremonial practices, which consequentially led to a loss in prestige for many personal servants who had gained influence through ceremonious display of their masters’ authority.

Henry VIII’s interest in private quarters appeared as early as the 1530s. At this point in time, the evolution of the Tudor Privy Chamber began in Hampton Court, with the purpose of looking after the King’s private needs. Based on the evidence of household ordinances and private accounts, the king occupied these lodgings more often, which suggests other public rooms had less significance in his daily routine. For even greater privacy, the king established other “miniature” estates on royal hunting grounds on the south side of the Thames outside of London, and supported the annexation of land for this purpose in Acts of Parliament of 1539 and 1540. The creation of royal hunting grounds and private estates were clarified in an Act

36 Ibid, 60.
released by the King’s Privy Council in 1548, which states their purpose was for “when his Highness waxed heavy with sickness, age and corpulences of the body, and might not travel so readily abroad, but was constrained to seek to have his game and pleasure ready at hand.”

Other wealthy households developed architectural barriers to prevent access into private rooms located on the lord’s side. Known as “the dais,” organization of noble households had it so these spaces were wholly separated from the servants’ quarters. The rise of the Privy Chamber as a new household department not only transformed the organization of great households, but it also refashioned the instruments of household government in royal estates to the extent that it became a widely recognized centre of political power. The growth of this department as a political hub was possible for Henry VII to apply in domestic settings due to the royal affinity Edward IV had built up during his reign.

The emergence of the royal Privy Chamber also reveals an increased importance in personal servants due to the labour and specialized skill sets they performed. Henry Percy’s household book from 1512 lists at least twenty-seven personal servants, who worked as stewards, clerks and grooms of the Privy Chamber, out of 163 listed in the cheque roll. Sir William Cecil’s household had around twenty-five to thirty-five managerial servants in the 1550s, and in 1585 Robert Dudley the Earl of Leicester brought along approximately 75 of his higher ranked servants on a journey into the Low Countries. Most Privy Chamber staff for the royal family had their own lodgings in the court, so they would always remain close by when on duty. In addition to these lodgings, many personal servants, peers and officers held in special

37 Ibid.
40 Ibid, 75.
regard by the king also had their own houses in the grounds of royal houses. The Earl of Kent is an example of a peer that had his own property near Greenwich in 1522.43 While this was a fairly convenient set-up for the king and his servants, it also raised concerns over internal threats that stemmed from divisions within the household and the potential for personal servants to betray or sabotage their master’s livelihood.44 These concerns turned out to be a common worry expressed by other aristocratic homeowners with equally influential servants – their ability to gain the trust of their masters also fueled anxieties about betrayal, deceit and dispersal of confidential information.

Wealthy households still moved throughout the sixteenth century, and servants had to coordinate with these movements in order to organize a household for the lord’s arrival or departure. The staffs for the wardrobes and the Privy Chamber were typically tasked with arranging furniture and the general layout of private rooms. The Eltham Ordinances laid out the responsibilities for servants of Henry VIII’s Privy Chamber, and outlined how this department was supposed to be laid out before the court’s arrival.45 Ushers of the chamber, yeomen, groom porters, grooms of the wardrobe and grooms of the chamber also tended to the supervision, upkeep, and furnishing of private chambers. A variety of furnishings were kept in these quarters, mainly standing wardrobes that contained robes, jewels, housed linens and tapestries.46 Beds, fireplaces, dining tables and chairs were also commonplace in private rooms, all of which required daily upkeep, repairs and cleaning. Noble households also employed servants for wardrobes, who acted as personal clerks and purveyed items. The personal day-book of a nobleman named Thomas Hillary lists a servant who worked as both a secretary and an

43 Thurley.
44 Starkey.
46 Ibid.
accountant. These servants were in fairly versatile positions and dealt with their master’s personal and business matters.

Noble male servants were also responsible for the representation of their masters’ authority, and did so in both a practical and ceremonious manner, though with more focus placed on the former aspect than the latter. Numbers of yeomen increased over the 1500s, and were hired to guide the king on routes from one part of the palace to another. The Lord Steward’s department, which included kitchens and larders, was consistently planned out in a similar manner between different estates so that other household departments could prepare themselves and function quicker while their masters moved between estates. This uniform planning of service helped to outline daily arrangement for the king and any potential guests that would visit. With so many people employed for domestic security and daily management, the aristocracy shared their homes with men who balanced on the edge between household authority and loyal subordinate. Concerns over servants’ capabilities to alter their masters’ reputation or threaten them were addressed before the turn of the sixteenth century, as early as 1487. In that year, an act was released to state that personal servants were expected to enquire whether any household man below the rank of peer plotted to harm the king or the steward, treasurer, controller or any household councilor. It may be because this division of authority between personal servants and masters was slight enough that noble servants sparked masters’ concerns over domestic control and the balance of power.

The layout of Privy Chambers in royal households, and other private departments set up in other aristocratic establishments, made it so personal servants would be responsible for

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47 Mertes, *The English Noble Household*, 44.
49 Ibid, 72.
50 Starkey, *The English Court*, 75.
granting access to the head of household for guests and menial staff. This “team” of household servants was assigned private duties, for the comfort and well-being of their master, and public duties for the financial, political and social needs of the household. Esquires in the Tudor court for example had a more public than private function since they controlled routine access to the king.51 Their duty was to represent the king’s presence and authority while he was elsewhere, thus they allowed him to remain in the comfort of his private chamber while they kept him updated on visitors and any local news they might have had to share. The other group of household servants, as in the more menial labourers, was more involved in the household’s presentation and maintenance rather than its social or political functions. In the 1540s, the royal estate of Whitehall had a permanent cleaning staff with a gentleman usher to supervise them. Any stay that lasted longer than a few weeks required extensive cleaning afterwards, sometimes a complete overhaul of the palace, which included repairing or replacing furniture, tapestries and more.52 While these workers performed essential duties for comfortable living, it was the more managerial servants that were deeply involved with the private lives of their masters, thus a certain degree of trust and caution were exercised in these master-servant relationships.

Similarly to the Paston letters from the fifteenth century, the Lisle correspondence between Arthur Plantagenet, Lady Lisle, and their servants reveals attempts made by their personal household staff to provide comfort and defend the well-being of their Lord and Lady. By 1485, Arthur Plantagenet, the illegitimate son of King Edward IV, was the only remaining male heir of the Yorkist bloodline. Later, when his nephew Henry VIII became king, Arthur became keeper of the royal forests in Clarendon and Bere, as well as a Privy Councillor and

51 Loades, The Tudor Court, 46.  
52 Thurley, The Royal Palaces of Tudor England, 72.
Vice-Admiral of England.\textsuperscript{53} The letters were primarily written between 1533 and 1540 when Arthur was a viscount in Calais, France. Aside from defence of the town, he was also responsible for providing entertainment to visitors who travelled to or from England, which largely shaped practices of hospitality that were carried out by his servants.\textsuperscript{54} Letters that discuss outside guests or private conversations display the household privileges and access that the Lisles granted to their most trusted personal servants. In 1533 William Seller, the servant in charge of the Lisles’ rents, was given the responsibility of protecting their land as well, a task that included updating the Lisles on local gossip and news.\textsuperscript{55} The Lisles’ steward, John Husee, who is the main figure in the Lisle Letters, is one example of a household servant that sought to protect the Lisles’ household and local reputation. In 1534, Husee sent a letter to Lord Lisle regarding his “unfeigned friends,” and advised him to “keep all things secreter … be conversant with some persons which he saith useth daily company, sounding highly against your honour.”\textsuperscript{56} In January of that same year he discussed another servant, named Boyles, who Husee suspected of “not using himself well” in an attempt to showcase himself as a good judge of character for the Lisles’ domestic staff.\textsuperscript{57} Leonard Smyth, the Lisles’ treasurer, appears to have not enjoyed addressing personal conflicts among staff, and in June 1534 he admitted after assisting a servant in the buttery that he “would rather not deal with every brabbling manner.”\textsuperscript{58} The next month he referred back to the incident in order to re-iterate that it was his master’s job to remind servants of their place, and suggested he was unsure of this new servant’s performance, “to the intent that

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\textsuperscript{53} Muriel St. Clare Byrne and Bridget Boland, eds. \textit{The Lisle Letters: Abridged} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 10.  \\
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{56} Byrne, \textit{The Lisle Letters: Abridged}, 44.  \\
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 185.
\end{flushleft}
I would and meant first to see how his truth would appear.”

The organizational concepts of household configuration established in the fifteenth century had molded domestic spaces to operate in a hierarchical manner, and mimicked models proposed by contemporary social publications. Not only was such a system necessary for the daily operations of household management, but also to keep domestic servants within their assigned, subordinate positions. Servant roles changed, with some that expanded or some that retracted, during the emergence of the Privy Chamber. The establishment of gentlemen pensioners at the peak of royal Privy Chambers established under Henry VIII meant they also employed more people from gentle families, which expanded the rank of private servants. Domestic ranks were also used to determine the rewards and privileges highly esteemed servants would receive for their work. In 1545, smaller manors nearby Whitehall were provided to noble servants and chief ministers by the king to utilize as personal living spaces and offices. Individually based titles and roles separated male servants from each other through numerous criteria including personal relationships with the family, education, past work experience and reliability. The hierarchical scheme of servants, inspired by aristocratic enforcement of social status, competition for promotion and conflict over its arrangement, fed into noble anxieties about power, access and privileges granted to personal staff.

As great households became politicized spaces for servants during the sixteenth century, drama texts and plays began to portray the male domestic servant, specifically personal servants such as the Steward, as an ingenious schemer who aimed to confound magisterial authorities. A popular metaphorical use of noble manservants explored perceived crises in service and

59 Ibid, 195.
60 Loades, The Tudor Court, 185.
addressed insecurities of the household hierarchy. Masters and mistresses had to concern themselves with external and internal circumstances that could subvert household order and the master-servant relationship. Although aristocrats aimed to construct quarters in houses for privacy, many servants could slander their employers in secrecy, a practice that homeowners recognized as a source of power in the hands of their trusted employees. The potential for servants to destroy or unbalance household order was a topic of interest for sixteenth century writers. The character of Brainworm in Ben Jonson’s *Everyman in His Humour* from 1598 is a good example of this type of dramatic portrayal of a serving man. As the prime source of dramatic action, Brainworm used different disguises and portrayed other trickster-like abilities to represent broader domestic insecurities and perceived crises in male service. Servant upheaval, or dispersal of private knowledge, could undermine a family unit, and discredited the reputation of those in charge of a household. On the other hand it was a great concern for the servants as well, considering that guests or seemingly good friends of their masters’ could also spread slander, and it was the servants who would end up a likely target for accusations. John Husee was clearly worried about such an occurrence, as brought up in his letter to Lord Lisle.

Great households, as centres of political power and wealth, also had to enforce behavioural codes to ensure that the owners could have a private life among plenty of live-in staff. Manservants were given titles that reflected their access to, and ability to transfer, crucial information on domestic operations and personal observations. The fact that so many personal servants were necessary for daily functions, such as catering meals, tracking finances, and tending to wardrobes full of expensive clothing, jewels and tapestries, explains why noble

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62 Burnett, *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture*, 79.
64 Richardson, *Household Servants in Early Modern England*, 158.
65 Byrne, *The Lisle Letters: Abridged*, 44.
masters could relate to dramatic displays of malevolent servants; such concerns were rooted in the delicate balance of authority between masters and their personal, managerial employees. In the Northumberland Household Book, officers of the household were expected to return their keys of their offices every night to the Counting House, and they could only claim them when accompanied by an usher or yeomen of the chamber. This was likely implemented to prevent servants from committing theft, or from making false alterations to personal or financial records, and ensured that they could only attend their offices while their master was awake. Such responsibilities had to be monitored and controlled so that the balance of authority between master and high-status servants was not inverted, and that the organization of household authority did not fall into disarray.

Male domestic servants, like the nobility, operated within individually assigned roles. Acquisition and distribution of power was a male-oriented matter. As for young women who sought positions in service, opportunities were very limited for them, and great households employed predominantly male staff throughout the sixteenth century. More girls and women sought positions in residential service as a result of demographic and economic pressures that led many young people to find work. In England’s urban settings the sex ratios of hired servants varied widely between towns and cities. A lone servant was more often a woman than a man, and even though the gender of the servants employed was based on the productive activities of the household the perceived feminization of domestic tasks was largely restricted to peasant and merchant households. Towards the end of the century this appears to have changed. A census from Ealing produced in 1599 shows that thirty-nine percent of servants in gentlemens’

67 McIntosh, Working Women in English Society, 56.
68 Ibid, 58.
households were women.⁷⁰ Women’s domestic work was not associated with authority, observation or management; this type of domesticity was more clearly linked to masculine concepts of service. Most of the women mentioned in the Earl of Leicester’s books are ones who were paid to wash the lord’s linens. One clear exception to this is one woman “that keapith Master Bakon’s house at Kewe,” whose duties are otherwise unmentioned.⁷¹ Female servants were excluded from social schemes and status groups described by sixteenth-century authors, and there was no clearly defined space for them to occupy in households nor were they provided tasks that reflected their master’s status. Servants were hardly incorporated into a status-based group to begin with, and since women were essentially status-less people female servants were further placed into the outliers of the early modern socio-political spectrum.

It is difficult to pinpoint when exactly larger, wealthier households began to hire more female servants. Most servant women who are mentioned in late medieval and sixteenth-century account books for noble households worked as laundresses and dairymaids. Chambermaids, gentlewomen or other personal female attendants were not servants that performed household duties, rather their purpose involved social and ceremonial uses for their mistress. The Northumberland Household book from 1512 only includes gentlewomen among its female members; aside from this the remaining employees have masculine titles and names.⁷² Records from the Leicester household accounts list no live-in female staff members from 1558 to 1586.⁷³ The account book for Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland and a descendent of the Henry Percy from the Northumberland Household Book, is the earliest available source for this study that explicitly lists women as domestic servants. Both Percys were members of the Tudors’ royal

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court. The 9th Earl of Northumberland was a courtier of Elizabeth I, and was later imprisoned under James I. The primary establishment of his family was Petworth House located in Sussex. His account book lists these women by name and occupation: the first woman listed in 1599 was named Mrs. Wright and was a keeper for Percy’s Barbican house. Although this is the earliest recorded entry for a female servant, it is likely that Percy had hired women to fill these positions prior to 1599, though it is unclear what such a position would specifically have entailed. What is important to note about Percy’s female servants is that they do not appear to occupy separate ranks; rather their titles and subsequent duties are recorded in a more generalized fashion.

The accession of Elizabeth I in 1558 possibly marked a turning point in gendered concepts of domestic service among the monarchy and the nobility. Itineraries for Mary I’s household in 1518 shows it was comprised of sixty-nine servants, and she was accompanied by both ladies and gentlemen. The development of the royal Privy Chamber as an administrative force halted while domestic functions of department became more prominent. Elizabeth’s ladies-in-waiting began to substitute for gentlemen and provisions were made for three-tiered structure of feed posts occupied by women, namely Ladies of the Bedchamber and Gentlewomen of the Privy Chamber. Her personal servants were augmented by the appointment of a group of unsalaried women and an additional skeleton staff of men, with the exception of the Groom of the Stool whose position had mostly been eliminated. Duties performed by members of Elizabeth’s Privy Chamber were of a straightforwardly domestic nature. Chamberers are

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid, 164.
78 Thurley, *The Royal Palaces of Tudor England*, 70.
79 Starkey, *The English Court*, 147.
mentioned often in records of the wardrobe and were responsible for the Queen’s linen, and they partook in the main responsibilities of everyday management of the Privy Chamber. It is not indicated if her other upper servants, such as the ladies and gentlewomen, had specific duties to perform, unless they were given specific posts such as Mistress of the Robes, Keeper of the Jewels and Plate or Keeper of the Queen’s books.  

Only two men worked as Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber during Elizabeth’s reign, one named John Asteley who was also Keeper of the Jewel House, and Christopher Hatton but there is no evidence to suggest their posts as Gentlemen were anything other than an honorary title, and no record indicates the practical duties they performed.

In literary works on contemporary social theory, servants were incorporated into a broad group that was indistinguishable from other people included in the final strata of “those who do not rule.” Neither Smith’s *The Commonwealth of England* from the early sixteenth century nor Wilson’s *The State of England* at the beginning of the seventeenth century explicitly state where, or if, women belonged in prominent social or occupational categories. As uncategorized people that could acquire some hint of status through their affiliation to a master or mistress, female domestic servants were confusing figures to those they shared a household with. Gervase Markham’s publication *A Health to a Gentlemanly Profession of Servingmen* from 1598 discussed the decline of superior male servants as a result of increased privacy, along with other significant architectural changes, and less need for military support towards the end of the century. Markham recalled a time “when Masters would merit such marvels at your hands … you tied your servants with this unbreakable bond of assured friendship. Infinite are the

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80 Ibid., 151-152.  
81 Ibid., 155.  
examples that may be alleged in this matter. Yea, but some will say, these examples are old, and long is it since this love and affection was thus in the highest degree made manifest.”

83 This text was also employed by moralists to complain that positions which had been previously allocated to men were being overtaken by women, and that the nature of noble domesticity had been overturned.

84 This trend carried on into the early seventeenth century, as shown in William Parkes’ The Curtaine-Drawer of the World from 1612, who argued that the state of gentlemanly service had “turned men into boys, and sometimes into women.”

85 Women’s perceived intellectual and physical frailties called for a man’s control, but could also show a lack of control as well, which would challenge the strength of the patriarchal, familial honour system inside individual households. For male servants of gentle status, this was taken as a sign that servanthood adhered less to prominent masculine values, and hence became a more demeaning occupation for them.

86 Behavioural expectations and concerns that involved female servants appear more frequently in literature and portraits from the seventeenth century, constructed in the aftermath of Elizabeth I’s influence in the royal Privy Chamber. These fictional women came to represent real ideals in dutiful behaviour, or ones that failed to complement patriarchal norms.

87 Ideas of “good conduct” that were applied to working women aimed to outlaw a range of behavioural possibilities, and to silence or prohibit any signs of female misconduct. Their master’s supervision was meant to prevent such misconduct; however a lot of household labour required

84 Heal, Hospitality in Early Modern England, 165-166.
85 William Parkes, The Curtaine-Drawer of the World (London: Printed by Nicholas Okes for Leonard Becket, and are to be sold at the Temple neere to the Church, 1612), 38.
86 Burnett, Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture, 126.
87 Ibid, 126-127.
both parties to work on their own initiative. Gendered honour codes in Tudor England were accumulative, and had to be publicly displayed so neighbours and locals would not question the stability of a family or their household. A servant’s misbehavior was taken as a sign that the man responsible for these subordinates was unable to instill masculine values in their home. As a result, male masters in these circumstances were considered to be weaker and effeminate. While male noble servants could disrupt social order and political affinity in a household, only female servants could be culprits for male feminization. Wives could also have been corrupted through a female servant’s influence, which further altered the effectiveness of patriarchal control in families. Women who worked in domestic settings were clearly viewed with suspicion, and seen as a group that could collapse social and gendered distinctions for their own ends.

Over the sixteenth century the growth in the number of servants that maintained great households slowed. The practice of conspicuous consumption that had shaped the layout, labour requirements and operations of noble establishments was unsustainable, and rapidly drained financial resources. Displays of wealth were less commonly placed at the forefront of great households, and the emergence of private departments in royal households reflected a greater desire to move away from public chambers. The Tudor monarchy actively aimed to subdue the power of noble estates, which further limited their ability to express their wealth and political significance within great households. Contemporary authors aimed to describe the different ranks of people within English society as a result of this fluctuation in wealth and power. In the midst of all this, the value of male personal servants changed as royal households focused more on

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89 Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England*, 126.
91 Burnett, *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture*, 127.
private departments and noble households lost financial and political prestige. Personal servants were granted privileges in these newly established private chambers, which raised concerns over the level of authority, access and privileges granted to them. These concerns took form in both correspondence and literary sources, which both depict complications in master-servant relationships due to the power that male servants held in politicized domestic settings. Such concerns expressed by both masters and male servants were clearly a male oriented matter since female servants, aside from those that worked in Elizabeth I’s Privy Chamber, were not granted access and privileges in their master’s personal and political actions.
CHAPTER 3: Servants in the Seventeenth Century

From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, England’s great households had undergone significant growth and prospered in both social influence and political power. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, this period of prosperity for noble households seemingly came to a close. The decline of noble estates resulted from a variety of social, financial and political circumstances. The state of the economy also seemed to work against the nobility, as prices for foodstuffs had risen six-fold in the early decades of the century. Servants were also affected by this, as the labour market became overstocked and wages rose less quickly than prices.\(^1\) Displays of wealth and overconsumption that had been used to define noble status were no longer sustainable, and had driven many wealthy, influential families away from their large households and personal servants. Male servants of higher domestic rank who worked in such households began to lose their status that they had acquired through their connections to noble homeowners. Internal and external factors that shaped seventeenth-century noble homes forced highly-esteemed manservants to search for new jobs that would better reflect their status as well-educated and politically influential figures. In order to maintain an ideal masculine identity, these men moved away from service to focus on, and take part in, the growing influence of the centralized royal court, in hopes that they could maintain connections with aristocratic employers. By doing so, men that sought these positions aimed to re-assert their masculinity through their occupational title, something that they could have achieved in domestic service while great households operated as containers for political and social power. Men who did domestic work in this century were still classified as servants. However, it seems that some male servants wanted to separate themselves from this title in order to preserve ideal gendered values.

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\(^1\) Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680*, 125.
in their occupational roles. Men in the middling working groups appeared to distance themselves from the domestic sphere in order to redefine occupational roles that suited gendered norms and social hierarchies.

Although women had been working as servants prior to the seventeenth century, this was mainly restricted to households among the peasantry or merchants households. As shown in artwork, literature, court records and some surviving account books, women were more present in the forefront of domestic operations compared to previous centuries. Reactions and portrayals of domestic women in these sources suggest that their presence was more noticeable and had more of a cultural impact than before, as religious and political figures aimed to validate traditional patriarchal schemes as a means of preventing moral corruption and social disorder. As men shunned the status of servanthood, more positions were filled by women. Less male competition in domestic sectors also allowed women to acquire positions that shared many similarities with managerial roles in aristocratic households. Servant tax returns from the end of the century suggest that around eighty one percent of household servants in London were women.\(^2\) Lone servant women were likely entrusted with their masters’ secrets, and as court records suggest they could also observe and comment on the behaviours and actions of their employers. One source base that demonstrates this are the Court of Arches records from London, which provide detailed accounts of women’s experiences as domestic workers during the late seventeenth century.\(^3\) The accessibility that these women had to their masters’ private lives, along with the interest of artwork and literature in the capabilities and behaviours of female servants, shows that they were able to integrate themselves more firmly into domestic settings as


households and occupational gender-based hierarchies condensed.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, demographic expansion in England was uneven, and by the 1630s the population had largely stabilized in terms of growth. From 1603 to 1641 the population actually decreased by about nine percent. Accurate estimates are difficult to obtain, since most numbers are based on incomplete tax records and surveys, but it is likely that a period of renewed growth did not occur until the end of the century. The total population had risen to around five million by 1680. Demographic trends in some urban centres experienced dramatic growth, particularly in Yorkshire and Exeter where numbers doubled due to migration, but this pattern was inconsistent among other towns and cities. In the wake of this expansion, average prices for foodstuffs rapidly inflated and had risen sixfold compared to prices from the sixteenth century. Wages rose much more slowly in comparison and were at their lowest point in the early decades of the seventeenth century due to an overstocked labour market. Servants remained a mobile group in search of available employment, and long-standing service provided by gentle manservants became increasingly uncommon. This loss of long-term service in exchange for short-term employment is apparent in an account by Francis North, 1st Baron Gilford, in which he recalled how his family’s households valued “venerable old stewards…one of a race of humankind heretofore frequent but now utterly extinct.”

Aside from financial strain, political circumstances played an equally important role in domestic settings and social divides among the gentry and the nobility. The king remained at the centre of political patronage and power, and each successor to the throne fundamentally affected

5 Ibid, 123, 125.
6 Ibid, 127.
7 Ibid, 125.
8 Richardson, *Household Servants in Early Modern England*, 76.
the course of politics and domestic policy. In 1615, James I began to compel the English gentry to take on more governmental roles in rural settings, and in the early 1620s he forced them to leave London. In 1622, seven thousand families left the city in order to take up their country seats, and many of these families perceived this as a major political and social crisis. James also appeared to have spent money quite lavishly, and control over funds for the Privy Chamber slipped away from the royal secretary and treasurer. Elizabeth I had a turnover of 2,500 pounds per year, whereas James had a total of 23,000 pounds just for the first two years of his reign. By 1608 the financial account for the Privy Chamber had new categories devoted to gifts and rewards to James’ friends, which by 1605 had already totaled 18,000 pounds. After 1623 Charles I started to play a major role in social and political reforms, alongside his and James’ “favourite” member of council, the Duke of Buckingham. The Duke was brought before the House of Lords in an investigation initiated by the House of Commons, but Charles dissolved Parliament before Buckingham could be brought in for formal impeachment. This backlash was the result of Buckingham’s rise to his position. He had been born into an impoverished family but James personally brought him into eminence. This denied traditional notions of noble honour, which had emphasized that people of notable lineage or wealth were worthy of influential status. In 1628 Buckingham was assassinated, which was likely the result of this perceived political corruption and the patronage he received through James and Charles, despite his seemingly insufficient social background.

In the early 1630s Charles continued his father’s campaign that aimed to halt the

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9 Starkey, The English Court, 226.
10 Heal, Hospitality in Early Modern England, 119.
11 Starkey, The English Court, 200-201.
12 Ibid, 226.
13 Asch, Nobilities in Transition, 90.
14 Ibid.
urbanization of the gentry. Large numbers of nobles and gentlemen were prosecuted, and Charles used his most powerful legal and political tactics to expel the elite, all in a race to endorse his vision of rural and urban harmony. Simultaneously, the end goal was also meant to restrict political intervention caused by the gentry’s presence in London.\textsuperscript{15} As England’s court under Charles became increasingly involved with the standardization of noble culture and the political involvement of the gentry, men of high status competed for the monarch’s favour and fought over political association with the Crown. Tensions among noble groups who strove to lay claim to royal patronage were a significant cause of domestic unrest in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{16} The peerage and gentry retaliated with passive resistance to taxation and parliamentary obstruction, as well as armed rebellions against Charles I’s rule towards the mid-seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{17} The civil war in England during the 1640s exacerbated issues of political stability, and was followed by a period of social turmoil in the aftermath of this conflict.\textsuperscript{18}

Two of the most important factors that caused the socio-political breakdown of England’s elite in the seventeenth century were a decline in respect and obedience to the monarchy, and the unsustainability of lavish consumption.\textsuperscript{19} This ultimately impacted the influence and stability of great households, and limited the ability for men to gain prestigious positions in household service. Pressures to partake in conspicuous consumption were hard to resist since physical displays of wealth and political influence were central in aristocratic culture.\textsuperscript{20} Hospitality and physical displays of wealth were a central feature of great households owned by the aristocracy. For example, gambling was a popular way for the aristocracy to indulge in their excessive

\textsuperscript{15} Heal, \textit{Hospitality in Early Modern England}, 120.
\textsuperscript{16} Asch, \textit{Nobilities in Transition}, 7.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 105.
\textsuperscript{19} Stone, \textit{The Crisis of the Aristocracy}, 12-13, 188.
\textsuperscript{20} Asch, \textit{Nobilities in Transition}, 3.
wealth, but it also depleted their financial reservoirs quickly. Just prior to the turn of the seventeenth century, the Earl of Rutland lost between one thousand and fifteen hundred pounds per year, which even his immense income could not support over time.\textsuperscript{21} Reductions in the physical displays of wealth and political authority that had been supported by large funds made it more difficult to distinguish the sufficient qualities one would need to be considered a member of the nobility.\textsuperscript{22} For noble and gentle landlords, the demographic and economic trends that occurred in the first half of the century either threatened their financial stability, or presented them with an opportunity to make more income. Price inflation could have potentially eroded the incomes and undermined the living standards of some aristocratic landowners; however, for those who still had control over their land, they benefitted from profits from other wealthy people that sought to buy their estates, or gained more income from higher rent. It seems that many landlords tried to raise their rental income before selling their land off to any potential buyers. As a result, many gentlemen and yeomen charged high rents to their tenants, and also based rent agreements on shorter lease periods.\textsuperscript{23}

Gentle and noble ranks in the seventeenth century are clearly defined in relation to their wealth in a Poll Tax imposed in 1660. Account records also support the theory that great households and large numbers of servants were no longer affordable as families descended in social ranks due to a loss of wealth. Different status-based groups are graduated, beginning at the group that paid the lowest, and for the most part appear to go up in increments of ten. Common people paid around six pennies per year, followed by gentlemen who paid five pounds. Esquires paid ten, knights paid twenty, and baronets paid thirty. Barons paid forty, viscounts fifty, earls

\textsuperscript{21} Loades, \textit{The Tudor Court}, 190.
\textsuperscript{22} Wrightson, \textit{English Society, 1580-1680}, 19.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 130.
sixty, and dukes paid the most, one hundred. Not only were nobles concerned that an increased number of people that had moved into their ranks, but also that this movement could also have gone downwards, and more people likely descended from their spot due to mismanaged fortunes. Based on evidence in seventeenth-century account records that listed the income of various notable families, in 1600 a total of 763 families in Lancashire County were considered to be gentle, but these numbers decreased over the course of the century. In 1642, there was a slight increase and the number rose to 774 gentle families. By 1695 this number had dropped to 662. 278 of these families lost their place among the Lancashire gentry by 1642: thirty-five lost their place due to severe economic decline, twenty did not produce a suitable male heir, and the rest lost their position due to less serious social or economic failures.

Physical displays of wealth in great households had begun to lose social and political significance as fewer nobles found practical ways to produce such displays while maintaining high enough funds to support lavish estates. This loss of significance in visible portrayals of wealth is shown in the removal of sumptuary laws and alterations in servants’ liveries. Earlier in the century sumptuary laws were ended, and people were no longer legally compelled to wear clothing that was deemed appropriate for their rank. Arthur Dent’s Puritan text The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven from 1612 criticized the ways maidservants started to over-dress too lavishly for their humble position in households, and openly scoffed at sumptuary laws by doing so. Many male officers of all ranks in the royal household of Charles I were issued uniforms, however only some of these were assigned to servants based on their respective departments. The majority of liveries were given to servants of the great wardrobe, and only some officers

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24 Laslett, The World We Have Lost, 34.
25 Ibid.
26 Wrightson, English Society, 1580-1680, 26-27.
27 Richardson, Household Servants in Early Modern England, 104.
within this department received an individual outfit. Livery payments in Henry Percy’s household seem to be inconsistent in regards to the servants’ ranks. Many servants who paid for liveries do not have a title mentioned by them at all. Some servants with seemingly important roles, such as John Holroid, a clerk of the kitchen, and John Haydon who worked as a footman and master cook from 1616 to 1626, are listed without liveries. Edward Francis, a steward of the household in the early seventeenth century is not listed with a livery, whereas another steward named Peter Dodsworth who worked for Percy from 1616 to 1650 is.

While the sixteenth century has been characterized as a period in which most great households stabilized in membership and began to decline as the nobility’s power depleted, social and political historians do not entirely agree on the factors that led to fewer servants being hired. The monarchy’s centralization of political authority through the de-urbanization of elite groups brought noble families away from their traditional centres of support. The lessened status of male noble servants and decreased numbers of them hired for households was an early sign of this process. The extent to which noble households shrunk between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is somewhat of a rough estimate based on the amalgamation of available sources. The household for the Earl of Derby decreased from 145 servants in 1590 to thirty-eight by 1702. Henry Percy’s household appears to have defied this trend. In the 1620’s his staff numbers went up from fifty-three to eighty. Neither of these households lined up with Richard Brathwaite’s criteria in Some Rules and Orders for the Government of the House of an Earl, which set out a list of at least eighty-seven male servants deemed necessary for the operation of a

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28 Aylmer, The King’s Servants, 173.
29 Batho, The Household Papers of Henry Percy, 151, 155.
30 Asch, Nobilities in Transition, 3-7; Mertes, The English Noble Household, 1250-1600, 188-191.
33 Batho, The Household Papers of Henry Percy, 45.
noble household.\textsuperscript{34} In addition to this were chambermaids, gentlewomen and launderers, the amount of which according to Brathwaite were to be set down by the lord and lady.\textsuperscript{35}

The decreased presence of resident labour represented by servants is one major factor that accounted for the smaller size of households in England. The seventeenth century marked the first phase in the decline of household servants, and numbers began to fall more sharply in the centuries that followed. Accounts that do provide such information show that the average number of household staff for the nobility in the mid-seventeenth century was between thirty to fifty servants. In England, the mean number of servants in 1650 to 1700 was about sixty-one per one hundred households.\textsuperscript{36} This is a significantly large drop from an average of 200 staff members in the mid-fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{37} In the early seventeenth century male servants hired for royal households mostly came from the middling-groups of society, though the status of these servants relied more on their lineage and education than arbitrary occupational classification.\textsuperscript{38} By the 1640s, most staff in noble and royal households had been hired for solely domestic tasks, and military roles such as that of knights had been mostly debased.\textsuperscript{39} Neither Henry Percy’s account nor Brathwaite’s manual mention knights as a necessary member of the household.

James I’s inheritance of the English court displays some important trends in terms of the political layout of royal estates, specifically in the private departments. The Privy Chamber was no longer at the innermost sanctum of royal households, and privy lodgings were added and provided the King with further seclusion and privacy. Even the Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber were barred from these lodgings, and the King’s peers and bishops who were permitted to enter

\textsuperscript{34} Brathwaite, \textit{Some Rules and Orders for the Government of the House of an Earl}, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Stone, \textit{The Crisis of the Aristocracy}, 1558-1641, 212; Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 186-188.
\textsuperscript{38} Aylmer, \textit{The King’s Servant}, 253, 277.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 260.
his “ withdrawing room” were denied further passage beyond this point.\textsuperscript{40} Over the course of his reign, it was the bedchamber that became the most important department for political development and domestic operation. Queen Elizabeth’s reforms in this portion of the household allowed James to have a more private and withdrawn personal life, and as a result the Privy Chamber itself took on a more formal character.\textsuperscript{41} Employees who tended to the king’s personal needs experienced these changes first hand, namely the groom of the stool who was the head of department for privy lodgings, along with gentlemen ushers who were still responsible for the management of private rooms.\textsuperscript{42} Gentlemen who worked in Charles I’s Privy Chamber in 1638 complained that of all other places and ranks in his household, their position was the one that had changed and fallen in importance the most.\textsuperscript{43} Gentlemen and other members of the Privy Chamber staff, such as grooms, no longer received similar rewards or promotions in royal service during the reign of James I, and due to his reforms the use of private chambers in both royal and noble households became more common later on in the century.\textsuperscript{44}

Queen Elizabeth’s domestic reforms not only changed the character of the household’s private departments, but changed the character of her household servants as well. She had mostly hired women to fill managerial positions in her private departments, and although they did not play an important part in politics to the same extent that male servants did in Henry VII and VIII’s houses, they were assigned significant departmental authority and administrative powers.\textsuperscript{45} The Ladies of the Bedchamber were tasked with dividing the functions for the Groom

\textsuperscript{40} Starkey, \textit{The English Court}, 234.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 178.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 183.
\textsuperscript{44} Heal, \textit{Hospitality in Early Modern England}, 162.
\textsuperscript{45} Starkey, \textit{The English Court}, 178.
of the Stool, thus it appears that their domestic roles had essentially been reversed.\textsuperscript{46} The position of the Groom of the Stool changed again under James I, when he emerged as the First Gentleman of the Bedchamber, who was responsible for the supervision of other private officers. Under Charles I, the person in this position was to help the king get dressed, attended him with the Master of the Horse to the king’s coach and attended as a cupbearer in the bedchamber.\textsuperscript{47} It appears this particular position became much more generalized after the reign of Elizabeth and provided a very different status, or notion of masculine honour, to this type of domestic gentlemanly service. The modification of this position may have been the result of Elizabeth’s feminization of domestic labour within the royal Privy Chambers and other relevant departments.

The architectural structures implemented in elite households during the seventeenth century replaced the need for large numbers of live-in employees and altered the duties of personal servants. Gentlemen Ushers were among the few servants allowed access into some of the more private sections of the royal household. They would mostly have received or denied visitors into the home, and assigned appropriate rooms to visitors. New reforms in the physical layout of Privy Chambers replaced many of the duties of gentlemen Ushers. Men in these positions experienced a loss of both practical and ceremonial functions, and ultimately a loss in household status.\textsuperscript{48} Other servants in positions of authority seem to have focused more on the practical aspects of their jobs as well, due to the increased importance of private chambers over the public areas. Some cheque rolls from the seventeenth century were still kept by Stewards who recorded other servants and their functions. The household of Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex in 1621 and 1622 had a Steward that was delegated full authority for management,

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 234.
\textsuperscript{48} Heal, \textit{Hospitality in Early Modern England}, 164.
but there is no mention of ceremonial tasks he would have performed to demonstrate the
magnificence of his master. Servants were caught up in the impact of the English Revolution, as
well as other fluctuations in the economy and social stability.\textsuperscript{49} Lavish displays of wealth and
hospitable practices diminished as the political impetus of royal estates moved further into the
innermost sanctums of private chambers. Masculine concepts of domesticity, which had been
supported by ceremonious displays of wealth and political involvement within royal councils and
public central halls, had broken down as monarchs in the seventeenth century retreated from
many of their household servants.

\textbf{Masculinity and Domestic Service: A Loss of Prestige}

Prior to the seventeenth century, men were willing to work in subordinate occupations so
long as it provided them with similar and political influence as their masters. After the collapse
of grand domestic hierarchies in the wake of the royal Privy Chambers, men sought to define
their own status rather than have it assigned through a superior figure. The ties between
masculinity, domesticity and loyalty to superiors appear to have been severed, and servanthood
did not reflect masculine values as strongly as it used to. From a masculine viewpoint the idea of
domestic service in the seventeenth century had become demeaning, since male servants no
longer operated at the base of personal and political networks for influential householders.\textsuperscript{50}
Fewer men could claim an esteemed position in household hierarchies as a result, which allowed
women, such as Elizabeth’s ladies, to effectively partake in functional rather than ceremonial
tasks that had been previously allocated to manservants.\textsuperscript{51} With less of a need to display wealth
and power in private and public settings, the primary tasks of servants became more centered on

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{49} Richardson, \textit{Household Servants in Early Modern England}, 152-153.
\bibitem{50} Heal, \textit{Hospitality in Early Modern England}, 167.
\bibitem{51} Ibid, 166.
\end{thebibliography}
the happiness and comfort of their masters, instead of acting on their master’s behalf as ceremonial vessels for a household’s magnificence.\textsuperscript{52} William Basse, who served as a page and footman for a lord in 1602 saw his position as being “no better than that of a knave” by 1633.\textsuperscript{53} Male domestics that did manage to find work in the seventeenth century started to adopt more precise titles for their jobs like Butler, Groom, and Coachman, in order to separate their role from a superior. By doing so, these men aimed to define themselves and their occupation within an individually based occupational status.\textsuperscript{54} The dissolution of masculine prestige in domestic work made way for more women to acquire household status, and with less competition to face servant women could move upwards in simpler domestic hierarchies more effectively.

Based on household accounts produced for the nobility, women appeared more frequently and were more clearly involved in domestic operations aside from laundry. Henry Percy had hired many women to work in his household after the sixteenth century, which may explain why he made the following warning to his son in 1609. “Grip into your hands what power soever you will of government, yet will there be certain persons about your wife that you shall never reduce … her women … will ever talk and ever be unreasonable.”\textsuperscript{55} Some of Percy’s female servants were hired as keepers for households: Mrs. Wright in 1599, and Mrs Benton/Bainton was the keeper for Percy’s Essex house and garden from 1607 to 1612 and again from 1614 to 1618. Both Benton and Wright were paid significantly more than other female servants. Each earned more than two pounds per work year compared to an average of one pound per year earned by other women in the Percy household. On the other hand, one maid named Mary, who is listed as “Mr. Henry Percy’s maid,” earned six pounds for one and a half year’s work in 1610, and

\textsuperscript{52} Amussen, \textit{An Ordered Society}, 39.
\textsuperscript{53} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 191.
\textsuperscript{54} Meldrum, \textit{Domestic Service and Gender 1660-1750}, 132.
\textsuperscript{55} Mertes, \textit{The English Noble Household}, 128.
another six pounds from 1611 to 1612. The wage gaps between these servants illustrate the ways their duties and wages were based on their relationship to Percy and the responsibilities he gave them.56

_An Account Book of a Kentish Estate_ contains records that spanned the period from 1616 to 1702. From up to 1680 the book was likely the work of Nicholas Toke of Godinton; it was then continued by his nephew Sir Nicholas Toke until 1702.57 Nicholas Toke fought on Charles I’s side in the Civil War of the 1640s, and held the office of Sheriff of Kent from 1662 to 1668.58 His estate was of a considerable size; he owned a great house in Godinton and rented a good deal of additional land that he supervised.59 When his nephew took over the estate in 1680, he leased out surrounding farms to under-tenants and spent most of his time living as a country gentleman at his estate in Godinton.60 Landholding in Kent during the seventeenth century was primarily for commercial farming, due to its fertile soil.61 The inhabitants here traded often with markets in London. Tenure in Kent was referred to as “gavelkind,” and involved payments in rent, service, suit of court and fealty in return for land.62 The lists of servants contained in _An Account Book of a Kentish Estate_ from 1616 to 1704 mentions no chamberlains, clerks, pages, esquires, yeomen, or other distinctly masculine titles. Workers are divided into two key groups: labourers refer to those who worked on farmland, and servants refer to women paid by the year. It is unclear whether this was how the entries were written originally or if they were altered by the transcriber. Other titles are rare in these lists: Mary Taylor and Ann Taylor are listed as the

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56 Batho, _The Household Papers of Henry Percy_, 149-164.
58 Ibid, xx.
59 Ibid, xxviii.
60 Ibid, xxvii.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid, xvi.
lady’s maid and a dairymaid, Tom James worked as a manservant based on his wages, and James Taylor who was a butler is the only man listed with a distinct household role.\textsuperscript{63}

From local documents and Church court records produced in 1690 that involved 100 households in London, it can be seen that 96 of them had one servant woman. Only five of these households hired six or more servants, and 56.4\% of these servants were also women.\textsuperscript{64} This is a significant increase from the Ealing census made at the end of the sixteenth century. Even households that could afford many servants were managed by staff predominantly made up of women. This trend increased over the next hundred years, and by the late-eighteenth century the prominence of female servants over men was clear in London. Based on tax returns produced in the 1780s, only thirty-two households hired more than five male servants.\textsuperscript{65} This trend of domestic “feminization,” that may have begun in the chambers of royal households, was also the culmination of other cultural factors that re-shaped other noble homes and private labour used to maintain them.

Seventeenth-century legal narratives and literature place contradictions of gendered norms within households, namely between flawed, weak male masters and disobedient female subordinates, at the centre of discussion.\textsuperscript{66} Servant women were in a position where they could observe and find local outlets to criticize the behaviours of their masters. Even in wealthier homes, such personal information was no longer restricted from women or filtered through chief staff members to an extensive degree. Some women went on their own accord to expose oppressive domestic circumstances and outright exploitation. A Sussex maidservant named Lydia Prynne testified in October 1655 that her master had sexually assaulted her, which had

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 525.
\textsuperscript{64} Meldrum, Domestic Service and Gender 1660-1750, 15.
\textsuperscript{65} Richardson, Household Servants in Early Modern London, 66.
\textsuperscript{66} Dolan, Dangerous Familiars, 60.
resulted in her pregnancy and his violent retaliation where he threatened to harm her and her child.⁶⁷ Although narratives from this period with such extensive details are unusual, they do show that some servant women were able to claim a voice in occupational conflicts and acted on their choice to litigate.

Personal accounts and legal narratives from the seventeenth century reveal servant women who acted with their own agency to resist or question the authority of their masters.⁶⁸ Accounts of servant women who voiced their experiences in local courts could display, and prove, that their masters were inadequate to perform in their domestic position.⁶⁹ Cases of masters that physically withdrew from their designated positions emphasize the ability of servant women to observe and comment on domestic misconduct. Two such cases were recorded in the Court of Arches Records from London in 1667. An account from Mary Sherwin, a maidservant for Mr. Stephen and Mrs. Hester Bolton, accused the former of having left his wife and children in London to fend for themselves. “And he not taking care for provision or maintenance for them, as Mrs. Bolton became so necessitous and poor that Mr. Bolton did borrow of this deponent, a little before Christmas in the linking year, to supply her great necessity.”⁷⁰ In that same year Mary Williams, a servant for Mrs. Bolton’s second husband, claimed she was essentially forced to work later hours due to the neglectful nature of her master.

Stephen Bolton her master used to keep very bad hours and used to come home at about 12 or 1 or 2 in the night or morning, and sayeth that when he so stayed out used to stay at alehouses or taverns, and particularly at the Inn Tavern behind the Exchange … she verily believes this and sayeth, that Mr Bolton very much neglected his wife and family and took little or no care for paying the rent for the house wherein he put his wife and family to live in.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Burnett, Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture, 124.
⁶⁸ Dolan, Dangerous Familiars, 59-60.
⁶⁹ Ibid, 87.
⁷¹ Ibid, 47.
Fictional works and dramas took notice of female domestics and their involvement in the private lives of their masters. As servant characters, women acted as confidants or shrewd observers of their masters’ daily affairs. Some openly criticized the state of their masters’ lives, such as their marriages, their behaviours, and their wit or lack thereof. They were also culprits for the behavioural corruption of their masters, mistresses and fellow male servants. The character of Lady Cockwood in the play *She Would if She Could* from 1668 is based on a recurring awareness of the interdependent nature of the relationship between masters and their female servants. Mrs. Sentry, Cockwood’s mistress, displays the social impact a servant could potentially have on one’s reputation, and the conflict between these characters portrays disturbances between domestic authority, subservience and feminine conduct. Throughout the play, Sentry proclaims “A lady’s honour is not safe that keeps a servant so subject to corruption. I will turn her out of my service for this.” However, after exclaiming this, she concludes that her life in the countryside, with women servants, is preferable to a life in London.\(^{72}\) William Congreve’s *The Way of the World* in 1700 also passed judgement on both female and male servants, but in a manner that suggests the latter had been feminized by the former. The male servant Petulant is described as a man who “never speaks truth at all. He will lie like a chambermaid or woman of quality’s porter. Now that is a fault.”\(^{73}\)

Painters in England devoted more artistic works to female domestic servants in the seventeenth century, and this artwork can showcase two important features. Firstly, it shows that families who could afford to commission artwork hired female servants to tend to general

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household duties. Secondly, it shows that these households blended together private living spaces
between homeowners and workers. John Riley’s portrait of Bridget Holmes, a domestic servant
who worked in the English royal court in the seventeenth century, displays prominent values of
this “necessary woman,” and the grand scale of this portrait alone suggests a high level of
importance in Holmes’ occupation. Artistic Charles Beale II made portraits of his family’s
maidservants in the late seventeenth century, such as one of a maid named Susan Gill. Costs of
living were on the rise until the mid-seventeenth century, and many less well-off families could
hire no servants at all – so the presence of women in both wealthy and less-wealthy rural homes
displays a clear change in the labour market. It also suggests changed preferences in servants,
more specifically for women servants. Economic fluctuation and a greater preference for
servants that could perform generalized labour led to more intimate connections between servant
women and families they worked for. The preservation of these bonds in artwork, personal
household accounts and legal documents reveal a new found appreciation for “the necessary”
servant woman. These workers were highly valued for the same reasons that upheld the high
esteem of male domestics in great households: they provided health and comfort for their
masters, and were also entrusted with intimate details they learned from their duties.

In terms of gender and control in literature focused on domestic work, some authors
suggested household order had been subverted as early as the first half of the seventeenth
century. Contemporary authors were quick to notice that family units and master-servant
relations were undermined by internal forces, many of which had been changed as a result of

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75 Ibid, 33.
76 Ann Kussmaul, Servants and Husbandry in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
78 Richardson, Household Servants in Early Modern England, 153.
external circumstances. Richard Brome’s comedic play *The Northern Lasse* from 1629 showcases a majority of servant responsibilities exercised in a mistress’ boudoir, rather than the master’s chamber, hinting at the loss of male domestic mastery. One source from 1671, titled *A Cap of Grey Hairs* by Caleb Trenchfield warned against maidservants’ depraved nature and advised masters to “not have any familiarity with the maidservants”, as this would be taken as a sign of weakness. These examples both share a common element: they play on the fragile state of a master’s patriarchal authority which caused servant women to claim control over domestic operations. Other fictional sources portray this gendered inversion of authority as an unfathomable and humorous concept, as writers scoffed at the idea that servant women would be able to have authoritative positions in private establishments. *The Ladies Remonstrance*, an anonymous pamphlet from 1659, is a satirical and comedic mockery of a petition that called for the rearrangement of domestic staff members in households located in London. Waiting gentlewomen, chambermaids and maidservants arraign soldiers, “not considering or having any regard to our tender condition,” and their unnamed master for abusing them, in hopes that their male companions are punished and their master loses his inheritance. While this may be an unlikely scenario, this statement portrays some truth about male anxieties about dislocations of power and gendered control in the household.

The prevalence of female servants in noble households is also hinted at in manuals about domestic management from this period. A significant feature of these manuals is the portions that have been dedicated to the appearance, duties and behaviours of servant women. This is

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79 Ibid, 158.
80 Burnett, *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture*, 178.
different from manuals written prior to the seventeenth century, when proper presentation and behaviour among household servants was primarily a male concern. An example of one of these manuals written for young maidens in search of noble housework is *The Compleat Servant-Maid*, written by Hannah Woolley in 1677. She wrote that “those persons who would qualify themselves for this employment, must in their behaviour carry themselves grave, solid and serious” in order to instill a belief in proper servitude to potential employers.\(^8^3\) Brathwaite pays extra attention to the role of gentlemen in noble houses, perhaps in an attempt to maintain masculine patterns of behaviour and occupational traits among servants of wealthy families and their homes.\(^8^4\) In comparison, Woolley’s housekeeping manual argues that it was men who disrupted important domestic tasks and infiltrated the work space of female servants.\(^8^5\) According to the following passage in her manual, female servants were to monitor staff members and make behavioural corrections when necessary. “They must likewise endeavor to be careful in looking after the rest of the servants, that every one perform their duty in their several places, that they keep good hours in their uprising and lying down, and that no goods be either spoiled or embezzled.”\(^8^6\) Men were also to be avoided, so they would not cause female servants to be immodest in their behaviour or to be idle with their time. These manuals display a sharp contrast in predominantly masculine or feminine work spaces, as well as a swap in gendered values and standards of domestic service. Additionally, they suggest that traditional roles for English women and men had changed and diversified in the midst of political revolts and social upheavals.\(^8^7\)

\(^{8^6}\) Ibid, 35.
\(^{8^7}\) Burnett, *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture*, 146.
century, the monarchy aimed to subdue and halt the urbanization of the nobility and gentry. Tensions caused by forced relocation under James I and the Civil War under Charles I put more strain on the management of great households, which had already been weakened by the pressures of conspicuous consumption. Many noble families had lost their position among the upper ranks of society due to depleted funds, and their political authority had simultaneously been limited. Fewer servants had been hired and households became smaller, thus many noble manservants could no longer have exercised their authority under their menial domestic companions. An increased level of privacy in royal estates had also further limited contact between personal servants and the king, and had removed a lot of the privileges manservants received through the labour they conducted in private departments. More accounts from this period reveal that noble servants were displeased with this loss of access, and reflect a diminished sense of masculine prestige in domestic work. At the same time, account records from noble households began to list more women at the forefront of domestic operations. Court records reveal an increased value in the observations of servant women in legal disputes. Manuals for household work, such as Hannah Woolley’s book, not only outlined expectations for women’s labour, but behavioural requirements and the manner in which women were to have controlled other workers as well. All of these sources can point to a greater prevalence of women, not just in terms of numbers hired for households, but also in the manner in which their relationships with masters and their work was valued in domestic settings.
CONCLUSION

Gendered concepts of domestic labour and servanthood changed throughout the late medieval period and early modern period in correlation to changes in the wealth, layout and political activities of great households. Perceptions of servitude and obedience went hand-in-hand with the overall nature of aristocratic households and the management that was required to provide for daily needs and keep schedules running smoothly. Out of all the definitive aspects of great households, the most important feature that shaped masculine notions of service, among more intimate and highly valuable positions, was political allegiance. The wealth of noble and gentle landowners ensured that their estates could be used to manage and display their political influence, and male servants of influential background were an integral component of their masters’ social image. Over time as households became more private and relied on fewer servants, employers appeared to have embraced the practicality and availability of female labourers. Aside from their availability, more women were likely hired because they did not cause the same concerns over balances of power and accessibility in the political and private departments of households.

Social dislocation caused by the aftermath of the Black Death in the fourteenth century and political instability in the fifteenth century were major factors in the initial stages of reforms for great households. Land was more easily attainable to those who had managed to keep a grasp on their wealth, which made way for the extensive expansion of elite estates. It was during this time that the standards in size and economic requirements were set in place for noble and gentle homes. The Lady of Clare’s accounts and Edward IV’s Black Book reveal the ways wealthy homeowners tried to organize and track the activities of their servants. At the same time, published ordinances were used to help preserve the balance of authority between the head of the
household and live-in domestic workers that had access to more private departments. The constant movement of households and domestic personnel shows that a large entourage was important to confirming a noble or gentleman’s worth among other equally powerful aristocrats. Values upheld in service, which mainly revolved around loyalty, honesty and reliability also strongly related to gendered ideology about masculine conduct and identity. For the late medieval period, the great household can be defined as an institution that was centralized around patriarchal control and political prestige, in which masculine norms shaped domestic activity.

Hierarchical systems and legal mechanisms such as sumptuary laws were made to ensure that status was attributed accordingly. They were also implemented into household settings to further support the power held by the master or mistress over their servants. However, these systems also raised concerns over methods that could be employed by servants of a notable position in an attempt to manipulate the authority attributed to them. This was a similar issue in boundaries that were set between ranks shared among the elite. Definitions of status groups became clearer over time but did not necessarily prevent movement upwards or downwards on the scale. Divisions between the aristocracy and the gentry, in similar fashion to the relationships that kept authority in the hands of masters over their servants, were distinct but somewhat fragile. Overconsumption of goods that were financially out of reach to most people could have proven the wealth of a particular household, but it was also an unsustainable method of social validation. This became increasingly apparent from the sixteenth century onwards, and by the seventeenth centuries many nobles had relocated into urban centres in order to find more affordable housing. This consequentially resulted in fewer servants being hired for a multitude of purposes, and labour ended up being more generalized as great households lost more of their wealth.
Household size and numbers of members appeared to have stabilized around the mid-fifteenth century and then declined in the seventeenth century and beyond. A variety of factors was responsible for the eventual disappearance of great households after this period. 

Demographic growth, which allowed more people to take over positions among higher ranks, fueled competitive consumption that rapidly drained the financial resources of many noble families. This further offset the financial stability of great households. Access to the political functions of great households that had been granted to certain servants in the fourteenth century changed with the rise of the Privy Chamber. The king and his political affinity had moved from public departments and receded into private chambers, and over time fewer and fewer servants were given permission to help or provide insight into personal affairs.

Household hierarchies were heavily based on social and political alliances between personal employees and their employers, and aimed to mimic contemporary social theories that articulated each prominent group within the English elite. However these theories could not remain consistent with the cultural climate of the country for more than a century at a time, and were realigned under different external pressures that occurred. Internally, households not only adjusted to these broader shifts but likely sparked many reforms in hierarchical structures, as shown in the shifts of power and magnificence within great halls, to seclusion and secrecy in the Privy Chamber. Over time, as household reforms allowed political action to take place in more private settings and became less focused on the physical validation of wealth and status, male servants had less involvement in the display of their masters’ social and political image. This meant that male servants of higher status had lost a significant portion of their own esteem and affluence, and when they no longer received certain rewards and privileges, they began to express distaste towards subordinate, which were inherently effeminate, features in their
Women servants were generally uninvolved in a majority of domestic duties until around the sixteenth century when Elizabeth I replaced many gentlemen in her Privy Chamber with noble ladies. Otherwise women were mostly hired as laundresses, who were usually not integrated into the rest of the staff members and typically came over from their own homes to perform their job. Under Elizabeth’s rule, many men in the royal household formed a “skeleton staff,” a staff that was mainly hired to tend to necessary duties, while her ladies were more involved in management of other servants. When James succeeded to the throne more men worked as personal servants again, but do not seem to have been given as much power in their position compared to personal manservants that worked for Henry VII and VIII. The disruption of noble and gentry families under Charles I further complicated and potentially weakened the role of male servants within royal estates.

Women’s presence in wealthy households is evident in various forms of media from the seventeenth century, including paintings and literature. Personal accounts also reflected the experiences and views of women servants more clearly, and show that they were more involved in the personal lives of their masters and in the management of domestic tasks. Manuals and accounts from the seventeenth century also portray this shift. Occupational roles that had been reserved for men were taken over by women, who were not confined to specific tasks but performed more general types of labour. More importantly, the loss of political prestige in noble households and the increased usage of private spaces meant that men who wanted to find socially influential work had to look elsewhere. The gendered ideology of service itself changed alongside the shifting nature of noble households. When household affairs were more public, and more involved with physical influence and power, men had defined service in accordance to
their involvement in the construction and protection of their masters’ authority, which when granted to them also gave a similar sense of social significance. As these affairs became more private, and less involved in the views of the public and servants, the authority that servants of high rank acquired from their masters not only became less significant, but was also harder to utilize in restricted settings. Political power was considered a factor that did not matter to women, since as people of no status this would not have affected their public or domestic rank. Servanthood for women was much simpler in regards to the gendered ideology behind it: women were placed into positions that allowed men, or women of notable status, to keep them subordinated yet productive, while it also gave them opportunities to develop skills they would have utilized in their own homes that ultimately maintained patriarchal mechanisms of control.

By the end of the seventeenth century it is clear that households began to incorporate more women servants to fill a wider variety of tasks. This trend in the feminization of domestic service among the English nobility carried on into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when domestic labour was more clearly associated with feminine qualities and characteristics. The feminization of domestic service, as this analysis has shown, is linked to the process of increasing privacy among wealthy estates and the correlating loss of prestige behind masculine roles. Although female servants were not directly involved in political aspects of great households to the same degree as male servants were, their ability to work with versatile roles allowed households to operate in a more simplified and sustainable manner as the early modern period came to a close.
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