



Danielle Callegari

# Dante's Gluttons

Food and Society from the Convivio  
to the Comedy

# Dante's Gluttons

# Food Culture, Food History before 1900

The expanding interest that food studies have elicited in the past few decades confirms the importance of a field that is still very much in the making. The history and cultures of food have been the object of wide-ranging methodological approaches: literary, cultural, economic, and material (to name just a few), and continue to elicit contributions from all the major disciplines.

The series publishes monographs on the history and culture of food, and hosts contributions from different fields, historiographic approaches, and perspectives. Contributions cover a long chronological period running from the Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century, respecting the distinctive time frames of food history. A similar criterion determines the wide geographic parameters that the series follows. As of the later Middle Ages, food and cuisine traveled with extreme ease not only within the European continent but increasingly to other parts of the world. The purview of this series thus comprises contributions including Europe, the Atlantic world, as well as exchanges with Asia and the Middle East.

## *Series editor*

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# Dante's Gluttons

*Food and Society from the Convivio to the Comedy*

*Danielle Callegari*

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*For my sisters*



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# Acknowledgments

Finishing your first book is never easy, but a pandemic really puts a fine point on that statement. When I began this project I had many grand intentions; I hope to have fulfilled at least some of them. Whatever I have managed to do has been, like all worthy achievements, with the help of a rich network of caring and encouraging supporters.

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my work, fielding my questions, and offering many virtual toasts in the dark days of revisions in lockdown. He, Beth Coggeshall, and Christiana Purdy Moudarres were especially crucial interlocutors as the manuscript was being completed, helping me to imagine how this work might become part of a new chapter in Dante studies.

To arrive at Dante's food I needed a great deal of help, and Allen Grieco's guidance was absolutely essential. Wandering around the reading rooms at Villa I Tatti, I also met David Rosenthal, who will someday be my co-author on a book about Last Suppers. While this book was still in its infancy, Laura Giannetti made herself available and shared some of the first stages of her own research into food and Italian literature which is now available in her new volume *Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy: The Renaissance of Taste* (Amsterdam University Press). At the University of Minnesota I was treated to an array of exciting scholarship on Premodern Food Cultures, and while there met Paul Freedman, who has been an exceptionally generous point of reference, reading this manuscript in its entirety and giving me confidence in my steps forward. Along the way, Ken Albala has acted as an infinite font of information as energetic in our conversations as he is in his promotion of the field.

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Diego, with his calming, centering presence and unaffected disposition, gave me the strength to finish this book. I write in the hope to impress him—anything more I accomplish is just icing on the cake.

And finally, I thank my sisters, because when we are at a table together I can look at the rest of the world and say, *la vostra miseria non mi tange*. This book is dedicated to them with the hope that we all die at an age too old to care, from laughing too hard with our mouths full of vintage Dom and Osetra.

# Introduction

*Ma vegna qua qualunque è per cura familiare o civile nella umana fame rimaso,  
e ad una mensa colli altri simili impediti s'assetti; e alli loro piedi si pongano tutti  
quelli che per pigrizia si sono stati, ché non sono degni di più alto sedere: e quelli e  
questi prendano la mia vivanda col pane che la farà loro e gustare e patire.*

*Convivio 1.1.13<sup>1</sup>*

*Or ti riman, lettor, sovra 'l tuo banco,  
dietro pensando a ciò che si preliba,  
s'esser vuoi lieto assai prima che stanco.  
Messo t'ho innanzi: omai per te ti ciba*

*Par. 10.22–25<sup>2</sup>*

While innumerable readers have taken up the invitation to sit down and eat at the medieval poet Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) banquet of knowledge in the seven hundred years since he first set himself to preparing it, very few of them seem to have asked why Dante insisted on setting a table and feeding his audience to begin with. From the very first dream of the *Vita nuova* in which the beloved feeds on the poet's heart, to the clearly pronounced table of the *Convivio*, to the encounter with Ugolino who chews on his enemy's head in *Inferno* 33, to the vision of salvation in *Paradiso* 24 described by Beatrice as the “gran cena / del benedetto Agnello” (great

1 “But let everyone come here whose truly human hunger remains unassuaged because of pressures of family or civic responsibilities; he is invited to take his place at table with all the others who have been similarly impeded. All whom laziness has held back may make a place for themselves at the others' feet, for they do not deserve a higher seat. And let each group take my food along with the bread provided, which will enable them both to taste and assimilate it.” All citations from the *Convivio* are taken from Dante, *Convivio*, ed. Inglese, and Dante, *The Banquet*, ed. and trans. Ryan.

2 “Now stay there, reader, on your bench, thinking back on your foretaste here, if you wish to rejoice long before you tire; I have set before you, now feed yourself.” All citations from the *Comedy* are taken from Dante, *La Commedia secondo l'antico vulgata*, ed. Petrocchi; translations are from Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. Durling and Martinez.

feast of the blessed Lamb; *Par.* 24.1–2), many of the poet's best known verses rely on food or eating. *Dante's Gluttons: Food and Society from the Convivio to the Comedy* explores how Dante uses food to articulate and reinforce, criticize and condemn, and at times consciously manipulate the social, political, and cultural values of his time. Combining medieval history, food studies, and literary criticism, *Dante's Gluttons* historicizes food and eating in Dante, beginning with his earliest collected poetry and arriving at the end of his major work. By interrogating the contemporary cultural associations of "gluttons" and "gluttony"—the figures Dante characterizes by the foods they consume and how they consume them—this book establishes how one of the world's preeminent authors uses the intimacy and universality of food as a cultural touchstone, communicating through a gastronomic language rooted in the deeply human relationship with material sustenance. Using the language of food, Dante establishes our responsibility to create and sustain community through the act of nourishment and giving of the self.

While the absence of food has often been the focus of investigations into medieval literary culture, food was a very present, tangible, and accessible currency to all medieval people. Then as now, food was at once ceremonious and quotidian, occult and familiar. The range of ideas it continues to express is distinctively enhanced by its ability to go unnoticed, as it is an expected component of nearly every social interface and relevant to every human community. Food's power as a symbol, too, is rooted in its interaction with the body: to be alive one must eat, and by eating, one gives life. Because the relationship with food transcends chronologies and geographies—everyone must eat to live, in all places and all times—it offers a perfect basis for developing a language unbound by those limiting elements, one that can communicate a system of thought across cultures. Yet this same relationship with food also acquires specific terms in any given population, so even as the tensions Dante describes with respect to the appetite or the effects of consumption on the body remain universal and timeless, they take on value according to the community in which they are cultivated. Moreover, and of special importance to this book, the act of recording these values itself inscribes a value system, so that as Dante uses food to construct a vernacular and address the most pressing debates of his time, he affirms that the relationship with food and eating is the best means by which to do this, investing the act of expressing oneself through food as well as the food items themselves with meaning. Dante is an icon of the medieval in his status as its most famous product, but also because he infused its values and preoccupations into his works. Using diet and the struggle to find balance

and satiation, Dante speaks to and for his time in the language that most accurately embodies it.

The abundance of research on food and foodways in the European Middle Ages now enables a thorough contextualization of food and eating practices in Dante's work. Food historians such as Ken Albala and Allen J. Grieco have provided substantial overviews of the intertwined relationships among food, class, and power in late medieval and early modern Europe.<sup>3</sup> Massimo Montanari has created an entire library of statistical and anecdotal accounts of the cultural values of food in medieval Italy, and Bruno Laurioux has reconstructed the rich network of culinary texts that circulated widely in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, especially on the Italian peninsula.<sup>4</sup> Paul Freedman has explored the spice trade, at once opening up a new branch of economic and social history and successfully undoing many of the primitivist myths surrounding medieval taste and choice.<sup>5</sup> Research on medieval medicine and its deep, nuanced connections with diet has been provided by historians of medieval medical culture, in particular in the important studies of Nancy Siraisi.<sup>6</sup> The vast body of work on gender, medieval theophosophy, and food from Caroline Walker Bynum could alone prompt a reconsideration of all the literature produced in the period, not least the work of a poet deeply concerned with reaching a wide and diverse audience that explicitly included women, at least in the case of the *Convivio*.<sup>7</sup>

Approaching Dante through the material and cultural elements with which he engages has in fact already proven to be a fruitful path toward understanding the poet's ability to engage with such diverse audiences over centuries. In her examination of fashion in the *Comedy*, Kristina Olson has established that Dante uses clothing to articulate surprisingly complex and even revolutionary ideas, precisely because clothes signal social values through the quotidian. As she observes, "Dress forms an essential part of Dante's lexicon that is at once other-worldly and bound up in the things of

3 See Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* and *A Cultural History of Food in the Renaissance*; Grieco, *Food, Social Politics and the Order of Nature in Renaissance Italy*.

4 For just a few examples particularly relevant to the present study, see Laurioux, "I libri di cucina italiani alla fine del Medioevo: un nuovo bilancio," pp. 33–58; Montanari, *L'alimentazione contadina nell'alto Medioevo*, *Alimentazione e cultura nel medioevo*, and *La fame e l'abbondanza*.

5 Freedman, *Out of the East*, and *Food: A History of Taste*.

6 Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils: Two Generations of Italian Medical Learning*, and *Medieval & Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*.

7 See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, and *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 1200–1336*.



this world.”<sup>8</sup> Olson distinguishes a crucial difference in Dante’s perception of the corruption of his native city by reading the fashions he describes closely, demonstrating that Dante does not in fact see women as exclusively responsible for the immorality of contemporary Florence; instead, his writing provides a fuller view of all-gendered participation in the civic-cultural deterioration he witnessed. Also in a sartorial vein, Ronald Martinez has used textile mechanics and tailoring practice to identify a pattern against which Dante’s poetic/political “weaving” can be viewed as a path toward the restoration of empire and human justice.<sup>9</sup> Looking carefully at legal culture, Justin Steinberg has shown that Dante’s ability to create poetry—indeed, his very definition of art and self-expression—is strongly connected to his understanding of freedom, privilege, and sovereignty, concepts grounded in the active contemporary debates of the medieval justice system.<sup>10</sup> In his study of the musical structuring of the *Comedy*, Francesco Ciabattoni tracks a back-and-forth motion between the use of music in the poem and parallel progress in the musical culture of Dante’s time, emphasizing how the poet was influenced by and became himself an influence in the textures of the medieval musical world.<sup>11</sup>

Using this rich body of critical work on Dante’s dialogue with material culture alongside archival research on premodern Italian food and foodways, this book takes Dante’s “gluttons” as its point of departure, arguing that no reading of Dante is complete without a firm understanding of the meaning of food in everyday life. By reconstructing the shared significance of foods and their perceived values, *Dante’s Gluttons* establishes how Dante uses food and eating practices as a means to delineate the boundaries of his community—both a lived, political reality, with its associated civic duties and privileges, and a poetic one, tied together with a literary language that transcends boundaries of time and space by virtue of its ability to grow and change like the people who use it. Intertwining medieval literature, history, and gastronomy, the book confirms that food is an omnipresent communicator, and that it is the means by which Dante’s work maintains its significance and accessibility today.

8 Olson, “Shoes, Gowns and Turncoats,” p. 27. See also her study of sumptuary legislation and the use of the uncovered female body as a market of corruption, Olson, “Uncovering the Historical Body of Florence.”

9 Martinez, “Dante ‘buon sartore,’” pp. 22–61.

10 Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law*.

11 Ciabattoni, *Dante’s Journey to Polyphony*. Alison Cornish has also explored this element of the poet’s work specifically with respect to *Paradiso* 20, in “Music, Justice, and Violence in *Paradiso* 20,” pp. 112–41.

## Approaching Food in Dante

To suggest that food plays a pivotal role in the works of Dante is so obvious as to seem almost absurd. The author of the *Convivio* is hardly subtle in his reliance on the figure of the meal in his work, and the preponderance of food images and language has certainly not eluded the attention of scholars. Yet neither has it prompted any substantial or systematic study of their presence. In his classic study, Ernst Robert Curtius notably marked Dante as the foremost exponent of the type of metaphors he branded “alimentary,” though he opted not to explore their use nor the reasoning behind it further.<sup>12</sup> Marianne Shapiro observed that “on balance, hunger devours more of Dante’s text than does lust, and its treatment is very little nuanced,” and Pina Palma has underlined that it was Dante who first fully understood how food fused the human and the divine, a key reason for which food later became so important to Italian literature, if not all vernacular literature on the continent.<sup>13</sup> However, studies of food imagery in Dante have remained primarily focused on liturgical or biblical precedents, combing sources for visions of spiritual consumption and satiation.<sup>14</sup> The result is that even where the poet announces that the substance of his text will be like a material food, and that reading it will be akin to sitting at a table and enjoying a meal among companions, readers of Dante have not seriously or precisely considered what the poet might be offering through the use of these figures, nor the broader nutritional model itself.

The lack of attention to food in Dante may in part be due to a modern prejudice against the world of the Middle Ages. For most of the last century, sexuality and economics were far more studied by both medieval literary scholars and historians, perhaps because food did not and does not feel present to the modern imagination of the medieval.<sup>15</sup> The Renaissance, along with great art and grandiose architecture, evokes images of dance, music, and lively intellectual exchange accompanied by luxurious banqueting.

12 Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, p. 136.

13 Shapiro, *Dante and the Knot of Body and Soul*, p. 9; Palma, *Savoring Power, Consuming the Times*, pp. 27–31.

14 See Gibbons, “Alimentary Metaphors in Dante’s *Paradiso*,” pp. 693–706; O’Brien, “The ‘Bread of Angels’ in *Paradiso* II,” pp. 97–106. The contributions by Purdy Moudarres, “Devouring Selves in the Circle of Gluttony,” and Chiodo, “Tutti i frutti,” in *Table Talk*, ed. Purdy Moudarres, offer two interpretations that open up the discussion by uniting theological concerns with medieval science and medicine.

15 See the complaint voiced in the mid-1980s by Bynum in “Fast, Feast, Flesh,” pp. 1–25. If historians have increasingly turned to food in the intervening decades, studies of food in medieval literature remain limited, and rarer still in Italian literature.

The Middle Ages, on the other hand, recall asceticism, solitude, and lean times in cold palaces. This is not necessarily a misinterpretation of the contemporary reality—demographic, meteorologic, and technological pressures meant that most medieval European people lived under severe conditions—but it has frequently led to erroneous conclusions or extrapolations. The scarcity of food neither diminished its power to convey meaning nor its metaphoric omnipresence. When Jacques Le Goff termed the late medieval European continent a “universe of hunger,” his purpose was to underscore the way in which food economies became a major factor in defining class, status, and the medieval self.<sup>16</sup> Ken Albala has illustrated how increased competition for food or impending famine in reality heightened its relational significance, and often led to an elaboration of the social and political values associated with foods.<sup>17</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum has repeatedly shown that food was the primary means of communicating courage, power, and virtue, precisely because of the more immediate threat of famine.<sup>18</sup>

The scholarly indifference to food in Dante in particular may also be due to a methodological bias against the use of material culture to read the poet's work. Despite the substantial increase in historical explorations of food on the peninsula over the last several decades, and in particular the depth of vision provided by historians of food and literature like Piero Camporesi and Bruno Laurioux, relatively few considerations of food in Italian literature have emerged.<sup>19</sup> Dantisti have traditionally responded with hesitance to the historical contextualization of the poet's work, and the placement of food at the bottom of the hierarchy of material culture studies in the literature of the canon makes it an unlikely place from which to test that position. Like Curtius, who first acknowledged but then dismissed Dante's alimentary metaphors in order to favor the more ancient and austere nautical ones, scholars of Dante have felt a certain distaste in giving too much attention to food-based figurative language in the work of their author.

The tendency to simultaneously accept Dante's heavy reliance on this tool (and even attribute its ubiquity in later literature to its development under his auspices) but resist the need to further nuance its presence has limited modern readers' understanding of Dante. It is certain that food was

16 Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'occident médiéval*, p. 290.

17 Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, pp. 186–87.

18 Bynum, “Fast, Feast, Flesh.”

19 See Camporesi, *The Magic Harvest*, trans. Hall; Laurioux, *Le moyen âge à table* and *Scrivere il Medioevo: lo spazio, la santità, il cibo, un libro dedicato ad Odile Redon*. For exceptions, see Palma, *Savoring Power, Consuming the Times* and Purdy Moudarres, *Table Talk*.

not trivial to medieval people, and it is certain that Dante would not have turned to it unthinkingly. Teodolinda Barolini has voiced the need to address this critical lacuna and the dismissal of the “very real and material forms of life and culture” Dante uses as the basis for his metaphors, including food, proposing that new scholars of Dante “Only Historicize!”<sup>20</sup> Robert Durling significantly argued that investigating food imagery in the *Comedy* would almost certainly lead us closer to “some of the fundamental issues of [Dante’s] poetics,” and followed the thread from its explicit beginnings in the *Convivio* through to the complications and preoccupations it conveys in the *Comedy*.<sup>21</sup> Imagining the finished poem as a healthy body and contrasting it with the diseased organs of lower Hell, Durling moved back and forth between the consumption and digestion that leads to physical growth in the individual and the analogous intellectual process that grows a mind, a parallel that is fully delineated in the poet’s major work. Durling’s approach not only demonstrates the richness of a reading that takes food and physiology as points of departure for interpreting intellectual expression and the production of literature, it establishes the integral role of a nutritional-generational model in Dante’s poetry. If knowledge is food, its digestion and assimilation will set the reproductive process in motion, but it is up to Dante to determine a way to serve it without creating the dyspepsia that plagues the residents of the infernal city.

Durling’s emphasis on the “usefulness of the body” in the *Comedy* in particular is part of a substantial tradition that probes medieval scientific patrimony for Dante’s sources, most notably through the work of Bruno Nardi.<sup>22</sup> The groundwork laid by Nardi prompted a number of closer analyses of Dante’s scientific culture, especially the way in which texts on anatomy and physiology newly available to Dante and his contemporaries informed the poet’s understanding of the interaction between the mind and body.<sup>23</sup> Patrizia Bertini Malgarini’s extensive account of medical and anatomical language confirmed that the Galenic concepts of humors and complexions fully permeate all of Dante’s works, and that biological (pre)conditions are perceived and reported in his descriptions of himself and the individuals he

20 Barolini, “‘Only Historicize’: History, Material Culture and the Future of Dante Studies,” p. 39.

21 Durling, “Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell,” p. 62.

22 For this term and a further elaboration of the body as a structural principal in the *Comedy*, see Durling, “Body,” in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Lansing, p. 116; and Durling, “The Body and the Flesh in the *Purgatorio*” in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. Barolini and Storey, pp. 183–191.

23 Many of Nardi’s publications are relevant here but perhaps most important is *Dante e la cultura medievale: nuovi saggi di filosofia dantesca*.

encounters.<sup>24</sup> Employing these sources to read more closely, Patrick Boyde made numerous suggestive connections between the medieval science of the body and the production of visions and dreams in Dante's poetry, reflecting on the verisimilitude created in the hazy recollections of the *Vita nuova* by indications of complexion changes.<sup>25</sup> The concepts of *compassione* and physical ability or impairment are readily addressed as important concerns to the philosopher of the *Convivio*, as Luca Bianchi has highlighted, for without a healthy body, there is no chance to engage the mind.<sup>26</sup>

In a similar vein but with focused attention on the major work, scholars like Vivian Nutton and Simon Gilson have shed light on the influence of dietary and medical tracts on Dante's development of the *contrapasso* and the bodily images which feel punishment in Hell.<sup>27</sup> In the first canticle of the poem, humoral theory and dietary disorder beset the damned; corporeal descriptions are provided for the pilgrim, the shades, and the very design of lower Hell which the reader can follow like an anatomical map. More than this, as Christiana Purdy Moudarres has shown, Dante's depiction of the sin of gluttony (and its correction) engages directly with contemporary debates on the effects of consumption not just on the body but also on one's identity and soul.<sup>28</sup> Manuele Gagnolati, too, has reiterated that physical signs must be read in the central canticle as well, as it is the space where the spirit and the flesh are reconciled rather than severed.<sup>29</sup>

Exploring the substantial circulation of illuminated texts like the *Tacuinum sanitatis* and other medical-nutritional pamphlets, Simon Gilson has proposed that these sources be understood as a "common intellectual patrimony that was diffused in a wide range of medical textbooks and other writings that condensed their teachings," one that Dante and his contemporaries had absorbed into their milieu.<sup>30</sup> The same can be said for the gastronomic texts of the period, the prevalence of which testify to a shared awareness of

24 Malgarini, "Il linguaggio medico e anatomico nelle opere di Dante," pp. 1–108.

25 Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy*.

26 Bianchi, "Noli comedere panem philosophorum inutiliter," pp. 335–55.

27 Nutton, "Dante, Medicine and the Invisible Body," and Gilson, "The Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Body in the *Commedia*," in *Dante and the Human Body*, ed. Barnes and Petrie, pp. 11–42 and pp. 43–60.

28 See Purdy Moudarres, "Devouring Selves in the Circle of Gluttony," and Purdy Moudarres, "Bodily Starvation and the Ravaging of the Will," pp. 205–28. Purdy Moudarres's forthcoming book, *Dante Poet of the Future: Faith, Science and the Immanence of the Age to Come* promises to make a major contribution to this argument.

29 Gagnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife*.

30 See Gilson, "The Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Body in the *Commedia*," p. 17, and Malgarini, "Il linguaggio medico e anatomico nelle opere di Dante."

culinary culture and a desire to acquire and exchange knowledge about food preparation and presentation. As the careful philological reconstructions of Jean-Louis Flandrin and Odile Redon have demonstrated, there were numerous texts in both Latin and the vernacular dedicated to ingredients, recipes, and the staging of a meal alongside more scientifically or medically inclined dietary treatises.<sup>31</sup> Anna Martellotti's extensive study of the *Liber de coquina*, which locates its initial production at Frederick II's court in Palermo circa 1230, confirms that attention to the socio-political values of food was a crucial part of a complete intellectual identity at this time, as relevant as the work Frederick commissioned on mathematics, poetry, and law.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Bruno Laurioux describes the *Liber* and its progeny—for it spawned many further culinary copies—as a “thoroughly diffused network” that began to proliferate in the thirteenth century and that became particularly rich on the Italian peninsula, just as Dante began composing in earnest.<sup>33</sup>

## Approaches to Medieval Gluttony

In *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, M. F. K. Fisher provided perhaps the most insightful modern reflection on gluttony, observing that it was the trait that ties all humans together:

It is a curious fact that no man likes to call himself a glutton, and yet each of us has in him a trace of gluttony, potential or actual. I cannot believe that there exists a single coherent human being who will not confess, at least to himself, that once or twice he has stuffed himself to the bursting point, on anything from quail financière to flapjacks, for no other reason than the beastlike satisfaction of his belly. In fact I pity anyone who has not permitted himself this sensual experience, if only to determine what his own private limitations are, and where, for himself alone, gourmandism ends and gluttony begins.<sup>34</sup>

Her statement might be amended to read “I cannot believe that there exists *or has existed*,” since gluttony is a preoccupation that, like the need for food

31 See especially Flandrin and Redon, “Les livres de cuisine italiens des XIVe et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles,” pp. 393–408.

32 Martellotti, *I ricettari di Federico II: Dal Meridionale al Liber de coquina*.

33 Laurioux, “I libri di cucina italiani alla fine del Medioevo,” p. 35.

34 Fisher, *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, p. 47.

itself, transcends both space and time. Our relationship with food and the line between eating and overeating—“where gourmandism ends and gluttony begins”—has always been troubling, in large part because that line is flexible and only determined “for [one]self alone.” Spanning secular and sacred traditions from antiquity to the present, the excessive desire for food has always been seen as the most likely and thus the most damaging of human proclivities. In contrast to other consumption practices that might be utterly prohibited, from drugs to sex to violence, eating stubbornly refuses to be eliminated as a daily practice. The inability to set immovable boundaries and the multiplicity of poles—between extreme asceticism and unfettered consumption and between hoarding and prodigal hospitality—creates a zone of perennial tension that is constantly challenged by the inadequacy of established social parameters. As any interpretation can demonstrate, be it biological, historical, or anthropological, no human being can survive without eating at least a little bit and occasionally; no community can grow without developing convivial and culinary practices; no state can thrive without effectively provisioning its population. At the same time, too much eating, or even too much thinking about food, is almost universally abhorred, dangerous to society and soul alike.

In the late Middle Ages, widespread famine converged with a growing population and shifting class structures to pose gluttony and food itself as questions of both quantity and quality, with secular and spiritual implications in equal measure. Food consumption (whether in excess or in abstinence) and foodstuffs were part of a thoroughly elaborated “socio-gastronomic” value system that was deeply imprinted on the premodern consciousness. This culinary code was woven into medieval literary production, as authors relied upon a collective sensitivity to the significance of food and dietary habits to construct their texts and articulate their arguments. As an author attempting to construct the most ambitious and significant literary work to date using the vernacular, Dante saw food as the omnipresent communicator, and as an exile after his banishment from Florence in 1302 as a result of political turmoil, he suffered from the true threat of possible starvation, recognizing the absolute value of food as sustenance during an itinerant existence that lasted until his death in 1321.

In the nutritional themes the poet makes use of and the broader digestive body of his work, Dante establishes that gluttony is an interaction with food that undermines the social contract: it is a rejection of civic duty that prompts a disintegration of the ties that hold a community together. The corruption of the body provoked by gluttony also leads to a corruption of the soul, not simply by means of turning one’s attention away from God

or allowing the intellect to wander, but by diluting the essential elements of human identity and adulterating the physical processes through which food leads to reproductivity, both sexual and intellectual. By asking us to reflect on the meaning of overeating, with respect to both food itself as well as the practices relating to the production and consumption of food, Dante's gluttons become an interpretive key, unlocking a reading of his work that has not yet been appreciated by critics but that in fact points to the durability and accessibility of it, reaching through the universally familiar feeling of hunger to touch audiences hundreds of years after the poet finished writing.

*Dante's Gluttons* demonstrates that for Dante, gluttony is an individual devastation *and* a public tragedy. It begins by bloating and discomposing the body as a result of excess food, then continues to destabilize the core of one's identity and cloud the intellect. It attacks from both sides, inasmuch as it can be the result of a disordered will and its cause, and it attacks the many even as it appears to afflict only the individual. As the encounters with Dante's gluttons show, the danger of the excessive, indiscriminate consumer is found in their own self-sabotage as well as in the domino effect that soon radiates outward, the undermining of healthy exchange and the fissure that opens up in the foundation of the human community. Dante's work strives to root out gluttony through an investigation of its many insidious iterations, which he contrasts with the natural desire and conscious consumption that grow and give back, that acknowledge responsibility and propagate good health. In doing so, he creates a template that functions across all the levels of human contributive potential, wherein there exists a gluttonous personhood, politics, and poetics set against a temperate productivity that binds us all together.

## Structure of the Book

With this critical apparatus in place, *Dante's Gluttons* begins with a first chapter that contextualizes and historicizes the idea of gluttony and appropriate eating practices in the medieval world. This chapter confirms Dante's historical moment as a time when the meaning of food was particularly charged, especially in the growing cities of the central Italian peninsula, as populations surged and social ordering and governing techniques alike were increasingly tied to food and foodways. It further considers the peculiar tension created by the highly personal and relativized meanings of gluttony, which developed according to a range of influences, and which were



informed by sources Dante would have referenced but that have not been recognized as part of his library, especially the *Liber de coquina* and other culinary texts, that in fact would have been very familiar in Dante's circles. By identifying these crucial influences and elaborating the contemporary context, this chapter lays the foundation for the dialogue between Dante's representations of food and eating and the rich gastronomic culture of his time. It demonstrates that for Dante, gluttony is an interaction with food that assaults a person's body and soul equally, while on a larger scale it undermines the social contract and leads to a break down of community. Gluttony emerges as a primary preoccupation for Dante in that, as a literally senseless, self-defeating process, it stands in perfect opposition to his goal of creating a united community.

The second chapter begins with Dante's youthful poetry and his first "glutton," Dante's friend and poetic rival Forese Donati, whom the poet playfully berates first for his partridge eating and then for his love of mutton. Attending to the hierarchical distinctions expressed by food and foodways in the European Middle Ages, this chapter focuses on social structuring and self-fashioning through food. Mutton and partridge are shown to be examples of figures in a classification that records and reiterates a system of community organization, and they permit Dante to comment in his verses on an established hierarchy and the roles he and his fellow poets play therein. Though superficially the poet calls Donati a "glutton," it is not his over-indulgence in food that is truly targeted, but rather his inability to recognize his responsibility to those around him as demonstrated by his dietary choices. This chapter then reconsiders Dante's use of bread in his philosophical treatise, the *Convivio*, where he positions himself as a distributor of bread to the hungry. Though scholars have often commented on the metaphoric meaning of food and hunger in the treatise, they have not explored the material values that informed the poet's use of this specific food item. Considering the social hierarchy and the social stakes of food, this chapter shows that Dante's metaphoric distribution of bread to the hungry and his condemnation of grain hoarding are in fact a realpolitik explanation of how to maintain power (and how it may be abused). Taking up mutton, partridge, and bread, Dante is not only communicating the more complicated wrongs his interlocutor commits against the community, he also enacts the method by which these shared understandings can be used to form communal bonds. The limitations of the *Convivio* dictate that it is ultimately not the space where Dante will explore this possibility fully, but these first exercises give shape to the concept of gluttony that will be articulated in the *Comedy*, where Dante will follow food through the

human body into questions of identity, intellect, and soul, passing from the individual to the collective.

The third chapter addresses the sinners in Dante's *Comedy* who are designated as gluttons in Hell. The most explicit gluttons in Dante's work present perhaps the most complicated vision of an (in)appropriate relationship with food, not least because they do not appear to be directly associated with food at all. Indeed, the primary spokesman for the infernal gluttons, Ciaccio, is an anonymous figure with no known history of gluttony who delivers a political prophecy. By offering an "official" introduction to infernal gluttony with Ciaccio—who explains how the city of Florence will buckle under its useless, gluttonous leaders—and extending the thread to the bottom of Hell, where the pilgrim encounters the triffecta of insatiable consumers in Count Ugolino, Fra' Alberigo, and Lucifer, the poet constructs a counter-image of the social harmony effected through feeding. These unchecked appetites demonstrate the multifold and profound consequences of gluttonous behavior on the health of the human city, but they also begin the work of extending those anticipated outcomes to the physiological model used for the production of new bodies—the paradigm of reproduction that Dante delineates for humans and their creative impulses, whether flesh or art. The belly of Hell is, like a human belly, the first organ in a reproductive process that results in new bodies and new spirits. Using an analogy rooted in dietary science, Dante shows his reader how the act of overstuffing the stomach jeopardizes the body's natural functions: first by diluting its essence and degrading the will, and then by inhibiting its ability to procreate, creating an indigestion that will poison not just this generation but also the next.

The fourth chapter turns to gluttony's correction on the terraces of Purgatory. The terrace designed to purge this sin sees Dante reunited with his old friend Forese Donati, who delivers a historiography of the lyric tradition and baptizes the "dolce stil novo," before giving way to the famous, challenging discourse on embryology provided by the Roman poet Statius. The long path to understanding the process that leads from consumption to creation, whether of humans or art, is mapped across an equally long portion of the poem. Statius's discourse on embryology, which finally provides the pilgrim with an explanation—albeit a perplexing one—of the generation of shade bodies and human bodies, only arrives in *Purgatorio* 25, when the poem is closer to its end than its beginning. In the purgatorial space where the fraught debate over the connection between body and soul is constantly present, Dante embraces a position somewhere in between the hylomorphic and the separated model, imagining the body as always and inexorably linked to the soul but also distinct from it, while on the journey

through this life and the next.<sup>35</sup> After *Inferno* reveals the fate of gluttons who either suffer from a stunted peristalsis that causes them to lose what makes them human, or go on consuming until they eat even the flesh of their loins, condemning both themselves and their progeny, *Purgatorio* models both how gluttony can be corrected and the growth and continuity that results from a healthful relationship with food. Coding the poetry of his former cohort as the consequence of overeating, Dante contrasts their now-obsolete poetic production with his own successful composition, the product of a judicious appetite. Turning once more to the question of production, but now in the form of bodies and souls, Dante emphatically confirms the connection between consuming and creating, insisting that anyone who knows how to eat can contribute to the formation of a lasting human community, be it through poetry, politics, or procreation.

The final chapter begins by examining the rejuvenation of the physical body that the pilgrim experiences in his passage from the purgatorial mountain to the realm of Heaven; it then confirms Dante's lasting emphasis on the perfection of the human need for material sustenance that compels us to construct community. *Paradiso* necessarily turns away from the appetites for food that have appeared so far in the poem, yet it is also where Dante affirms definitively how good provisioning and convivial consumption strengthen the bonds of community. This occurs most crucially in the prophecy of his exile through a food-based metaphor, delivered by the poet's ancestor Cacciaguida, but also in the presentation of Dante's body as it shrinks in the face of a lean diet. Pouring himself into his work, the last self-portrait Dante paints in the *Comedy* is of a man who finds himself finally beyond the reach of gluttony. Through his poem, he has found the means for a fruitful fast: a way of channeling his appetite into work that produces for the community, and of sharing what he has so that what he does not consume might be left to feed others.

*Dante's Gluttons* thus sets out to respond to a recent drive in Dante studies: a push to historicize and apply material culture studies in an effort to open up traditional models of literary criticism. It addresses the increasing call in medieval studies to identify the larger phenomena that characterized the

35 Gragnolati distills Dante's position in this way: "Dante's *Comedy* settles for neither a fully dualistic nor a fully hylomorphic view of the body: it is precisely by endorsing the potential of the tension between these views that his *Comedy* succeeds in expressing a sense of the body as being tightly connected to the soul without being reducible to it." See Gragnolati, "Gluttony and the Anthropology of Pain in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*," p. 250. For more on the subject and a thorough summary of relevant bibliography, see Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife*, as well as the fourth chapter of this book.

experience of producing and receiving culture. It confirms the importance, in particular, of a monograph-length study that engages these scholarly trends while promoting the study of literature through and with food as a means of connecting the European literary canon to a larger canon of global cultural exchange. These goals are achieved by reading the work of Dante, but also by responding to the call of the poet himself. As an author dedicated to the pursuit of salvation and self-knowledge, Dante finds in the relationship with food an opportunity not just to restrain the self but to improve the self, and through this process find contributive potential. Everyone eats, and thus everyone understands the language of food; more than this, everyone is poised to be able to employ the language of food. In this sense, close attention to the human relationship with food and Dante's use of it reveals the effect he had on those who came later, through the poet's use of these shared terms and his belief that they could form the basis for a successful literary language. Dante's gluttons are not just a through line or a persistent presence, but indeed a hermeneutic unto themselves—a means by which to access Dante's work in the comprehensive and transcendent way he intended.

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