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Gender, Space and Place: The Experience of Servants in Rural Households 1550-1750

Género, espacio y lugar: la experiencia del servicio en el hogar rural de la temprana Edad Moderna

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KEYWORDS

House
 Space
 Servants
 Gender

ABSTRACT

This article examines the organisation and use of domestic space by servants for eating and sleeping, looking particularly at the seventeenth century and at middling sort households, broadly defined. It relates models of architectural and social change to the ways that individuals described their experience and use of domestic space in court records. It concludes that while there was a trend to separate the work and living spaces of servants from the rest of the family, an early modern house was not one where rigid and static social patterns were mapped upon its spaces. A number of social factors struggled to define the social character of a space, a struggle which largely pivoted around the concepts of control and use rather than separation or segregation according to status or gender. Spatial patterns were ephemeral. Nonetheless, it is possible to illustrate how some aspects of the social relations of the household were reflected in and reinforced by the way that domestic space was organised and used. Moreover, the implications of such use and organisation carry important messages about the nature of the household itself.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Casa
 Espacio
 Servicio doméstico
 Género
 Sirvientes
 Siglo XVII

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la organización y el uso del espacio doméstico de los sirvientes durante el siglo XVII y en hogares de clase media. Relaciona los modelos de cambio arquitectónico y social con las formas en que los individuos describieron su experiencia y uso del espacio doméstico en los registros judiciales. Concluye que, si bien existía una tendencia a separar el trabajo y los espacios de vida de los sirvientes del resto de la familia, una casa moderna temprana no era aquella en la que los patrones sociales rígidos y estáticos estaban mapeados. Una serie de factores sociales lucharon por definir el carácter social de un espacio, una lucha que giró en torno a los conceptos de control y uso en lugar de separación o segregación según el estatus o el género. Los patrones espaciales fueron efímeros, no obstante, es posible ilustrar cómo algunos aspectos de las relaciones sociales de la familia se reflejaron y se reforzaron por la forma en que se organizó y utilizó el espacio doméstico.

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Introduction

The boundary between home and work was very blurred in early modern England. Farmhouses had rooms used for processing of products and many rural households operated a small manufacturing business on the side that was run from the main house or from a shop attached to the family dwelling. Alehouses, taverns and inns were commercial social spaces, but they were run out of domestic spaces and proprietors routinely used parlours, halls, and kitchens to entertain their customers. In rural villages artisans often had ‘workshops’ attached to the main dwelling house or, in smaller homes, a weaver and his wife might work at the loom and the spinning wheel in the only available room (Hoskins 1953, pp. 54-55; Whittle 2011, pp. 144 -146). Complexities were also created by the fact that servants and apprentices lived with middling sort families in close and fairly intimate terms. One of the most striking characteristics of society in this period was the presence of large numbers of servants and apprentices who lived with their employers, receiving food and accommodation as well as a cash wage. According to Kussmaul, 60% of young people aged 15-24 were servants in this period. In the countryside men and women worked mainly on farms, while in London between 1695 and 1723 two thirds of single women worked as domestic servants (Capp, p. 127; Kussmaul, 1981). Numbers of servants varied of course with the size and wealth of the household and according to the demands of the regional economy. For example, small farms in northern England typically employed one female servant if any, while large mixed farms in the south-east employed large numbers of male and female servants up until the middle of the eighteenth century (Whittle, 2005, p. 55).

Servants were defined very broadly in this period as dependants who lived in the household of another and they were a highly varied group. A tutor could be as much a servant as a kitchen maid or farm hand; servants could also be related in some way to their employer. But despite these differences all servants were bound together by the formal and legal nature of their relationship with the master or mistress of the household. Servants were normally hired for one year in the countryside and in the town and their wages were ostensibly regulated by statute. For the duration of their contracts, they were subsumed within the households in which they worked and, legally and colloquially, considered to be part of the family. Apprenticeships were a slightly different arrangement. The family of the apprentice paid a premium to the master or mistress for providing training in a specialist craft, and the apprentice lived and worked in a master’s household for a longer period: usually seven years. (Capp 2003, pp. 127-30)

What this spatial complexity meant in particular households on a day-to-day basis and its consequences for household relationships is less clear and has received relatively little historical attention. Historians have conducted a large number of thematic studies of the role played by servants within early modern rural household life. Inventories have also been deployed in a number of studies of rural houses to analyse changes in the organisation of the living accommodation of servants during the period. But remarkably little work has been done on the *contexts* in which servants negotiated day to day life alongside other household members. In other words while historians have analysed where servants lived, they have paid less attention to how they lived. In my view we need to know a great deal more about the spatial organisation of the *integration* of the activities of various members of the household during day-to-day life, in other words the way that a house was transformed from a physical place into a social space. Yet to date the history of vernacular rural homes has not benefited as much from anthropological approaches which have been so fruitfully adopted to explore the social meaning of domestic spaces belonging to houses of the elite in the past or to different social groups in contemporary society, and which have highlighted the intricate links between space and the formation of social identities and relations (Friedman, 1989; Wall, 1993)

Over the past thirty years research in a wide variety of fields including archaeology, anthropology and geography has been pivotal in developing a theoretical and empirical literature on the distinction between space and place. The strength of this strand of scholarship lies in the way that it understands space in social and performative terms. A space is conceptualised as more than, and different from, a physical location or place. According to the French historian Michel de Certeau, ‘space is a practiced place’ (Certeau, 1984, p.117) Natt Alcock also explains that, a place is transformed into a space by the social actors who constitute it through everyday use. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers’ (Alcock, 1994, pp. 207-30).

Similarly, the feminist anthropologist Hannah More has argued that, ‘meanings are not inherent in the organisation of ... space, but must be invoked through the activities of social actors’ (Moore, 1986, p. 8). Space is therefore a field of social action which is related to a place or location in which individuals coexist and compete. It is space which shapes, muddles and confuses social performance. The basic premise of spatial analysis is that the organisation of space in terms of lay-out, access, use and control, simultaneously reflects social relations and has an input into how social relations are made real.

The following discussion hopes to show the tremendous potential that a focus on space has to comment on household relationships in the past through a case study of the organisation and use of domestic spaces belonging to agricultural and non-agricultural households in a rural setting predominantly county of Essex in the ‘long seventeenth century’. It draws on anthropological approaches to analyse how the complex position of the rural servant as employee and dependent influenced the ways in which they used and experienced the houses in which they lived and worked. Several features of the region lend themselves to study. Essex had a strong and varied economy in the early modern period, with multiple proto-industrial activities in addition to agriculture. The growth of the cloth trade and proximity to London markets meant that it was a precociously market-oriented region, which allows an analysis of different aspects of the organisation of space that is especially sensitive to the influence of continuity and change (Goose and Cooper, 1998, p. 76; Wrightson, 1981). The surviving source material is also rich and extensive. The starting point for study is the vivid picture that archaeologists and historians of material culture have provided of the material conditions of early modern middling sort rural domestic life. Without such work the analysis would not have been possible. Several scholars have also used material evidence to explore how domestic space was given social and cultural meanings. For example, the archaeologist Matthew Johnson has used evidence from house plans and inventories in highly imaginative ways to explore links between prescriptive ideas about domestic space and the ‘lived experience’ of early modern rural households. He argues that the shift in the design of domestic space during the seventeenth century from a hall-based house to specialised rooms reflected and reinforced a redefinition of domestic relations whereby a patriarchal model of inclusivity, in which servants were embraced as part of the family, gave way to a system of spatial organisation that fostered social separation and segregation (Stone, 1977; Johnson, 1996). Yet several scholars have raised questions about the attempt to reconstruct of social practice from documents such as floor plans and inventories, suggesting that such studies are sometimes afflicted by what has been termed ‘the problem of meaning’ which reflect at best the prescriptions of those who built the houses rather than the experience of people who used them everyday. For this reason the analysis that follows moves away from material evidence and focuses on the extant depositions of the ecclesiastical and common law courts. These documents record details given by middling people and their servants about their own domestic spaces and how they used them. Judicial evidence poses some problems of interpretation. Litigants presented themselves in ways that they wanted to be seen by the court, and the records of their words have been filtered by the legal officials who wrote them down. Nonetheless censorship is not thought to have been widespread in this period and the degree of distortion caused by the judicial context is mitigated by the variety of documents that deal with marriage, moral, family and neighbourhood disputes, as well as criminal matters. The situation and interest of the speaker is also an important consideration because amongst the best evidence of spatial experience in the depositions are the casual remarks that were included by witnesses more to set the scene than for any didactic purpose, and which often show a striking disregard for conventional patterns of conduct. These records therefore provide invaluable insights into the ways that ordinary people used and organised their houses day-to-day.

The article focuses on the ways in which early modern middling householders (very broadly defined) organised eating and sleeping in the spaces that they shared with their servants. It argues that fixed social patterns were not inscribed upon early modern homes. Rooms were multifunctional, dynamic and so their use and meaning constantly shifted. Moreover, lack of space in most households meant that separation or segregation according to rank or gender was not possible or practical. Nonetheless, the organisation of space for these everyday activities played an important role in the expression of the social, age and gender hierarchies that ordered the early modern domestic world. What is more it carries important messages about the social character of the household itself.

Eating

Eating together was very important for marking out the boundaries of belonging to the early modern household and as an arena in which family unity was expressed (Goody, 1982, p. 204). A husband was expected to provide adequate provision for his wife and children (Wrightson, 1982, pp. 90 y 108). Bed and board formed part of the contractual arrangement between apprentices and masters; and servants lived and ate in the homes where they worked (Kussmaul, 1981, p. 40). Yet eating also had an undoubted importance in early modern society for the marking out of social difference (Mennell, 1985). The following discussion explores how early modern middling families prepared, served and ate their food and what this evidence tells us about relations between employers and their servants.

In early modern England food preparation was regarded as a female task. Young male servants, often called 'boys', were assigned peripheral tasks such as heating the oven for baking and fetching water for cooking, showing that age and place could blur distinctions between male and female work in interesting respects. By the latter part of the seventeenth century in some wealthier homes food preparation was delegated almost entirely to female servants, suggesting that work in the kitchen was beginning to be considered a menial activity (Overton et al., 2004, p. 80). We find, for example, that evidence provided to undermine Elizabeth Vickar's claim to be the wife of the late Thomas Atwood included a claim that she had been observed performing 'the meanest and most servile offices for Edward Atwood, such as dressing his victuals and wash the dishes, wait on him at table and weed the garden, and to behave herself in all respects as a common servant' (Earle, 1994, p. 240). Yet the popularity of handbooks such as the *Queen-Like Closet* by Hannah Wolley which appeared in 1670, designed for the mistress of a country house, indicate that competence in cooking was required even of affluent women. On the whole women in middling and lower level households prepared meals for their families, where possible assisted by one or two female servants.

Although cooking was a female activity, and so the rooms in which food were prepared were gendered in terms of use, they remained highly permeable and firmly multifunctional through the period. By the end of the sixteenth century in most middling households in England, cooking had moved out of the hall into a separate kitchen (Weatherill, 1988, p. 150). But a variety of evidence confirms that this spatial specialisation did not automatically encourage a parallel move towards social or gender segregation, as some commentators have suggested (Johnson, 1996, pp. 174-7). A study of probate inventories from the north-west and southern regions of Restoration England notes that the contents of kitchens included items of 'comfort and colour' varying from books to weaponry, birdcages, time-pieces, looking glasses and prints (Pennell, 1997, pp. 236-8). Prosecutions for poison record male servants, apprentices, women and men using the kitchen for a variety of purposes at different times of the day (ERO, Q/SBa 2/ 85; Q/SR 390/32; ERO, D/B5 Sb2/4 not foliated; D/B5 Sb2/7, fos 255v-258). In these circumstances any attempt to define working spaces according to gender or status was clearly impractical. The kitchen continued to be a highly integrated social space in which different household members co-existed and went about their respective tasks within a gendered division of labour with very little apparent segregation according to status or strict patterns of control.

By contrast, the organisation of space for eating household meals provided an arena for the overt expression of hierarchical distinctions between servants and their masters and mistresses. There were, of course, many variations in day-to-day arrangements for eating that were shaped, amongst other factors, by different working practices, the size and wealth of the household and the time of day or season of the year. Family members did not always eat together. Men who worked in the fields ate outside. Masters and mistresses often ate supper alone in the evening. In the cloth towns of north and central Essex early modern 'fast food' was available for people to buy and to eat on the street. In rural villages masters, mistresses, male and female servants frequently went out to taverns to eat and to drink ale in the evening. (Johnson, 1990, pp. 46-48; ERO, Q/SBa 2/58; Sachse, 1938, pp. 13-14, 20, 22, 23, 26, 34, 41, 43, 44, 58, 68, 79).

Midday dinner was the main meal of the day in which members of the household generally ate together and its organisation carried considerable symbolic weight for marking out the hierarchy that informed relations between

them. A range of arrangements are revealed in the records, depending to a large extent on the size and wealth of the household. In affluent homes, with several servants, rank was displayed by different tables. Parents and children ate at an 'upper' table, sometimes joined by senior employees, while servants and apprentices lower down the pecking order ate separately at a lower table (Overton et. al. 2004: 130; Melville 1999: 216; Earle 1994: 240-1; Meldrum 2000: 146). The status conscious Elizabethan tutor, Thomas Wythorne, was well aware of the importance of these spatial distinctions when he stipulated to his employers that he should be 'used as a friend and not a servant'. He noted, with some relief, in his autobiography that, 'upon this, they not only allowed me to sit at their table but also at their own mess, so long as there were not any to occupy the place ... that was a great deal my better' (Osborn, 1961, p. 94). C. Varley, in his extraordinary autobiography entitled 'the unfortunate husbandman', noted with obvious pleasure that in the second of the households where he worked as a farm servant, 'he sat at table with my master and mistress...' (Varley, 1768, p. 43). A marital case that came before the bishop of London's consistory court in 1574 provides another vivid illustration of the significance of these spatial distinctions for the marking out of the household hierarchy of place. Witnesses declared that Elizabeth, the adulterous wife of one Henry Denham, disrupted domestic order in a scandalous manner by moving her lover, the apprentice Isaac Binge, from the lower table to the upper table to sit beside her to eat (Gowing, 1996, p. 190)

In households of more modest means, with fewer rooms and less furniture, servants and apprentices ate at the same table as the master and mistress. But gender, generational and status hierarchies were still reflected and reinforced by systems of seating. Subordinate members of the household of both sexes were expected to sit lower down the table, on less comfortable forms, stools and benches, or, if chairs were in short supply, children probably had to stand (Sarti, 2002, p. 155). A pilot count of seating furniture made from 160 probate inventories from just over the county border in eastern Suffolk in 1584 found an average ratio of 1 chair to every 4.3 other seat places. Over time chairs became more common and also more comfortable but seating continued to reflect rank. Inventory lists invariably distinguished between 'great', 'little', 'small' or 'ordinary' chairs (Garrard, 1980, p. 59). The overlapping influences of gender and status are apparent in these contexts. The master sat at the head of the table, often in the only single chair. The distinct position of the wife, as deputy governor, was also marked out by her superior place at the table, where she sat in a chair, above servants and children of both sexes. (Johnson, 1996, p. 175; Sarti, 1999, p. 155) An extract from a chap-book of the period highlights the disadvantages of age with regard to the allocation of place at table. In 1685 an unknown commentator on courting couples wrote:

above all let them [young maids and men] be respectful to their parents and when they come to the Table, seat themselves last in a place suitable for their degree, not contending therein, nor seeming dissatisfied, though they sit below their inferiors. (Pennell, 1997, p. 228)

Legal cases also show how the spatial organisation of mealtimes was used to mark out the hierarchy of place. We find that in evidence given in support of Jane Lillington, whose status as wife or servant was at issue, witnesses emphasised that she 'sat at the upper end of the table and carved as mistress of the family' (Meldrum, 2000, p. 163). Customs of social and spatial separation became more complete by the eighteenth century, as the number of rooms in houses increased, tables reduced in size and increased in number. By this stage employees were more often required to eat in the kitchen or in the hall, while the master and his family ate in the parlour. For example, the eighteenth century country clergymen, James Woodforde, regularly entertained neighbours to dinner in his parlour while his 'folkes' as he termed his servants ate together in the kitchen. (Woodford, 1981, p. 77; Overton et al., 2004, pp. 94, 119, 130-4)

The household pecking order was also demonstrated by the order and manner of servants' access to food. An amusing account given by the Lancashire apprentice, Roger Lowe, of his first meal at the servants' table of a local cleric, implies an absence of even the rudiments of order at the lower table:

Every servant [had] a bowlful of podige [pottage] anon a great trencher like a pott lid I and all the others had, with a great quantity of podige. The dishes else were but small and few. I put bread into my podige thinking to have a spoon, but none came. While I was thus in expectation of that I could not obtaine,

every man having a horn spoon in their pockets, having done their podige fell to the other dishes. Thought I, these hungry Amallkites that I am gotten amongst will devour all if I do not set upon a resolution. ... Thought I what must I do with all these, wished in my heart many times that those hungry Rogues had them [dishes of food] in their guts, but that would not do, for still they were there before me, and I durst not set them away, though it was manners so to have done.

Lowe decided to eat his pottage as quickly as possible, but burnt his tongue, preventing him from finishing his meal. He left his food, 'with a hungry belly but a lamenting heart, and ere since I have been cautious how to supp pottige' (Sachse, 1938, pp. 39-40). Yet Lowe's obvious horror at what he experienced, suggests that mealtimes in middling households may often have followed more orderly rules.

Varley also noticed the ways in which the order imposed at mealtimes were used to demarcate divisions and gradations amongst his fellow farm servants. He noted that in the first household where he served, 'the master placed me next him at the table, and always helped me before the rest of the servants, which made them rather jealous with me at first' (Varley, 1768, p. 28). It is interesting to note in the conduct literature of the period the ways in which changes in the rural economy and the drive towards efficiency may have led the middling sort to regulate the timing of mealtimes much more closely to instil discipline and social distance (Thomson, 1993, pp. 352-403). Thomas Tusser advised the good housewife that by noon she should have dinner 'readie and neate' but that she should 'let meat tarrie servant, not servant his meate. Plough cattle a baiting, call servant to dinner, the thicker together, the charges the thinner' (Tusser, 1580, p. 174)

A case of poison in a London house provides some very rare but extremely illuminating insights into the ordering of mealtimes at middling social levels and so is worth recounting in some depth. It involved the attempt by Edward Frances, a 'blackmore servant' (probably a slave), to murder his master Thomas Dymock, over a nine-month period in 1692, in an effort to gain his liberty. On one occasion Frances managed to put rat poison into some water gruel in preparation on the kitchen fire. Thomas Dymock's wife Rebekah told the court that she tried to tempt her husband into eating some supper after he had fallen ill from drinking ale poisoned by Frances a few days before. After her husband refused the gruel Rebekah decided to eat a portion her self and ordered her maid to bring some to her. The maid, Joanne Lichfield, duly brought the gruel to her mistress and then asked her 'if shee may eate the rest of the water grewell'. Rebekah agreed. However it is interesting to note that before Joanne actually sat down to eat the food she felt obliged first to ask her master's daughter and then Edward Frances if they would eat it. Only when they both refused did Joanne feel able to take 'the water grewell' and eat it herself.

Gender, age and 'place' thus intersected in complex ways to regulate the pecking order of serving the meal: the master was offered food first, followed by the mistress, the children of the nuclear family, the male servant and then the female servant. Sadly, the family cat who came lowest of all on the social ladder, ate the 'grewell' that was left over and died soon afterwards (Melville, 1999, p. 221).

It was assumed in early modern culture that social factors also influenced what people ate and how much. According to prescriptive literature the key determinants were status, age and 'place'. Conduct writers advised that the subordinate position of servants and children in relation to *both* household governors should be reflected and reinforced by their lesser quality of food. Evidence from farm accounts suggest that employers adopted a variety of practices. Robert Loder, a prosperous farmer in Berkshire, England, in the early seventeenth-century, employed five servants, three men and two women, to run his farm and household in the 1610s. He had a wife and a growing family of three young children, but the adults in the house were mostly employees. His accounts assume that all adults in the household consumed equal shares of the food purchased, family and servants, men, and women (Kusmaul, 1981, p. 30)

On the other hand, evidence from a wide variety of sources, shows how differences within the household hierarchy could be marked out and enforced by the allocation of different qualities and quantities of food according to rank. Complaints of starvation of male and female apprentices and servants that reached the Essex bench during the period provide evidence of the most extreme end of the spectrum of this form of differential

dietary control (ERO, Q/SR 348/44). But even in more orderly and especially in larger households, consumption could be status related. Henry Best, a Yorkshire gentleman farmer was convinced that he fed his servants better than most men did. He recorded in his farming book in 1642 that he gave his thatchers three good meals a day, each consisting of 'fower services': butter, milk or porridge; cheese; eggs; pies or bacon'. But he also noted that he ate better than his men. His pies were made of best wheate but his servants ate pie-crusts of maslin flour and puddings made with barley flour, except at harvest time when they ate wheaten puddings (Woodward, 1984, pp. lv111-ix). In 1656 Edward Barlow noticed that in the household of his prospective employer, apprentices were seated at the same table as their master and mistress and their children, but at the lower end. They were given pudding without suet and plums and meat of poorer quality (Houlbrooke, 1984, p. 176). Patterns of consumption also expose complex interrelations of gender and class. Kitchen accounts from the Bacon estate in the late sixteenth century show that larger amounts of meat and drink were provided for male than for female workers (Mendelson and Crawford, 1998, p. 274). All commentators agreed that servants should not be spoilt by too many treats. Tusser advised the good housewife that she should give her servants enough food but that luxuries should be avoided: 'Give servant no dainties, but give ynough, too many chaps walking, do beggar the plough. Poor seggons halfe starved worke faintly and dull, and lubbers do loiter, their bellies too full (Tusser, 1580, p. 174).

Sleeping

Sleeping, like eating, provided a clear context for the articulation of hierarchy in the early modern household. Legal accounts confirm that the mistress and the master slept in the best and most comfortable bed, although the disparities in the status and power of husbands and wives were exposed in cases of marital conflict when women were most often displaced. The unfortunate consequences of the fight between the Rector of Alphamstone and his wife, as reported to the court of quarter sessions in 1572, offers a vivid example. It appears that the household only had three beds. After an argument the Rector remained in the best bed and his wife was forced to take the second, displacing their son, Symond Callye, who joined their maidservant Joan Rayner in the third bed. Joan was forced to sleep with Symond from two weeks before Christmas to Candlemas, and, 'not having the feare of God before her eyes, being overcome with the entyceing and alurement of the same younge man, consenting to his wicked demand, is now become with child by the same Symond' (ERO, Q/SR 79/5).

Symond and Joan's experience provides evidence of servants' lack of ability to exercise control over the spaces that they used for sleep. They were usually allocated the third, fourth fifth 'best' or 'worst' 'flock' or 'boarded bedd steddles'. Alternatively, they might be expected to sleep on 'trundle' or 'truckle beds', low beds on wheels that could be stored under larger beds during the day (Steer, 1950, p. 17).

The rooms in which members of the household slept further reinforced conventional conceptions of authority and order. The master and mistress took precedence of place in the parlour, considered to be the 'best room' in the house (ERO, D/AED 8, fo. 71v. Nuncupative will of Alice Bowles alias Mosse (1630); Harrison c. Bayley (1607), D/AED 5, fo. 115v.) Later, as spheres of life began to separate out in more affluent homes, the 'chief bed' was removed upstairs into the 'parlour', 'fore' or 'great' chamber on the first floor (Weatherill, 1988, pp. 159-60; Overton et al., 2004, p. 133). Servants, apprentices and children slept in a variety of less comfortable, less exclusive circumstances. They were less likely to be allocated a space specialised for sleeping. In the earlier period servants frequently slept on trundle beds in the hall, a room used for a variety of different purposes during the day including cooking, working and eating. Elizabeth Retteridge, apprentice with Thomas Fyersham, linendraper of Colchester, for example, slept in the hall of her master's house (ERO D/B5 Sb2/3, fo.120v). The seventeenth century Lancashire apprentice, Roger Lowe, records in his diary that he sometimes slept on a trundle bed in his master's shop so that he could serve customers late into the evening (Sachse, 1938, p. 6). Several Essex wills of the period refer to the 'soller where my servants lie', suggesting servants sometimes slept in the unheated attics of the house, presumably amongst the sacks of grain or raw materials often stored there (Emmison, 1991, p. 4). In other circumstances servants slept in boarded beds in the chambers over service rooms, which were sometimes separated from the main dwelling house. We learn in a deposition given by Thomas Jones in 1620, that

while he was a servant to William and Isobel Collins of Halstead, he lay in a chamber outside the main house, directly over the cheese house from where, he alleged, he could spy on his mistress through cracks in the floorboards, as she conducted her adulterous affair in the outhouse below (Brampton c. Collin (1620), ERO, D/ABD1, not foliated)

Documentary evidence confirms that in Essex as in other parts of England, live-in male servants often did not actually live in. On larger farms with many more rooms service chambers were deliberately constructed to serve for accommodation for live-in servants in garrets above the ground floor. That bedrooms hardly existed for seasonal servants who worked on temporary basis in many homes is suggested by the confession made by Susan Newman to the borough court in Colchester in December 1654. She accidentally set fire to her master's barn when she was startled by a cat and knocked over a candle, while she was 'about the makeing her masters servants bed in the same barne (ERO, D/B5 Sb2/9, fo. 95v). Henry Best hired harvest workers for a short period in 1642 and instructed his foreman to 'sette then up boardes for bedsteads and to lay in strawe ready against that time; they usually made three beds ready for them in the folks chamber an if ther be anymore, they make the rest in the barne, killne, or some other convenient howse for that purpose (Woodward, 1984, p. 50)

Even the sleeping arrangements of more permanent servants tended to be more temporary. They were expected to move wherever and whenever their superiors commanded them. In July 1650, for example, a servant of one Mr Amatt of Hutton was ordered to sleep in the barn to keep watch over the vagrants' lodging overnight (ERO, Q/SBa 2/74). Earlier, in 1628, Katherine Butcher of Belchamp St. Paul informed the court of quarter sessions that her servant Susan Galloway, 'did lye with her two or three nights by reason her husband had required her she should keep with her until he returned in the same chamber' (ERO, Q/SBa 2/12)

The sleeping quarters of servants were often more crowded than the bedchambers of their superiors. It was common practice, for example, for servants to share a bed with the children of the household. In 1592 Mary Clarke, maidservant to Rebecca Purcas of Thaxted, informed the court of quarter sessions that she shared a bed with 'one child of thirteen years of age' (ERO, Q/SR 124/59, 60; Q/SBa 2/21). The consequences of this crowding could occasionally be tragic as when in December 1682 Isaac Archer, minister of Chippenham in Cambridgeshire recorded the sad death of his infant daughter. He wrote in his diary that, 'She had a tender hearted nurse, but we feare 'twas overlaid ... there being 4 in the bed' (Storey, 1994, p. 166)

Servants rarely, if ever, possessed a key to the room in which they slept and so could not develop the sense of personal space and privacy that their employers began to enjoy in the late seventeenth century in specialised spaces such as bedchambers, great chambers, closets and studies, that began to appear in larger households by this date and which could be equipped with locks and keys. By contrast, family members could constantly and casually pass through the rooms in which servants slept and employers entered whenever they wished. Court records reveal, for example, that one morning in March 1621 Isobel Collins, 'suspecting [her servant] ... Marg[are]t to be lousy did one day go into her chamber and ... searching her bed did find the same full of lice' (Brampton c. Collin (1621), ERO, D/ABD2, not foliated)

More serious than these violations of personal privacy, lack of spatial control left young women vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Servants were not entirely passive or helpless in these circumstances (Meldrum, 2000, pp. 100-110). Their knowledge of the layout and organisation of the house meant that they could sometimes hide or lock themselves into a room if the key had been left inside the door. A good example is the occasion when Leonard Whiting's maidservant locked herself in the milkhouse to escape from her master who tried to sexually assault her, while his wife was away (Emmison, 1973, p. 45). But in other instances servants found it very difficult to resist the advances of masters who were able to exploit their power of access to and control over all rooms within the house and sexually abuse their servants. Young women like Dorothy Baker, whose master, Mr Kemp, 'would locke her up at night to have his pleasure of hir', were left vulnerable to the violence that too frequently characterised a female servant's experience of domestic life (ERO, D/B5 Sb2/6, fo. 72v)

Another potent expression of the subordinate status of servants was the manner and timing of their retirement to sleep. In the houses of affluent middling families, servants were required to wait up until their employers came home at night, to warm their beds and guide them by candlelight to their chamber. Mary Day, who worked as a servant for Joseph Rule, a yeoman of Upminster, reported that her master refused to pay for candles, ‘that she might see to warm her [her mistress Mary Day] to bed’ (Rule c. Rule (1675), LMA, DL/C/237, fo. 391v). William Winter, apprentice to John Sumner of Barking, explained that one Sunday about eleven o’ clock at night, his master came home late and he ‘waited upon him up to his Chamber doore and att the doore gave him a candle and he the said John then went into the chamber and immediately blew out the candle and this dep[onen]t then went his way in order to goe to bedd’ (Sumner c. Sumner (1697), LMA, DL/C/245, fo.398v). Elizabeth Pepys expected help with undressing and Samuel became disgruntled if his boy did not help him to bed (Latham and Matthews, 1970, p. 200)

Some distinctions can be discerned between the experiences of male and female servants. There were no references in the depositions to male servants sleeping with their employers and only one example of a ‘boy’, probably a male apprentice, sleeping in his master’s bedchamber. But maidservants quite often slept in the same chamber as their masters and mistresses (ERO, Q/SBa 2/56). Sharing a room meant that copulation could be a fairly public affair. In 1608 Elizabeth Lucas, who worked as a servant for Richard Gilder, a butcher of Colchester, confessed to the borough court that an apprentice ‘with whom she did dwell did begett her with childe and that he had the carnal use and knowledge of her bodie at Easter last on her bedd wher she did lye att her masters beddfote when her master and dame were abedd in the night tyme’ (ERO, D/B5 Sb2/6, fo. 190v)

Lawrence Stone has argued that these arrangements were common at middling social levels at least until the end of the eighteenth century when increasing stress began to be laid on personal privacy and servants began to be lodged in separate chambers (Stone, 1977, pp. 254-5). However, probate evidence and references from the depositions suggests that middling families began to re-arrange their servants’ sleeping quarters much earlier in the first half of the seventeenth century. At this stage of research it is difficult to be certain about the causes of change. Alterations in arrangements may have been made in part to protect personal reputation. From around 1580 the church began to condemn the communal sleeping of mixed sexes, and regular presentments began to be made to the archdeaconry courts for sexual offences, which focused on the unsuitability of such conduct. In 1600, for example, some searching questions were put to one Edwards of Manningtree as to, ‘whether he hath sent his wife commonly by the tide to Harwich market in the night season, his maid lying at his bed’s feet in the chamber (Emmison, 1973, p. 15; ERO, D/AEA 15, fo. 125v)

The extent of church influence on household sleeping arrangements is difficult to assess. Comfort, convenience and the status associated with the ownership of several expensive beds probably also contributed to change. But there is considerable evidence to indicate that from the early part of the seventeenth century servants of both sexes were provided with sleeping accommodation separate from their superiors whenever possible or practical and when rooms were shared with other servants, single sex sleeping accommodation was provided (ERO, D/B5 Sb2/9, fo. 90v). In Edward Spooner and Richard Brewer shared a chamber in an outhouse while they worked as servants for one Widow Porter in 1633, while the maidservant slept in the dwelling house (ERO, Q/SBa 2/41; Q/SBa 2/12). By the middle to late seventeenth century as demand for labour increased in arable and dairying districts, it became cheaper for servants to live in and nearly every yeoman’s house recorded the presence of a ‘Mayds Chamber’ and a ‘Mans Chamber’ (Barley, p. 248; Steer, 1950, pp. 123, 128, 135, 148; Overton et al., 2004, p. 81)

The provision of separate sleeping arrangements for servants obviously depended to a significant degree on the size of and wealth of the household, the number of beds and the number of people in it. Poorer families often could not afford more than one bed. We find, for example, that Ann Ellis of Kelvedon was presented before the Archdeacon of Colchester on a charge of incest after her sixteen year old son was overheard to say that, ‘he desyered to fele other children’s secret p[ar]t[es] sayinge further that he Lyinge nughtly with his mother and grandmother knewe ther secret p[ar]t[es] to be hearye’ (ERO, D/ACA 34, fo. 52v).

Patterns of change were complex and varied according to situation. Many families continued to eat, sleep and work with their servants in the same space for much of the period, partly because of lack of space but also because of habit. Specialised rooms were widespread in gentry's houses by the eighteenth century, for example, but paradoxically one of the most popular innovations into the organisation of their domestic spaces at that time was the great chamber, a first floor room used for a variety of activities including eating and sleeping as well as entertaining guests (Overton et al., 2004, pp. 133-4)

Conclusion

The early modern house was an arena that resonated with power and symbolism for servants throughout the early modern period even in more modest middling sort homes. Its organisation was vitally important for the marking out and maintaining of hierarchy that sustained order in the early modern domestic world. It was not simply a passive backdrop to a social system that had structural origins elsewhere. The way people used space reflected and, in turn had effects back upon, the way social relations between masters and mistresses and their employees were expressed, reaffirmed, challenged or changed.

Yet space in the early modern house was not static but fluid, highly dynamic and variable according to a number of factors including the personality of individuals, time of day, size and wealth of the household, the local economy and occupation. It also varied according to time and use and was determined in the different contexts addressed by different social factors (status, gender, age and place). Social distance between masters and their servants was mapped out spatially by the organisation of mealtimes and the beds and rooms in which they slept. On the other hand food preparation, although gendered, was an activity in which interdependence more than hierarchy between household members was expressed (Flather, 2007, pp. 75-93). Recognition of these complexities requires a revision of interpretations of the significance of changes in the organisation of domestic space over time. Specialised spaces for different functions were created but seventeenth century houses were busy places and room use was not set in stone. Almost all spaces remained accessible to everyone and continued to be multifunctional throughout the period. In these circumstances changes in the physical structure of houses seem less clearly related to sharper spatial and social distinctions between servants and their employers than has sometimes been assumed. What is required is further research into the spaces where we see servants and their employers using their domestic spaces for different purposes that is sensitive to the negotiations required to organise the multiple realms of activity created by life and work.

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