

## Spoiled or Splendid?: Speculations on a Culinary Misgiving

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“To limit their [spices’] function to food preservation and explain their use solely in those terms would be like calling champagne a good thirst quencher.”

— Wolfgang Schivelbusch

The state of medieval eating can be characterized in the modern imagination by parallel yet contrasting acts of consumption. The first is sublime and religious, the eating of the literal body of Christ through the sacrament of the Eucharist. The other is repellent and decadent, the presumed practice of eating spoiled meat, its putrid taste disguised within an overpowering façade of spices and strongly-flavored ingredients. While the holy feast was ideologically central to medieval culture, integral to the way that medieval Christians perceived themselves,<sup>1</sup> its unwholesome secular counterpoint is hardly more than a myth of the modern age, a presumption of temporal privilege that persistently clings to the prior era. While the former feast was vital to the Middle Ages itself, the fantasy of the latter meal suits only the ideological needs of the present. In this essay, I intend to quickly present the case against the spoiled food of the Middle Ages, and then offer a few speculations as to why modern observers continue to perpetuate this distasteful myth.

While it is true that the refined palates of medieval eaters of high status had a yen for the exotic tastes obtained by combining a disparate and (we often assume) incongruous amalgam of spices in their prepared dishes and sauces,<sup>2</sup> it does not follow that this taste was primarily for purposes of making the inedible palatable. There are other, more powerful and compelling reasons that Middle Age gourmards enjoyed the taste of spices. Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes that spices are just one aspect of cultural borrowing from the Islamic Middle East, creating an economic dependence that rivaled the contemporary Western addiction to petroleum.<sup>3</sup> Madeleine Pelner

<sup>1</sup> The literature on the subject is vast, and justice cannot be done to its intricacies in this brief note. See Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast Holy Fast* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1987) or Miri Rubin’s “The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities” (in David Aers, ed. *Culture and History: 1350-1600* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992)) for powerful statements on the importance of eating the Host in medieval culture.

<sup>2</sup> It is common in medieval recipes to find sugar, salt, cinnamon, ginger, black pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and saffron in a single sauce, mixed with vinegar or verjuice (the juice of unripe grapes) as a base. W. E. Mead, in *The English Medieval Feast* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), presumes that every dish consumed at a banquet was heavily-processed and pulverized, perhaps reading extant cookery books a bit too literally: “Out of the mortar came the impalpable messes so characteristic of the medieval table. Nearly every dish, whatever its name, was soft and mushy, with its principal ingredients disguised by the addition of wine or spices or vegetables. The skill of the cook was attested by the fact that his strange compounds were actually eaten. It was apparently not worth the pains of a cook of any reputation to prepare food simply, and hence practically everything had to be mashed or cut into small pieces and mixed with something else, preferably of so strong a flavour as to disguise the taste of most of the other ingredients. Nearly every dish was a riddle.” Mead does not take into account the probable function of the cookbook as an *aide-memoire* for the medieval chef, whose technical expertise was most likely such that instructions for how to roast a pig would not be necessary, while making a particular stew or sauce might be. See Terence Scully, “Mixing It Up in the Medieval Kitchen” in *Medieval Food and Drink, ACTA XXI* (1995), pp. 1-26, for a correcting perspective on medieval cooking techniques and their likely purpose in dietary theory.

<sup>3</sup> Toby Peterson, “The Arab Influence on Western European Cooking,” *Journal of Medieval History* 6 (1980): 317-20; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* (1980). Trans. David Jacobson (New York: Pantheon, 1992) p. 8-9. The spice craze is often linked to the aftermath of the Crusades (as in Reay Tanahill’s *Food in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), p. 189), but international trade made these

Cosman states that “spices were a superb insignia of conspicuous wealth... A particular odor or taste in food thus affirmed the political statement: power bought this” (45). Spices not only bespoke of power, but the “good life” and “wellness,” as argued by Paul Freedman, alluring consumers due to their “expensive, exotic, and even mysteriously sacred nature” (223-4). Jack Turner suggests that spices were indeed used for concealment, but posits that the taste being hidden was that of salted meat or fish (109).<sup>4</sup> Scholars of ancient nutrition, such as Ken Albala and Terrence Scully, also show that spices played an important role in constituting the proper balance of a dish according to the predominant medical theory of the bodily humors.<sup>5</sup> Spices in the Middle Ages were fabulously expensive, difficult to obtain, and reserved for only the wealthiest eaters: it is more than highly unlikely that these precious, almost ineffable, commodities would have been thrown away simply to preserve bad meat.

Even though numerous food scholars have disproven this hypothesis—medievalist and otherwise—the misapprehension nonetheless persists, promulgated largely by modern scholars who read medieval references to tainted meat too literally, give too much credence to early sources that look down upon the perceived culinary ineptitude of their earlier ancestors,<sup>6</sup> and, worst yet, repeat and replicate previous iterations of the myth in contemporary sources.<sup>7</sup> But bad (or incomplete) research does not explain the prevalence of the spoiled food assumption. There is something more pernicious at stake here—scholars and writers have reflexively repeated this misprision because of the flavor of something more alluring than accuracy, and that is the savory tang of the politics of time. Cherished myths of modern progress are far more compelling to the weight of unadorned realism. Felipe Fernández-Armesto precisely expresses the assumptions behind this prevalent myth: “It is an offshoot of the myth of progress—the assumption that people in earlier times were less competent, or less intelligent, or less capable of providing for their needs than we are today.” (155) This myth of progress is a reflex of the high regard that contemporary society holds for itself, and reveals a belief that at some level most social problems are solvable simply through the application of technology or progressive ideologies, and anything unpleasant, from misogyny to torture, is just a holdover from a medieval past.

It is not my argument that medieval people never ate spoiled food, nor that spices do not have some preservative and antimicrobial properties. Nina L. Etkin suggests that the ultimate

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commodities available in Europe much earlier, as evidenced by the final bequest of the Venerable Bede, who in 735 asked that “some” black pepper, among his other treasures in his possession be distributed to his brethren at Wearmouth-Jarrow.

<sup>4</sup> Following Timothy Morton’s suggestion, “It is unclear whether disguise was ever a primary motive in the medieval use of spice” (*The Poetics of Spice*, p. 17), I wonder if Turner’s idea is just as far-fetched as the spoiled meat thesis, since medieval recipes existed to remove excess salt from a piece of meat or fish.

<sup>5</sup> *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, esp. ch. 3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2002); “Mixing It Up in the Medieval Kitchen,” p. 2-3. Although Albala does not locate a “Galenic Revival” until 1530, the medical theory of the Middle Ages was dominated by the ideas of Galen of Pergamum and the concept of the four bodily humors (sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic).

<sup>6</sup> These sources are often alluded to, but rarely enumerated. Alfred Franklin, in his *Vie Privée d’Autrefois* (1889), characterizes medieval cookery as consisting of “abominables ragouts” (p. 44), but says nothing about spoiled food. Richard Warner, in *Antiquitates culinariae* (1791) describes the ancient dishes as “unintelligible to a modern, as the hieroglyphics of an Egyptian pillar” (pp. xxxii-xxxiii).

<sup>7</sup> As renowned food scholar Sidney Mintz does in his 1997 book, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), where he approvingly cites W. E. Mead’s 1931 culinary misgivings of the nature of medieval food (p. 57). One particularly pernicious example of the promulgation of the myth of spoiled medieval food can be found in Hansjörg Küster’s contribution, “Spices and Flavourings,” to the *Cambridge World History of Food*, vol. 1 (Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 435-37, a reiteration that is sure to lead to many future repetitions, since many non-specialists will come to this volume looking for information.

purpose for introducing spices into cuisine may have been to kill food-spoiling micro-organisms, and a preference for those flavors grew up as a secondary effect (98-100), but that could only hold true for populations where spices were native, in the Indonesian Archipelago and other tropical locations. However, the medieval taste for these preservative spices could not be directly related to such a practical purpose. The spice trade had to move heaven and earth to bring these commodities to new, faraway places, necessitating the creation of markets of compelling desire wherever they went. The wondrous properties and exotic origins of spices were a part of the formation of overwhelming need that justified the expenditure for acquisition. Spices were also used liberally in all recipes, not just for meat (one recipe even says to add spices to boiled strawberries!). Also, spices need to be added in large amounts in order to fully preserve a foodstuff, but research into medieval household use of spices shows that while lots of different spices were purchased, they were not usually obtained in exceptionally large quantities, and were expected to last a while once purchased.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly the food supply, even with widespread and thoroughly-practiced methods of preservation (salting, drying, smoking, curing, etc.), was in a perilous condition, especially for the urban poor, who were forced to rely on cookshops for their dinner.<sup>9</sup> The reputation for cleanliness and quality of these cookshops was not high, as evidenced by the common civic regulations focused on their sanitary practices, or the humorous diss thrown at Roger of Ware, the Cook of the Canterbury pilgrimage, by Harry Bailey:

Oure Hoost answerde and seide, "I graunte it thee.  
 Now telle on, Roger; look that it be good  
 For many a pastee hastow laten blood,  
 And many a Jakke of Doevere hastow sold  
 That hath ben twies hoot and twies coold.  
 Of many a pilgrim 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.4345-52)<sup>10</sup>

The idea alone makes the stomach churn: meat and gravy drained from pie crusts day after day until they can be sold; pastries (like the "Jack of Dover") heated and reheated; rancid herbs on goose of uncertain quality; flies everywhere. It is important to remember, however, that this detail, while it may have had a reflection somewhere at sometime, is from a fictional conversation. It is not a historical fact. Hygienic standards may have been low in the urban cookshops which catered largely to the city's poor and working-class customers, but they did exist, and ordinances can be found that prohibit exactly the types of abuses Roger of Ware is accused of perpetrating.<sup>11</sup> Whether prosecutions were common or rare is more or less irrelevant to my purposes here: it is enough that the civic culture of London recognized a problem and legislated against it. Were there a widespread

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<sup>8</sup> Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household, 1250-1600* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 113. There are anecdotal accounts of large amounts of spices purchased or made available for special occasions and by certain generous individuals, but these probably should be regarded as exceptions that do not prove a rule.

<sup>9</sup> See Martha Carlin, "Fast Food and Urban Living Standards in Medieval England" (in Martha Carlin and Joel Rosenthal, ed. *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe*. London and Rio Grande, OH: Hambledon; 1998), pp. 27-51, for research on the probable eating habits of the urban poor, whose tenements homes often were not equipped with cooking facilities.

<sup>10</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> See Carlin, pp. 39-41.

cultural acceptance of spoiled food as the norm, capable of being corrected by the addition of spices, there would be no need to create laws to prohibit the sale of dangerous food. (Similar regulations exist today—and are often violated in spectacular fashion.) Also, it is important to note that the poor urban eaters, who depended upon these cookshops for their dinner, were not among the population that could afford the preserving spices, nor would cookshop chefs think to lavish these expensive ingredients on their working-class clientele.

As many critics note, spices were incredibly expensive, hard to obtain, and redolent of the highest circles of power. Their ideal consumers—the aristocracy, powerful ecclesiasts, and later the upper bourgeoisie—would have been accustomed to purchasing and acquiring only the freshest and best meat for their meals, in whatever season of the year it was available.<sup>12</sup> If anything, it was more likely that meat was even fresher for a medieval consumer than it is now in this age of refrigeration and flash-freezing, when days or weeks may pass between slaughter and service. The time period between killing and purchase would have been much shorter, hunting was a yearlong pastime,<sup>13</sup> and livestock (and even fish) were often kept alive until the very moment they were needed on the table. These noble or high-status eaters were the ones who consumed the bounty of the international spice trade, as well as the best the local markets and manors could offer. Except for exotic spices and some luxury foodstuffs, such as almonds, rice, or citrus fruits, medieval cuisine was slow, seasonal, and intensely localvore in nature. There was little question of choice in the matter. The myth of spoiled food also ignores several other practical considerations. First, as Nina Etkin reminds, tainted meat is not healthy, and would have had severe consequences on the body of its eaters (238). Also, as Paul Freedman remarks, spices are not going to do anything to cover the taste or smell of spoiled meat, rendering them a pricy and ultimately ineffective strategy.<sup>14</sup>

Some observers have cringed at the thought of the spiciness of medieval cuisine, probably under the influence of the idea of French *haute cuisine* as the apex of culinary accomplishment (and perhaps even, especially in early observers, a xenophobic suspicion of the spicy foods of Indian, Middle Eastern, or African immigrant populations), but pragmatic considerations are definitely not the primary reason for that preference. Like it or not, the wealthy eaters of the Middle Ages ate spicy food because they liked the way it tasted and were willing to pay large amounts of money to eat that way. Believe it or not, there were deliberately-conceived medical ideas behind the combinations that formed the medieval sauce or stew, which tended to write in a necessity for these fabulously superfluous commodities.<sup>15</sup>

Often described as the initiators of scientific inquiry in the early modern era,<sup>16</sup> spices are forced to assume a complex role in a modern mythology of progress, neither fish nor fowl, not

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<sup>12</sup> See Christopher Dyer's "English Diet in the Later Middle Ages" (in *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R.H. Hilton*. Ed. T.H. Ashton, et al. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1983. pp. 191-216), p. 193, for evidence that contradicts the widely-held notion that medieval husbandry practiced a mass slaughter of their livestock every winter, making it necessary that eaters would only have salted, dried, and otherwise preserved meat available during the winter months.

<sup>13</sup> Although a fictional account, it does not seem to have strained credulity that, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Bertilak would engage in a three-day hunt between Christmas and New Year's Day in northwestern England.

<sup>14</sup> *Out of the East*, 3. There is little empirical research into the matter, and it is inconceivable that anyone would knowingly volunteer to receive food poisoning just to test out the hypothesis.

<sup>15</sup> Ken Albala, in his *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, shows how humoral theory operates on a practical basis, demonstrating how the "complexion" of a foodstuff (say, cold and moist) can be "corrected" by adding ingredients (such as sugar or spices) which warm and dry out the resulting dish to achieve an appropriate and healthful balance for proper bodily digestion.

<sup>16</sup> Such as by Küster, p. 437.

quite on one side of the medieval/modern divide or the other. These powdery, almost insubstantial commodities are made to do heavy work as not only the defining feature of one period but also the dividing line between them:

With the help of spices the Middle Ages were, so to speak, outwitted. Spices played a sort of catalytic role in the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. They straddled the two periods, part of both, not quite belonging to either, yet decisively influencing both. In their cultural significance spices were wholly medieval; this is evident from the fact that they quickly lost that significance in the modern world. At the same time, they existed like foreign bodies in the medieval world, forerunners of the loosened boundaries of modern times. The medieval spice trade had already done away with narrow local borders. (Schivelbusch 12)

In a patent bit of teleology and progressivism, Schivelbusch claims that the medieval world had to be fooled into giving up its middle-ness, coaxed like a donkey following a carrot into the modern world. Spices appear in his narrative to be not just a dynamic force, but also the difference between medieval and modern, driving the backwards Middle Ages to be something other than it could otherwise have become on its own. Spices are latent modernity, a powerful force of time contained in tiny seed pods and delicate shreds of bark, but are not of modernity themselves. What Schivelbusch does not perceive in his narrative of spices and the politics of time, is that spices' role as warping and world-bending force predates the Middle Ages—that the Classical world was equally expanded and challenged by the presence of spices. More importantly, what he identifies as peculiarly modern about spices only seems so in retrospect. Their aspect as transnational commodity has a long history. Spices are only coincidentally able to be aligned with the recent modern world's globalism. However, globalism itself is not a uniquely modern mode of awareness. Spices may have indeed been an important catalyst for often-intensely local markets to gain an awareness of a larger world, feeding the literary and cultural imagination in the process, but it does not follow that spices are precocious fragments of a modernity anachronistically dragging the medieval world into a new, expansive self-consciousness.

What is more, spices did not just wink out of favor with consumers out of some sort of forward-looking appetite for modernity. Economics most likely drove this downturn in taste. The opening of the global spice market in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Dutch and Portuguese merchants fought for direct access to the Spice Islands, long monopolized by Indian and Middle Eastern merchants, was most likely more responsible for the change in preference. The resulting availability of spices to European eaters not only caused the prices to drop, but also revealed these foreign worlds of spice to be mundane after all. The ancient legends of the exotic production of black pepper and cinnamon<sup>17</sup> were disproven once and for all by the merchants who wrested control of their share. Blood was spilled for the right to dominate the market, forcing the West to acknowledge that spices were just one among an entire world of everyday, mortal, perhaps even tawdry, commodities.

The most suspicious aspect of the characterization of medieval food as spoiled is in its periodizing specificity: it is just the Middle Ages which is singled out for critique. No one ever says that Classical or Renaissance cooking was inherently bad. However, medieval prestige cuisine was based in an imitation of Classical Roman recipes, which also adored the heavily-spiced flavors

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<sup>17</sup> Black pepper was said to have gotten its color from the fires that were needed to burn out the venomous snakes that infested the pepper bushes. Cinnamon was reputed to be used by birds to build their nests on inaccessible mountains, requiring ingenuity to harvest the sticks. Both stories can be found in *Out of the East*, pp. 134-35.

that vigorous international trade made possible.<sup>18</sup> On the other end, there are many continuities of cooking practices and food storage technologies between the medieval and early modern eras, therefore Renaissance cooks would have faced similar challenges with the freshness of their food supply (and cooks would continue to face these same challenges until modern refrigeration was made practical in the mid-nineteenth century.) And, as Europe became more urbanized and industrialized, the freshness of food might have become harder to maintain. So if anything, the food supply in early modern Europe would have been more—not less—likely to have become spoiled in transit and storage. However, the use of spices went down in the seventeenth century dramatically in recipes for many high status eaters. Should we assume that the taste of spoiled meat somehow became palatable to these diners? Or are other cultural and economic reasons for the reduced dependence of powerfully-flavored spice combinations?

Observers from later centuries have often been determined to create a decisive break between the Renaissance and the history that preceded it. For example, jurists and legal theorists defined and codified medieval feudalism in order to consolidate a servile prehistory to their own contexts of absolutism and colonialism.<sup>19</sup> Scholars have argued earnestly that *Hamlet* marks the starting point for modern subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> Even where there is continuity, the mythology of the Renaissance is marshaled to interpret this connection as a radical break and new beginning. There are those who will insist on seeing innovation as the natural condition of the early modern era, and create a narrative of that new order. Norbert Elias is a case in point: he posits that Erasmus' courtesy manual *De civilitate morum puerilium* (1530) was the start of a new cultural consciousness, of a new perception of the self among others. Never mind that courtesy manuals have existed for hundreds of years prior to that point, which not only teach many of the same techniques of the body, but also are the source of the Erasmean precept.<sup>21</sup> Cookery is another cultural continuity, and even after the rise of La Varenne's *nouvelle cuisine*,<sup>22</sup> cookbooks containing many of the same medieval recipes, (carrying on in almost complete ignorance of New World foodstuffs) continued to be published in both England and France into the early eighteenth century.

Therefore, the modern myth of medieval food says much more about us and our attitudes towards the past than it could describe our former selves. In contemplating the putrid meals of yesteryear, we engage in a particularly rancid form of the politics of time. Peter Osborne describes this phenomenon as the sense that prior and preceding chronological periods are constantly in competition with the contemporary (116). Modernity—as an epoch-making temporal maneuver that both trumps and answers all former moments—is actually a product of chronological neurosis. Despite a desperate belief that humans have progressed into better times, we still feel the pull of

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<sup>18</sup> Many of the spices now in use, such as cloves or nutmeg, were unknown to Roman eaters, except for black pepper, which was used in enthusiastic quantity and frequency. Roman cuisine preferred the rich flavors of spices such as silphium (now extinct) and asafoetida, and the fish-based sauce called *garum* (the recipe of which is now lost).

<sup>19</sup> See Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2008), esp. ch. 1 & 2.

<sup>20</sup> This idea is challenged and convincingly repudiated by David Aers in his “Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists” (in *Culture and History 1350-1600*, ed. David Aers, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992), pp. 177-202.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix C to Jonathan Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 198-201, for notes on the continuities and differences of Erasmus's work.

<sup>22</sup> Much confusion arises in the emphasis on “fresh” ingredients required in the recipes of Francois Pierre de la Varenne, commonly understood as the progenitor of *haute cuisine* in France. The author of *Le cuisinier françois* (2nd ed., 1652) often states that the ingredients used in his recipes should be “frais” (fresh), implying to many readers that cooks up to this point were accustomed to using ingredients that were some other standard. The misunderstanding arises from the modern assumption that the opposite of “fresh” must have been “spoiled.” The actual opposite, however, especially for fish or meat, was usually “salted” or otherwise preserved.

past identities, experiencing a dangerous continuity of time, which, following Johannes Fabian, I call a “suspicion of coevality,”<sup>23</sup> which could explode into anachronism at any moment. Modern people suspect that the past—or at least what we choose to disavow of the past—survives in dozens of ways. So we burden the past with judgments about its dangerous and undesirable qualities, giving rise to the mythology of progress described above by Fernández-Armesto. We see the people of the medieval past as childlike and foolish, given to superstition and irrationality, unable to see things with the clear empiricism we believe we enjoy today.<sup>24</sup> This is the Middle Ages of Johan Huizinga’s *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919), a widely influential description of a medieval cultural psychology that is caught up in extremes, staggering like a “giant with the head of a child, hither and thither” (24). Huizinga’s book has the effect of bracketing these extremes as temporally bound, as if to disavow their pull on our own modern sensibilities. The Middle Ages are recreated in the modern imagination as a time of savage vacillation between tenderness and cruelty, passion and death. And so the myth of spoiled food fits importantly into a story we tell ourselves about the past. Not only were medieval people childlike and ignorant, but they were obsessed with the distinction between beauty and death. Spoiled food is the perfect emblem of that obsession: the meat is rotting, decaying, and so beautiful, sweet-smelling spices were lavished upon it to conceal the corruption. Like the corpse of a saint, it still smells fresh even in dissolution.

The modern period has constructed itself as a time of life and health, of the realization of wholesome living. The Middle Ages is modernity’s dark shadow, moribund—Death is untamed and runs rampant within the time period, waiting to snatch up humans in a thousand different ways. Food plays an important role in this politics of time, and if we believe our food to be nutritious and wholesome, then our shadowy brethren must have eaten the opposite. Their cuisine is decadent and rotting, garnished with spices to conceal the truth of the era: that it is given to death rather than life. The modern world assumes that death and corruption has been tamed by technology. The dead smell of formaldehyde and flowers, while our rotting garbage stinks in landfills away from polite society. Refrigeration takes care of the rest. But this attitude reeks of desperation and misgiving, forcing the Middle Ages to eat the spoiled food we cannot abide the presence of. While our food supply may no longer stink, it is no more wholesome for that. Factory-raised animals endure horrifying living conditions—crowded, mutilated, pumped full of hormones, steroids and antibiotics, living in their own filth. Factory-farmed fish are not much better, fattened on human excrement and chemicals. Even our vegetable supply is compromised by pesticides, weed killers, and dangerous fertilizers—and we are just beginning to discover the ill side effects of genetically-modified crops. Science and the demands of economics and overpopulation have made our food less healthy, while technology prolongs the time that passes from harvest to purchase to consumption. We actually eat less fresh food in more dangerous conditions than our medieval forebears, but insist upon the noisome nature of our ancestors’ feasting. While we dwell on the moribund, superstitious nature of the Middle Ages, given to the specious reasoning that would make a spiced, spoiled dish palatable, we take it on faith alone that our systems of food production and distribution have our best interests at heart, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary.

We look back and wonder what forces make medieval cuisine to assume its character. In our lack of imagination, we see only technical determinants, and since we know the Middle Ages

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<sup>23</sup> “Coevality” is a keyword of Fabian’s *Time and the Other* (1983), New York: Columbia UP, 2002. As far as I know, the term “suspicion of coevality” is my own and is explored in greater detail in the first chapter of my book *The Political Appetites of Medieval English Romance* (in progress).

<sup>24</sup> The effects of this assumed empiricism is the subject of Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

was technologically limited, we figure that lack must be evident in their food. We don't see what we have in common with medieval cuisine—that is, a will to power through social spectacle; a desire to accommodate our tastes to articulated medical precepts; a need to differentiate ourselves by class; and a yearning to experience something fantastic through cultural embellishment. Maybe we know that we share these things with medieval humans, but imagine in the hubris of our progress that these desires must have been childlike, imperfect, or exploitative. We imagine that our own tastes have been purged of their bitter aspects, and serve all through our democratic ideology, or at least are equally available to all consumers. What we don't see is that our own food may be spoiled even in its splendid trappings, that we still exercise unjust power over the world's resources through the appetites we will not subject to critique.



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