



## A Medieval Home Companion

*Tania Bayard (Editor, Translator)*

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A window into the daily life of a medieval household, originally written as instructions for a young wife from her husband-with more than fifty medieval woodcuts and printed in two colors throughout.

## A Medieval Home Companion Details

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### Orsolya says

Nowadays, if a man penned a manual directed to women providing instruction on how to conduct personal and household affairs; one can bet that feminist groups would have a field day. However, in 1393 this was accepted behavior as women were expected to be submissive (sadly) to their husbands. During this time frame, a 60-something year-old husband wrote a manual for his 15 year-old bride which included exhaustive detail on how she should manage personal and household interactions, religious matters, and even marital intimacy. Tonia Bayard translates portions of this in “A Medieval Home Companion: Housekeeping in the Fourteenth Century”.

The introduction to “A Medieval Home Companion” is valuable to the reading and NOT suggested to be skipped, as it provides helpful information on the nature of the original manuscript and of Bayard’s translation. Bayard explains why she includes some sections over others and also breaks down some areas which could cause confusion.

“A Medieval Home Companion” includes the husband-author’s actual letter to his wife (concerning the manual) before being divided into eight sections: (1) Worship, Dress, Comportment, & Speech (2) Chastity (3) Love (4) How to Care for a Husband (5) Gardening (6) The Household (7) The Kitchen and (8) Other Small Matters. As mentioned, some sections are longer than others, which makes sense per Bayard’s reasoning but it can also lead to boredom depending on the interests of the readers.

The text of “A Medieval Home Companion” is well-written with respect to language and flows quite well. Although some may worry that the manual would be degrading to women; surprisingly, it is not. Yes, there *are* some moments where a female’s blood may begin to boil but the original author incorporates humor, bible verses and folk tales, love, and even advice for his own gender amongst the writings. Therefore, the manual isn’t insulting and is readable.

Aside from being an entertaining read and serving as an insight into the life of one living in fourteenth century France; “A Medieval Home Companion” makes for strong source material for historians or historical fiction authors. The details are informative and answer many questions which other source may not address.

“A Medieval Home Companion” is also successful at causing reader contemplation, as it is shocking how much women were expected to do and yet conduct themselves in a graceful and entertaining way. Readers will be exhausted just reading about it!

There are a couple paragraphs in “A Medieval Home Companion” which isn’t directed towards the wife. This is clear, though, and will not cause confusion because the name of the individual is mentioned and called out properly.

Bayard’s translation ends with original “recipes” for various concoctions from bug poison to rose water, candied orange peels to ink, and everything in between. This isn’t particularly a strong ending, as Bayard doesn’t provide a summary or an after word which would ‘stick’ but it is still interesting, nonetheless. It should also be noted that the text is supplemented with woodcut illustrations which adds to the appeal and medieval ‘feel’ of the book.

“A Medieval Home Companion” is a quick read of an original, primary manuscript. Bayard satisfies both novice and expert readers on the topic while arousing further investigation. “A Medieval Home Companion”

is recommended for anyone and everyone interested in medieval times.

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### **Cow says**

It's interesting, so far, how little has changed in the home in six hundred years (obvious and huge changes in gender roles aside)...

This was an excellent translation and collection; rather than go purely academic, it's made to be very accessible. So you can both learn what a 14th century household was like \_and\_ learn a few things about plants and herbs...

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### **R. G. Nairam says**

A very interesting read! My main wish is that it hadn't been abbreviated (then again, if it hadn't, maybe I wouldn't have been as interested). Also, that I could actually understand what the recipes were talking about.

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### **Jessica Trapp says**

An interesting resource for medieval common life.

From page 136: To cure a toothache: Take an earthenware pot with a lid. The pot should be tightly sealed with clay, and the lid should have a hole in the middle. Or take a lidless pot covered with a trencher that has a hole in the middle. Fill the pot with water, put sage or other herbs in it, and set it to boil. Take off your clothes and get into bed. With your head well covered, position your open mouth over the hole so you can breathe the steam passing through it. Keep yourself well covered.

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### **Meaghan says**

I thought this was going to be one of those "written by a historian, this is what life was like way back when" books. In fact, it's an actual housekeeping guide written by a 15th-century French guy and edited and translated by Tania Bayard. I probably wouldn't have picked it up if I had known. But it is a good illustration of both medieval housekeeping and the medieval mindset, and valuable to people researching the period.

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### **Nancy Thormann says**

This is common sense advice for any married couple. I liked the gardening section the best. You have to remember that this book was written by a 60 year old husband for his 15 year old wife. He knew he'd pass away before she grew old and was giving her advice on how to run a household. She apparently had no living relatives to help her with this.

The unusual part of this book is that a 60 year old man married a 15 year old girl. He then he wrote a book helping her with household duties. Nowadays if a 60 year old man married a 15 year old girl, the feminists would be screaming blue murder. Writing a book for her that helps with household duties would only stoke these flames.

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### **Kit Alloway says**

Although the contents of this book are interesting, especially to those of us interested in daily medieval life, it suffers from the editor's excessive cuts and from the complete lack of commentary or explanations.

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### **Diana Ooten says**

This book was adorable and interesting. Even educational. This book had me wishing to be a wonderful wife to some honorable man, consider the benefits of a positive reputation, and even garden. It also gave me a sense of gratitude that if I want a fresh bottle of wine, I need only throw the old one out and go to the store for another...not tie up silly concoctions in cloths and lower them carefully into casks. I feel that I benefited from having read this book cover to cover.

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### **Bhan13 says**

This book is a very abridged version of a household manual that was written in the late 1300's by an older husband for his very young wife (who, as an orphan, presumably hadn't had a mother to teach her these things). It covers everything from communication and respect between a husband and wife to making sand for an hourglass, and the tone is affectionate. I found it endearing, and it presents a more equal relationship between spouses than people like to admit (and which corresponds with other, later histories I've read recently). As a gardener I was intrigued by the instructions on how to graft a grape vine so that it grows out of the side of a cherry tree's trunk, I'd never heard of that before, also he passes along a trick to secretly turn a glass of white wine red at the table, and how to make an invisible ink that lasts eight days.

Many thanks to my friend Deborah for loaning me this book :)

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### **Kara says**

This book is all kinds of awesome.

So, back in the late 14th century, a man in his 50's – old by the standards of the day – married a 15 year old girl. He then sat down and wrote a book on how to be a good housewife for her to use both to be a good wife to him and later to be a good wife to whoever she presumably married after he died.

He sites in the prologue that he decided to write the book because his young bride told him she couldn't run his house for him because didn't know how to do anything. Which is the part where I started giggling, imagining the teenager pulling the old 'I-can't-do-that-because-I-don't-know-how!' whine. No doubt next

she'll be telling him her Algebra grade is so bad because the teacher hates her.

Anyway, the elderly Parisian wrote down everything one needs to know on managing a middle class house in that time and place, spending a lot of time both on the physical, mundane stuff – how to get rid of bedbugs, but also a lot on the more mental stuff. He talks a lot on how to avoid sin and be virtuous (and the translator says she cut out a /lot/ of the Jesus-Jesus-Jesus stuff for this abridge version). And he also covers how a husband and wife can have a good relationship – communicate. He also – gasp! – suggests the relationship should be somewhat equal. Not that he's suggesting women be allowed to roam free or anything crazy like that, heaven forbid, but he is suggesting a woman doesn't have to be a slave to be a good wife. Also, he advises his child bride not to fake it. Mmm...kay.

Surprisingly, there's some still useful information in here – like how to negotiate with contractors, him warning her that they will always say at the end of the job that it took more labor, hours and materials than they will quote you at the beginning of the job.

Preach truth sir.

He covers a lot ground – marriage counseling, family relationships, how to stay in good standing in a community, the perils of gossip, tips for good gardening, cooking, cleaning, winemaking, covering just about everything a woman would need to know to be considered Good for that time and place.

But, despite the fact this book was written for his wife, the author gets caught up in his own words, waxing on poetic about life, the universe, everything, and I can just see him at his desk, surrounded by parchment, quills and inkwells, scribbling all sorts of advice on paper to his dear wife, and can also see her standing right next to him, trying to ask him a question, and him mumbling, 'not now honey, I just have to finish this chapter,' and her rolling her eyes and flouncing off to see who's making the jousting tournament finals.

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## **Nancy says**

This was a completely engrossing and informative read about the Middle Ages. It's a translation of a manuscript written by an older husband to his teenaged wife on the management of the home. Tons of details about everyday life, and illustrated with lovely medieval woodcuts. It begins with a beautiful prayer to Our Lady. A couple of references to bad words (some that are merely impolite now, others that are truly vulgar) in a section about avoiding this kind of talk. But with an explanation of that section, fine for older grade schoolers.

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## **Mary Catelli says**

This is an excellent book of its type, its type being medieval advice to a new bride. A 15-year-old, who asked her 60-year-old husband to be forbearing with her lack of ability.

Runs a large gamut. From how she ought to conduct herself and arrange her clothes; to avoid young trouble-making men (Queens of France, he assured her, never read a sealed letter except in their husbands' handwriting), through dealing with fleas, what are the best times to plant what plants, and when to harvest

them; advice about animals, down to how to slaughter them; what you hire by way of servants, from temporary odd-jobs (where you must make the deal first) to the household servants (the younger women, in particular, ought to sleep in the mistress's chamber, with no easy egress); and a lot of recipes.

It is amusing to note that he talks of "her husband" to make sure she would apply it if she remarried; it would reflect badly on him if her second husband found she could not manage his household and be trustworthy.

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## **Melody says**

Enjoyable history. It is a sliver of an excerpt from a much longer document, the which I now want to track down and read. I found it very interesting and accessible. It made some medieval practices come vibrantly alive. I loved the obvious care the old man who wrote it had for his young wife, and how he was so matter-of-fact that he was likely teaching her skills she'd use as a young widow, or a freshly remarried girl. I loved the recipes! And the preserving of roses, especially. Mostly I just wanted more.

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## **Sue says**

Delightful first-hand look at a medieval household. An older husband writes to help his very young wife learn proper behavior, manage servants, run the kitchen and grow her garden. Much of this might still be useful, but some, not so much. Illustrated with woodcuts from the era.

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## **Kate says**

A lovely, accessible excerpt of *The Householder of Paris*, with very entertaining descriptions of the old man's 15-year-old wife (addressed as "Sister") should act, cook, housekeep, etc. Since I don't read medieval French and don't have enough time for history in general, this was a great opportunity to read a primary source. The reader certainly gets a feel for the time, attitudes, and overall overbearing patronizing friendliness of a writing-inclined man 700 years ago. The abridgement and the pictures were excellently done by Tania Bayard.

Most disturbing? The Householder's diatribe on how a woman has to be careful to avoid even the possible appearance of immorality. I mean, really, is there ANY way to avoid nasty gossip, if someone is inclined to think you immoral? I was reminded of Austen's Mary Bennett - apparently the Householder thought a woman's reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful, and loss of virtue is irretrievable. But how different is his opinion from those more-modern-than-thou people who insist that appearance IS reality? Awesomely worth reading.

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