



**Pleasures of Gluttony**  
**Los placeres de la Codicia**  
**Os prazeres da Gula**

Burçin EROL<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In the late Middle Ages, especially in England, displaying an abundance of food and feasting became not only an act of pleasure but also a means of establishing status and wealth, despite gluttony being one of the seven deadly sins. In the fourteenth century – due to various reasons such as increased population, crop failure, the Black Death, and the disruption of food production by warfare – feasting, the displaying of food, and indulgence in gluttony was an indicator of wealth, riches, and high status for the upper class or the social climber as it is well indicated in the works of Chaucer and some of his contemporaries.

**Resumo:** Especialmente na Idade Média Tardia, na Inglaterra, demonstrações de comida abundante e ceias se tornaram não somente um prazer, mas uma representação do estabelecimento de status e riqueza, apesar da gula ser proclamada um dos sete pecados capitais. No século XIV, devido a várias calamidades, como crescimento populacional, problemas na colheita, a peste negra e a quebra da produção de comida, o fornecimento e a ostentação de comida e indulgência na gula foi um indicador de riqueza grande status para a classe alta ou para ascendentes sociais, como bem indicada nos trabalhos de Chaucer e alguns de seus contemporâneos.

**Keywords:** Seven Deadly Sins – Gluttony – Pleasure – Middle English Literature.

**Palavras-chaves:** Sete Pecados Capitais – Gula – Prazer – Literatura em Inglês Médio.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr., Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: [burc@hacettepe.edu.tr](mailto:burc@hacettepe.edu.tr).



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It is one of the basic facts that human beings eat to survive, however, as Anderson points out human beings derive pleasure and enjoyment from their food in addition to the basic physical requirement of subsistence.<sup>2</sup> Although food is essential for survival, the consumption of food is also a social act and frequently the ingestion of food is ‘cultivated for pure pleasure.’<sup>3</sup> Anderson underlines the fact that food is an agent in defining one’s identity and place in society and, like many other food specialists, that it is a communicator of class, ethnic identity, lifestyle, affiliation, and other social positions, moreover it is stated that food is ‘second only to language as a social communication system.’<sup>4</sup> In the Middle Ages not only were these markers frequently reinforced but they were also strictly regulated both by civil and religious authorities.

The food culture and consumption in the Middle Ages was shaped by two powerful traditions: the ecclesiastical and the medical.<sup>5</sup> The medical authorities whose tradition stretched back to antiquity and to the theory of the humours, laid out the composition of the dishes to keep the humours of the body in balance and there were also strict rules as to the order in which the prepared foods were to be served.<sup>6</sup> The cooks prepared the meals and served them meticulously according to these principles. The second factor in defining food and consumption traditions and habits was ecclesiastical authority.

According to the ecclesiastical tradition, moderation was key in food consumption. This principle was rooted both in religion and the classical tradition. The classical philosophers praised the principle of the Golden Median, advising the balanced and moderate consumption of food and drinks.

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<sup>2</sup> ANDERSON, E. N. *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2005, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> SCULLY, Terence. *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> ANDERSON. *Everyone Eats*, pp. 140-41; SCULLY. *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*, pp. 40-41ff; see also COLQUHOUN, Kate. *Taste: The Story of Britain through its Cooking*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007, p. 67.



On the other hand, the ecclesiastical authorities encouraged the concentration on the spiritual world rather than the physical and preached for abstinence and moderation. Gluttony was regarded as the most dangerous of the sins because Adam and Eve had been banished from Paradise as a result of it.<sup>7</sup> Gluttony was also understood to be the easiest to commit; it tempted man daily and lead to the other sins. It was possible to avoid the other sins, however, man had to consume food daily for his survival, and hence it was an ever present threat.

The Catholic Church classified the sins under two groups: venial and mortal. The first group could be forgiven through penance, but committing a sin in the second group, however, threatened eternal damnation. With this approach in mind the doctrine of the Seven Deadly Sins was formulated. Gluttony, according to this doctrine, was defined as the over consumption of food. Although the definition emphasised food, later the temptation of drinking and drunkenness was also included in the definition. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* defined the six ways of committing Gluttony: eating too soon, eating too expensively, eating too much, eating too eagerly, eating too daintily, and eating wildly. The concept of the Seven Deadly Sins became a very popular topic and it was treated in many literary works and religious manuals and works of edification.<sup>8</sup> It also made its way into medieval art. Bruegel, for example, presents the aspects of Gluttony in his picture entitled *the Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*.

In the section on the ‘Temptations’, the author of the *Ancrene Riwle*, a thirteenth-century book of instructions for the anchoresses, gives a description of the sin in line with the allegorical representations of the time. He says: ‘The Sow of Gluttony has young with these names: the first, Too Early, the second Too Delicately, the third Too Voraciously, the fourth Too Much, the fifth Too Often. These young are farrowed in drinking more often than in eating.’<sup>9</sup> It was common to represent the allegorical figure of Gluttony in illuminations and carvings as riding on a sow.

In a similar vein, the fourteenth-century poet William Langland, in *Piers Plowman*, devoted an entire section to the detailed description of the Seven

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<sup>7</sup> COSMAN, Madeline Pelner. *Fabulous Feasts: Medieval Cookery and Ceremony*. New York: George Braziller, 1976, pp. 116-17.

<sup>8</sup> See PANTIN, W. A. *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980, p. 189 *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> *The Ancrene Riwle*, SALU, M. B. (trans.). London: Burns and Oates, 1995, p. 91.



Deadly Sins. Gluttony is depicted at length; the way in which drunkenness leads to other sins and obstructs the road to salvation is given through the allegorical figure who is lured by drink, neglects his church visit, ignores the fast and, becoming drunk, engages in gambling, eating, swearing, and the most disgusting aftereffects and bodily functions of overeating and drinking are vividly depicted.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Church tried to impose strict rules about Gluttony and demanded food intake restrictions in quantity, kind, and in mealtimes, these restrictions seemed to have been largely ineffective. The sin of Gluttony was the greatest temptation because unlike the other sins man had to eat every day for his survival and the temptation was present every day. Montanari points out a very important factor that played a great role in this attitude when he says:

All traditional societies and cultures are marked by hunger, or to state it better, by the *fear* of hunger. That fear could indeed become true hunger after years of famine, epidemics, and war- the three scourges against which one implores divine protection.<sup>11</sup>

All these factors were an immediate reality in the Middle Ages. Dyer underlines the impact of the Great Famine of 1315-18 when as much as 15% of the population died and states that due to bad harvest years of 1293-95, 1310-12 and 1321-22, the mortality rates went up.<sup>12</sup> Indulging in food when available was a human satisfaction at its simplest (and it also acquired a symbolic status value to directly point out the haves and have-nots and social hierarchies and power structures).

The wish fulfilment of the hungry multitude found its expression in the medieval poem *Cockaigne*. In the poem, a paradisiacal world is described with a special emphasis on the abundance and availability of food. There are rivers of oil, milk, honey, wine, and an abundance of all kinds of fruit. There is also an

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<sup>10</sup> LANGLAND, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman. A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, SCHMIDT, A. V. C. (ed.). London: Dent, 1987, pp. 297-384.

<sup>11</sup> MONTANARI, Massimo. *Food is Culture*, SONNENFELD, Albert (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> DYER, Christopher. 'Did the Peasants Really Starve in Medieval England?' In: CARLIN, Martha and ROSENTHAL, Joel T. (eds.), *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe*. London: Hambleton Press, 1998, pp. 53-71 (pp. 61-66). See also MARVIN, Julia. 'Cannibalism as an Aspect of Famine in Two English Chronicles.' In CARLIN, Martha and ROSENTHAL, Joel T. (eds.), *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe*, pp. 73-86 (p. 73).



abbey made of various delicacies, walls of pastries, fish, flesh, pudding, and a cloister composed of various expensive spices.<sup>13</sup> There is an abundance of edible birds, ‘geese fly roasted on spit...Fly right down into man’s mouth.’<sup>14</sup> The description is of a temple of food and all the food is freely available. Bruegel also depicts this medieval dream fulfilment scene in his painting *The Land of Cockaigne* where not only is food and drink abundant but also figures who have consumed an excess of food are lying down immersed in sloth.

The desire to consume food and drink not only for nourishment but also for the enjoyment of worldly delights leading to the various sorts of Gluttony was common. The strictest attitude against the temptation was laid down in the monastic orders as a sign of the devotion to the spiritual world and the taming of the fleshly desires and worldly temptations. The food consumption and kinds of food the clergy and especially the monastic orders could eat were laid down by the Church. Although the monastic tradition can be traced to the desert fathers in the early centuries of Christianity, in Anglo-Saxon England the golden age of monasticism was in the tenth to twelfth centuries.

In fact, ‘[w]ith the end of the twelfth century, the medieval flowering of the monasteries was over. Individual monasteries and even monastic orders continued to maintain high standards, but the spirit which inspired their founders were lacking.’<sup>15</sup> As opposed to the eremitical way of life which was a way of life of complete isolation, St Benedict was inspired by Eastern monasticism and ‘recommended a communal life within the precincts of the monastery, under the rule of an elected abbot.’<sup>16</sup> Monastic life was centred on divine services, reading, and manual labour. Coulton mentions the four main pillars of monastic discipline as: ‘propertylessness, labour, claustration, and diet.’<sup>17</sup> However, monastic history displays a continual reassertion of rules, deviation, and lack of compliance with the rules and certain principles of toleration being accepted by the popes.

The diet and food intake of the monastic orders were particularly marked out by strict rules. What they ate and even how, where, and when they ate was

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Cockaigne’: In CLAEYS, Gregory and SARGENT, Lyman Tower (eds.), *The Utopia Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1999, pp. 71-76 (p. 76).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> ZARNECKI, George. ‘The Contribution of the Orders.’ In: EVANS, Joan (ed.), *The Flowering of the Middle Ages*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, pp. 49-66 (p. 63).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> COULTON, George Gordon. *Medieval Panorama*. New York: Meridian, 1955, p. 269.



meticulously laid down but not always followed. The rules and restrictions were not only transgressed in practice but also eroded in theory. The monastic records provide written proof of these transgressions.<sup>18</sup> English monks had one meal a day and a light supper was permitted in summer, but they demanded a breakfast of bread with ale or wine. This application also applied to English nuns.<sup>19</sup> Monastic food was strictly vegetarian ruling out the consumption of 'butcher's meat', unless they were very sick in which case it was allowed to be eaten only in the refectory or the infirmary.<sup>20</sup>

The Catholic Church's doctrine of the rejection of red meat had many implications. Shunning luxurious food and meat meant the embracing of the highest spirituality and the taming of the sinful human flesh. As meat was the food of the powerful and the wealthy, it also pointed to the rejection of earthly values and submersion in the spiritual and otherworldly values.<sup>21</sup> In general, Montanari argues for various reasons for the Christian practice of fish days and the monastic vegetarian diet. He states that it served, in general, as penance.

Secondly, he states that since red meat was associated with blood sacrifices of pagans it was a stance against paganism. Thirdly, as it was stated in the scientific writings of the day, it was believed to provoke lechery. Hence, abstinence from red meat helped the prevention of this sin. As a last point, he also emphasises its relation to the legacy of Classical Mediterranean food culture accepting vegetarian food as a food of peace.<sup>22</sup>

The rules related to the monastic consumption of meat ruled out the 'four legged' but not the 'two legged.' This meant that poultry, game birds, small birds, and waterfowl were enjoyed by the clergy.<sup>23</sup> The food available to the monks consisted of bread, cheese, egg dishes, beans, vegetables, cereal and fish.<sup>24</sup> Again, there was a Christian ideology and worldview in the imposition

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>19</sup> POWER, Eileen. *Medieval People*. New York: Doubleday, 1956, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> COULTON. *Medieval Panorama*, p. 270.

<sup>21</sup> MONTANARI, Massimo. *Avrupa'da Yemeğin Tarihi*, ÖNEN, Mesut and HİNGİNAR, Biranda (trans.). İstanbul: Afa Yayıncılık, 1995, pp. 39, 63.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-89.

<sup>23</sup> BEARS, Peter, et al. *A Taste of History: 10,000 Years of Food in Britain*. London: British Museum Press, 1993, p. 102.

<sup>24</sup> BISHOP, Morris. *The Penguin Book of the Middle Ages*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, p. 189.



of restrictions on the consumption of birds. According to the concept of the Chain of Beings, there existed a hierarchical order in the universe stretching from God to inanimate object in a descending order. The acceptance of bulbs and root vegetables such as turnips, onions, and leeks was based on the belief that these vegetables were the humblest as they were in direct contact with the soil. The fruits of the trees were credited with comparative nobility, since they were closer to the sky. Following the same ideology the highest value and nobility was attributed to the flying birds in the animal kingdom. Hence, the monastic rules allowed the consumption of poultry and waterfowls but not the others.<sup>25</sup>

The restriction of red meat was overcome by not following the spirit of the law but reinterpreting the letter of the law; when the flesh pots were prohibited by papal statute by creating a 'sort of half-way chamber, in which meat was eaten without polluting (so the cannons argued) either the refectory or infirmary' the ban was overcome.<sup>26</sup> The portrait of the monk in Chaucer's *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* implicitly satirises the monastic indulgence in food: although the items of food mentioned in the description of the monk, that is, oysters, pulled hen, and the fat roasted swan all comply with the monastic regulations, the monk is not 'pale as a forepyned goost' (l.205). Moreover, he is also depicted as a hunter, which not only is proof of his breach of claustration but also indicative of his breach of consumption of animals of prey.

The church calendar required the observation of holy days both in the form of fasts and feasts. On these days 'ideally, everyone ought to have stopped work and attended mass on all the major ones – a matter of fifty or more a year besides Sundays.'<sup>27</sup> For practical reasons the populace could only attend about fifteen to twenty of these per year. The fast days were intended to 'strengthen a person's spiritual life by lessening earthly pleasures.'<sup>28</sup> On fast days food intake was limited to one meal and a change in diet; 'it also meant abstaining from meat and meat products-milk, eggs, butter, and cheese.' These days were called 'fish days' as opposed to the others that were called the 'flesh

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<sup>25</sup> MONTANARI. *Avrupa'da Yemeğin Tarihi*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>26</sup> COULTON. *Medieval Panorama*, pp. 269-70. See also, HENISH, Bridget Ann. *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> MEAD, Dorothy M. *The Medieval Church in England*. Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1988, p. 97.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.



days'. In fact, '[a]bout one-third of the days of the year were fish days - every Friday, the forty days of Lent, ember days, rogation days and vigils (the days before certain important festivals).<sup>29</sup> As Montanari points out, this would add up to about 150 days a year.<sup>30</sup> Strict fasting meant eating only once in the twenty-four hours after Vespers and, if at all possible, limiting it to only water and bread.<sup>31</sup> The fast days, especially during Lent, were a period of abstinence in order to create an occasion to recollect sin and to seek spiritual cleansing. However, the food restrictions led cooks to ingenious culinary solutions and even to the creation of eggs and other dishes from the acceptable ingredients. The spirit of fasting was replaced by feasting on invented dainty dishes.

The second factor that led to Gluttony was the use of food as a medium to display social status, wealth, and power. In Adamson's words: 'Food, as the most immediate human need, was a favorite way for the nobility to show their wealth and their exquisite taste, and thereby affirm their status.'<sup>32</sup> The Middle Ages were an era addicted to splendid tables, and nowhere was the power of food more obvious than the medieval feast, the public demonstration of privilege and power designed to emphasise the victory of courtly order, politeness and comfort over dearth and privation.<sup>33</sup>

It was expected of rulers and lords to offer lavish feasts symbolising the fatherly duty of the liege lord to feed his people. The abundance of the dishes was a confirmation of worldly success. The sumptuary laws tried to strictly regulate who could eat what in accordance with one's status and social standing with close regard to class.<sup>34</sup> It has even been stated that '[t]he statutes of diet ... regulated the number of courses per meal, number of dishes within courses, varieties of victuals even types and costs of their sauces.'<sup>35</sup>

The types and variations of the food available were impressive, even by modern standards: '[t]ypical of upper-class cookery were the use of spices,

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> MONTANARI. *Food is Culture*, pp. 46, 97.

<sup>31</sup> MENNEL, Stephen. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996, pp. 27-28.

<sup>32</sup> ADAMSON, Melitta Weiss. *Food in Medieval Times*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> COLQUHOUN. *Taste*, p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> ANDERSON. *Everyone Eats*, p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> COSMAN. *Fabulous Feasts*, p. 105.



almonds, eggs, chickens, and pork.<sup>36</sup> Roast meat was a marker of high social status as the preparation of such dishes was expensive and required culinary expertise.<sup>37</sup> As an assertion of his high status and social standing, Chaucer's Franklin keeps a permanent table unlike the usual medieval ones which are dismantled after use and he displays an abundance of savoury dishes.<sup>38</sup> The seating of the host and guests were arranged to confirm the social status and standing of those partaking in the feast.<sup>39</sup> A very good example of the seating protocol is given in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where the king, queen and Sir Gawain are seated at the *dais* (high table). In addition to the seating arrangements even at the same feast certain foods would be offered to more distinguished guests.<sup>40</sup>

Bread was the staple food of all classes and it came in different colours ranging from white to quite dark according to the quality and fineness of the ingredients. Wheat, rye, barley, oats, and spelt were some of the grains that were used for bread making. Wheat was generally used to produce white bread intended for the upper classes.<sup>41</sup> The lower classes consumed black bread made from less fine meal and a mixture of various grains. The monastic rule required the consumption of simple and dark coloured bread. Again, this was a point of transgression. Chaucer's prioress described in the *General Prologue* feeds her hounds with 'westel bread', which is high-quality bread.<sup>42</sup> It is implied that she is served this white bread readily in her convent. One's social position was also defined by the colour, age and the quantity of the bread. At feasts, when bread rolls were served, the new bread was for the lord, one-day-old bread for the guests, and three-day-old bread for the household.<sup>43</sup>

During the Middle Ages, devotion to spiritual values, contemplation of the afterlife, and salvation through a humble and simple life where Christian values ruled was desired, however they were not part of the realities of daily life and were far from these high ideals. Especially in relation to food almost

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<sup>36</sup> ADAMSON. *Food in Medieval Times*, p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> COLQUHOUN. *Taste*, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> CHAUCER, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*, BENSON, Larry D. et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, General Prologue, pp. 329-54.

<sup>39</sup> COSMAN. *Fabulous Feasts*, p. 107.

<sup>40</sup> COLQUHOUN. *Taste*, p. 67.

<sup>41</sup> MONTANARI. *Food is Culture*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>42</sup> BOWDEN, Muriel. *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the 'Canterbury Tales'*. London: Souvenir Press, 1973, p. 99.

<sup>43</sup> COLQUHOUN. *Taste*, p. 74.



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all the described forms of Gluttony were committed through breaking fast, over-eating and drinking, eating luxuriously and as a means not only of indulging in the pleasures of food but also making use of food as a means of worldly pride and display.

The Reformation brought new interpretations and approaches. The dietary norms of the Roman Church were rejected. Luther said: 'Just as the father says to his family "Obey my will, and for the rest, eat, drink and dress as you please" so God does not care how we eat or dress.'<sup>44</sup> Thus, he left all matters to the conscience of the individual and did away with the concepts of abstinence, refraining from meat consumption and fasting. Hence, at the end of the era as in the painting of Bruegel *The Battle between Carnival and Lent* seemed to have come to an end with the restrictions being left to the individual and the pleasures of food and feasting having gained the upper hand.

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<sup>44</sup> Quotation taken from MONTANARI. *Food is Culture*, p. 133.