

eTopoi

Journal for Ancient Studies

Special Volume 2 (2012), pp. 243–252

Elliott Shore

Modern Restaurants and Ancient Commensality

in Susan Pollock (ed.), *Between Feasts and Daily Meals:
Toward an Archaeology of Commensal Spaces*

Edited by Gerd Graßhoff and Michael Meyer,
Excellence Cluster Topoi, Berlin

eTopoi ISSN 2192-2608

<http://journal.topoi.org>



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Modern Restaurants and Ancient Commensality

Commensality in terms of archaeological investigations seems to revolve around questions of feasting and everyday eating patterns. The nature of the available evidence moves archaeologists and ancient historians to conjecture about these questions in innovative and thoughtful ways. How can a modern historian of food enter into this conversation? The history of restaurants in the West seems to provide one way into this debate and poses the question of what evidence we actually have for what commensality might be.

Modern history; restaurants; commensality; dining out; spectacle.

Auseinandersetzungen mit Kommensalität im Rahmen archäologischer Untersuchungen scheinen sich im Wesentlichen um Fragen zu Festen und alltäglichen Essgewohnheiten zu drehen. Die Art der ihnen zur Verfügung stehenden Befunde lässt Archäologen/Archäologinnen und Althistoriker/Althistorikerinnen auf innovative und umsichtige Weise über diese Themen nachdenken. Wie kann sich nun die Historie mit dem Thema Nahrung und Essen in der Neuzeit in diese Diskussion einbringen? Die Geschichte des Restaurants in den Kulturen des Westens scheint eine Möglichkeit zu sein, in diese Debatte einzusteigen und wirft zudem die Frage auf, welche Daten wir eigentlich haben, um zu erforschen, was Kommensalität sein könnte.

Neuere und Neueste Geschichte; Restaurants; Kommensalität; Essen außer Haus; Spektakel.

1 Introduction

Two issues confronted me upon being invited to a commensality workshop as the lone modern historian: I had only a layperson's understanding of ancient archaeology, and I had never heard of commensality. The latter seemed easily remedied: I could and did look up the word. To the Oxford English Dictionary it seemed to mean "the habit of eating at the same table"—"Eating together," as Dr. Johnson would say, "promotes good will, Sir, commensality is benevolent." No quarrels with that—I had written a piece on the history of restaurants in the West,¹ and that seemed to qualify me to some extent to say something about eating together at the same table, at least if the table was in a place that we call a restaurant. But not being an archaeologist could not be remedied by looking up a word.

It got worse at the workshop—not only was I not an archaeologist, but I was not prepared for the work that was needed to try to make sense of often the tiniest bit of data—a pot here, an opening in a wall there, kitchen leavings here, bowls of different shapes and sizes there—what did it mean, how could one conjecture and make an argument about what ancient commensality may have looked like in different places at different times from what appeared to me to be such little evidence? Especially for those archaeologists who were working almost exclusively with objects and without textual sources, I found

1 Some of the sections of this paper are adapted from my "Dining Out: The Development of the Restaurant": Shore 2007.

myself fighting the urge to say: hey, you can't prove that, or, wait a second, how do you know that it was women who were cooking at that fire, you are just speculating! In restaurants, it took more than half of the time in their modern existence for women to start to even work in restaurants, let alone cook in them! It was tough going for me—and who knows how hard it was for the skilled archaeologists? What did they think of this interloper, sitting near the back, wondering what he could say or do while they wondered if he had wandered into the wrong academic building at the Freie Universität in Berlin.

Giving the last talk on the last day and then being part of a larger discussion almost put me over the edge. Why would this learned crowd listen to me anyway? I had never measured the dimensions of any of the dining rooms that I was about to describe, nor could I meticulously describe the china or the cooking implements—I had never unearthed the remains of any restaurant nor had I sifted through the kitchen debris. Not a recipe for success. But something that happens at the table when one eats out in Germany—and indeed took place again at the end of the conference when we all seemed to be engaged in the commensal act of eating together at an Italian restaurant in a Berlin suburb—helped me to try to make sense about why it might not have been such a terrible idea to have me over for dinner. I brought it up in discussion—a question about when eating at the same table is commensality and when it just looks like it.

When people in Germany eat in a restaurant, and they are not related to one another, they almost always pay for their food individually, sometimes down to the extra bits like rolls and water and wine that to an outsider look like they are being shared among the group. So the waitperson, when she or he comes by for the reckoning, brings a large purse along and painfully and exactly figures out precisely how much each person owes. “I will pay for that bottle of water, or half of that bottle of wine,” is not heard that uncommonly. Did we all eat together at a common table or not? Did we share a social space together even though we paid individually? What was actually happening at the table that we seemed to be sharing before the time came to pay the bill?²

Does it matter that when folks in Germany go out to eat, they often divide the bill up in (what I experience as) excruciating exactness? Does that affect the commensal aspects of eating out? Moreover, what does it mean to eat at the same table, listen to and discuss serious and funny matters as a group and then pay individually at the end? Is the act of eating in public also an individual act? How is eating in public a ritual act, and how is it also an ordinary one? It seems to bear directly on one of the questions that was asked of the participants in the workshop: how ritual commensality could be defined in relation to daily commensal practices in order to become something special? How do ritualized forms of food consumption arise out of ordinary commensal routines? The restaurant seems to be an excellent site to look for answers to these questions. And perhaps, somewhere along the way, to provide another angle to look at the ancient commensal world pieced together by archaeologists.

2 Commensal Defined

Commensal: A person who usually eats at the same table as another or several others. We are very attached to the meaning of the name Commensal, as it broadly defines the essence of our mission. By opening our table to our customers and sharing with them our love of vegetarianism, we endeavor to offer them the best of who we are.

Commensal's Commitments

2 The American expression “going Dutch” is a term that could refer to this. The corresponding phrase in Turkish is *hesabı Alman usulü ödemek*, which can be translated into English as “to pay the bill the German way.” *Alman usulü* = German style.

Beneficial, ethical and organic, the Commensal brand appeals to consumers who choose to live a healthy lifestyle, with the knowledge that their health begins with what's on their plate. It upholds values that are in line with maintaining good relations with our planet as well as sustainable development, environmental responsibility and health. Commensal is first and foremost a way of life that values well-being, personal accomplishment and authenticity. It is a humanitarian brand based on the life values of respect, integrity and sharing.

At Commensal, we steadfastly abide by our commitments and also support social integration through an employment program in our central kitchen.³

No, this is not the Oxford English Dictionary's updated definition of commensal, but it very well could become it. It certainly takes in an enormous field of endeavor: saving the planet, being the best you can be as an individual, and at the same time, sharing. A good brand indeed. No, it comes from a restaurant chain in Canada, Commensal—it is the statement of their philosophy. A chain that started with one restaurant in 1977 and thirty-four years later opened its seventh, noting:

The opening of the new Boisbriand restaurant marks an evolution in the dining experience. New colours along with a new ambiance and several thoughtful touches are what make Commensal a restaurant concept in tune with today's population, *who expect and seek out pleasure, adventure and freedom with a focus on taking care of themselves.*⁴

Pleasure, adventure and freedom with a focus on taking care of themselves. The new meaning of commensal.

Or the first meaning of commensal, at least when it comes to the first restaurant as Rebecca L. Spang⁵ has helped us to understand: it was an establishment named after a particular type of food, a bouillon 'restoratif.' The restaurant served a healthful hot broth that was supposed to soothe and 'restore' the body. The first restaurant provided both food and a place to eat it that promoted health. Mathurin Roze de Chantoiseau opened his Parisian establishment in 1766 with the claim that he would serve broth made from a nutritious extract of meats and vegetables, a claim that was based on the quasi-scientific ideals of the Enlightenment, the movement that among its many projects purported to apply reason to such problems as curing the ailments of intellectuals and artists.⁶ The impetus for such frugal and healthful dining in Paris might have been a reaction against the elaboration of French cuisine in the first half of the eighteenth century. The shift between ostentatious, baroque, and innovative tastes and a reaction in the direction of (supposedly) classical purity was not new. But the diner in a restaurant was usually alone, said to be recovering from the nervous disorders that the commensal eating patterns of the 18th century elites in Paris had brought on.

From sipping chicken broth alone in 1766 into a chain of vegetarian restaurants in Ontario and Quebec called Commensal in 2011? How might we think about the restaurant as an extension of domestic food consumption when it began as the opposite, a way to get away from the increasingly ritualized—at least for the upper classes—form of dining at home? In other words, at least for the privileged classes in 18th century Europe, the feast had become the normal way to eat—and what the restaurant was, at least at its origins,

3 Quoted from [http://www.commensal.com/en/qui/philosophie/resto/default.idigit\(01.08.2011\)](http://www.commensal.com/en/qui/philosophie/resto/default.idigit(01.08.2011)).

4 Emphasis added, quoted from [http://www.commensal.com/en/qui/history/resto/default.idigit\(01.08.2011\)](http://www.commensal.com/en/qui/history/resto/default.idigit(01.08.2011)).

5 Spang 2000.

6 The source of and impetus to this movement is the Renaissance humanist Platina 1998.

was a place for bowling alone,⁷ a place for a healthful broth (the moral equivalent of vegetarianism of the 21st century?) alone, away from family, away from the ritual—often performed in a semi-public way—of powerful people eating their meals. You got to do it whenever you wanted, the broth was brought to you, warm, not sitting on a table as part of an elaborate table-setting and not among people who were seated in a ritually prescribed way at a precise time of the day.

Before we continue, let's think about what a restaurant is and why it seems to be a modern invention. It was chiefly distinguishable at its outset from an inn, the only place one could get a meal while travelling—i. e., while not at home. A restaurant is a destination in itself as a place to eat, rather than (as with an inn) a place of local gathering or traveller's refuge that also offers food. Within the restricted opening hours of the establishment, a restaurant offers a variety of dishes, more so than is the case with an inn. Thus most restaurants do not open for breakfast and those that do, outside of hotels or modern-day inns, specialize to some extent in this meal. The meals restaurants do serve have more options than traditional inns could provide; at a restaurant one eats what one desires from an often extensive menu. During most of its history, the restaurant has offered meals served by a waiter whose job is limited to this (so he is not doubling as an innkeeper, ostler, or bartender).⁸ Rather than gathering with the other lodgers at an inn or guesthouse, the clientele of a restaurant come with their friends, sit apart from others, and pay for a specific meal when they are finished.

Certain facets of restaurant dining now seem so natural or automatic that it is worth noting that they are based on culturally and historically specific rules and expectations. Once having chosen not to dine at home, one might plan ahead and decide to go at a particular time to a certain restaurant, but the decision to go out could as easily be made on the spur of the moment. Even with a reservation, unless the restaurant has certain specialties (Joe's Stone Crabs in Miami Beach or a Brazilian *churrasceria*), usually a decision about exactly what to eat has not been made in advance. Even going to a restaurant renowned for a certain food, one's partner might want to eat something else (hence steakhouses offer fish of a sort, and sometimes vegetarian options). Even if arriving a few minutes late, the diners still expect the food to be ready for preparation (or reheating) when ordered and cooked, or at least plated once the guests are seated. A plate with the food ordered is set before each diner, or served from a plate set on the table. The party has a general idea of what this will all cost, depending on the category of the restaurant, the nature of the ingredients, whether or not wine or spirits accompanied the meal, and how many courses were consumed. When it comes time to settle up, a bill arrives listing the dishes ordered, with prices that agree (one expects) with those stated on the menu.

Although these expectations might not explicitly occur to someone routinely dining in a restaurant, they are established characteristics that have defined the institution since it sprung to life fully formed in the 1760s in Paris.⁹ No such institution was available in the West before then. Away from home or the court, one might have an array of dining choices, but none would include the attributes of what would be considered a restaurant. One characteristic of early restaurants, offering opportunities for intimate and perhaps illicit meetings, was important in their earliest days but is no longer integral

7 This is a reference to a widely read and influential text by Robert D. Putnam 2000, which gathered data on the increasing isolation of Americans in such findings as the drop in family dinners of 43% over the period of the last quarter of the 20th century.

8 As far as we can tell, it is probably in the latter half of the nineteenth century that the first waitresses appear, not at the classic French restaurant, but at something called the Harvey Houses which were set along the American frontier railroad lines at neatly spaced distances beginning in 1870. It is likely that the first woman to run a middle class café did so in the late 19th century in Glasgow—Kate Cranston.

9 For further literature on the early history of restaurants, see Grimod de La Reynière and Coste 1803–1812; Jarves 1856; Aron 1975; Trager 1997; Spang 2000; Pitte 2002; Strong 2002.

to their meaning or function. It may be tantalizing to think about this possibility of the early meaning of the restaurant as a ritual form of feasting that the restaurant was best suited to perform, one that would work less well in the home or in an acknowledged feasting place. The *cabinets particuliers* provided a programme of which eating formed only a part. Objects of many stories, the private rooms in Parisian restaurants offered a new venue for encounters between men and women not married to one another who could meet in a public place but a private space, more elegant and less stigmatized than a brothel. Private rooms flourished in Parisian restaurants for at least the first half of the nineteenth century, and they fulfilled a number of social functions in addition to serving as places for sexual meetings. Some of the more discreet Parisian restaurants maintained separate entrances, so that the couples did not have to traverse the public space in order to reach their rendezvous, but private rooms also allowed for political groups, for spies, for people who needed a space outside of the home to meet, but for whom public meetings were interdicted by French law. But despite the pleasures of the flesh and the stimulation of political discussion, the private room of a restaurant was essentially a locale for the delectation of food.

The ritual form of elite eating that prevailed into mid-18th century Europe led to the first restaurants, but those restaurants, within a span of no more than fifty years, became a ritualized form of their own. The restaurants projected a certain image of familial intimacy and refinement at the same time. So in addition to ritualized possibilities for intrigue, French restaurants continued to recast the notion of the domestic, first by simplifying the food for lone diners, then recodifying it, and then exporting it. The French restaurant became, for at least a century and a half, the embodiment of what it meant to be a restaurant, exported throughout the world. The owners of *Les Trois Frères Provençaux*, founded in 1786, were actually unrelated but married to three sisters. From their native Marseilles they brought to Paris a splendid recipe for the Provençal *brandade de morue* (puréed saltcod). It was the first stop in Paris for many foreigners on the nineteenth-century grand tour, especially for Americans, who admired its furnishings as much as its food and who perhaps felt it easier to experience France in a way that seemed to demand less advance preparation than did visits to historic sites and museums. This one establishment so embodied the notion of the French restaurant that it was imported to the first world's fair in the United States, the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, where the American author William Dean Howells lamented, after dining at the temporary branch:

When I think of it, I am ready to justify the enormous charges at the restaurant of the Trois Frères Provençaux (so called because each of the Brothers makes out his bill of Three Prices, and you pay the sum total), as a proper reprisal upon us; but I would fain whisper in the ears of those avengers that not all Americans are guilty.¹⁰

A third aspect in the ritualized codification of what eating in a restaurant was to be was the emergence of a nascent publicity industry that would help enshrine classic examples of the institution. Guidebooks, listings and reviews of restaurants abounded. As was the case with the 'restaurant' itself, we can name the person who set this machinery in motion: the Parisian lawyer and gastronome Alexandre-Balthasar-Laurent Grimod de La Reynière, who published the *Almanach des gourmands* in 1803. In the first decade of the nineteenth century Grimod developed the preconditions for what constituted true gastronomic spectacle, the nexus of cuisine and atmosphere characteristic of the modern restaurant. A great establishment had to satisfy taste but also to fulfill fantasy and desire.

10 Howells 1876, 94.

Grimod helped to fix in the minds of his readers the restaurant as a place apart, with its own rules, where learning to read the menu and to order the right foods and wines developed into an act of taste that would take an effort to perform correctly. The client as well as the waiter had to obtain a degree of expertise.

So eating in a restaurant provided at first a way to get out from under ritualized forms of dining at home by eating ‘alone’ in a space that was semi-public. It developed very quickly, though, into another form of ritualized space that had its own rules that one had to learn—how to order, what wines went with what foods, where to go and which restaurants to avoid. And you could perform certain acts—meetings, trysts—in restaurants that you could not easily do at home. This process was more or less true of western European and US restaurant formation into the 19th century. But the success of the restaurant for the elites led by the middle of the 19th century—due in part to a number of technological and industrial changes—to the development of the restaurant for the growing middle classes and the poor. These restaurants started to take on other forms—less ritualized and looking more like eating at home.

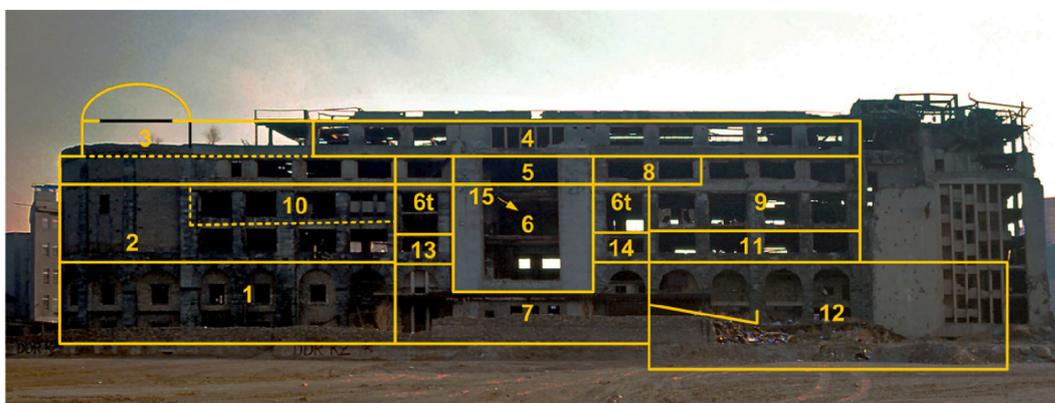
So let’s turn back to our German example of eating in public and wondering whether it was commensal or not. And whether and to what extent it retained the nature of a ritual feast or may have turned into something completely other. In Germany, as in Italy, Britain and the United States, the restaurant was first imported from France through the introduction of *grande cuisine* by chefs trained in Paris, and then the middle-class and lower-class versions of the restaurant followed in the latter half of the nineteenth century due to the rise in the urban population and the influence of technology. Germans took the word “restaurant” into their language after 1850. Previous German terms referred to inns or taverns and they were superseded, at least in legal terms, by the words *Gastwirtschaft* or *Gaststätte*, for those restaurants that would develop for the middle class. After 1840, Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt am Main and Munich would all boast well-known restaurants, many of them connected to the rise of the luxury hotel, a phenomenon that helped to make the classic restaurant an internationally familiar institution. One of the most famous developed in Berlin in 1872, when the Kempinski family started to sell sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs in tasting rooms in the cellars from which they conducted what was then their principal business, the sale of Hungarian wines. The enterprise changed direction and grew into a hotel and mass-luxury restaurant that by 1913 would serve luxurious eight-course dinners (or half-portions for half the price) to 10,000 diners a day. The Restaurant Kempinski in the Leipziger Straße had up to 250 chefs employed at once and when it opened in 1889, it became the largest restaurant in Berlin. But it did not remain so, for this was only the first incarnation of the large-scale Kempinski restaurant empire: the second was on the Ku’damm (now rebuilt as the Hotel Bristol), and the most glorious was called the “Haus Vaterland” on Potsdamer Platz (heavily damaged in World War II). Under one roof there were 12 restaurants, a huge cafe (with 2,500 seats) and a movie theater—all told a capacity of 8,000, with a total of more than one million visitors a year. The restaurants were themed: the Löwenbrau here, a Spanish Bodega there, and an American Wild-West-Bar to boot. The entire chain was confiscated from its Jewish owners by the National Socialists in the 1930s.

What was going on at the Haus Vaterland? One million visitors a year, 8,000 seats that could be filled, and you could travel the world’s cuisines without leaving the building. A short century and a half after the modern Western restaurant was formed in response to the ritualized feasting at home, this outsized extravaganza emerges. The number and kinds of experiences one could have in this complex destabilize the notion of what eating out might look like, what feasting might be, and, by extension to the 21st century, what eating at home is. At Haus Vaterland, dining became a multi-media experience:

The Rhine Terrace Restaurant was famous for its weather simulations. The tagline that ‘In Haus Vaterland, one eats heartily and the storms rage hourly,’ was borne out by the creation of a backdrop portraying the Rhine Valley at St. Goar—(with views of the Rheinfels Castle and the Lorelei Cliffs). Once an hour the lights in the room were dimmed and thunder, lightning and heavy downpours were simulated. In order to protect the guests from the gushing rain water, the tables were protected from the simulation by glass panels. In the recreated Rhine Valley, model trains ran and model ships plied the surface of the water. In cooperation with Lufthansa, model airplanes moved through the landscape pulled along on thin filaments.¹¹

Eating out in public at the Rhine Terrace, combined with all of the other opportunities at Haus Vaterland for both dining and watching films, seems to encapsulate the multiple possibilities in a very capacious idea—commensality. Add into this stew the likelihood that when one went there in a group, the bill was almost certainly split down to the last pfennig, eating out can be eating alone, it can be eating with people but not sharing the cost of the meal, it can be a spectacle that one observes and where one is observed by other diners, and where one can choose the level of ritual in the dining “experience” to suit one’s mood and one’s income. Do we know what people experienced in Haus Vaterland? Do historians today have more evidence for what they thought they were experiencing than the archaeologists at our workshop had for their commensal questions? Maybe in the remains of this precursor of what has now become a universal experience of eating out are the shards of commensality. The inverse of eating out as eating at home and the festive meals are often at home, while eating out has become a form of eating at home.

Maybe there are modern ruins that can speak to us in the ways that the archaeological sites do. Here is Haus Vaterland in 1976:¹²



1. = Kaffee Vaterland	5. = Czardas / Osteria	8. = Wild-West-Bar	12. = Kammerlichtspiele (Kino)
2. = Rheinterrasse	6. = Mittelhalle	9. = Löwenbräu	13. = Bodega ab 1930
3. = Palmensaal (Ballsaal)	6t = Treppenaufgänge Mittelhalle	10. = Türkisches Café	14. = Japanische Teestube
4. = Hauptküche	7. = Eingangsfoyer	11. = Grinzing	15. = Bodega, Teltower Rübschen, Bremer Kombüse

11 The German original (accessed [January 2012] at http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haus_Vaterland#K.C3.BCnStlerische_Ausgestaltung_der_Gastst.C3.A4tten) reads: “Berühmt waren die Wettersimulationen in der Rheinterrasse. Unter dem Motto ‘Im Haus Vaterland ißt man gründlich, hier gewitterts stündlich’ wurden in einer nachgebauten Kulisse der Rheintallandschaft bei St. Goar (mit Blick auf die Burg Rheinfels und den Loreleyfelsen) zu jeder Stunde die Saalbeleuchtung gedämpft sowie Donner, Blitz und Wolkenbrüche simuliert. Zum Schutz der Gäste vor den Regengüssen waren die Tischreihen mit Glasscheiben zur Kulisse hin abgetrennt. Im nachgebauten Rheintal fuhren Modelleisenbahnen, außerdem bewegten sich Schiffsmodelle auf dem Wasserlauf. Es wurden sogar in Kooperation mit der Lufthansa Flugzeugmodelle an dünnen Fäden durch die Kulissenlandschaft bewegt.“

12 http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/de/1/1b/Haus_Vaterland_schnitt_1024.jpg(accessed July 2011).

This is a twentieth century site, so it should be much easier to analyze than an ancient archaeological one. But is it? Do we know what people experienced in its various commensal spaces, what they felt and thought as they watched the spectacles in the restaurants or in the cinema? How will archaeologists of the future deal with these, our ruins, in thinking about eating together and apart?

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Elliott Shore

Chief Information Officer, Director of Libraries and Professor of History, Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, USA. He has also taught at Temple University, The New School of Social Research, Rutgers University, and at the University of Köln, where he was a senior Fulbright Scholar. He was the librarian at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton for a dozen years. He has published in a number of fields, including the history of publishing, advertising, food, and political and social radicalism.

CIO, Bibliotheksdirektor und Professor für Geschichte, Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, USA; Lehrtätigkeit an der Temple University, The New School of Social Research, Rutgers University und der Universität Köln; Inhaber des Fulbright Senior Stipendiums; Bibliothekar am Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Zahlreiche Veröffentlichungen zu unterschiedlichen Themen, einschließlich Geschichte des Verlagswesens, Werbung, Essen sowie politischer und sozialer Radikalismus.

Bryn Mawr College
101 N. Merion Ave.
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010

eshore@brynmawr.edu