
Old Pies, Stray Flies, and Possibly Poisonous Parsley in the Cook's Prologue and Tale

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ABSTRACT

The Prologue of the Cook's Tale and the Prologue of the Manciple's Tale in *The Canterbury Tales* can be taken as satires on innkeepers and those who sell stale food. The Cook's Prologue is short (with only thirty-nine lines), but it tells us several things about daily dining in Chaucer's England. Herry Bailly, the innkeeper, accuses Hogge of Ware, the cook, of handling food unhygienically and of making his customers sick. Freshness seems to be a prerequisite for food in Chaucer's London. Were medieval attitudes toward food hygiene similar to our modern attitudes concerning food safety and health? Given that the manciples, the cooks, and the innkeepers were economic rivals in fourteenth-century England, how do we interpret the fraught yet seemingly intimate relation among Herry Bailly, Roger the Cook, and the Manciple in *The Canterbury Tales*? By exploring the Cook's intriguing relationship with the pilgrims and the foods he prepares for his customers, this article reads closely the portrait of the Cook in the General Prologue along with the food references in the Prologue of the Cook's Tale and the Prologue of the Manciple's Tale with a view to better understanding how Chaucer refracts the lived experience of London cooks in the Cook's Tale.

KEYWORDS food, Chaucer's Cook, food safety and food fraud, food culture in fourteenth-century England, *Canterbury Tales*

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When I read the General Prologue the very first time, some thirty years ago, stimulated by Jill Mann's thesis on Chaucer and medieval estates satires, I was taken aback by the subtlety with which Chaucer had reinterpreted the rich literary tradition of satire regarding the three social classes (clergy, nobility, and commoners) in medieval England.¹ Chaucer represents the pilgrims according to their places in society, incorporates the rhetorical tropes used in the literature of sin and the conventional features of gluttony.² The tradition of estates satire goes back at least to Alanus ab Insulis (c. 1128-1202/3), and Chaucer blends them into a fluid, dynamic, and joyous world of the pilgrims.³ From reading Mann, I also noted the way in which the professional lives of the pilgrims, at least in some aspects, were associated with penitential literature. As I think about Chaucer's Cook and the Cook's Tale now, however, I am more struck by Chaucer's emphasis on the broader aspects of the Cook's professional performance, especially in his insistence that the social world in which the pilgrims find themselves is fundamentally unclean and afflicted with diseases ("Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages, . . . the hooly blisful martir for to seke / That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke" [GP 12, 17-18]).⁴ By exploring the various qualities of the character of the Cook in the *Canterbury Tales*, this article reads closely the portrait of the Cook in the General Prologue along with the food references in the Prologue of the Cook's Tale and the Prologue of the Manciple's Tale with a view to better understanding how Chaucer refracts the lived experience of London

¹ Jill Mann published *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* in 1973. Mann examines medieval satire on the estates in Latin, French, and English during the period of 1100-1400 and argues that the way Chaucer shaped his selection and use of materials is distinctive in contrast to other satirists.

² Writers of medieval literature of sin often depict the seven deadly sins (or cardinal sins) given as Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Covetousness, Gluttony, and Lust. The sins are frequently personified—for example, in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, William Dunbar's "The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis," and the Parson's Tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. As generally acknowledged among medievalists, they provide a thematic structure for Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.

³ For a brief account on the relationship between Chaucer's twenty-odd pilgrims and the structure of medieval society, and on the role of their "estates" in the *Canterbury Tales*, see Mann, Preface, xi-xii; and Introduction, 1-16. See also *Historians on Chaucer: The "General Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales* edited by Stephen H. Rigby (2014).

⁴ All citations of *The Canterbury Tales* are from the *Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry Benson (1987). Where necessary, abbreviations are used in accordance with those in Benson's edition. GP (=General Prologue) is used in the present article, as are CT (=The *Canterbury Tales*) and CkT (=The Cook's Tale). For more detailed information, see "Abbreviations" in the *Riverside Chaucer* (779-93). The CT survives in ten fragments, labeled with Roman numerals in Benson's edition, whereas the alphabetical designations added in parentheses are those of the Chaucer Society, adopted by Walter W. Skeat in his CT edition. Modern editions differ in the order in which the tales are presented. Skeat's edition has them in the order followed by the Chaucer Society so that the complete arrangement in Benson's edition is as follows: I(A), II(B), VII(B²), VI(C), III(D), IV(E), V(F), VIII(G), IX(H), X(I). For references to the fragments in Benson's edition, see his editorial note to the CT (3-22).

cooks.⁵ Can we trust Chaucer's Cook? Evidently not, if we accept that the Host's words about him are true. Moreover, Chaucer's Cook does not deny the Host's charges of food fraud and lack of working ethics. The Prologue of the Cook's Tale and the Prologue of the Manciple's Tale in *The Canterbury Tales* can be taken as satires on innkeepers and those who sell stale food. The Cook's Prologue is short (with only thirty-nine lines), but it tells us several things about daily dining in Chaucer's England. Herry Bailly, the innkeeper, accuses Hogge of Ware, the cook, of handling food unhygienically and of making his customers sick.⁶ Freshness seems a prerequisite for food in Chaucer's London. Were medieval attitudes toward food hygiene similar to the modern attitudes concerning food safety and health? Given that the manciples, the cooks, and the innkeepers were economic rivals in fourteenth-century England, how do we interpret the fraught yet seemingly intimate relation among Herry Bailly, Roger the Cook, and the Manciple?⁷ By exploring the Cook's intriguing relationship with the pilgrims and the food he prepares for his customers, I argue that Chaucer (and perhaps his contemporary audience) shared with us the same attitudes to and concerns about food hygiene.

The portrait of the Cook has an inherent stereotype likely established by gluttony satire and estates literature, but Chaucer constructs his portrait entirely on the basis of London cooks' working life. The Cook has been variously labeled an unhygienic glutton, the proprietor of an unsanitary shop, a drunk, a lecher, and a moral deviant (Bertolet 229-46). The Cook's job is a line of business familiar to the pilgrims: "A COOK they hadde with hem for the nones / To boille the chiknes with the marybones, / And poudre-marchant tart and galyngale" (GP 379-81).⁸ If Chaucer makes us see the "greet harm" (GP 385) of the Cook's "mormal" and the "blood-letting" of the Cook's old pies, the flyblown meat, and the stale "blankmangers" as commonplace in his cookshop, he also challenges

⁵ The earliest English cookbook, *The Forme of Cury* (c. 1390), dates from the reign of Richard II. Apart from early cookbooks, historical documents, account books, conduct books, official regulations and laws such as the Sumptuary Laws, literary texts such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Langland's *Piers Plowman* also provide information about the food culture in medieval England. Terence Scully defines the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the "hey-day for medieval cookery" due to the substantial amount of information about food in these periods (5). For more information, see Adamson; Biebel; Black; Davis; Dyer; Hammond; Henisch; and Woolgar, *Culture*.

⁶ Harry Bailly is the standardized form, but I prefer to keep to Herry Bailly (I(A).4358) as it is the only attested spelling in the original, and I believe it presents a strong (perhaps even a stronger) argument in the present study.

⁷ According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED hereafter), *manciple* (see also *maunciple*) is an "officer or servant who buys provisions for a college, inn of court, or other institution."

⁸ According to the MED, *poudre-marchant* is a spice or a mixture of spices, so "tart made with spices" or "spiced tart." *Galingale* is a rhizome of the ginger family.

us to wonder how dangerous and harmful the unclean food he prepares for his customers can be.⁹ Ware is mentioned as the hometown of Roger the Cook, who is nicknamed “Hogge.” Jack of Dover was a type of pie popular in medieval London.¹⁰ The term “Jack of Dover” in the Cook’s Tale is the subject of much debate. It received its origins from a “Jakke,” a twice-baked pie. Roger the Cook “laten blood” (I(A).4346) the pasty in his cookshop probably for the purpose of prolonging its shelf life, and probably for the reason of making the old pie look nice; such a practice paints Hogge of Ware as a swindler.¹¹

Critics like Mann, Scully, Elizabeth M. Biebel, Maggie Black, Christopher M. Woolgar (“Cook”; “Meat”), and many others have found the influence of the satirical tradition about gluttony in Chaucer’s description of the pilgrims or have seen it as anticipating the English society that came into its own food culture in the following centuries.¹² Others have argued that Chaucer was recalling the great societal spectrum that he saw in his London with the variety of vocational features and socio-economic situations.¹³ Chaucer’s list of social classes in the General Prologue is longer and more varied than is often seen in the estates satire genre, as the working lives of the pilgrims, namely, their estates or professions, are connected with the details of their appearance and personality. The Tabard Inn of Southwerk, the open, varied, and social arena in which Chaucer the Pilgrim is so eager to set up his social networking (“And shortly, whan the

⁹ Blankmanger is a thick stew or mousse of chopped chicken or fish boiled with rice, fricassee. See Larry D. Benson’s note to line 387, 29. The medieval dish is not the same as the modern blancmange.

¹⁰ Pies could be made either as pastries seasoned with red or white meat or fish, or as tart with fillings of meat or fish as well as closed pies filled with red or white meat or with spices and egg yolks (Hieatt 207). Dover Sole was a commonly used fish in medieval England (Dyer 191-216). The “pastees” that Roger “laten blood” (I(A).4346) are a kind of dinner pastry which may have originated in Cornwall. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), a pasty, or “paste,” is “a pie of seasoned meat, especially venison, enclosed in a pastry crust and baked without a dish” (“Pasty” 1). “Pastees” serve to portray London culinary culture whereas, from Dover to London, Hogge of Ware’s dubious Cheapside pies highlight a distinctive melting pot local food culture in the heart of medieval England.

¹¹ Jack of Dover is related to the Cook’s hometown Ware. Dover is somewhat closer to London than Ware. Ware is located in Hertfordshire, about thirty miles north of London. In the first half of the fourteenth century, London’s population grew to as many as 80,000 people, while other major British cities like York, Bristol, and Norwich had merely one fourth of London’s population. Most Londoners went on pilgrimages to sites like St. Thomas Becket’s cathedral, as in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Ware, in Chaucer’s time, served as an important coach stop town for many London travelers. Many of the buildings on the Old North Road and High Street (called “Water Row” in Chaucer’s time) were taverns with stables designed to hold horses. Some of Ware’s medieval houses are located on St. Andrew’s Street. For more information, consult the website Mapping Chaucer. I am grateful to Catherine Batt for pointing out that given the fact that Ware is north of London, in Hertfordshire, it is further away from Dover (as their map shows) than London. We are, however, unsure whether by the fourteenth century the word “paste” was already specifically associated with the pasties made in Cornwall. Jack of Dover is a generic term for a pastry or pie.

¹² See note 3 above.

¹³ See Butterfield; Cannon; Lerer; Simpson; and Strohm.

sonne was to reste, / So hadde I spoken with hem everichon / That I was of hir felaweshipe anon" [GP 30-32]), suggests a world in which the pilgrims experience not only the pleasure of traveling but also a sense of belonging, fellowship, and commitment ("[we] made forward erly for to ryse / To take oure wey . . ." [GP 33-34]).

But Chaucer's pilgrims have other, more realistic aspects that make us recognize some of them as real persons and not simply Christianized stereotypes of characters that we may find in the literature of sin. The portraits that Chaucer, as narrator and their fictional companion, presents to us conjure up the everyday practices of the professional or working lives of the pilgrims. Hogge of Ware, a cook of London, is a good example.¹⁴ Although the Cook appears only three times in *Canterbury Tales*, there is a richness of local color that characterizes the Cook as a professional worker in London. As brief as it is, the portrait of the Cook in the General Prologue is almost entirely focused on his vocational skills. Chaucer depicts the Cook's professional excellence based on a range of different cooking skills and dishes prepared.

A COOK they hadde with hem for the nones
To boille the chiknes with the marybones,
And poudre-marchant tart and galyngale.
Wel koude he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale.
He koude rooste, and sethe, and broille, and frye,
Maken mortreux, and wel bake a pye. . . .
For blankmanger, that made he with the beste. (GP 379-87)

The Cook knows how to roast, boil, grill, fry, and bake. His "creations" include boiled chickens with marrow-bones, spiced tarts and galingale, "mortreux," Jack of Dover, and "blankmanger." Similar lists of foods and cooking procedures can be seen in gluttony satire and literature of sins. For example, William Langland's Prologue to *Piers Plowman* ends with a striking picture of the cook crying "Hote pyes, hote! / Goode gees and gryes! Ga we dyne, ga we!" (230-31).¹⁵ And in a remarkable way a cook's creations are listed in the medieval English lyric "The Land of Cockaigne."¹⁶

¹⁴ Chaucer may have modeled the Cook, Hogge of Ware, on a real-life figure, Roger of Ware, who was "a common nightwalker" being accused of several misdeeds such as theft and lechery. See *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1364-1381* (158), quoted in Ogutcu 380.

¹⁵ This is from *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, edited by Derek Pearsall (2008).

¹⁶ This poem survives in only one manuscript, London, British Library, Harley MS 913. It makes the greatest use of the techniques of listing food, in describing the "wel fair abbei / Of white monkes and of grei" with

In this brief sketch of the Cook, Chaucer the Pilgrim remarks sensibly:

But greet harm was it, as it thoughte me,
That on his shyne a mormal hadde he.
For blankmanger, that made he with the beste. (GP 385-87)

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These three lines, which immediately follow the list of dishes the Cook is capable of making, give us a strong impression of the Cook as a lively individual whose unpleasant skin-disease seems to worry his customers about the safety standards of his food preparation and production. Our attention is thus drawn from the “estates” of the Cook and the conventional satire tropes to the possibly filthy (un-hygienic) habits of London cooks. Here we find our responses to the Cook tangled with observations from three textual sources: the pilgrim-narrator’s description, the estates stereotypes, and the pilgrim’s interactions with his fellow pilgrims. For many years, Chaucer scholars have found tales quite at odds with the character of the storyteller that is introduced in the General Prologue. But the Cook’s Prologue and the Tale are compatible in that the Cook is said to like a dirty story; he enjoys the Reeve’s tale, and offers to tell a “jape of malice” of his own (I(A).4325-26, I(A).4338). Interpreting each tale as a subtle delineation of its teller’s character results in many problems, as has been heatedly discussed by David Lawton, A. C. Spearing, C. David Benson and many others.¹⁷ The Cook’s role in the frame narrative of *Canterbury Tales* is minor, and his character seems ambiguous. The Cook first appears in the General Prologue; then, following the Reeve’s Tale, the Cook has a brief prologue followed by a fragmentary tale about the decadent life of Perkyn Revelour.¹⁸ The Cook’s final appearance is in the Manciple’s Prologue, where he is accused of drunkenness by the Host and the

“pasteiis,” “fluren cakes,” and “fat podinges,” in a wonderland where the “gees irosted on the spitte” fly indoors, and the cook cries out “Gees, al hote, al hote!”

¹⁷ See Lawton, esp. 90-97; Spearing 715-46; and C. David Benson 126-42.

¹⁸ Many critics, puzzling over the sudden ending, explore the tale’s “open-ended-ness” with an imagined base-text. Searching through the extant fragment of the Cook’s Tale for clues regarding its closure, they willy-nilly make the perplexing problem of the Cook’s Tale unique in many ways. For excellent discussions of pre-modern and modern speculations upon the sudden termination of the Cook’s tale, see Casey; Hig; and Stinson. See also McGerr for her thorough study of closure in Chaucer, where she argues that open-ended-ness, or models of open-books, existed in the literary tradition of the late medieval era. For Chaucer, I believe, the dramatic (in)completeness of the Cook’s Tale was perfectly acceptable. Evidence within the *Canterbury Tales* suggests that the tale appears to inform later conversation and interaction among Roger the Cook, Herry Bailly, and the Manciple. Bailly asks: “Is that a cook of Londoun, with meschaunce?” (IX(H).11). The Host’s address to Hogge of Ware depends greatly on the earlier tale of Roger the Cook and the prologue, and it calls our attention to the “friendship” of the Guildsmen of the *Canterbury Tales*. See also Burrow 17-37; and Lumiansky 208-09.

Manciple. The scribe of the Hengert Manuscript, having originally left part of a leaf free to accommodate the Cook's Tale if more of the text became available, later wrote in the left-hand margin, "Of this cokes tale maked Chaucer na moore." This suggests that he was given reliable and sufficient instructions that Chaucer had left the tale incomplete intentionally (rather than that the final part of it was lost or in-the-making).¹⁹ So, what can we make of Chaucer's Cook based on the limited textual evidence we can get in *The Canterbury Tales*?

For modern scholars, the infamous "mormal" on the Cook's leg has long become one of many points of speculation about the Cook's filthy life.²⁰ Some critics have interpreted the Cook's "mormal" as a sign of his moral deviance and "uncleanliness" (Braddy; Curry; Mann; Sweany). Walter C. Curry defines it as "a species of ulcerated, dry-scabbed *apostema* which is produced by the corruption of blood of natural melancholia, or sometimes of melancholia combined with *salsum phlegma*" (48). Resulting from the combination of corrupted melancholia with salt phlegm, the "mormal" might cause itching for the Cook. Such physical maladies on the face or body were also reflective of moral maladies, such as uncleanliness, excessive eating and drinking wine as well as lechery. Curry notes that the Cook's *mormal malum mortuum* would have been viewed as resulting from "disgraceful association with diseased and filthy women" (51). He attributes "mormals" to generally intemperate and unclean habits of the Cook's sexual life. Haldeen Braddy claims that it must refer to an ulcer or sore, wet and oozing wound, and thus the skin-disease could be contaminating the Cook's dishes (265-67). In addition to Braddy and Curry, excellent commentary has been written about the interplay between the physical, ethical, and spiritual wholesomeness in Chaucer's portrayals of the Cook and his fellow pilgrims by Jill Mann, Erin Sweany, and Christopher Woolgar, among others. We can see how

¹⁹ The Hengwrt manuscript is generally acknowledged among Chaucer scholars to be the oldest manuscript and the one closest to the form circulating in Chaucer's own day, in which the Cook's sudden termination of his tale is followed by the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale. Nevertheless, Peter Robinson, among others, acknowledges the limitations of Hengwrt. The Hengwrt manuscript "has the best of all, where it has a text, but it may not have all the text which Chaucer wrote, nor have it all in the best order, nor spell the text as Chaucer spelt it" (Robinson 214). M. C. Seymour believes that the tale is unfinished and that the Hengwrt scribe, writing in London or Westminster c. 1405, was unable to find or hear of it (260), so the scribe added his note later. Casey claims that "of the manuscript's five different shades of ink, the lightest brown ink appears *only* in Section 2 and the Cook's Tale note" (187); thus, "clearly, the scribe completed the tale with no *explicit* and returned to add the note" (188). For more information about the heated debates about Chaucer's text and the early manuscripts' codicology and paleographical problems, see O'Connell; Mooney; Doyle and Parkes; Stubbs; and Wang.

²⁰ No other fragmented part of the *Canterbury Tales* resulted in quite the range and number of responses as the Cook's Tale in the textual history of the *Canterbury Tales* and modern criticism. The Cook's "mormal" and the closure of his tale are two of the major points of speculations among scholars. See note 12 above.

distasteful in a cook (especially his “unclean behavior with queens”) would be, particularly when Chaucer the pilgrim and their fictional companion mentions the Cook’s “mormal” disturbingly with his excellent “blankmanger” (GP 387). Mann concludes that “the introduction of the Cook’s mormal is most effective, especially since Chaucer juxtaposes his reference to it with a wistful mention of the Cook’s excellent ‘blankmanger.’ Such a technique for arousing feeling is something Chaucer could have learned from gluttony satire, where disease, excrement, and vomit are introduced to create an aversion for the mountains of food which produce them” (169). However, Woolgar aptly contests that modern scholarship has discussed Chaucer’s Cook in relation to estates satire; as such, it has examined if he performed the duties or work in accordance with his social status while also setting him in the tradition of writing about gluttony and the deadly sins. When seen in the context of estates satire, “the fat Cook can be read as an epitome of indulgence, and a distinct danger to both the physical and moral well-being of the pilgrims” (“The Cook” 262-76). I am not convinced that reading Chaucer’s London cooks in the context of gluttony satire genre sufficiently accounts for the meaning and force that Chaucer gives to the Cook’s breach of trust, or that it lays bare the meaning and force that Chaucer gives to the word “cleanliness,” which was usually understood simply as moral and religious uprightness in medieval literature. So I want to ask again what we should make of the “harmful” aspect of the Cook’s “mormal,” and how recognizing the effect of this harmfulness might alter our perception of the unclean life of the Cook, at least of his work as a professional food preparer in Chaucer’s London. Such an inquiry may shed new light on medieval attitudes to food hygiene. According to the Middle English description of the “mormal,” it is a “harm” (*MED*), an injury, a diseased part of the body, moral evil, pain, and many similar concepts. We may not realize how unusual or common it was for Chaucer to give positive/negative connotations to a word such as “mormal,” conditioned as we are by a society that increasingly values hygiene in food production and can even talk about codes of ethics for chefs.²¹ We may forget that we owe our sense of food safety and food fraud to a major shift in sensibility that did not come about until the twenty-first

²¹ Codes of ethics for chefs call on members to obey regulations that promote public health and safety. The American Culinary Foundation (ACF), for example, expects chefs to provide nutritious meals and fresh ingredients, practice truth in advertising, and adhere to health and safety standards. Chefs must always conduct themselves professionally in a manner that brings honor—not disrepute—to their profession. The code of ethics for the Atlanta branch of the American Culinary Foundation mirrors West Point’s strict honor code, stating simply that members “will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do” (<https://www.acfchefs.org/ACF/About/ACF/About/>).

century.²² Whatever sense or senses of the word “mormal” Chaucer may have in mind here, his phrase “greet harm” (GP 385) implies a potentially discomfoting physical and emotional condition of disease, if not for the pilgrims, at least for the reader unused to imagining a filthy world that encounters death and bodily wounds in ordinary life.²³

Chaucer’s less conventional uses of gluttony and estates satires in the *Canterbury Tales* make the equivocal senses he gives to the uncleanliness of the Cook’s creations/re-creations more striking.²⁴ Here I want to highlight the persistent image of the uncleanliness in the portrait of the Cook and in the Cook’s Prologue, and also of a tension between healthiness and the human need for food safety that one sees in the Host’s criticism of the Cook’s lack of working ethics. I would agree with Erin E. Sweany, who sees Chaucer as anticipating the potential symptoms of leprosy in the Cook’s leg sore and thus the Cook’s ambiguous physical state as embodying a kind of uncertainty that illustrates “how damaged skin is the troubled point at which we negotiate the fraught relationship of self and community” (119). Sweany’s take seems to me a useful explanation of why we perceive the Cook’s character to be ambiguous and the tale he tells as a dynamic, unfinished, yet open narrative. However, given that it pays little attention to Chaucer’s representation of the problems of food fraud in the fourteenth-century London, it explains away Chaucer’s implications of the Cook’s unhealthy life, which is, I would argue, a crucial aspect for us in interpreting the meaning and force of Perkyn’s morally deviant life in the tale he tells.²⁵

²² See FDA FSMA Food Safety Modernization Act 2018 (<https://www.fda.gov/food/guidance-regulation-food-and-dietary-supplements/food-safety-modernization-act-fsma>).

²³ The word “mormal” in the *MED* cites John Lydgate in *The Fall of Princes* saying that there is a relationship between “riotous living and mormals.”

²⁴ Mann remarks that “the material of their portraits [Cook, Shipman, Yeoman, Manciple] seems to be given its first literary expression in Chaucer. . . . [T]hese four characters appear to have the best claim to be regarded as Chaucer’s ‘original creations’” (168). Indeed, a thorough investigation of the estates tradition in confessional manuals may reveal resemblances with popular stereotypes. Nevertheless, in the portrait of the Cook, Chaucer seems to construct the character entirely on the basis of his keen observations of the character’s profession, namely, a food preparer in London.

²⁵ William Woods argues that Chaucer terminates the tale because of the contemporary political dispute between Nicholas Brembre and John Hyndlee of Northampton, in which various guilds turned against the guild of victualers (189-206). Haldeen Braddy examines the Indenture of Apprenticeship in 1396 between John Hyndlee of Northampton and Thomas Edward, son of Gilbert Edward of Wyndesore, and points out that Perkyn breaks all three of the agreements in the Indenture: 1) the apprentice shall not absent himself illegally; 2) the apprentice shall not lend out goods and chattels of the master without permission; and 3) the apprentice shall not visit taverns, prostitutes, or dice-like games to the loss of time to the master” (18). Prompted by Braddy’s insinuation, Jim Casey cites the *OED* definition of “indenture” as “a deed between two or more parties with mutual covenants, executed in two or more copies, all having their tops or edges correspondingly indented or serrated for identification and security” and suggests that “if only we could find a second section of CkT, matching the serration of *swyving* for sustenance, then the mystery of the tale

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This passage shows dramatically what it means to enter the Cook's social circle and raises questions about food safety in Chaucer's London. This is the account of the Host's approach to Roger the Cook before he starts his tale.

For many a pastee hastow laten blood,
And many a Jakke of Dovere hastow soold,
That hath been twies hoot and twies coold.
Of many a pilgrym hastow Cristes curs,
For of thy percely yet they fare the wors,
That they han eten with thy stubbel goos;
For in thy shoppe is many a flye loos. (I(A).4346-52)

Herry Bailly accuses the Cook of being an untrustworthy food preparer, doctoring the food he sells in his shop by draining off the gravy to prolong the pasty's shelf life and reheating day after day the stale Jack of Dover until it is sold. According to *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1323-1482*, rotten items were forbidden, and using rotten items in cooking would result in punishment. The Host implies that the Cook sold stale pies and rotten parsley, which he served with his stubble-fed geese, where "many a flye loos" (I(A).4352). Parsley was a popular herb throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. As a warm and dry herb, it was regarded as healthy, generating good blood and thus balancing the four humors in the body (Adamson 11-12).²⁶ Medieval people believed that there were three different spirits in the body—natural, vital, and animal. They were affected by outside influences and in turn affected every aspect of human physical, mental, and emotional conditions. Blood, which was created in the liver out of food, passed from the liver (home of the natural spirit) through to the heart (home of the vital spirit) into the arteries and thence to the brain (home of the animal spirit). When the arterial blood, which contained air from the lungs, reached the brain, it underwent a process of refinement—it was "cooked" on its passage through the *rete mirabile*, a netlike web at the top of the spine.²⁷ Like the vocation of physicians, that of cooks has much to do with medieval humoral

would be solved" (196n36).

²⁶ Physicians in medieval times advocated white meat as healthy and nutritious warm food; thus chicken, especially chicken soup, constituted an important part of medieval food culture (Adamson 33-34). "Mortreux" and "blankmanger" were both made with poultry or fish on fast days (Heiatt 205). Chicken was a favorite dish on the tables of rich people not only for its meat but also for its eggs. As for pies, tarts, and pastries, they could include red meat, cheese, vegetables, herbs, or nuts according to preferences (Adamson 87; Scully 96).

²⁷ For more information, see Harvey, esp. 15-16. The complex yet intriguing studies of medieval herbal medicine and humoral theory are beyond the scope of the present study.

theory. A good cook knows well the medicinal effects of foodstuffs according to the humoral theory. In medieval times, a cook's profession was associated with that of a physician, for whom a working knowledge of the humoral quality of foodstuffs was of great importance to doing his job well. Hence, "the responsibilities of the medieval cook clearly extended into the sickroom" (Scully 195). The job of Roger the Cook includes manual labor—for instance, bleeding the animals (as part of butchery)—and most London cooks "were accused of drinking on the job, of being hot-tempered and crotchety, and of possessing a rough sense of humor" (Adamson 57). When seen in this medical context, the Cook's geese with possibly rotten parsley can create certain negative effect. The medicinal effect of fresh parsley is entirely consonant with medieval humoral theory.

Apart from the food fraud and staleness the pilgrims find in his "creations and re-creations," what I find most interesting about Roger the Cook, however, is the apparent rivalry, if not intimacy, among the fourteenth-century English victuallers in London.²⁸ The Manciple and the Host show no compassion to the Cook, when they find him cranky and too drunk to stay put on his horse. Herry Bailly mocks the Cook for sleeping on his horse and asks:

What eyleth thee to slepe by the morwe?
 Hastow had fleen al nyght, or artow dronke?
 Or hastow with som quene al nyght yswonke,
 So that thow mayst nat holden up thyn heed? (IX(H).16-19)

In these lines, the Host points out that the Cook is unhygienic, flea-bitten, that he is a drunkard, and that he sports with "some queen all night" so that he cannot hold up his head. The Manciple joins in the "bourde" (IX(H).81) and calls the Cook a "dronken wight" (IX(H).35) whose "breeth ful soure stynketh" (IX(H).32).²⁹ The Cook admits that he feels "hevynesse" (IX(H).22) but does not know why, and that he would rather sleep than drink the best gallon of wine in Cheapside.³⁰

²⁸ The Cook accompanies the Guildsmen during the pilgrimage to Canterbury. They might be honorary members of their parish guilds, which were fraternal and charitable organizations (GP 363-64). Scully points out that the contrast or conflict between the Cook and the Host is a result of the association of cooking with hospitality and with the service of food by innkeeper as part of their business (238). Mann notes that the Guildsmen have none of the traditional mercantile vices such as fraud, usury, and avarice (104). Again, Chaucer seems more amused than indignant at their bustling self-importance.

²⁹ Hieatt, highlighting the antagonistic professional relationship between cookshop men and manciples, argues that Herry Bailly's "jape and pleye" (IX.4) reflects professional conflict since innkeepers, cooks, and pie-men were all victuallers in competition with one another in medieval London (199-209).

³⁰ In Chaucer's time, Cheapside was a favorite scene of festivals and processions. It was the location of a great number of markets, selling a great variety of fresh produce and other goods. Both Hogge of Ware and

As ther is falle on me swich hevynesse,
Noot I nat why, that me were levere slepe
Than the beste galon wyn in Chepe. (IX(H).22-24)

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In medieval England, contaminated foodstuffs include “most notably rancid oil and lard, infected pork, and rotten fish” (Rawcliffe 80). Flyblown meat was thought to cause illness if eaten, and if one sells flyblown meat, as Roger the Cook does, the danger of illness is spread from the food vender to his customers. When the Host worries about Roger’s old pies and fly infestations, he is alerting his fellow pilgrims to the danger of food poisoning and infection via human contacts. Showing the Host preoccupied with fresh and clean food entails a certain artistic risk.³¹ Our Herry Bailly can begin to sound like our next-door neighbor. The point of taking the risk, I believe, is to show that the cooking procedures of Roger the Cook cannot begin to control the unclean world around him. The Cook’s labor gives force and meaning to his vocation as a food preparer and his professional daily activity engages him with a vibrant, prosperous, yet morally corrupt society. The Host’s description of Roger’s old pies, hinting that the Cook “laten blood” (I(A).4346) from his old pies, a way of adulterating foods which are possibly beginning to go bad, suggests that he “resurrects” them back on shelf in his shop for profit. Besides, his description of loose flies and stubble-fed geese with possibly poisonous parsley and the “twice hot and twice cold” Jack of Dover suggests more danger to the Cook’s customers than to the Cook himself.

Another passage can illustrate the other important way in which we see the fraught relationship among the Cook, the Host, and the Manciple. Here the Manciple speaks courteously and seemingly sympathetically to the drunken Cook, offering to tell a tale in the place of the Cook while cautioning everyone about the Cook’s poor physical condition:

“Wel,” quod the Manuciple, “if it may doon ese
To thee, sire Cook, and to no wight displease

the apprentice in his tale, Perkyn Revelour, are from London. Perkyn is said to have neglected his duties as a victualler’s apprentice during these vibrant city festivals and processions, reveling with the crowd. Some parts of Cheapside had a reputation for prostitution. This may explain why at the end of the Cook’s Tale Perkyn’s morally deviant life also relates to Cheapside, implying that he simply moves in to one of the brothels with his new wife: “He loved bet the tavern than the shoppe. / For whan ther any ridying was in Chepe / Out of the shoppe thider wolde, he lepe” (I(A).4376-78). For more information, see Mapping Chaucer.

³¹ Herry Billy, Hogge of Ware, and the Manciple are fictional characters in the frame narrative, namely, they are pilgrims on the move for a “holy purpose.” The Host’s criticism of the Cook concerning the health and safety standards of the food he sells calls our attention to the daily practices of London cooks in the fourteenth century.

Which that heere rideth in this compaignye,
 And that oure Hoost wole, of his curteisye,
 I wol as now excuse thee of thy tale.
 For, in good feith, thy visage is ful pale,
 Thyne eyen daswen eek, as that me thynketh
 And, wel I woot, thy breeth ful soure stynketh” (IX(H).25-32)

**The Cook's
 Prologue and Tale**

The Manciple says that if everyone else is happy, he will take it on himself to excuse the Cook of his tale; he tells him that he will not flatter him, that his breath stinks and he is in no fit state to tell a story. The Cook is then in rage at the Manciple, and in a drunken stupor causes his horse to throw him off. Sweany describes the Manciple's observations of the Cook's paleness and dazed eyes as the essential bodily traits of lepers (“their skin was said to be light in color and uncommonly smooth, hairless, and free of wrinkles” [133]). However, the notion of public health, that is, of keeping one's body and the community intact by living hygienically, clean and free of bacteria, is modern. In a communal society in which the pilgrims are from all walks of life and are focused on the purposes of their pilgrimage, that is, to seek “the hooly blisful martir . . . / that hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke” (GP 17-18), it makes little sense to worry about public health. Yet Chaucer gives the reader a perspective that they lack, namely, a concept about food hygiene. Drunkenness and leprosy are not really the point, if we read Chaucer's Cook from this perspective. Chaucer's Cook looks more like an unclean person contaminating everything around him.

The concern with food safety and the fear for food fraud embodied in the Host's criticism and in the Manciple's later vehement hostile remark reflect the working lives of victuallers in Chaucer's London. It also reflects the pilgrims' earthly life in a fallen society, a theme that runs through the *Canterbury Tales* and gives the Cook's Tale much of its complexity and power. Pie-men, cooks, and tavern-keepers were not allowed to sell ale or wine, yet Hogge is drunk all the time. In Bailly's Tabard Inn the pilgrims found the tavern attractive because the wine the innkeeper provides is strong and they love to drink as much as they like: “strong was the wyn, and wel to drynke us leste” (GP 750). Perhaps the Host has witnessed Hogge's drunkenness before, and perhaps the relationship between them (and with the Manciple) is one of grumpiness as Hieatt suggests (203). Both Roger the Cook and the apprentice in his tale, Perkyn Revelour, work in London: “A prentys whilom dwelled in oure cite / And of a craft of vitailliers was hee” (I(A).4365-66). “Oure citee” refers to London, the same place where the Cook earns his living: “The Cook of Londoun, whil the Reve spak, / For joye

him thought he clawed him on the bak” (I(A).4326-27). The Cook begins to tell a tale of an apprentice victualler, a profession related to his “estates.” A victualler, a seller of food, might deal closely with a manciple, a purchaser of food, and someone like the Cook, a preparer of food (Lumiansky 208-09). Perhaps the sudden ending of the Cook’s tale makes sense if one imagines the physical, mental, and emotional conditions of the drunken Cook in the Manciple’s Prologue. That is, the Cook is too drunk to proceed further, so the tale ends abruptly. Furthermore, the Cook is from London and is thus surrounded in his everyday life by the commerce of goods and services in a vibrant mercantile society in Cheapside of London. Hogge of Ware is on his pilgrimage to cook for London guildsmen, including the “haberdasshere and a carpenter, a webbe, a dyere, and a tapycer” (GP 361-62). Therefore, perhaps, the Cook tells a tale based not only on his own professional life purchasing ingredients and spices and preparing food but on his working experience and transactions with the London guildsmen for whom he cooks. The Cook, in his short “open-book,”³² sticks to what he and his associates know about an apprentice’s morally deviant life in a mercantile London. It is easy to overemphasize the humanistic, moral value of professionalism in the portrait of the Cook, the Cook’s Prologue, and his tale at the expense of the “joy” of living in a corrupt world as unclean, unprofessional, and yet lively as the one in which Perkin Revelour plunders profits by gambling and wanders in the back alleys of London in the Cook’s Tale.

I would conclude with two scenes that suggest the nature of this “joy” and link it with qualities of the Cook’s estates that I have been discussing. After the Manciple’s reprimand of his drinking problem, the Cook becomes so angry that he falls from his horse and must be assisted to remount. Then the Manciple offers the Cook some wine, which wonderfully restores him: “And of that drynke the Cook was wonder fayn” (IX(H).92), and Chaucer the narrator/pilgrim remarks, “Of this vessel the Cook drank faste, allas! What neded hym? He drank ynough biforn” (IX(H).88-89). Bailly knows very well that Hogge, who was “all pale and nothing red,” cannot tell a tale because of his fallen condition, but he continues to “jape and playe” with the drunken Cook for his “penaunce” (IX(H).12). Meanwhile, the Manciple joins the fun and keeps feeding the Cook “a draghte of wyn, ye, of a ripe grape” (IX(H).83) to show that, in spite of his drunken stupor, the Cook cannot stop drinking. Wine was used by cooks while preparing sauces, but it was first used mainly as a medicine, distilled by apothecaries. It was used in the fourteenth-century England as “*aqua vitae* (water of life) in recipes for

³² See note 12 and McGerr’s *Chaucer’s Open Books*.

spiced wine” (Hammond 55). Wine, unlike the commonly consumed ale, was very expensive, as it was mostly imported, especially from France and Italy. For an unclean drunkard as the Cook, having more wine can be far more dangerous, far closer to illness, but the heat from alcohol might be refreshing and restorative, and thus a kind of remedy.

Moreover, wine was served for special religious or social occasions and was mostly drunk by the rich. The Cook’s miraculous recovery from his “heaviness/drunkenness/sleepiness” via the consumption of good wine offered by an amiable fellow pilgrim is worth noting. Caroline Walker Bynum argues in her study of late medieval piety that Christian commentators have traditionally associated the Virgin Mary’s breast with grapes, and that they have interpreted certain phrases from the Song of Solomon as Eucharistic references (271-72).³³ Lying behind this metaphor is the theology which identifies the blood of Christ with sacramental wine: “mankind was fed with the blood of Christ, [and] even made drunk from this most precious liquor” (Vincent 34). As Bynum observes, this parallel is represented in illuminations and paintings where artists depict the lactating Jesus.³⁴ More significantly in late medieval piety, Christ’s blood not only evokes his suffering love but also represents baptism and penance.³⁵ Chaucer the narrator/pilgrim notes that the Cook is *fayn*, that is, he feels great, emotionally agitated and happy after drinking wine. The Manciple’s good wine restores the drunken Cook from his stupor, and in a religious sense the wine the Cook consumes, like the sacramental wine (Communion wine) in celebration of the Eucharist, has a miraculous effect on the physical, mental, and spiritual conditions of the sinner.³⁶

The other scene occurs in the ending of the Cook’s Tale where the Cook ends his tale in which there is a wife who makes a living for herself and her husband through prostitution. Perkyn Revelour, the irresponsible apprentice dismissed by his master because of his theft, takes up with a fellow who, like Perkyn, enjoys “dys, and revel, and disport” (I(A).4420) and has a wife “that heeld for contenance / A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance” (I(A).4421-22). Perkyn loves the tavern better than his cookshop, and, wherever there is a festival or procession in Cheap-

³³ Passages from the Song of Solomon include “How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! How much better is thy love than wine! And the smell of thine ointments than all spices!” (4.1.10); “I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother’s house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate” (4.8.2); “Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? I raised thee up under the apple tree; there thy mother brought thee forth: there she brought thee forth that bare thee” (4.8.5). All citations are of the King James Version.

³⁴ For Eucharistic piety and women, see Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, ch. 4.

³⁵ For a detailed discussion of Christ’s blood and Eucharistic piety, see Bynum’s *Wonderful Blood*.

³⁶ For a religious reading of the Cook’s Tale, see Burakov 2-5.

side, he would run out of the shop to revel with the crowd. He often steals from his master and eventually gets caught by his master and kicked out of the cookshop. This jolly apprentice left his master and could riot all night as he likes with a companion of his own sort: one who loves dice, reveling, and pleasure. There is little evidence that Perkyn's sins are anything other than carnal sins of excessive merriment, lechery, and sloth. He is, after all, Peter the Merry-maker. However, the sin of his friend's wife who "swyved for hir sustenance" (I(A).4422) seems far more dreadful than that of Perkyn. Intriguingly, the unprofessional apprentice seems to enjoy his convivial relationship with a gambler and a "common woman." The question of Perkyn's working ethics is strikingly silenced.³⁷

I dwell on the sense of food safety and food hygiene because it is so woven into the fabric of the Cook's Prologue and also because it links him with our awareness of the codes of ethics for chefs in the USA (FSMA) and with health and food safety standards here in Taiwan. The pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales* never reach their travel destination, namely, the Canterbury Cathedral. More strikingly, in the original plan, their ultimate goal is a secular one: feasting at the Tabard Inn. To suggest that "greet harm" (GP 385) is possible in a filthy body, Chaucer challenges us to enter the unclean life of the Cook as if entering a familiar world of gastronomic experience. Roger the Cook's working ethics and his unclean life thus serve as a site that demands interpretation by the pilgrims as well as the reader. The Host's accusation of the Cook's drunkenness and food fraud reveals a definite culinary preference for well-prepared foods, free of the contamination that nature often infects them with, whereas Chaucer the Pilgrim's abrupt remark of the Cook's physical condition (leg sore) suggests a practical concern about food hygiene. In short, the "mormal" might label the Cook as an unprofessional food-preparer who not only violates the code of honor for chefs but also jeopardizes the health of his customers and the public health of the community. Chaucer's imagining of the "estates" may be colored by a long literary satire tradition, but that tradition does not explain why he attached so much attention to the Cook's breach of trust and his customers' concern about food hygiene. We cannot answer the question fully, but I think that the answer has to do with a kind of yearning that has resurfaced in modern times—a yearning for healthy, nutritious, wholesome, tasty, and fresh food in which we may find heavenly delight and vitality.

³⁷ One may suspect that Perkyn and the friend whom he moves in with are both gay men (and might be lovers) since this friend "hadde a wyf that heeld for contenance" (a wife kept for the sake of appearance). After Perkyn moves in, he might also exploit this "sustenance" since now they live together. However, there is no textual evidence or any explicit or allusive words in the Cook's tale to indicate that Perkyn and his friend are men in homosexual love.

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