

Farm to Table to Confessional: Literary Gastronomy and Sustainability

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Abstract

In the study of medieval English literature, we may find a wealth of fantastical feast scenes, anxieties over diet, religious invectives against gluttony, narratives exalting agricultural labor, and more. My research investigated the roles and representations of food and diet in English literature of the thirteenth through fifteenth-centuries, with earlier texts included for historical context. While much literary scholarship that examines food tends to study a foodstuff according to its symbolic function in the rhetoric, my thesis argued for a more totalizing approach to texts that concern foodstuffs, feasting diet, or agricultural labor.

Echoing the modern discourse on food systems – which often highlights production, consumption, and disposal – my research examined a variety of texts according to their performance in one (or more) of the three larger categories: production, consumption, and moral contemplation. Through this totalizing examination of the literature in the broader context of the food system contemporaneous to these texts, my project argues that the conversation about food in the literature is preconditioned to conversations about religion, agriculture, gender, the economy, and more.



Guilt, Drinking Games, and Giant Whales

Medieval feasts – and consumption in general – are not identical, historically or textually. Whether on the back of a whale or next to a dead body, the rhetorical presentation of the feast varies. However, the common denominator is often an anxiety about what is being eaten, how the food got there, how to eat it, or whether it's fit for eating at all. This thesis was organized into three sections: literatures concerning production (farm), consumption (table), and moral contemplation (confessional).

Primary Literature Consulted:

- + Middle English cookery manuals (i.e. *The Form of Curye*)
- + Middle English and Anglo-Norman romance
- + Middle English poetry, epic
- + Roman Catholic treatises, monastic rules, the Vulgate

Secondary Literature Consulted:

- + Histories of food in England and British Isles
- + History of food culture in Italy, including light analysis of symbolic elevation of food
- + Articles on fowl management, utensil use, gluttony and temperance, fasting, etc.

Findings

Literature and gastronomy have an ongoing, uncertain relationship defined by what is never defined in the text. The rhetorical presentation of food labor, foodstuffs, consumption, instruction, edification, and an infinite number of gastronomic elements are effectively absent from the texts when they should be present, if not prominent, in the rhetoric. However, the prevalent rhetoric of absence does not necessarily render the literature of this period obscure.

The complications caused by absent rhetoric only obscure the text completely if a totalizing appreciation of the medieval food system is not utilized in the reading. Absent food elements are no less absent if we recognize that they should be present in the text, but the recognition of what the text ought to include (according to what we can observe in history and in the literature itself) may invite further alternative readings of widely studied literature.

Additionally, the anxieties over what it means to eat “enough” resurface constantly in the literature. While it is anachronistic to superimpose “sustainability” as a concept onto the medieval English food system, we can trace the history and culture of Western sustainability in the literature of this period. Particularly in the religious literature, we find many exhortations to examine oneself, to determine what is enough for one's own body and community. By studying the rhetoric of medieval gluttony and temperance, we can see early examples of gastronomic sustainability philosophy.



Moving Forward

This project remained confined to the thematic subcategories of production, consumption, and moral contemplation. However, there is much literature to be examined through the holistic gastrocritical framework I propose in my thesis. Gendered divisions of labor, anti-Semitism, immigration, and the politics of international food trade are all subjects which are very much of interest, yet could not fit into this thesis. I plan to investigate these subcategories of literary gastronomy in the future.

Additionally, while the scope of this project may seem small, my thesis demonstrates that reading food in literature – in a totalizing manner that considers the entire food system – is very possible. Humanities classrooms could very easily incorporate gastrocriticism into their curriculum so long as the full context of the relevant food system is used to inform the respective subject.

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Project Goals

- + Conceptualize the late medieval (13th – 15th centuries) English food system through examination of primary and secondary literature
- + Analyze literature for patterns of “sustainability” in order to comprehend notions of what is “enough” or “proper”
- + Propose a gastrocritical framework that can be used by future literary scholars