"OF FISH AND FLESH AND TENDER BREEDE OF WIN BOTH WHITE AND REEDE":

EATING AND DRINKING IN MIDDLE ENGLISH NARRATIVE TEXTS

The human condition is subject to a series of everyday physiological demands -eating / drinking, excreting, reproducing and sleeping- some of which lend themselves better than others to exploitation for literary purposes: those connected with what the Wife of Bath calls so neatly, on the one hand, "office" and, on the other, "ese of engendrure", tend to find their literary reflection in Middle English in the plain-speaking fabliau *genre,* in works such as *Dame Siriz,* or Chaucer's Merchant's, Miller's or Summoner's *Tales,* not forgetting, either, the Wife of Bath's *Prologue,* sex, of course, although unspecified being implicit in any narrative dealing with adultery or suspected adultery (certain romances, for example). Sleeping, indeed, had already acquired literary status in classical writings, as the *conditio sine qua non* for dreaming and for all that dreams might signify, and we need look no further than *The Nuns' Priest's Tale* and the *Parliament of Fowles* to judge how productive a theme this was to be in Middle English writing both as a subject of literary discourse and as a stratagem for literary invention. It is the aim of this study to take a look at some examples of the reflection in Middle English narrative texts of the remaining physiological necessity -eating and drinking- in an attempt to analyse and evaluate the ways in which these all too human activities are exploited for literary purposes

in the period with which are concerned. Since narrative literature, almost by definition, tends to occupy itself with the extraordinary, it will hardly be surprising if gastronomic allusions in Middle English texts tend to move between the two poles of excess and default, rather than centring themselves on the desirable but unexciting golden mean.

Excessive eating and drinking, for example -the deadly sin of *Gula* or Gluttony- provides an excellent excuse for the Middle English author to indulge in a little preaching on the subject, in such narratives as lend themselves convincingly to the inclusion of moralising contexts. Thus Chaucer's Pardoner, having boasted to the pilgrims of his skill as a preacher, demonstrates realistically the truth of his claim by starting a story about a group of "riotous" "yonge folk", whose vices he can then proceed to deplore in a fire-and-brimstone sermon, attacking in the first place precisely, the sin of gluttony, for they "eten...and drynken over hir might" in "superfluytee abhominable". It is no accident, obviously, that Chaucer has the Pardoner himself insisting that before he begins his tale, he should (precisely) "...at this alestake/...bothe drynke, and eten of a cake".

In fact, he dedicates the majority of the lines dealing with the evil effects of gluttony -stupidity, lechery, gourmandise- to drunkenness, singling out for special condemnation the "white wyn of Lepe" which, being stronger and cheaper than French wines, had a way of "creeping subtilly" into these, the resulting heady mixture giving rise to great "fumositee" (or indigestion). Like other moralists, he insists on the more disgusting results of over-eating and over-drinking: sour breath, sterterous breathing and foul sounds at "either ende" of the belly, which, with great rhetorical skill he both personifies and apostrophizes.

In Gower's English narrative poem, the *Confessio Amantis,* the poet likewise dedicates the greater part of the introductory section to the *Sixth Book,* concerning gluttony, to drunkenness, whose contradictory effects he analyses in some detail, pointing out that it can make a wise man foolish, yet turn a fool into a great clerk, a phenomenon perhaps illustrated by Chaucer's Summoner, who when "... he wel dronken hadde the wyn," would "... speke no word but Latyn". However, since Amans (i.e. Gower) is principally concerned with love, the text then moves into the world of allegorical imagery, a comparison being established between being besotted by wine and besotted by love! Nevertheless, Gower does manage to include a cautionary tale, concerning the Spanish gluttons and drunkards, Galba and Vitelus, who not only oppressed all Spain, but also defiled all her women -lechery, as the Pardoner points out, being a fruit of inebriation- before being finally brought to justice and executed dead-drunk! Both in his allegorical French work *Le Miroure de l'Omme,* and in his moral essay in Latin, *Vox Clamantis,* Gower satirises the various off-shoots of gluttony and gourmandise, in terms which almost suggest personifications of these abstractions. Of course, the great master of such personification is the author of *Piers Plowman,* who in his magnificent evocation of the Seven Deadly Sins in Passus V, presents us with a memorable *Gula*, drunk and incapacitated before he eventually repents and promises never to eat any more until his Aunt Abstinence gives him permission. Langland spares us none of the sordid physiological details associated with Gula's state -urinating, breaking wind, vomiting- such details, as Jill Mann points out, being typical of gluttony satire, the aim being to thus "create an aversion for the mountains of food which produce" such effects.[1]

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[1].- Jill Mann: *Chaucer and Mediaeval Estates Satire.* Cambridge, 1973; p. 169.

The tradition of the personification of the Seven Deadly Sins is, in fact, carried on into the late 15th. century by William Dunbar who in *The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins,* witnesses, in a trance, the grotesque dance of the Sins in Hell on Shrove Tuesday. Like the other writers already mentioned, it is excessive drinking which interests him most: here, the "fowll monstir Gluttony" is seen as being followed by drunkards, armed with cans, flagons, cups and tankards, all demanding "Drynk!" They are attended by devils who serve them "with hait leid to laip"!

Gluttony, of course, affects not only the intellect and the digestive system, but also the pocket: lavish eating means lavish spending, and the anonymous moralist who composed the 14th. century allegorical poem, *Wynnere and Waster* (Thrifty and Thriftless), in which both excessive expenditure and excessive hoarding are criticised, offers us an interesting and lengthy description (24 lines) of the kind of dinner Waster lays on for his followers, worth says Wynnere, "a ransom of silver which is hardly surprising if we think that the menu includes for its twelve courses (each dish to be shared by two guests): boar's heads, buck-tails, broth, venison, frumenty, pheasants, pies, mince, grilled fowls, (of which each guest is given a six-man portion); all these to be followed by more roast meat in spiced gravy, halved kids, quartered swans, and an infinite variety of birds -as Charles Cooper remarks: "our ancestors ate practically everything that had wings, from a bustard to a sparrow"[1] -a remark certainly borne out by Wynnere's list, which includes : wild geese, bitterns, snipe, larks, linnets (sprinkled with sugar!), woodcock, woodpeckers, teal and titmice, the meal to be rounded off with rabbits, pasties, pies, mawmenny and custard pies!

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[1].- Charles Cooper: *The English Table in History and Literature.* London, 1929; p. 3.

Members of the Church, of course, especially monks and friars, were closely identified in the Middle Ages with gluttony, but hardly Chaucer's Parson, who "koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce", and who, in his Sermon-Tale, after glossing the uses of Penitence, analyses the "chief synnes". and their "braunches and ...twigges", including, of course, *Gula*. Like the Pardoner, he insists particularly on drunkenness which is "the horrible sepulture of mannes resoun", and then, echoing St.Gregory, classifies different types of gluttony, for all which, of course, the *Remedium* is abstinence. It is, interestingly, dealt with in far fewer lines than any of the other Deadly Sins, so that one asks oneself if Chaucer, author of the sympathetic description of the Franklin, and "rounde of shap" as he admits himself to be in his *Envoye* to Scogan, was more tolerant of this particular failing than of the others?

Not everyone, of course, can become a prey to gluttony: to eat excessively well, as Wynnere insists, you either need to be wealthy yourself or to be on good terms with those who are: as Chaucer's Parson puts it: "... riche men been cleped to festes, and povre folk been put away and rebuked", and his Friar prefers to be familiar with franklins (and one can't help thinking of *the* Franklin) and to frequent the rich and "sellers of vitaille", rather than such "poraille" as beggars (like himself) and lepers. Although we do find individual instances of secular drunks and gluttons in the Middle English narrative -the miller in *The Reeve's Tale,* for example, goes to bed so befuddled with ale that he is totally unaware of the amorous antics around him, just as the Miller-pilgrim's "wit is (so) overcome" by drink, that he obstreperously demands to tell his tale before the Monk's, and at the wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell in the romance of the same name, the latter, a loathly lady, "ete as moche as six that there wore", including three capons, three curlews and a vast amount of baked foods, all which, of course, helps to make her even more loathly! -this specific

vice was traditionally and notoriously associated with the clergy in general, and with monks and friars in particular! We are, therefore, moving away from the moralising passage inserted into a narrative context, and into the realm of estates satire, satire because it is referred, precisely to those who ought to know better, to those who, like Chaucer's Parson, should "drawen folk to hevene... / By good ensample".

Chaucer's Friar, however, frequents "sellers of vitaille", and the friar in *The Summoner's Tale* who, according to his own words is "a man of litel sustenance", requires only a capon's liver and a "shiver" of soft bread followed, however, by a roasted pig's head; indeed, as he continues to exalt his frugality, his hypocrisy becomes more apparent, and we realise that he is expecting far more and far better fare from Thomas's wife. As an anonymous poet in his diatribe *Against Friars* (about 1400) remarks, after commenting sarcastically on the "weakness" and "simpleness" of their "sustenance":

> I have lived now forty years,
> And fatter men about the neres
> Yet saw I never than are these freres

Chaucer's Monk not only has recourse to gastronomic figures of speech -invoking "oysters" and "pulled hens", but also loved "a fat swan...best of any roost", that is to say, one of the choicest dishes of the Middle Ages, prepared in a way probably forbidden by his Rule, thus revealing himself to be perhaps a gourmet rather than a glutton, the choiceness of the swan being reflected by contemporary prices: in 1309, for example, (at the Installation of the new Prior of St.Augustine's, Canterbury), 500 capons and hens cost 6 pounds, whilst 24 swans cost seven![1]

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[1].- M. E. Whitmore: *Mediaeval English Domestic Life and Amusements in the Works of Chaucer.* New York, 1972; p. 108, n. 84.

Not surprizingly, Langland has his contribution to make in this context:[1] in Book XIII of *Piers Plowman,* the dreamer is invited to dinner by Conscience with Scripture, Learning, Patience and a great Divine, and is irritated at the sight of this Master Friar at the high table, gulping down his wine greedily and gobbling up innumerable dishes of minced meat and puddings, tripe, galantine and eggs fried in butter, and wishes that, as in Dunbar's poem, the dishes were full of molten lead! These excesses in this "bloated, round-bellied chamber-pot of a man", says Patience, will provoke the usual disgusting physiological effects, which he then proceeds to enumerate. Of course, the indignation with such self-indulgence on the part of the clergy gains in intensity precisely because they *are* clergy, who are flagrantly flouting the rules of austerity imposed, in principle, on their orders; rules, if strictly followed, could be very severe. The Rule of St. Benedict, for example, which Chaucer's Monk found "old and som-del streit", laid down that his monks should have for their two daily meals: herbs, bread and wine (3/4) of a pint", and that furthermore "all, save the very weak and sick" were to abstain wholly "from eating the flesh of quadrupeds".[2] It is hardly surprizing if their reactions thereto may have been on occasions excessive: and a charitable interpretation might see in such fallings by the way, a form of compensation for the loss of a normal family life imposed by the rule of celibacy.

Especially interesting in this context is the delightful late 13th or early 14th century Anglo-Irish parodic poem, *The Land of Cokayne,* for it should not be forgotten that references to eating and drinking in the Middle English narrative are frequently exploited for humorous, and, as we have been seeing, for satirical ends: in this vision of an earthly paradise, tailor-made for monks and friars, and situated to "the

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1.- See Jill Man: "Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman." Essays and Studies,* 1979.

2.- Whitmore: *op. cit.,* p. 109.

west of Spain", the white and grey monks of the "fair abbee" established therein can break all the monastic rules with a vengeance: obedience, celibacy and austerity, including, of course, frugality in eating and drinking, since,

> In Cokaigne is met and drink
> Wipute care, how and swink

the food there being "choice" and the wine "clear" at all *three* meals! It is to be noted that the anonymous author insists not only on the plentifulness of food and drink in Cokayne, but also on its *accessibility,* for a multi-spice tree flourishes in the abbey grounds, and four wells constantly gush out not only healing medicinal waters, but also sweet spiced wine: better still, like the Hansel and Gretel houses of our youthful storybooks, the abbey walls are made of fish and meat pies, its roof-tiles of cakes, and its pinnacles of sausages, and, rather like our modern self-basting chickens, roasted geese fly to the abbey, roasted and begarlicked, ready for eating, whilst larks cooked in spices drop into your very mouth! What more could one ask for? And how different to the herring and eggs allowed to the Black Monks at Christ Church, Canterbury on a fish day, or to the bacon, pottage bean-soup and bread which was the staple monastic diet in general! In fact, the gastronomic delights of this earthfully paradise are delightfully and irreverently contrasted even with those offered by the traditional Paradise of mediaeval theology, in which there is nothing to eat, the author affirms, but fruit and nothing to drink but water! Notions of paradise are, of course, very personal: for the wolf, in the beast-tale, *The Fox and the Wolf in the Well,* Paradise is where there are "bothe shep and get"! After the grim visions of gluttony evoked by Langland and, indeed, Chaucer, it comes as a relief to see the sin viewed in a comic light. The poem, in fact, has been classified as an example of English goliardic verse, the term, of course, deriving ultimately from Latin *gula* (OF goliard < L. gula).

Any reference to large quantities of food in a Middle English context will immediately bring to mind, of course, Chaucer's memorable portrait of the Franklin, since of the 30 lines he dedicates to this pilgrim, at least half refer to food and drink: to the excellent quality of his wines:

> A bettre envyned man was nowher noon

to the abundance and quality of his fare:

> It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke

at every season, and to the demands made on the professional skill of his cook. This ruddy-faced, white-bearded Santa Claus figure (the chromatic combination recalling, perhaps, "the reed and the whit" wines), self-confessedly an epicure, is far from the repulsive embodiments of gluttony evoked by Langland or Chaucer's Pardoner, precisely because of his healthy, sanguine complexion -note that Chaucer's disgusting drunks turn *pale* in their cups, like both of his millers- and, of course, on account of the suggestion of generosity and hospitality implicit in the allusions to St. Julian and to his "table dormant", always set for company, company such as Chaucer's Friar, for example! The effects of helping himself generously from his own table may well be mitigated by his morning custom, specifically emphasized by Chaucer, of having "a sop in wyn", that is, a piece of toasted bread dipped in wine, a healthy dietetic measure if the 16th century *Regimen Sanitatis Salerni* is to be believed: "wine soppis", we are informed in this treatise, are good for cleaning your teeth, for improving your sight, and for curing all forms of indigestion and "superfluous digestion".[1] It will be remembered that old January, after

[1].- William E. Mead: *The Mediaeval English Feast.* London, 1931; p. 128.

his nocturnal labours as a bridegroom, takes "a sop in fyn clarree" at dawn. That Chaucer, in attrributing such good living to his Franklin was, in fact, following a well established tradition concerning the epicureanism of this class of men, is confirmed by an interesting 15th. century document entitled *A Fest for a Franklen,* which contains an "irreproachable" menu for such an occasion, including, brawn, bacon, peas, mutton, chicken, capons, goose, pork, pies, stew, jussel, veal, lamb, kid, rabbit, pigeon, doucettes (sweet pies), fritters, apples, pears, spices, cakes and wafers spiced with mead and ale and bread and cheese -enough, as one critic has put it, to make any "table dormant" groan![1]

Of course, the Franklin is not the only example in Middle English writing of gastronomic *"aficiones"* being used as a characterisation device: Chaucer's Monk's swan, as we have seeen, contributes to the overall impression of good living that the poet obviously wishes to convey, and the general moral and physical repulsiveness of the Summoner is emphasized by his fondness for "garleek, oynons, and eek lekes", and "strong wyn, reed as blood" (a very telling simile that!). Similarly, when the nightingale, in the early 13th century debate poem, wants to stress the repulsiveness of the owl, she suggests that frogs, snails, mice and disgusting creatures are her natural and proper diet, to which the owl ripostes that it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black since the nightingale lives on a diet of spiders, "foul" flies and worms dug out of the bark of trees! One is rather surprized that Chaucer, in the *General Prologue,* should be so silent on the subject of the gastronomic tastes of the ruddy-faced, wide-hipped Wife of Bath. However, in the prologue to her tale, she herself informs us of her fondness for "a draughte of sweete wyn", associating drinking, as other moralists often do, with lasciviousness: "A likerous mouth moste

[1].- Whitmore: *op. cit.,* p. 103.

han a likerous tayle", she affirms, adding that lechers know that "In wommen vinolent is no defence"!

We hear more about the Prioress's table-manners than about her diet, but one suspects that the "rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed" with which she feeds her little dogs come straight from her own table, and she may be as much of a gourmet as the Monk, wastel bread, for example, being made with fine white wheat flour as opposed to rye or barley bread, consumed by the poor and the frugal. Frugality of diet, the other gastronomic extreme, may also be used as a characterising device, as is obviously the case of Chaucer's Doctor of Physik, who is "mesurable" of his diet:

> For it was of no superfluitee,
> But of greet norissyng and digestible

Evidently no sops in wine are needed here! With the knowledge of medical science afforded by all those medical classics he has read, the Doctor, obviously knows that, as the Pardoner puts it:

> ... many maladyes
> Folwen of excesse and glotonyes

We may note the similarity of Chaucer's vocabulary in both texts: the Pardoner condemns "superfluytee abhominable", and wishes that Adam, like the Doctor, had been "more mesurable / Of his diet..." Chaucer, however, follows up his references to the Doctor's diet with the remark that he "was but esy of dispence", suggesting that the Doctor's frugality may, in fact, be due to meanness rather than to scientific considerations, and the modern English cliché, "cheap and nourishing" ("norissyng") immediately springs to mind! In fact, there are no gastronomic allusions in the portraits of those other pilgrims most obviously obsessed with gain: the "sclendre colerik" Reeve (as

opposed to the embonpoint of the Monk), the Merchant, the Manciple, etc.

Chaucer's widow in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is quite a different matter: here we are in the presence of enforced frugality, due to poverty, and Chaucer's negatives concerning her *not* suffering from any of the maladies characteristic of the glutton -gout and apoplexy-, concerning her *not* eating "deyntee" morsels or piquant sauces, *nor* drinking wine *"neither* whit ne reed", marks her out as one of the world's have-nots! Her "sklendre" meals consist of milk, brown bread, boiled bacon and an occasional egg -a rather colourless board in comparison with the rosy wine and flesh tints of the Franklin's "table dormant", and, of course, a far cry from the brilliant coral, gold, azure and jet hues of the real hero of the story -Chantecleer! This, Chaucer's single reference to the diet of the poor does prove, at least, that he was acquainted with their way of life, as, obviously, was Langland, who, like Chaucer, has recourse to negatives when his protagonist is faced with the demands of Hunger: "I have no money", says Piers, "to buy pullets, nor geese, nor pigs; nor do I possess the wherewithal to make bacon and eggs. What I do have", he adds, "are two green cheeses, a few curds of cream, an oatmeal cake, two bran and bean loaves, parsley, potherbs and plenty of cabbages". These, and his cow and calf must keep him and his family alive until next harvest-time. What other folk bring to help Piers in his hour of need, is of much the same sort: peascods, baked apples, shallots, chervils and ripe cherries. The author of *Wynnere and Waster* has a very clear idea of the gastronomic abyss which separates the haves from the have-nots: "Let lords live as they will, and lowly men ('Laddes on fote') as they can", he suggests; the former will eat bitterns and swans, wheat-bread and rich broths, the latter, bacon and beef, rye-bread and grey gruel! Another 14th century narrative text, *How the Ploughman Learned his Pater Noster,* however, contains a more

encouraging account of a thrifty ploughman's store of food, including flitches of bacon, butter, eggs, cheeses, malt (for making ale), salt beef, onions, garlic, cream and milk. This sounds a little more promising, but even here we may observe a notorious lack of the fish, poultry, and assorted meats and pies which seem to have been so prominent a feature of the rich man's table.

Chaucer has his Parson, in his section on *Superbia,* rail against this kind of "pride of table", of which, presumably, the Franklin might well feel guilty:

> Pride of the table (he says) appeereth eek ful ofte; for certes, riche men been cleped to festes, and povre folk been put awey and rebuked. Also in excesse of diverse metes and drynkes, and namely swich manere bake-metes and dishe-metes, brennynge of wilde fir and peynted and castelled with papir, and semblable wast, so that it is abusioun for to thynke.

Indeed, the Middle English narrative is full of descriptions of great feasts in rich men's houses, the main literary object thereof being, precisely, to illustrate the social rank, royal or otherwise, of the characters in the story, and to amaze the "humble reader" by these descriptions of their luxurious way of life. It is to be noted, in any case, that such narratives often deal with some extraordinary occasion or feast-day, (New Year's Eve in Camelot in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight),* a wedding or a family reunion, for example, permitting thus great flights of culinary fancy! It is perhaps worth remembering, in this context, that one of the most popular and productive symbols of mediaeval literature -the Round Table- sprang from the world of the great banquet. Arthur made the Round Table, Wace tells us in his *Roman de Brut,* that all might sit equally and be served equally at his board. The Round Table was to become, therefore, a *symbol* of equality: no one there was, like Chaucer's Knight, or indeed, Bishop Baldwin, in a later Arthurian story *(Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight) "to begin the board" "above" another. The legendary example was not, however, followed, and allusions to the dais, or High Table, and the positioning of guests "everich in his degree" are frequently to be found in Middle English narrative poetry, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and *Clerk's Tale,* and *Cleanness,* whilst 15th century courtesy books continue to insist on the *Ordre of Goyng or Sittyng* with which the marshal or usher of a banqueting-hall must be familiar.

In fact, the Middle English narrative throws quite a lot of light on contemporary customs associated with the great banquet, as well as telling us about what was actually consumed and how on such occasions, although allowance must be made for a little literary exaggeration and idealisation! The use of a fanfare of trumpets, for example, to announce the first of the twelve courses to be served to Arthur's guests is described in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* and in *Cleanness,* probably by the same poet, "stentorian trumpets" indicate that Belshazzar's feast is starting in earnest. Chaucer makes several allusions to minstrelsy as an essential part of a feast; at January's wedding celebration, for example, at King Cambuskan's birthday dinner, and as an entertainment for Duke Theseus' guests. His Parson, however, sees in "curiositee of minstrelcye" an invitation to "delyces of luxurie"!

References are sometimes made too to the regiment of servants, who, headed by the Steward and the Marshal, were responsible for the success of such occasions: thus Chaucer the Pilgrim is of the opinion that Harry Bailly would have made a "good marshal in an hall", and he makes passing references in the *Squire's* and *The Merchant's Tales* to stewards, ushers and squires. It will be remembered that the "Squire of Lowe Degree" in the romance, actually becomes a Marshal. Especially interesting are Chaucer's

allusions to the art of carving meat (so plentiful, as we shall see, at great feasts), possessed by the Squire, and also by Damian in *The Merchant's Tale.* The ability to carve skilfully was, indeed, highly considered as is proved by the existence of treatises on the subjects such as John Russell's 15th century *The Connynge of Kervynge* and *The Kervynge of Flesh* or the *Boke of Kervynge* printed by Wynkyn de Worde in the early 16th century. We have also the testimony of England's earliest romance, *King Horn,* in which King Aylmar instructs his steward to educate his foundling, Horn Child, and teach him, among other arts:

> Bivore me to kerve,
> And of the cupe serve.

Indeed, according to F.J. Furnivall: "manly exercises, manners and courtesy, music and singing, knowledge of the order of precedency of ranks, and *ability to carve,*[1] were in early times more important than Latin and Philosophy." Interesting in this context, is the affirmation made in *Cleanness* that Christ had so fine a force in his fingers that he needed no knife when cutting or carving, and broke bread without a blade, succeeding better than "all the toles of Tolowse (probably a mistake for Toledo)" could attempt to do it. The legend, derived from St Luke (xxiv, 35)- "And they told...how (Christ) was known of them in breaking of bread" -would appear to suggest that Christ trascends the requirement of mediaeval etiquette, that demanded that bread be cut, not broken, but as Sir Isaac Gollancz points out, attention is drawn to the fact that Christ's fingers can, in fact, *cut*.[2] In this same poem,

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[1].- Frederick J. Furnivall: *The Babees Book...,* originally published *EETS,* 1868, reprinted: Greenwood Press, New York, 1969; p. iv.

[2].- Sir Israel Gollancz: Preface to *Cleanness, with a new English translation by Derek Brewer.* Cambridge, 1974; p. xvii.

Abraham is compared to a "steward", and in the episode recounting Belshazzar's feast, reference is made to the contemporary taste for sophisticated table decorations, such as Chaucer's Parson disapproves of: pies and dishes, he says, are "peynted and castellated with papir". Over each guest's platter at Belshazzar's feast, we are told, there was an arbour intricately cut out of patterned paper pointed in gold, and pictures of birds and beasts thereon painted in azure and indigo. These platters were of "shining silver", and King Arthur's guests in *Sir Gawain...,* likewise have their broth served in "bowls of silver", obviously examples of the "to great preciousness of vessel" that Chaucer's Parson likewise deplores. By the 15th century, the "preciousnesse" has increased and in the late burlesque romance, *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle,* the king invites the Carl in "bowls of gold" so solid that no knight can lift them singlehanded, and the Court drink their wine out of gold cups holding four gallons or more!

Insofar as the actual menus of such literary banquets are concerned, there are certainly no lack of detailed descriptions, although it must be admitted that Chaucer, for example, although fairly specific on the subject of the Franklin's "table dormant", is fairly restrained in this respect in other cases, although he does tend to exaggerate the general sumptuousness of the fare he is referring to. It is interesting, in fact, to note that both Chaucer and the Gawain-poet, apologise, as it were, for *not* offering a detailed menu of their feasts, by means of such rhetorical questions as: "What needeth yow the feste to descryve?", or assurances such as: "Now wyl I of her seruise say you no more, / For vch wy¥e may wel wit no wont pat pey were," as if, indeed, they felt the need to justify their inclusion of all the gastronomic details, probably because, as will be seen, the romances did very often dedicate a fair number of lines to the subject. However, we learn that King Sarpedoun entertained Troilus and Pandarus with expensive and "dainty" food, that Queen Dido offered

Aeneas "a feste...ful of dayntees and richesse", and that at king Cambuskan's feast (the *Squire's Tale)* "strange broths", swans and young herons were served. The Gawain-poet is likewise restrained: insofar as King Arthur's New Year's Feast is concerned, we learn only that there were delicacies and dainties, "Foysoun of the fresche", and both good beer and bright wine. However, the Lenten feast set before Sir Gawain on his arrival at Sir Bertilak's court on Christmas Eve, may be abstinential but is anything but frugal: several fine, well-seasoned soups, followed by grilled fish and fish pies of all kinds, "subtly sauced", and plenty of wine! The Gawain-poet likewise embroiders gastronomically the Gospel of St.Matthew, when he glosses it in *Cleanness:* whereas the evangelist's rich man who prepares a wedding feast only offers "oxen" and "fatlings", the mediaeval exegete mentions as well: bulls, roast boars, "finely fattened" fowls, partridges, plovers and curlews!

The 15th century romance of *The Squire of Lowe Degree* is a particularly gastronomically orientated text, since the Squire in question is appointed Marshal of a King's hall, and we are given information not only concerning his livery, but also concerning the hierarchy of other domestic officers: the steward, usher, panter and butler. We are likewise informed as to what the Squire serves the king: expensive and "delicate" fare, including partridges, peacocks, plovers, teal, duck, drake, cocks, curlews, cranes, pheasants, storks and snipe (many baked in pies), as also fresh venison and many other "delicacies". It is, in fact, interesting to compare this literary evocation of a royal dinner with the real-life 14th century menu or "porweanse" preserved in MS Cosin V, III, LL: "For the fest for the king at home for his owene tale," at which he was to be provided with:

> *1st Course:* Venison with frumenty, boars heads, large meat (i.e. boiled pork, beef or mutton), roasted swan, roasted fat capons, peas, pike, and two "soteltees" (subtleties, i.e. food made to look

> like something else: Christmas or wedding cake sculpture, birds covered with feathers to look alive and sugar sculptures of human figures, etc.)
> *2nd Course:* There were likewise to be three different types of pottages, plus roast pork, roast cranes, pheasants, herons and peacocks: bream, brawn, roast rabbit and another "subtlety."
> *3rd Course:* German broth, roasted venison, roasted heron, peacocks, quail, rabbit, partridges, larks, perch, mincemeat, pasties, rice, fritters and two subtleties.[1]

Life, on this count, is certainly larger than literature!

The Squire of Low Degree is an interesting text in this respect, since, apart from this more or less conventional list of food served at the king's table, we are likewise offered that of the "goodies" with which the king tries to tempt and encourage his love-sick daughter: the edible "goodies" consist of wild fowl, green ginger and dates, and baked venison (not much of a change, one would think, for this particular princess). The drinkable "goodies" are, however, a different matter, since she is to be offered not only spiced wine in general, but more specifically: Spanish white wine and malmsey, Italian white wine, Cretan white wine, raspis, Antioch wine, honey wine, Granada wine, Greek wine, muscatel, claret, white wine from La Rochelle, Alsatian wine and simply red wine her "stomake to defie" (i.e. as a cure for indigestion -like the sop in wine!).

Sir Launfal, in the Breton *lai,* is given spiced wines and Rhenish wines by Dame Tryamour, and, of course, vintner's son as he was, there is no lack of "vinolent" references, as we have seen in Chaucer's works: Daun John, in the *Shipman's Tale,* brings his relatives "a jubbe of Malvesye" and some red Italian wine -vernage-, and, of course, the Shipman himself is used to transporting *vin de*

1.- *Curye on Inglysch.* (English Culinary Manuscripts of the fourteenth Century), Ed. by C.B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, *EETS,* Oxford, 1985; p. 39.

Bordeaux. Absalon sends Alison a gift of sweet wine, mead and spicy ale, whilst anxious old January drinks "Ypocras, clarree and vernage" on his wedding-night to increase his "courage". The potency of *el blanco de Lepe* has already been commented on, and Chaucer makes several references to the distributing of wine and spices in elegant households, including Calchas' tent in the Greek Camp.

Banquetting, of course, means eating in public, and, hence, a social occasion, in which the question of table manners will inevitably arise: tha number of courtesy books which include instructions on how to be "at mete wel-ytaught", like Chaucer's Prioress, bear witness to the importance of the subject, and the allusion to the loathly lady's behaviour at the table in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* is significant in this respect: not only does she eat gluttonously, but also, with her "three-inch long nails" "she breke her mete ungoodly" -"Therefore she ete alone"!

Of course, feasts, to be successful, need more than guests and stewards: the men behind the scenes, the cooks, are even more important, and that the culinary art was taken very seriously in the later Middle Ages is proved by the number of recipes extant from the period, and the literary references to the profession found in Chaucer, Gower and others. It is significant, as has often been pointed out, that the up-and-coming middle class represented by Chaucer's guildsmen should, precisely, have brought a cook along with them on their pilgrimage -a cook competent in the skills required to please the mediaeval palate; for, as a specialist on the subject has observed:

> Practically all ordinary meats and game, fish and poultry, as well as stewed fruit and desserts of every description, were so loaded with cinammon, ginger, cloves, cubebs, pepper, galingale, mace and

> nutmeg, one or all, that whatever has been taken as the basis of the dish was made practically unrecognisable... [1]

Not forgetting, either, the "stamping, straining and grinding" to which the basic food was subjected, before being spiced: "The ideal," says W. E. Mead, "was that nothing should be left in its natural state"![2] The descriptions of the mediaeval cooks' activities, therefore, obviously contribute to the realism of the texts they appear in: Chaucer's guildsmen's cook is wholly credible, and one can sympathize with the situation of the demanding Franklin's cook, such demands being very much the order of the day if we are to believe Gower, who, in his Sixth Book, analyses the "delicat glutton" whose chief delight consists in spicy or fancy meats, and whose thanks, therefore, are measured only by how well his cook serves his mouth. The enumeration of the different culinary operations these literary cooks must perform is likewise convincing, above all, when compared with real-life recipes and household account books. Chaucer's Pardoner, as was mentioned, enumerates the different pulverising operations, the turning of "substaunce into accident", as he puts it humorously, operations with which the Cook-Pilgrim is likewise familiar, since we are specifically informed that he was a dab hand at *morteux,* (a boiled dish of finely ground meat or fish in broth), and "blankmanger" (ground capon with rice and almond milk). Spices are also to be associated with Chaucer's cook's art, a culinary tendency already adumbrated in the Franklin's cook's "tart and pungent" sauce! As Jill Mann points out, "the portrait of Chaucer's cook is almost entirely constructed on the basis of his estate,"[3] although the "mormal" on his sins endows him with a certain individuality. The

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1.- Mead, *op. cit.,* p. 74.

2.- *Ibid.,* p. 53.

3.- Jill Mann: *Chaucer and Mediaeval Estates Satire,* p. 168

profession in general is, of course, being satirised by Harry Bailley, as is obvious by his derogatory references to warmed-up pies, cheap substitute fillings, and the presence of flies in his shop. The realism of such references is borne out by contemporary *ordinances* concerning the sale of putrid food, the passing off of baked beef as venison, and of rabbit as everything, by pastry-cooks, whose street cries of "Hot pies, hot!" closes Langland's vivid evocation of the different strata of contemporary society assembled in his field "full of folk", and the familiar cry undoubtedly echoes through Chaucer's affirmation that his Pardoner's wallet is full of "pardons" come "all hot from Rome."

References to eating and drinking, finally, may also function in the Middle English narrative as a means to spark off dramatic incident, or to help the plot to progress: the most outstanding example of this phenomenon, as mediaeval moralists were not slow to point out, being the eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, which both Chaucer's Parson and his Pardoner, interestingly, ascribe to gluttony rather than to disobedience:

> For whil that Adam fasted, as I rede,
> He was in Paradys;

comments the latter in the introduction to his tale. Indeed, as the anonymous author of the *Ancrene Riwle* remarks, in a similar context, "often... great things have small beginnings". Thus, for example, the weeping of Dame Siriz's bitch is produced by her being dosed with pepper and mustard, and it is this small, but telling detail, that of a dog weeping like a human being, that convinces Margeri of the veracity of the old woman's cock-and-bull story of a bewitched daughter. In *The Fox and the Wolf,* the fox's gluttony, his devouring of too many hens, produces in him such an insatiable thirst that it befogs his usual acumen, and he falls into the trap of the well, just as the ale-befuddled

miller allows himself to be cuckolded in *The Reeve's Tale*. The pregnant woman's traditional craving for certain types of food, can be used as a justification by May, in *The Merchant's Tale,* for climbing up into the pear-tree and having an acrobatic rendez-vous there with Damian. As early as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136), a banquet affords the occasion for Utherpendragon to notice Ygerna, apparently for the first time, and to upset her husband by not only constantly smiling at her, and engaging her in sprightly conversation, but also by ordering plates of food to be passed to her, and by sending his attendants to her with golden goblets of wine -and from that particular instance of love at first sight the whole Arthurian legend was born!

In fine, allusions to eating and drinking, then, excessively, insufficiently or idiosyncratically, may be included in Middle English narrative writing for varying reasons: for moralizing purposes, for characterization purposes, to illustrate and exult the wealth of a character or a social class, to satirise a determined estate or professional group, to reflect religious customs or the flouting thereof, to lend realism to a text, or, on the contrary, to add fantasy thereto, and thus to heighten its interest, or, finally, to spark off further dramatic incident, in the fulfilling of all which functions, moreover, humour, satire and irony will often be included to endow and enliven these manducatory and bibulatory episodes with a further literary dimension.

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