

# Is Bread Male or Female?

## Gender and Power Relations

Noel Buttigieg

On August 6, 1742, Magdalena Grech appears for the first time in the court room of the *Magna Curia Castellania*. During her deposition Grech explained how her aggressive behaviour and that of her two daughters towards Ludovico Pace and his wife was instigated by the threat of a letter addressed to her husband who was off island on business. Pace, an acquaintance of the Grech family, decided to write a letter to the merchantmen Bartholomeo Grech to advise him about his family's unorthodoxy. Ludovico Pace believed that Bartholomeo should refrain from providing his family with the necessary means to buy bread.

The role of bread within such situations reflects more than what at face value might be identified as male chauvinism or even economic imperialism. An examination of breadways – behaviours and beliefs surrounding the entire process of bread production and consumption - help us explore the nature of gender roles and power relations during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Bread is here employed as a 'total social fact'.<sup>1</sup> Bread production and consumption generate a myriad of meanings. For pre-industrial communities, bread was so central to life that irrespective of economic background the thought of bread was inescapable. Consequently, it was given an endless amount of meanings and associated with various aspects of human behaviour.

Bread, some might say, is *sine qua non* of food in Malta, but as well as for the rest of Mediterranean Europe. The Maltese lived a frugal life; the consequence of habitual rationing that by time became both voluntary and necessary. Within this dietary system, bread helps to illustrate possible transformations and enable consideration of their qualitative impact on the local pre-industrial urbanites. Thus,

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1 C.M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body. Gender, Meaning and Power*, Routledge 1999, 29.

in this study, I will be concentrating on a central question related to bread, power and gender: How does control of bread production and consumption reveal aspects of power relations and notions of sex and gender?

### Bread in Malta

During the Hospitaller rule (1530-1798) the urban towns of Valletta, Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea developed into the central hub of the Island's economic activity. These harbour towns grew into an active servicing post for the multifarious trading economy and its concomitant maritime requisites.<sup>2</sup> The fortified conglomerate of the harbour towns was also accompanied by a dynamic demographic growth. By the closing decades of the eighteenth century, nearly a third of the Island's population dwelt within the harbour littoral. The political and economic ideology of the government coupled by the socio-cultural forces of a cosmopolitan environment generated an urban mentality which differed in several aspects from its traditional rural counterpart.<sup>3</sup>

Such developments did not happen unchecked. The island's inability of provisioning itself was an annual preoccupation. This meant that the wheat-bread cycle depended primarily on imports. Since late medieval times, Malta's dependency on Sicilian grain imports became imperative for the Island's provisioning.<sup>4</sup> When Sicily experienced scarcity, the islanders were immediately faced by the threat of hunger. Bread shortages often led to a precarious and fragile equilibrium since food consumption often fell below nutritional requirements.

The Maltese constantly talked about their bread and equated this staple with a number of other symbolic meanings. Bread was pregnant with strong associations to the sacred. For instance, similar to several Mediterranean communities, mistreatment of bread was a sign of disrespect to the Source of all sustenance.<sup>5</sup> If someone dropped a piece of bread on the ground, the person was expected to pick it up, kiss it and set it in a safe, clean place. It was sacrilegious to dispose of bread inappropriately. The gesture of giving stressed the links between material and spiritual concerns. The sanctification of bread and its distributive value was best exhibited in a number of festive occasions and particular rites of passage during which bread was donated to the pauper.

2 V. Mallia Milanese, 'Valletta 1566-1798. An Epitome of Europe', *Bank of Valletta Reports and Accounts Supplement*, Malta 1988, i-xxxviii; C. Vassallo, 'Trade in 18<sup>th</sup> century Malta', *Sunday Times of Malta*, June 12 & 19 1994.

3 C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta*, Malta 2000, 237-4. See also C. Cassar, 'Popular perceptions and values in Hospitaller Malta', in *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798*, ed. V. Mallia Milanese, Malta 1993, 431; F. Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta*, Malta 2001, 9.

4 Cassar 2000, 2-4.

5 A.M. Cirese, 'Il Pane Cibo e il Pane Segno' in *Il Pane*, ed. C. Papa, Perugia 1992, 29-34.

Bread was a symbol of power at all levels in society and its daily acquisition a measure of one's success or failure. When asked to go to church and redress his unorthodox behaviour of getting drunk and using foul language, an Early Modern labourer was reported to the Inquisitor for stating that no Church will earn him his daily bread.<sup>6</sup> Bread influenced everyone's thinking and conveyed all sorts of notions: health, fortune, love, family, work, joy, and so on. Tropes like these evolved imperceptibly into a host of idioms characterizing a wide range of behaviours. Bread related Maltese idioms communicate ideas of labour and resources, status and power, honour or shame, success or failure, and employed to explain in popular terms the basic and personal experiences.<sup>7</sup>

### The Bread Market

The Early Modern Maltese expressed and exhibited their gender identities through breadways. Cultural norms requested a rigid sexual division of labour, men and women had clearly defined specific bread roles: women had to mill, knead and bake the bread while their male counterparts had to earn the money to buy the grain and then consume the final product. Historically, it is widely held that women, particularly in pre-industrial societies, were mainly held responsible for the production and processing of food.<sup>8</sup> Carole M. Counihan surmises an interesting cultural construct which defines an important female role:

The predominant role of women in feeding is a cultural universal, a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connections to and influence over others.<sup>9</sup>

Bread-making was an unpaid, domestic activity, only natural and expected by society. Thus, one can assume that since bread was so important within the local diet, and consumed profusely more than any other food, then the domestic production of bread marks an important niche of eighteenth-century femaleness. If females had access to the reproductive nature of bread, then how did the dwindling of bread-centred experience within the harbour littoral effect maleness and femaleness?

Although this study lacks the quantitative evidence to deduce the percentage by which women opted for readymade bread rather than homemade bread, available information indicates how more women and men preferred the former for various reasons. Bread-making was always a challenge, and the final product

6 AIM. *Crim. Proc.*, vol. 69A, (case 168), ff.342-3: June 17, 1654.

7 C. Cassar, *Fenkata: An emblem of Maltese peasant resistance?*, Malta 1994, 4.

8 M.E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press 2000, 103-6; M. Chojnacka, *Working Women of Early Modern Venice*, London 2001, Introduction; N.Z. Davies, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Oxford 1987, 126.

9 Counihan, 46.

depended on a number of factors which could affect the quality of this food. The availability of fresh bread produced by professional bakers raised quality standards also recognised by the government of the Knights through the regulatory policing practices intended to check bread quality and standards.<sup>10</sup> The nature of the urban complex, its cosmopolitan character and the commercial culture induced by such setting seemed to generate an accepting mentality that women had nothing to be ashamed of if they had to purchase ready-made bread. In an increasing commercial pre-industrial society, women within the urban complex seem to start to opt more for readymade bread because of their growing support in other chores, including the family business.

As early as 1647, G.F. Abela remarks how the Qormi bakeries supplied the Valletta market with the necessary bread supplies.<sup>11</sup> Other references of bakers hailing from *Casal Fornaro*<sup>12</sup> are commonly found in the documents of the *Magna Curia Castellania*. The dependency on Qormi bakers remains significant even into the closing decades of the eighteenth century. For instance, in May 1780, thirteen bakers refused to bake bread for the Valletta open market. This decision, probably unprecedented in its nature, was the least welcome by the local authorities. Six of these bakers spent nearly a week arrested in the prisons of the civil courts of justice. There is no evidence as yet which could shed light into this collective protest, yet the scrivener of the court of justice wrote, '*carcerati perche non volere ubbidire di far il pane pubblico ... avendo con cio causato penuria di pane in questa piazza*'.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, there was an urban demand for bakers' bread, a situation similar to other major European cities such as Paris.<sup>14</sup> Apart from the Qormi bakers, another document from the archives of the *Magna Curia Castellania* sheds light on licensed retail outlets found in the four harbour towns.<sup>15</sup> There is no indication related to its origins or purpose. The scrivener seems to have listed all the licensed operators specifying when granted permission to operate between 1776 and 1784. In all probability this was a survey of licensed retailers who were by law expected to renew their permits every three years. The list does not have repetitive names of licensed practitioners, assuming that when the list was compiled in 1784, the licensees were still all operating in that same year. Most of the names were also traced from the compilations of petitions found in the *Registrum Supplicationum Apothecarum* thus emphasising its validity and reliability. The table below indicates the numbers of bread related operators within Valletta.

10 K. Gambin & N. Buttigieg, *Storja tal-Kultura ta' l-Ikel f' Malta*, Malta 2004, 115-6.

11 G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichita', ed alter Notitie*, Malta 1984, 92.

12 The town of Qormi was also referred to in seventeenth and eighteenth century documents as *Casal Fornaro*, otherwise, the village of bakers.

13 *Lib. Carc.* (1773-78), May 17, 1780, May 27, 1780. 'Arrested because they did not want to obey and produce the bread for the public...they caused a shortage of bread in this market'.

14 S.L. Kaplan, *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question (1700-1775)*, Duke University Press 1996, 24.

15 MCC, NA92/04, Box 499.

Valletta									
Profession	1776	1777	1778	1779	1780	1781	1782	1783	1784
Panettieri in Piazza	3	4	/	1	4	3	/	/	/
Fornari & Panettieri	/	1	1	1	2	2	/	/	2
Pannettieri	1	1	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Fornari	1	1	2	2	2	/	4	/	/

Table 1. Number of licensed bread operators. Collated from MCC, NA92/04, Box 499.

This evidence might be another indicator of the growing demand for readymade bread within Valletta. The number of bread hawkers with a license to sell bread during open-market hours, otherwise *panettieri in piazza*, show a consistent growth with nothing less than fifteen *panettieri* selling bread to the Valletta populace by 1784. Fresh bread was baked daily by several Valletta bakers too. A total of twenty-one bakers offered this service to the urban dwellers between 1776 and 1782. Valletta was gradually becoming a self-sufficient city with professional bakers situated close to the same dwellers who could then interact with the same person that prepares their daily bread rather than the unknown baker from Qormi. Could it be that the Qormi bakers' protest referred to earlier on was a reaction to the competition offered by these licensed Valletta bakers?

A study of the licenses issued during the same period indicates that bread was also sold from other retail outlets not necessarily related exclusively to bread selling. For example, in October 1780 Veneranda Micallef filed a request to carry on operating from the shop of her late husband Tommaso. Although the retail function is that of a *bottega di lurdo*, Veneranda is asking permission to sell other food items such as eggs and bread.<sup>16</sup> Retail licences similar to Veneranda's further emphasise the presence of a demand for readymade bread.

Apart from the availability of retail outlets and bread-making services, the harbour towns have been exposed to the idea of readymade bread for a long time. The practise of purchasing baked bread was further facilitated through long existing institutionalised services the government of the Knights offered towards the sick, old-aged, the poor and slaves.<sup>17</sup> The bread retailing service within the harbour town also catered for the demands of a considerable foreign community temporarily visiting the island as part of the island's commercial activity.<sup>18</sup>

16 *NAM. Reg. Supp. Apothec.* 1780-4, vol 16, f.43.

17 P. Cassar, 'Malta's Medical and Social Services under the Knights Hospitallers', in *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798*, ed. V. Mallia Milanese, Malta 1993, 475-82.

18 F. Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta*, 53-4.



The sum of all these elements indicates that urban dwellers were more readily available to accept the baker's bread. Eighteenth-century urban society must have recognised the advantages of gradually abandoning domestic bread production. This reality must have had an impact on some aspects of the symbolic nature of bread as well as on the notion of social structure.

### Bread, Gender & Power Relations.

There are several important scholarly works focusing on the relation of food production and consumption and its influence on power relations. Its evolution is interesting and a short reflection here could elucidate aspects of this study. Reflecting on Marxist theory, G.A. Cohen explains how the Marxist perspective recognized the man-food relationship as a necessity. Nevertheless, Karl Marx's thinking was mainly conditioned by economic influences, thus the emphasis lies on male power over the production of food. Consequently, there was no reflection on the man-food relationship from a social perspective and therefore no attention was given to food consumption.<sup>19</sup>

A social perspective to the function of production comes down to us through the work of T. Parsons and R. Bales. Their study differentiates between material production, which is purely an economic exercise, from emotional production which takes place within a family environment. Women were seen as mediums through which happiness and stability could be generated at home. Yet again, similar to Marxist scholars, they ignore the part that physical consumption might play in providing a happy and emotionally stable home.<sup>20</sup>

In a study about the role of women in relation to food production, A. McIntosh and M. Zey extended the Bales and Parsons idea of production to the notion of consumption. While defining women as 'gatekeepers of food consumption', their sociological enquiry focused on the 'production of consumption', in other words, the processing of food products for consumption within the family's domestic environment.<sup>21</sup> Because a good deal of consumption happens at home, several studies emphasise how women have recognized the importance of the 'production of consumption' opportunities they provide in terms of survival value, moral worth and self-fulfilment. Such understanding equates domestic food with the female domain. Women are credited with control over purchasing, storing, cooking and serving of food. However, a close scrutiny to such assumption might prove otherwise. There is a startling difference between responsibility and control especially in an

19 G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, Princeton University Press 1978, 103.

20 T. Parsons & R.F. Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, Glencoe Free Press 1955.

21 W.A. McIntosh & M. Zey, 'Women as Gatekeepers of Food Consumption: A Sociological Critique', in *Food & Gender. Identity and Power*, eds. C. Counihan & S. Kaplan, Routledge 2004, 125-44.

eighteenth-century perspective when the abundance of food was often limited if not entirely missing. Thus, if bread played such an important role in keeping mouths full, then it remains the main means through which women can take advantage over consumption opportunities. With bread production drifting away from urban kitchens, women would also lose control over the 'production of consumption'.

Marriage involves the reciprocal exchange of purchasing 'power for food': money or a service for a loaf of bread. Bread was a product of such a union, and its consumption an affirmation of their interdependence. This element of reciprocity is a clear-cut indicator of making social connections. M. Mauss highlights often obvious pervasive cultural trends, for instance, the power of the gift which bonds participants in a continuous engagement.<sup>22</sup> Both parties feel indebted to each other and thus interact through giving. As M. Sahlins aptly observes, food is the most important component compared to other stuff which is more readily or necessarily shared.<sup>23</sup> Within this context bread is the most basic of all reciprocal exchanges, more so than any other food in eighteenth-century Malta.

The case study of the merchantman Bartholomeo Grech highlights several aspects of an urban mentality influenced by both economic and social meanings related to his bread culture. What's more interesting here is that the 'power for food' equation is taken to a new level. As long as 'production of consumption' happened within the domestic sphere, the exchange revolved around balancing the purchase of grain by the husband, and the baking of good bread by his wife. The gender roles were clear and either side could be easily questioned depending on his or her performance. But what happens if 'production of consumption' no longer happens at home?

The lack of 'production of consumption' of bread reveals strong human relationships while emphasising basic social values. The fear of losing the most basic of daily survival was a concern for Magdalena Grech and her two daughters. Bread was more than a material possession. It was a family union whose success depended on a strong element of reciprocity. As long as bread remained a domestic act, its production reflected the labour of several entities within the social group. But the consumption of bakery bread required modified social values. According to Ludovico Pace, Bartholomeo Grech could justify his maleness with his ability of procuring a living for his family. As long as bread was present on the kitchen table, Pace believed that his friend's integrity was safeguarded while Grech should defend his untouchable position even during his absence from home. As an act of marriage reciprocity, Grech should have expected unconditional respect from the rest of his family. Bread, thus becomes an act of maleness, a means to defend masculinity. The economic dependency of Grech's wife meant that female behaviour had to meet particular social values propagated as norms by society in general. These norms

22 M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, New York 1967.

23 M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, Aldine 1972, 41-99, 215.

were by and large a yardstick against which women would uphold the honour of their male counterparts and avoid tarnishing their *vergüenza*, basically, a combination of shame, modesty, care for one's reputation and feminine honour."

The realities within this social change must have had an impact on social structure. At face value, J.L. Flandrin's assertion that the relationship between husband and wife was one in which the latter was economically dependent on the former generally applies for the local case study." Evidence shows how males would use bread as a means to silence any form of female protest. Men imposed power by deciding how much money should go into purchasing supplies holding their wives responsible to efficient family budgeting.<sup>16</sup> Husbands claimed control over the quality and abundance, judging any food prepared by the wife. Men even stopped providing their wives with the necessary money to feed the family." Social expectations reduced any female possibilities of rejecting male imperialism when things went out of hand. In fact, some evidence shows how eighteenth-century Maltese women even delved into ensorcelling their food as a means to tame male abusive behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Bread and the economic demands to acquire it became mainly a male prerogative. Although this was already true for earlier times, the late eighteenth-century urban experience sees bread more of a male rather than a female domain.

If Early Modern women were held responsible for the 'production of consumption', men, to a varying degree, controlled its enactment. This situation clearly defined an established hierarchical power structure. If women could have used bread to win more respect at home, the readymade bread culture contracted female influence in the kitchen. The changing market economy augmented their responsibility for the emotional well-being of the family. The increasing dependency on marketable bread gradually erodes the mutual giving and receiving of bread yet reinforced male-female economic dependency. More and more the urban dwellers acquired their bread from the market and retail shops through money-based exchanges rather than the reciprocal exchange of domestic bread production the further were male-female power relations modified. Males not only remained responsible over the family finances, but then became in control of the most staple of all foods. Males became the breadwinners *par excellence*. If D. Arnold's definition of food in general is applied to the notion of bread in Early Modern times then, 'bread was, and continues

to be, power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form'." Conversely, when males of the Early Modern community failed to procure daily bread, the immediate experience of hunger was nothing else but the most evident signal of powerlessness.

## Conclusion

Late eighteenth-century Maltese society is typical of other Mediterranean Southern European society. Relationships are dictated by patriarchal norms which constantly need to be reconfirmed. These norms include a number of basic expectations such as the ability to organize and unify the family. Leadership was mainly a manipulation of man's honour. This responsibility was demanding and entailed constant surveillance of mundane activities. The most basic of all was the provisioning of the family with the necessary foodstuffs.

This examination of bread indicates how by the closing decades of the eighteenth century, urban men and women increasingly adhered to modified gender roles and power relations. Unlike preceding centuries, a clear socio-economic division allocated bread within an entirely male domain as the domestic 'production of consumption' becomes completely a baker's prerogative. Eighteenth-century Maltese men and women already shared an environment motivated by an unequal cultural powerbase. For the urban community, men still enjoyed a recognized value for their work. The same could not be said for women, whose economic status was considered as inferior and consequently poorly paid. Within this already set mentality, bread was going to help to reinforce particular social conventions which were not as yet unclear until the domestic production of bread remained no longer a niche of urban female identity. This cultural behaviour would contrast with the bread experience found within the countryside where the domestic production of bread would see its practise even into the early decades of the twentieth century.

Breadways, thus, could be here seen as another key measure of male versus female power. The provisioning of bread, one might assume, gave males a justified power status from a socio-economic perspective. To a certain extent, the abandonment of domestic bread production, could have given urban women a reason to partake in the active market economy generated during the closing decades of Hospitaller rule. This would have meant that urban women could have also earned their own bread in the temporary or permanent absence of their husbands. Maybe historians might look into this possible development as this would further shed light on the observations stated above.

29 See Counihan. 7.

24 NAM. NA92/04. Box. 419; Aug\*\* 6. 1742.

25 J.L. Flandrin. *Families in Former Times*. Cambridge University Press 1979. 121

26 NAM. NA92/04. Box. 416; August 3, 1742.

27 MCC, Ub. Care 1741-1743; December 18. 1742.

28 C n u r 2002, Chapter 5.