“THE Ooze OF Gluttony”:
Attitudes Towards Food, Eating,
And Excess In the Middle Ages

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Abstract: An historical approach to the meanings of the fat body cannot
ignore gluttony, since the glutton is often characterized as the excessive eater,
eventually corpulent. This contemporary western view of the vice of gluttony
is challenged by the puzzling notion found throughout the Middle Ages that
Adam and Eve, with their first bites of forbidden fruit, commit the sin of
gluttony. How can ingesting so little food be gluttonous? Working with Mary
Douglas’s notion that the way a culture thinks about food reflects and reveals
the structures of its “whole experience of life” (“Culture and Food,” 78), I
argue that medieval conceptions of gluttony present a world in which the
state of one’s soul is directly connected to the maintenance of one’s proper
physical boundaries and balance, a condition which extends to, and helps to
maintain, the social body.

“It’s no sin to be fat, but it might as well be.”1 Jeremy Igger’s com-
ment a decade ago highlights the precarious cultural location of the
fat body. As Anne Scott Beller writes, “obesity has been identified as a
‘disease’ with a stipulated cure (dieting) and an acknowledged etiology
(gluttony).”2 And, although we now rarely use the term to describe how fat bodies are created, this is because we
have defined gluttony simply as overeating, often use that term instead,
and assume—perhaps rightly so—that gluttony or overeating necessarily
leads to corpulence. Moreover, while being fat is not officially a sin, it
is true that in the contemporary West, there is a tendency to attribute
moral failings to the fat body. Natalie Allon suggests that, “fat people
are viewed as ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’”; they suffer from “societal opposition

1 Jeremy Igger, “Innocence Lost: Our Complicated Relationship with Food,” The
to gluttony.”³ In the contemporary western mind, fat people are “out of control,” or “out of bounds,” and their inability to be in command of themselves is literally displayed on their fat bodies.⁴

This implicit connection between gluttony and corpulence—and our concomitant disdain for fatness—is, however, a relatively recent cultural phenomenon. Ken Albala traces “the modern anxiety over obesity” to the seventeenth century, “when fat was fashionable.”⁵ New ideas about body chemistry and physiology at that time led medical professionals to begin to question whether being fat was unhealthy, thereby creating “a nascent fear of fat.”⁶ As time went on, the bond between gluttony and corpulence solidified, underscoring our current assumption that the glutton is, necessarily, corpulent.

Prior to the seventeenth century, however, such a strong connection between gluttony and corpulence is lacking.⁷ Medieval medical and health treatises, such as Hildegard of Bingen’s Cause et cure, written in the twelfth century, assume that the four bodily fluids—blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile—along with the four primal elements—heat, cold, wetness, and dryness—determine an individual’s constitution. Different temperaments and body types result from the domination of one of the four humors in each person’s body. In Hildegard’s text, for instance, it is important for thin people to bathe often, while those with “fat flesh will harm themselves with water baths because they are warm and moist within.”⁸ Hildegard harbors no particular disdain for any type of body, for bodies simply are what they are, though everyone must strive to maintain his or her humoral balance.

Despite the lack of connection between gluttony and corpulence in medieval medical discourse, the Middle Ages is a time when moral discourse about gluttony—one of the seven deadly sins—flourished.

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⁶ Albala, 169–171.
⁷ Albala also notes that fatness was not linked to gluttony in the Middle Ages, although he argues that theologically, gluttony was primarily about a lack of charity towards others. I argue here that gluttony has a much broader range of social meanings in the Middle Ages than Albala suggests.
⁸ Hildegard of Bingen, On Natural Philosophy and Medicine, Selections from “Cause et Cure”, trans. and ed. by Margaret Berger (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), 96.