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Food Representation in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

**Bachelor thesis**

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I hereby declare that I have worked on my bachelor thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the works cited section.

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## Acknowledgement

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## Annotation

The aim of the bachelor thesis is to look up and focus on food and food metaphors in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Food, so ordinary and necessary aspect of everyday life at any time, any era, can lead us to better understanding of the medieval way of thinking and culture. I would like to show to my contemporaries, especially students, how different the medieval society was in comparison to life in the modern world and the differences between the values of both the eras. I focused on the question of social status, virtues and gender seen by Geoffrey Chaucer's eyes.

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## 1. Introduction

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer written between 1387 – 1400 has always been a highly valued work of medieval literature. The way of life, thinking, but also indulgence and weakness of people living in author's times is pictured through parody and ironic view of the characters. He uses food and drink as the means to express people's characters, look, but also mood and situation.

The attitude to food used to be quite different in Chaucer's times. The life was much harder, people had to toil all day long to have enough food for the family. Nevertheless, there was a crop failure quite often and people could face starving. Having a year supply of food guaranteed survival of the next winter. Most people could not afford to buy some more expensive food too often – things like meat, fish, milk products or alcoholic drinks were quite expensive. Especially spices like cinnamon or cloves were rare, being imported from foreign countries by ships. People were forced to be concerned with food and they probably thought about food more often than people today, when the danger of famine is something unknown in developed countries. Food influenced their way of thinking. Such a respect for food was reflected in literature.

Food could express the human experiences like love, hate, fear, joy, pleasure, happiness, sadness, anger and others. The beautiful woman's complexion is often compared to milk, the nice smell with cinnamon or other spices. In addition, milk often symbolises childhood and innocence or, simply, illustrates a white colour.

It is also worth mentioning that the language of the Bible is rich in food metaphors.

## 1.1 Food and Drink in Medieval England

Derek Brewer refers Chaucer's description of poor people's life in the country. He uses an example of everyday food to emphasise the poverty of a country woman – he mentions that she had only brown bread, fried bacon, one or two eggs sometimes and no wine. Chaucer, who suffered from obesity, notes that such diet was quite healthy.<sup>1</sup>

Bread was, without doubts, one of the most important component of the diet. The poor probably used such flour that was most available in the region they lived. A very popular bread called maslin was made of mixture of wheat and rye flour. In colder and less fertile north barley and oats were grown and therefore used for baking. Nevertheless, any other available grains were added to bread. Beans, peas and evens acorns were transformed into flour.

Leavening bread was probably known in Chaucer's times, but the custom to add a ferment to the dough was not commonly spread. People often made the loaves very thin to be cooked well. These loaves also served as plates and finally, soaked with gravy and sauces eaten as well.

While the poor were grateful for having any bread every day, the lords and rich families ate soft white bread made of the finest flour, sifted two or three times. Therefore, the white bread was seen as a symbol of affluence, dark, heavy bread, was seen as the food of the poor. Dietary requirements were quite different in the Middle Ages. When vegetables was prepared, the time of cooking was usually too long to preserve the most important vitamins.

Although the overcooked vegetables lost a lot of nutrients, mediavel peasants ate much larger amount of cereals and legumes. Pottage was a kind of soup-stew made of oats, sometimes peas and beans were added as well. Most of the garden products were eaten cooked.

Eggs, milk and dairy products were often produced at home. Poultry, sheep and even cattle and pigs were held to supply with meat.milk and wool. Smoked and salted meat were common food supplies then.

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Brewer, Derek. *Chaucer a jeho svět*. Trans. A. Bejblík. Praha: Odeon, 1988 (Original work *Chaucer and His World*. London: Eye Methuen Limited, 1978).Chapter I. p.6 par. 3 .

Both freshwater fish and seafish were available in mediavel England and prepared especially on fast days, often by using pea-paste and almond milk.

The cooks mostly had to rely on local production. Nevertheless, luxuries like spices – cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg, cardamoms, cloves, grains of parradise and saffron were brought to England by spice merchants. Almonds were also widely used and even almond milk was served during fast days instead of banned cow milk. Moreover, the almond milk can be preserved more easily.

Suprisingly, fruits from Orient like citrus fruits, oranges and lemons in both fresh and pickled forms were known and used. Currants, raisins, figs and dates were also available for the rich.

The necessary part of diet are drinks. Water in wells was not safe, quite often contaminated, especially in towns. Not only in England, but in most medieval Europe people used beer and ale not only as a drink, but for cooking soups, porridges and other meals.

Milk was predominatly used for dairy production, cheese, cottage cheese and butter and as a drink most suitable for children, sick and elderly people.

Those who could afford it bought wine. The technology and final product was, of course, different from the sorts of wine produced today. The rich could afford wine imported mostly from France. The alcohol content was only about 5 %, much lower than the sorts which we know. Wine was also an important additive to meals.

But wine is much more than a drink. It is a symbol used in literature, both poetry and prose, expressing various feelings, features, love, but also negative attributes.

Another alcoholic drink, popular through the whole Europe in the Middle Ages, was mead. Its sweet taste evoked the delight of the romantic and physical love and pleasure..

## **1.2 The Canterbury Tales and students**

Chaucer in his The Canterbury Tales uses food for expressing the characters and describing their features, the situation and mood.

The Canterbury Tales, written in verses, is a collection of stories talked by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. The characters are very different and their view of life is miscellaneous. The author depicts them with irony and sarkasm, criticizing especially the hyprocrisy of the pardoner and other church representatives.

Nevertheless, the language of the tales, even the versions transformed into modern English, is slightly difficult and complicated for young students. Focusing on the food in the verses might make the understanding to the tales easier.

## 2. Food Representation in Particular Chapters.

### 2.1 Prologue. The Characters

In this part of the Canterbury Tales individual characters of the pilgrims are introduced.

#### 2.1.1 *The Franklin's Portrait*

“The Franklin's Portrait“ (Frankelain's Portrait) describes not only the Franklin's character and look, but also his wealth and importance, which is illustrated by richness of a table in his house:

Middle English

The Frankelain's Portrait

White was his beard as in the dayesye

Of his complexion he was sanguin.

Well loved he by the morrwe a sop in win.

To liven in delit was ever his wone,

For he was Epicurus owne sone.

That held opinion that plein delit

Was veray felicitee parfit.

As householder and that a greet was he-

Saint Julian he was in his contree.

His breed, his ale, was always after oon,

Withoute beke mete was never his hous,

Of fish and flesh, and that so plentevous

It snowed in his house of mete and drinke

Of alle daintees that mencoude thinke

After the sundry sesons of the year

So chaunged he his mete and his supper.

Full many a fat partrich had he in muwe,

And many a breen, and many a luce in stuwe;

Woe was his cook but if his sauce were

Poignant and sharp, and redy all his gere

His table dormant in his hall alway

Stood redy covered all the longe day.

At sessions there was the lord and sire.

Full ofte time he was knight of the shire

An anlass, and a gipser all of silk

Heng at his girdle, white as morne milk.

A shrive had he been, and a contour.

Was nowhere swich a worthy vavasour (The General Prologue, 332-60)

.

The extract in modern English version (for better understanding here):

The Franklin

His bread and ale were always fresh and fine,

And no one had a better stock of wine.

Baked meat was always in his house, the best

Of fish and flesh, so much that to each guest

It almost seemed to snow with meat and drink

And all the dainties of which one could think.

His meals would always vary, to adhere

To all the changing seasons of the year.

The coop was partridge-filled, birds fat as any,

And in the pond the breams and pikes were many.

Woe to the cook unless his sauce was tart

And he had all utensils set to start!

His table would stay mounted in the hall

All set and ready at a moment's call.

In county sessions he was lord and sire,

And often he had been Knight of the Shire.

A dagger and a purse made out of silk

Hung from his belt, as white as morning milk.

A sheriff he'd been, and county auditor.

There wasn't a more worthy vavasor. (V, 331-60)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993. fragment 1, lines 331-60)

The sentence: „Wel loved he by the morwe a sop in wyn“ or „He loved right well his morning sop in wine.“ in modern English illustrates the Franklin’s attitude to food and the fact, that he could afford a good breakfast every day. „Sop“ was a kind of bread or cake, that was eaten dipped in wine.

The contrast between Franklin’s white beard and „healthy red“ complexion is emphasised by using „wine sopped in bread“ every morning. This description evokes an image of an elderly, strong, healthy and probably earthy man. The tenth line mentions the quality of ale and bread produced in his household. Like the Franklin himself, everything in his house was strong and healthy. As well his top-class „stock of wine“ is a symbol of the highest quality of the owner. Wine, the most appreciated drink in medieval times, the drink of kings and noblemen. In the New Testament Jesus changes water into wine, when the guests in the Cana wedding were run out of wine. Having enough wine indicated the man’s status. The table rich of various dishes are the evidence of the Franklin’s wealth:

The verses indicate that all the expensive food like meat, various kinds of fish (bream, pike), wild birds (partridge) and wine were always prepared for any guests, representing the Franklin’s wealth and power. He even had a cook to prepare meals for the family. The twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth lines culminate in describing the opulence of the Franklin’s table.

Bream and pike, freshwater fish from Franklin’s own pond. Surely his fish are not an ancient symbol of Christianity here. The fat, fresh fish on the table are the symbol security in having plenty of food every day. Here is a contrast between the five loaves of bread and two fish that Jesus multiplied to feed the five thousand hungry people. No miracle is needed here. Franklin’s household is perfectly supplied anytime. The plentitude and overeating of his guests shows that there is no place for spirituality. The Franklin gains a reputation by means of materialial delight and the joy of living. How different and far is his behaviour from the medieval concept of virtues like ascetism, humility and shyness. But the author probably sees the contrast between the ideal preaching by the church and the real life.

All the important persons who visited him because he gained fortune are mentioned in the last two lines of the extract. The Franklin, the low-born man could boast about the friendly relations with peers.

### 2.1.2 *The Prioress*

The Prioress, Madame Eglentine, absolutely varies from the Franklin. The author's irony is clear.

Middle English:

At mete well y-taught was the withalle;  
She let no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
Ne wet her fingers in hir sauce deepe.  
Well could she carry a morsel, and well keepe,  
That no droppe ne fill upon hir breast.  
In courtesy was set full much hir lest  
Hir overlippe wiped she so clene,  
That in hir cup there was no ferthing seene  
Of grece, whan she drunken had hir draught;  
Full seemely after hir mete she raughte,  
And sikerly she was of great disport  
And full plesaunt, and amiable of port, (The General Prologue, 127-38)

The nun is so exaragateredly and excessively decent and clean that she never enjoys her meals so as not to stain herself. She also fed her dogs with *roasted flesh, or milk and wastel breed*. That means, that even her dogs got only the best food, which even the poor could not afford. The author probably sees her as sweepy and two-faced, trying to imitate court manners, while a nun should be characterized by quite different virtues.

### 2.1.3 *The Cook*

Another character portrayed through food is, of course, a Cook. He is briefly ingtroduced as a person, whose responsibility is cooking for his companions.

Extract in middle English:

A cook they hadde with hem for the nones,  
To boil the chickens with the marybones,

And powdre-marchant tart, and galingale,  
Well could he know a draught of London ale.  
He coude rost, and seeth, and broil, and frye,  
Maken mortreux, and well bake a pie,  
But greet harm was it, as it thoughte me,  
That on his shin a mormal hadde he.  
For blankmanger, that made he with the beste. (The General Prologue, 379-87)

The Cook prepares quite opulent menu for the pilgrims including chickens boiled together with marrow bones, mortreux, which is a mixture of chicken, pork, liver, sugar, yolks and spices, pies and galingale, which is a kind of marmelade, made of honey, wine, ginger, cinnamon and galingale (a kind of herb similar to ginger). Generally, the food served to the pilgrims was rich in calories and far from simple food that the faithful were to eat.

#### *2.1.4 The Sompnour (Summoner, Somnour)*

An enormous piece of cake appears also in the Sompnour's part – the Sompnour is a person of a really repulsive look and disgusting manners. Moreover, he is pictured as a garlic, onion and leek lover. These vegetables were the symbol of immorality, apart from the typical smell.

He was a real embodiment of two-facedness, immorality and depravity. His duty was to ward the morality of the others, but, in fact, he was the symbol of a sin and lie..

The Sompnour demonstrates hating the behaviour of priests and monks. Nevertheless, he himself is pictured in the General Prologue as a really repulsive person. He looks probably the most hideous person of all the pilgrims – his pimply face and puffed, narrow eyes indicated a self-indulgent, licentious personality. Most of the skin disorders were seen as dangerous and disgusting, showing the immorality of the person. This is emphasised by his partiality for garlic, onion, leek and red wine. Especially garlic was a symbol of sin – it was not taken as healthy vegetables like today. Generally, these vegetables were believed to cause health problems. Moreover, the author emphasises the Sompnour's permanently drinks red wine – the red colour, compared to blood, expresses the bottom of the moral decay and he shows him as a really cruel person without any scruples:

Well loved he garlek, onions and eek leekes  
And for to drinke strong wine red as blood (The General Prologue, 624-5)

Other prove of the Sompnour's hypocricy is his pretended knowledge of Latin – in fact he remembers only a few phrases that he caught in the court. Especially, when he is drunk he „speaks“ in Latin:

And whan that he well drunken had the win,  
than wold he speke no word but Latin (The General Prologue, 636-7)

The author emphasise Sompnour's alcoholism and the red wine, compared to blood, shows him as a really cruel person without any scruples.

The last lines describing the Sompnour in the *General Prologue* see him also as a funny guy:

A garland had he set upon his head  
As greet as it were for an ale-stake  
A buckeler had he made him of a cake (The General Prologue, 666-8) )

He liked to wear a garland exactly the same that were on pub door. Moreover, a cake served him as a buckeler – a buckler in modern version, which means a round objects, usually made of metal that protected a medieval warrior against enemy's arrows. So a large and probably soft cake he used as a life-saving tool. But, these small round shields were also used as a very effective weapon – by punching an opponent with either its flat face or its rim. Does the author mean that a cake could be also used as a weapon – in the Sompnour's hands? Maybe. He may hold it exactly like a shield that could evoke the funny image of a buckler instead of a round cake. One way or another, the round cake symbolises him as a food lover as well. In spite of the fact that he is a drunkard and a gourmand, he passionately attacks friars and monks and their intemperate way of life.

As greet as it were for an ale-stake:  
A buckeler had he made him of a cake (The General Prologue r, 667-8)

„A cake“ in the last line may symbolise an unstable substance that forms his body, a man, formable like dough, completely unreliable and self-interested, „preaching water but drinking wine“ in the real life.

## **2.2. Food representation in the particular tales**

### *2.2.1. Describing characters in The Miller's Tale*

*The Miller's Tale*, one of the best known Chaucer's tales, talks about a young adulterous wife, her seducer and her cheated husband

The extract from *The Miller's Tale*

This clerk was cleped hende Nicholas  
Of deme lovehe koud, and of solas;  
And thereto he was sly and full privee,  
And like a maiden meeke for to see  
And like a maiden meeke for to see.  
A chambre had he in that hostelrye-  
Alone, withouten any compaignye-  
Full fetisly y-dight with herbes swoote;  
And he himself as sweet as is the roote  
Of licoris or any setewale (Chaucer, 13-21)

The extract in modern English – for better understanding:

This student's name was Nicholas the Handy.  
He led a secret love life fine and dandy,  
In private always, ever on the sly,  
Though meek as any maiden to the eye.  
With Nicholas there were no other boarders,

He lived alone, and had there in his quarters  
Some fragrant herbs, arranged as best to suit,  
And he himself was sweeter than the root  
Of licorice or any herb at all. (I, 3199-3207)<sup>1</sup>

Nicholas lives in his small room smelling with herbs and he himself and the protagonist himself is described *sweeter than the root of licorice or any herb at all*. The sweetness of the licorice expresses a gentle, sensitive man, who deals with philosophy, science, but also music and poetry, but also his tender look.

The carpenter's wife Alison is characterized as a very young, lovely and clean girl. The line *...A barmecloth as white as the morn milk ...* probably expresses her innocent look. Nevertheless, the girl probably was innocent inside in her heart, being married to the elderly man. The author implies that the young women forced to live with men who were much older were not happy and such uneven marriages resulted in infidelity.

Hir mouth was sweet as bragot or the meeth,  
Or hoord of apples laid in hay or heeth. (The Miller's Tale, 75-6)

These lines openly express her seductiveness. Alison is luscious and innocent at the same time, a very ingenious mixture of innocence and eroticism.

When Absolon tries to seduce Alison, besides the other offers he sends her various delicacies:

He sent hir piment, meeth, and spiced ale,  
And wafers piping hot out of the gleede, (The Miller's Tale, 193-4)

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Trans. Ronald L. Ecker, Eugene J. Crook. Hodge & Bradock.

Nonetheless, Alison refuses him, because she loves Nicholas. But the amorous Absolon continues his attempt in another part of the story:

Whan that the firste cock hath cros, anon  
Up rist this jolly lover Absolon,  
And him arrayeth gay at points devis.  
But first he cheweth grain and licoris  
To smellen sweet, ere he had kembed his heer,  
Under his tongue a trewe-love he beer,  
For thereby wende he to be gracious. (The Miller's Tale, 501-13)

To be attractive and smell nicely he chews spices and continues to persuade her to be his sweetheart:

What do ye, honea-comb, sweet Alisoun,  
My faire bird, my sweete cinnamome? (The Miller's Tale, 513-4)

He sees Alison like something very sweet, pleasant and lovely. But she refuses him again and again.

Chaucer does not condemn anybody and describes the story with indulgence and humour. The effect is emphasised by the fact that the narrator of the story, the miller, is drunk and tells that to the other pilgrims. Therefore the story is so funny and ritous. Though the carpenter is extremely jellous of his wife he helps to save her life, believing, that the flood is really coming.

And hem vitailed, bothe trough and tubbe,  
With breed and cheese and good ale in the jubbe (The Miller's Tale, 441-2)

Bread, cheese and good ale symbolise the best that he could prepare to survive the flood. The basic food represents the security of the shelter that the carpenter arranged. Surely he is jelous, but also gullible. Finally, that is him who becomes a laughing-stock to the others.

### 2.2.2 *The Merchant's Tale*

*The Merchant's Tale* deals with the same theme like. An elderly knight named January who took in his head to get married with a young woman, much younger than he was. He convinces himself that this is the best choice:

She shall not passe twenty years certain!  
Old fish and the yong fleshwolde I have full fain.  
Bet is, quod he, a pike than a pickerel  
And bet than old boef is the tender veel (The Merchant's Tale, 173-6)

Translated into modern English:

She won't be over twenty certainly;  
To have old fish and young flesh, that's for me.  
A pike beats any pickerel for a meal,  
And better than old beef is tender veal. ( IV-1417-20)<sup>1</sup>

How sensuously thinks about young future wife, comparing her to *young flash* and *tender veal*. He does not listen to his friend's warnings and marries young May. And while in *The Miller's Tale* the Biblical topic of flood takes a burlesque character, here in *The Merchant's Tale* the motif of creation from Genesis is clear. The garden where January intended to spend nice time with his lovely May represents the Paradise and the pear tree is the forbidden tree. Damian the student seduces May like the snake. The January becomes blind like Adam and Eve were before committing the first sin. His sight is given back exactly at the moment when he can see his young wife and Damian hugging in the tree. But, exactly like in *The Miller's Tale*, he trusts in his wife's love so intensively, that she easily convicts him that she did everything only because of him and that she only wanted to cure his eyes. Adam and Eve were expelled from the country because of their sin, January is punished for his foolishness, in spite of the fact that he does not know about it. Nevertheless, everybody is satisfied. May and Damian fulfilled their love. January is convinced that he got the best, cleverest and unselfish wife.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

But not only the mentioned paraphrase of the story of Genesis is included. The author warns elderly men against marriages with much younger women. He suggests that such a misalliance makes the men fool and a laughing-stock.

The verses, where Chaucer openly describes January's attempt to succeed during the wedding night:

Wol go to bed-he wol jo lenger tarrye  
he drinketh ipocras, claree, and vernage,  
Of spice hot t'encesreesen his corage  
And many a letuary had he full fin,  
Swich as the cursed monk Daun Constantin  
Hath written in his book De Coitu.  
To eaten hem all he has no thing echu (The Merchant's Tale, 362-8)

Translated into modern English:

He drank some wines like claret, which require  
Hot spices and would heighten his desire,  
And also ate some aphrodisiacs--  
Don Constantine, curst monk, relates the facts  
About them in his book De Coitu;  
To eat them all he nothing would eschew. (IV, 1807-12)<sup>1</sup>

The poor January is eager to please his wife and uses all possible aphrodisiacs - spices and wine that is available. Unfortunately, his young wife does not seem to be very happy, falling in love with young Damian.

Both The Miller's Tale and The Merchant's Tale express the author's advice to elderly men not to marry too young women.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

### 2.2.3 *The Reeve's Tale*

In *The Reeve's Tale* a reader can recognize quite another archetype – the bread and flour, the God's gift. A dishonest miller steals grains and flour from his customers. The punishing of the miller is typical for Chaucer's style. The two students, being deceived by the miller and having lost even the horse that was not theirs, quickly think out a plan. They ask the miller for dinner and bed and he agreed, ordering to prepare an opulent meal for them with roasted goose and good ale.

The fat goose and ale are not the life needs. According to the represents of the Church a man needs only bread and water. These luxuries food probably symbolise the miller's fall in the next part of the story. He drinks and eats together with the students and finally, drunk, gets asleep.

The complicated changing characters in various beds during the night, when all the protagonists were sleeping in the same room led to misunderstanding, but finally the aim is reached. Moreover the students get what they wanted – the miller's young daughter and, by a mistake, his wife as well. The humorous confusing the beds because of cradle moving from bed to bed develops into the burlesque. Finally, the aim is achieved, but nobody is hurt too seriously and the students are satisfied.

Nevertheless, the implicit meaning hidden in the story tells to the readers or listeners the clean message: NEVER steal any other's bread. In addition, drinking too much alcoholic drinks makes people foolish.

### 2.2.4 *The Nun's Priest Tale*

Although the tale is, like most Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, humorous and probably allegoric, the first verses depict the modest way of life of an elderly widow.

Full sooty was hir bower and eek hir halle  
In which she eet full many a slendre meel;  
Of poignant sauce hir needed neveradeed;  
No daintee morsed passed thurgh hir throte...  
Hir diet was accordant to hir cote.

Repleccioun no made hir never sick:  
Attempre diet was all hir physik,  
And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce,  
The goute let hir nothing for to daunce,  
N'apoplexye shente not hir heed.  
No wine ne drank she, neither white no red:  
Hir boord was served most with white and black..  
Milk and brown breed, in which she fond no lack;  
Seind bacon, and sometime an ey or twaye,  
For she was as it were a manner daye. (The Nun's Priest Tale, 12-26)

In modern English (for better understanding):

And sooty were the bedroom and the hall  
In which she'd eaten many a scanty meal.  
With pungent sauce she never had to deal.  
No dainty morsel passed her throat, it's not  
A fancy diet found in such a cot,  
So overeating never caused her qualm.  
A temperate diet was her only balm,  
With exercise and a contented heart;  
The gout did not stop dancing on her part,  
And apoplexy never hurt her head.  
She had no wine to drink, nor white nor red,  
Her board was mostly served with white and black  
(Milk and brown bread, of which she found no lack),  
Broiled bacon, and sometimes an egg or two.  
Her work was much like dairywomen do. (VII, 2832-46)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993.

Quite a long description of the widow's everyday menu emphasise her modesty. The simple food and quite small portions strengthened the woman's health, as well as work.

Chaucer, obliquely, criticizes overeating, that causes both demoralization and decadence. Simple diet is the best way how to keep one's health, like the woman, who is healthy and sprightly. Moreover, she never drinks wine. She uses milk instead. The milk, as well as eggs and bread are eaten in reasonable amount, the widow never waste food. She has only what she needs. .

Nevertheless, the elderly widow is not the main character of the story. She is not important at all. The tale is an alegoric narrating about a widow's cock and his fight with a fox.

#### *2.2.5 The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*

The Pardoner himself is seen as a archetype of „preaching water, drinking wine. As he is drunk, he franky talks about the hackneyed phrases that he uses to gain as much money from his „sheep“ as possible, accusing them from mortal sins. Nevertheless, he is „a man of sin“ himself. There is no other character in Canterbury Tales who is more two-faced than the Pardoner. His thoughtlessness and amorality are emphasised in the verses:

I woll have money, woole, cheese and whete  
Al were it yiven of the povrest page  
Or of the povrest widwe in the village –  
Al shold hir children sterve for famine!  
Nay, I wol drinke licour of the vine (The Pardoner's Prologue, 120-4)

Now have I drunk a draught of corny ale (The Pardoner's Prologue, 128)

However he moralizes, warning others from sins, he uses the money he extracted from the people for buying such things like alcoholic drinks – wine, ale. He never hesitates, he takes it even from the poorest, who do not have enough even for the basic food for young children.

Pardoner also sells various worthless things like rags and bones. He proclaims that he offers valuable relics having magic powers. He does not feel any pangs of conscience and callously gains money from anybody, abusing their confidence. He does not worry about stealing the money from people. A mitten offered by him should bring prosperity to its bearer, which is symbolized by *multiplying of his grain*. Probably, not only the crops of wheat or oats should be multiplied, but also money and other property. Grains, the source of living for thousands of years, symbolized money and success.

He that his hand will put in this mittein,  
He shall have multiplying of his grain,  
Whan he hath sowed, be it whete or otes,  
So that he offer pence, or elles groats (The Pardoner's Prologue, 45-8)

It is possible that such two-faced, immoral characters became archetypes in people's minds, which later contributed to the fall of Catholic Church in England.

Nevertheless, full of enthusiasm he starts to talk a story of a group of young friends. He depicts their way of life like full of gambling, drinking in bars and visiting brothel and the guys themselves as devil's servants. And again and again, drinking wine and other alcohol is the base of sin, according to Pardoner. The next sins are gluttony and adultery. He probably accuses the young men of seducing the young girls selling fruit or cakes.

And right anon than comesn tombesteres  
Fetis and small, and yonge frutesteres,  
Singers with harpes, bawdes, wafereres, (The Pardoner's Tale, 149-51)

Here are cakes and fruit also seen as the „fruit of Paradise“, the forbidden fruit – the young fruitsellers – when the fruit was picked and eaten, the Man – Adam – lost his innocence together with his wife, Eva. Consequently both of them experienced the grief which they had not known before. They had to face the difficulties of life, hard work to obtain their food, protect themselves against the dangerous environment. The Biblical theme is clear in the next part:

Adam our father and his wife also  
Fro paradise to labour and to woe  
Were driven for that vice, it is no drede:

For while that Adam fasted, as I rede,  
He was in paradise, and whan that he  
Eet of the fruit defended on a tree (The Pardoner's Tale, 177-82)

Pardoner warns the others, but he either thinks that the punishing because of his sins is not related to himself, or – more probably – he does not believe in anything he preaches to other people. He continues to name the worst Bible offenders – Herodes or killers of John the Baptist and depicts, that their legendary crimes were committed when the mentioned culprits were drunk. (Herodes was known for his debauched way of life and John the Baptist was beheaded after intrigue made in a ball – Salome was incited by her mother to ask for John's head).

Afterwards the gluttony is uncovered as the cause of sins, leading people to the hell. The first sin is mentioned once more. Overeating according to Pardoner, causes various diseases and disorders, while moderate people are healthy and vital. He also uses Saint Paul's teachings.

Another character similar to two-faced and self-seeking Pardoner is Sompnour.

### 2.2.6 *The Sompnour's /Summoner's Prologue and Tale*

In the Chapter 2.1.4. is mentioned the Sompnour's /Summoner's character in the General Prologue.

His story is about a friar and his companions who convince people in villages to give him as much food and other gifts as possible, promising them saving their souls:

In every house he'd pore about and pry  
While begging meal and cheese or else some corn. (III, 1738-9)<sup>1</sup>  
"Give us a bushel wheat, or malt, or rey, rye  
A Godde's kichel, or a trip of cheese, little cake scrap  
Or elles what you list, we may not chese; choose  
A Godde's halfpenny, or a mass penny... (III, 1746-9)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English.* Trans. Ronald L. Ecker, Eugene J. Crook. Hodge & Bradock.

They take anything that people give them, do not worry whether they have enough themselves. The grains or various bakery products, the symbol of prosperity of the folks, are given them, while the donors hope to be redeemed. But the friar and his guys just smile – they know that they do not deserve the food given them by the naive villagers and never feel any pangs of conscience, never think about the hard work and difficult life of the people. When the friar comes to a village woman whose baby died a few days ago, he does not hesitate to ask her for an opulent meal – and proclaims himself to be very modest :

"Madam, now je vous dis sans doute," he said,  
"If I had of a capon but the liver,  
And of your soft bread but a single sliver,  
And then a roasted pig's head--though for me  
No animal I wish killed--I would be  
Then having with you only homey fare.  
I am a man whose appetite is spare;  
The Bible is my spirit's food, my flesh  
So on the move, always so set for fresh  
New vigils, that my appetite's destroyed.  
Madam, I pray that you'll not be annoyed (III, 1838-50)<sup>1</sup>

The only reward for the desperate mother of the baby who died is the friar's „revelation“ – he tells her what she wants to hear - how happily her child lives in heaven. Then he continues telling lies about his life in poverty and abstinence, the others:

"Aaron, who the temple administrated,  
And all the other priests who took their way  
Into the holy temple, there to pray  
For all the people, service to perform,

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1 (Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English.* Trans. Ronald L. Ecker, Eugene J. Crook. Hodge & Bradock.

Were not allowed to drink in any form  
That might result in drunkenness, but there  
They were to watch in abstinence and prayer,  
Or else they'd surely die. Heed what I say.  
If they're not sober who for people pray,  
I warn you--but enough, no more of it.  
Lord Jesus, as it says in Holy Writ,  
Gave us examples, how to fast and pray.  
That's why we mendicants, we friars, I say,  
Are humble and so wed to continence,  
To poverty, good works, and abstinence (III, 1894-908)<sup>1</sup>

Again and again he boasts with his and other priests and churchmen alleged „moral qualities“. He even does not think about the fact that he claims something quite so different from his deed. Is that possible that he does not consider *the liver*, *the pig's head* and *the white bread* to be something exceptional, something, that the ordinary people cannot have too often?

### 2.2.7 *The Monk's Tale – Count Ugolino of Pisa*

Vice versa. starving children who desperate ask for a piece or a crumb of bread in *The Earl Ugolino of Pisa (Count Ugolino of Pisa in modern English)* the count Ugolino is starved to death in prison together with his three young children. This fragment bears no traces of humour. The sad story, the martyrdom when the father, helpless and desperate, who is forced to watch his children's death. The theme was also adapted by Dante Alighieri, as well as by some other authors. Unfortunately, the story is most likely real, the bones of Ugolino, his sons and nephews were found in Pisa not long ago.

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<sup>1</sup> (Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English.* Trans. Ronald L. Ecker, Eugene J. Crook. Hodge & Bradock.

In *The Monk's Tale* is worth to pay attention to the part where is martyrism of Earl Hugolin of Pisa described. The Udolino's story has real-life historical roots. Nevertheless, the real Udolino was much older and imprisoned together with his adult sons and young grandsons.

Ugolino is imprisoned together with his young children and they are sentenced to the cruel death of hunger:

His youngest son, whose age was only three,  
Then asked him, "Father, why is it you weep?  
When will the jailer bring our food? Have we  
No single crumb of bread that you could keep?  
I am so hungry I can't even sleep.  
Would God that I might always sleep, instead  
Of feeling in me hunger's gnawing creep!  
There's nothing I would rather have than bread."

So day by day this child began to cry,  
Till in his father's lap he finally lay  
And said, "Farewell, my father, I must die!"  
He kissed his father, died that very day.  
And when his father saw he'd passed away,  
His grief was such he bit his own two arms  
And cried, "Alas, O Fortune! Well I may  
On your false wheel lay blame for all my harms!" (VII, 2431-46)<sup>1</sup>

In this part of the tale is expressed the inner fear of the suffering from the lack of food. Children, no matter originating from a rich, noble family, ask the desperate father for a simple meal like pottage (soup) or a small slice of bread. To die of hunger was not impossible. There were not only wars, capturing in hands of enemy, but sometimes draught or hailing could destroy the long effort of the peasants and there was nobody to help them.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Trans. Ronald L. Ecker, Eugene J. Crook. Hodge & Braddock.

In another part of the story the starving, dying child, seeing his father biting his hands in grief of the first child's death, suggests the father to eat his flesh to save his life, moving the reader:

It was for hunger, so his sons believed,  
That he had gnawed his arms and not for woe.  
"No, Father, don't do that," they said, aggrieved,  
"But eat our flesh instead. Not long ago  
Our flesh you gave us; take it back just so,  
And eat enough." That's what they had to say,  
And in a day or two both were to go  
Lay in their father's lap and pass away. (VII, 2447-54) <sup>1</sup>

Such moving, romantic style of verses was popular among readers. Nevertheless, Chaucer felt the cliché of such works, that appeared especially in chivalry poetry and emphasised the critic of it in another parody „chivalry“ poem. Let us show that in the next chapter.

#### 2.2.8 *The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas*

The author is asked to tell a story and after a short hesitation he starts to declaim something like a long chivalry balad. The main character is called Sir Thopas. And he is described, of course, in a very romantic way, as well as the countryside around him:

There springen herbes greete and smalle...  
The licosis and setevale  
And many a clove-gilofree  
And nutemeg to put in ale"  
Whether in the moist and stale  
Or for to lay in coffee... (The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas 49-54)

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English.* Trans. Ronald L. Ecker, Eugene J. Crook. Hodge & Bradock.

All the spices are used to picture the lovely forest, where the fairies lived with their queen. The smell of the herbs and spices evoked the magic world of charming fairies, where only rare, smelly things can be found. Coffee was probably drunk with the spices to give an original flavour to it, but only in the homes of the noblemen and the upper class.

Then, after his marvelous victory over the giant and saving the world of the fairies, Sir Thopas is welcomed at home, and, of course, an opulent feast is prepared to greet and please him:

They fette him firs the sweete wine

And meed eek in the maselin

And royal spicerye,

And gingerbreed that was ful fin,

And licoris, and eek comin

With sugre that in trye (The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas 140-5)

How noticeable is the fact that most of the delightful delicacies taste sweet, the served wine is sweet too, mead and gingerbread are full of honey. Also the suger mentioned in the last line was very expensive. Sir Thopas had to be given all the best. But why only so sugery food and drink is offered? To a brave knight, who has saved the Queen of the Fairies, defeated the evil Giant? The sweets were predominantly popular among children and ladies. Generally, such the brave knights were fed with a lot of roast of grilled meat. Often it was venison they hunted with their companions. If there was no deer, they had beef, lamb, mutton, pork or poultry from their farms. But nothing like that is offered to Sir Thopas – only the menu like for a group of ladies. Does it mean that there is something wrong with him? Should the reader see him not only like a brave warrior and fighter, or does an author indicate that Sir Thopas is not a real knight, but an unmanly guy, who exists only in the phantasy of women, longing for a brave, but tender lover.

Of course, there were the ladies who chose the meals and drinks and the author might express that they wanted to give to Sir Thopas all the best that they could imagine. Therefore they chose everything that was the most delicious in their own eyes – the best sugar, sweet

wine and honey prepared with the best spices, mead. Other verses, where Sir Thopas dresses the soft and white shirt may emphasise his effeminacy.

Generally, the landlord, together with other pilgrims does not let the teller of the story finish it. The cliché of the unreal chivalry story is too funny even for them.

Himself drank water of the well,

As did the knight Sir Percivell (The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas, 204-5)

Just after these lines the listeners interrupt him. They do not want to listen the long, empty, boring, wretched rhyming.

### 2.2.9. *The Student's Tale*

The shy young man is also asked to tell something to entertain the pilgrims. The second part of his story describes Griselda, an ideal of maid's and woman's beauty, innocence, chastity, honour and fidelity. However, reading the first lines of the tale the reader clearly sees that the author plays jokes of all the naive readers, parodying contemporary tales and ballads about perfect, self – sacrificing women do anything for their fathers and husbands, though it contradicts the common sense

Griselda is perfect even in her girlhood. She drinks water and uses herbs to cook meals for herself and her father. There is no other word about another meal, so such a menu characteristic hermits or penitents emphasises the girl's modesty.

But, like in the Cinderella's story, a rich marquis asked her to marry him. To emphasise the difference between the status of the young bride and the groom's palace is mentioned the kitchen store stuffed with food. But, unlike Cinderella, Griselda is forced to undergo tests after the wedding, when both her children are taken away from her and she thinks that her husband ordered to kill them. Nevertheless, she passively follows his will and lets the servant to take her children. Both the babies were still breastfed by her and this fact emphasises the mother's love and the detail, that the babies did not have their mother's milk were often, in

fact, sentenced to death. It is hard to imagine a mother who is able to give up a baby, who needs her mother, who is completely depended on her and her milk. Moreover, she is told that the baby is to be killed. But the submissive Griselda loves husband despite his cruelty, she even never asks about her lost children and, after long years of Griselda's suffering and assuring her husband about her eternal love, the reader waits for the happy end.

Chaucer criticizes the society that was predominantly patriarchal and points out the fact that young girls and women are taught to be so extremely submissive and love and obey their husbands and fathers, no matter how mad or cruel their behaviour towards them is, that the male members of the family could hurt, abuse and torture them and even their children. This Chaucer's intention is a bit surprising and shows his non - conventional and modern way of thinking. He tries to show the women how useless and sad Griselda's life was. She could not see her children to grow, she was thinking what happened to them all the time, finally she was expelled from the palace herself and did not do anything to protect her children. Finally, she was happy at the end of her life, but most of it being psychically tortured by her „loving“ husband.

#### 2.2.10 *The Franklin's Tale*

Another devoted woman appears in „The Franklin's Tale“, The Franklin, described as a person loving good meal and powerful comrades, talks about the love and marriage of Dorigen. When young Aurelius falls passionately in love with her she refuses him. But then she promises her heart provided that Aurelius removes all the rocks on the sea cost. When he manages to meet the requirements, no matter how impossible, she is desperate and tells that to her husband Arviragus.. Everybody in the story wants to keep their promises and not hurt anyone, so Aurelius returns Dorigen her word, as he does not want her to be unhappy.

Nevertheless, meals and drinks help to express the author's thoughts in this tale as well. For example, when Aurelius and his brother are shown around the house of the magician, who helps them, they can see his tricks:

That tregetoures within an halle large

Have made comei in a waterand a barge

And in the halle rowen up and down;  
Some time hath seemed come a grimt leoun  
Some time flowers spring as in a mede  
Some time a vine and grapes white and rede... (The Franklin's Tale, 435-40)

Yes, this is a real miracle when even grapes appear. Vine is the kind of plant difficult to grow. People have to work a lot of months and sometimes the result is not paid, in case of poor harvest.

A mixture and influence of various cultures, traditions and mythology can be felt in the next verses of the tale:

Janus sit by the fire with the double beard  
And drinketh of his bugle horn the win  
Biforn him stant brawen of the tusked swin (The Franklin's Tale, 344-6)

In modern English:

Sits Janus by the fire with double beard  
And drinks out of his bugle horn the wine;  
Before him stands the meat of tusky swine, (5, 1252-4) <sup>1</sup> .

Janus, a two-faced God of doors, gates and doorways, beginning and transitions, future and past. He is drinking wine and eating meat from the wild pig – his feasting, probably eternal feasting, symbolises plentitude and the joy that the Gods have for ever, being uplifted all the human beings and their worries.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

### 2.2.11 *The Shipman's Tale*

In *The Shipman's Tale* a young, beautiful wife, her rich husband, people affecting their lives and the last but not least, the young woman's infidelity is solved. But, unlike the Dorigen or Griselda, the rich merchant's wife, whose name is not mentioned, is a very clever manipulator, using all her charm, intelligence and quick-wittedness. She always manages what she wants.

The humour of the tale is similar to e.g. *The Miller's Tale* or *The Merchant's Tale*, where young women who make fools of their elderly husbands but, the reader feels, that the author does not condemn them and describes humorously their acts.

The scenes of welcoming or meeting the two old friends are made more sincere by describing the meals they have together:

Who was so welcome as my lord Daun John,  
Our dere cosin, full of curteisye?  
With him brought he a jubbe of malvesye  
And eek another, full of fine vernage,  
And volatil, as ay was his usage.  
And thus I let hem ete and drink and playe,  
This marchant and this monk, a day or twaye (The Shipman's Tale, 68-74)

All the best had the friends on the table. *Vernage* was a kind of Italian sweet wine, which was probably expensive. The meat was probably also only the best, however, various games was available more often than today.

Now, pleasant, joyfull atmosphere is at table. Nevertheless, the two-faced monk plans to get closer to the lovely merchant's wife.

While he intends to seduce her, she also wants to use the opportunity for her owns plans – to gain some money. Their dialog culminates when the monk asks the lady to order to serve meal for all of them:

„Goth now your way,“ quod he, „all still and softe,  
And let us dine as soon as that ye may,  
For by my chilindre it is prime of day,  
Goth now, and beth as trew as I shall be.“  
„Now elles God forbede, sir,“ quod she –

And forth she goth as jolif as a pie,  
And bade the cookes that they shold hem hie  
So that men mighte dine – and that anon. (The Shipman's Tale, 204-11)

The meal eaten together symbolises the executed agreement between them. Lately, when the merchant is preparing for the journey, after the dinner the monk encourages him to be careful:

I pray you, cosin, wisely that ye ride,  
Governeth you also of your diete  
Attemprely and namely in this hete. (The Shipman's Tale, 260-2)

And then he asks him for lending the money. Consequently the monk spends the night together with the young lady and she gets her husband's money.

### 2.2.12 *The Manciple's Tale*

In the *Prologue* to the tale the Pilgrims solve the case of alleged cook's excessive drinking and wine is discussed. Finally that is the Manciple who starts to talk another tale.

Again and again, the theme of fidelity and infidelity, as well as jealousy appears in the tales. In this tale, a talkative crow tells to the God of the Sun, Phoebus/Phebes that his wife was unfaithful on him. Then, as the result, he in affect kills his wife and, consequently, the crow is punished as well. In the tale a parable with well taken and fed domestic animals is used. No matter how excellent is the food they get from their owners, their natural instinct always wins.

Take any bird and put it in a cage,  
And all your good intentions then engage  
To raise it tenderly with meat and drink,  
With all the dainties of which you can think,  
And keep it as unspotted as you might;  
Although his golden cage be ever bright,  
This bird would rather twenty-thousandfold  
Be in a forest that is rude and cold,

Be eating worms and live in wretchedness.  
This bird will always try for nothing less  
Than his escape, if any way there be;  
This bird will always want his liberty.  
Let's take a cat and raise him well with milk  
And tender meat, and make his couch of silk,  
Then let him see a mouse go by the wall--  
At once he'll leave the milk and meat and all,  
And every dainty that is in the house,  
Such appetite he has to eat a mouse. (IX, 163-80) <sup>1</sup>

A bird longs for liberty, not for the life in the gold cage, although he gets enough food and drink every day. The bird prefers the life in the wood, facing possible hunger and predators.

And a cat, no matter how excellent it is fed, no matter how tasty the milk and meat it has every day, tends to be a predator and catch mice. The women are compared to the pets..Of course, in case of women this is not the milk and meat like in the case of cats. Milk and meat represent not only material things – though it was essential in the Middle Ages- but also immaterial values, especially love. Moreover, milk contrasts with the meat. Milk is the symbol of innocence, childhood, tenderness, while meat is attribute of hunter, hunting, fight and defeated prey. Cats are seen as nice, sweet, tender and cuddly pets, but within a second they can be changed into cruel predators killing small animals like mice and birds, whenever their natural instinct prevails. So, the cats fed with milk and meat are compared to women.

However they have a nice home and good husband, they look for adventure, for something special. Yes, this is really sexist view of women like simple, sensuous and egoistic creatures. And such ideas lead Phoebus to believe that his wife really cheats on him. Simply, he expects that his wife, having a possibility, seeing another man commits adultery. And when his pet crow tells him about the infidelity of his wife, he, in affect, kills her. We can see a parallel with Othello's story written two hundred years later.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993  
2.2.13 *The Lawyer's Tale*

The tale follows the life story of a beautiful Roman princess Constance, who as an exemplary Christian spreads her faith anywhere she comes. A lot of key moments of the story occur during feasts. Also some New Testament parables we can find there.

The tale itself is quite long and complicated, having 1160 verses. First is Constance sent to Syria to marry the sultan, but when he converts to Christianity because of her, his mother orders to kill Constance's retinue.

In these verses she asks her son to be allowed to welcome the guests:

She asked if, as an honor, she could hold  
A feast, with every Christian as a guest;  
„I 'll labour much to please them,“ he was told. (II, 379-81) <sup>1</sup>

But when all the Christians are stabbed together with the Sultan and Constance is sent to Italy alone in a small boat. But her faith protects her:

Where might she get her meat and drink? How safe  
The food she had, three years and more to sail?  
Who fed Saint Mary of Egypt in the cave  
or desert? Non but Christ, and without fail.  
Five thousand people – marvelous the tale! –  
With five loaves and two fishes he would feed; (II, 498-503) <sup>1</sup>

The fact that Constance survived for years on the board is a miracle – the same, that helped Jesus to feed more than five thousands people gathered near the Lake Tiberias. When the evil Sultaness ordered to put her in a ship, but supplied her with water, food and clothes. Nevertheless, it was the God's will that saved her. Like the crowds fed with only five loaves of bread and two small fishes she simply trusts the Lord. Her food probably remains fresh and plentiful. Her strong faith saves her anytime. Other Christian hero mentioned in the verses is Saint Mary of Egypt, an anchoress, who lived in the desert for forty-seven years and survived on plants and herbs there.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

The symbolism of Christ's miracle of feeding the five thousands often appears in European Christian literature. How unfathomable the story appears for the materialistic world, especially for people in former socialistic countries, where „scientific materialism“ was the only legal philosophy! How difficult it is to explain or understand that *not only is a man live by bred alone, but every word of God ... (Luke4:4:)*

The principle of mass conservation, as well as human biological needs do not allow to survive for such a long time. These question prevent us to take the story like an ideal picture of a virtuous woman, who was seen by a middle-aged reader like a supranatural being, almost a fairy who does not need any worthy things and is able to survive without them.

But Constance is finally saved and another powerfull man, king Alla, asks her to marry him. But another bad mother-in-law appears in her life and tries to destroy her life again. Here are the verses where the author expresses the tension at the background of the wedding:

I do not wish with either chaff or straw  
To stretch the tale, I'll get right to the wheat.  
What should I tell of royalty one saw  
There at the rites, what course came first to eat,  
who blew a trumpet or a horn? The meat  
or fruit of every tale is what to say:  
They eat and drink, they dance and sing and play (II, 701-7)<sup>1</sup>

When the teller of the story *will get right to the wheat* he means that he goes straight to the point of the matter. He claims that he does not want to bother the listeners with the details. Of course, all the Chaucer's verses are quite lengthy for a contemporary reader, used to short, clear texts without any redundant words.

And now, what do *the meat of fruit of every tale* symbolise? There are probably lots of things to describe at the wedding: the meals, people, music, dancing... No matter which course the guests choose to start, they can get anything. The wedding feast is probably oppulent, everybody is enjoying it, the young couple should be happy.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

But the king's mother, who is jealous and hates Constance, plans to remove her from the family and kingdom. When Alla has to leave the country, Constance is giving birth to his sone. But her mother-in-law exchanges the letter for Alla. And alcoholic drinks, wine and ale are the instrument of the sin again:

This messenger consumed much ale and wine  
And stolen were his letters stealthily  
Out of his box, while he slept like a swine (II, 743-5)<sup>1</sup>

Yes, too much wine and ale made the man a sleeping creature without its own will, that is only a puppet in the king's mother's hands. Not only the wine and ale, but also the man himself is accused, being compared to a *swine*.

Nevertheless, Constance and her baby are finally saved and meet together with Alla. All the tale, similar to other stories of early Christian martyrs and heroes, presents food, in case of Constance, as something superfluous, something that a virtuous Christian woman, protected by the God, Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary and all the other saints does not need. The God's word is what feeds her body and mind. On the other hand, alcoholic drinks are presented as the instrument of Evil, destroying people, families and communities. And that has always happened from time immemorial. No wonder, that the Monk talks in his tale about the destructive influence of alcohol several times.

#### 2.2.14 *The Monk's Tale – Belshazzar, Nero, Alexander*

The tale is a collection of tragical stories of personalities known from The Old Testament or talking about various legendary personalities. In chapter 2.2.8 I dealt with starving in Ugolino's story. Now this is wine which expresses immorality and perversity. When Belshazzar inherits his father's wealth and the kingdom, he lives in luxury, starts to organize feasts for thousands of lords.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

His wife, his lords, and all his concubines  
Then drank, as long as appetite would last,  
Out of these noble vessels sundry wines; ( IIV, 2199-201)<sup>1</sup>

Excessive wine drinking, hand in hand with the desecration of wessels, brought from the temple. Belsazzar's sins are to be punished and his dark destiny is illustrated by the sinister writing *Mene, techel* on the wall. One of the magicians is able to read it and explains it. Then Daniel remembers the previous king, his father was banished from the human's society for some time:

with asses dwelt, ate hay as his reward, (IIV, 2216)<sup>1</sup>

Eating hay is a very clear proof how strict was the king punished, as hay is not human's food and eating it lowered him to a position of a beast.

Nevertheless, Belshazzar does not pay his attention to the clear warning and bears consequences of his acts.

And from his vessels drink so brazenly  
Your wife, youre wenches too drink sinfully  
Mixed wine from those same wessels, while you pray  
To your false gods in curst idolatry  
For such, your retribution's on the way. (IIV, 2226-30)<sup>1</sup>

Again and again, drinking leads people to immorality. Worshiping the pagan, „false“ gods is another result. And, the Old Testament God is strick and cruel. Belshazzar is punished like all the others who do not follow his will.

One of the best known personalities of the ancient world and Roman history, the emperor Nero – the symbol of madness, dictatorship, cruelty, perversity and violence was permanently drunk, consuming wine in large quantities. His alcoholism made his decisions much more devastating, which finally led to his shameful death.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

The part of *The Monk's Tale* pictures his worst sins. Under the influence of alcohol he does not hesitate to order even his own mother's murder feeling no mercy:

Not one tear from his eye fell at the sight,  
No simply said, „A woman fair was she.“  
The wonder is how Nero could or might  
Be any judge of here late beauty. He  
Then ordered wine he brought, which instantly  
He drank – he gave no other sign of woe.  
When power has been joined to cruelty,  
Alas, how deeply will the venom flow! (IIV, 2487-94)<sup>1</sup>

Wine is mentioned in the verses describing Alexander, famous warrior, who cannot be compared to any other brave man and his heroic deeds are remembered in the tale. He probably liked wine as well, but moderate wine drinking is perceived kindly, with understanding:

Save wine and women, nothing might arrest  
His zeal, in arms and labor, to devour; (IIV, 2643-2644)<sup>1</sup>

However Alexander likes all the pleasures that life offers, he is so self-disciplined that nothing can lower his ability and skills as a warrior and military leader.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey; Ecker, Ronald L.; Crook, Eugen. *The Canterbury Tales. A Complete Translation into Modern English*. Hodge & Braddock, 1993

### 3. Wine and Bread

Generally, it is possible to say that food in *The Canterbury Tales* is seen from three different angles. Firstly, food is the basic need and obtaining it has always been a common, natural part of life of the poor, ordinary people. Secondly, food can represent the material status of people, who can afford opulent feasts. And finally, quite opposite meaning religious, spiritual sense, the sacred bread and wine, the most mysterious part of Christian mass, communion, where bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. So bread and wine are the most important components not only the everyday menu, but also a part of Christian's spirituality.

#### 3.1. Wine

Together with beer wine was the oldest and most spread alcoholic drink. However it was primarily developed to quench people's thirst, the growers soon created lots of sorts of various colors, tastes and qualities. Let us remember the King of Bohemia Charles IV, who brought the vine plant from Burgundy. In fact, vine was grown centuries before his reign, thanks to Saint Ludmila and Wenceslas. Wine was popular with the nobles in Europe.

To Britain it was allegedly brought by the Romans. And, while it was becoming more and more popular with common people, more and more drinkers became addicted to it. Wine has always symbolised good mood, exuberance, but also profligacy and alcoholism.

Sometimes Chaucer benevolently sees the wine drinkers as cheerful life lovers, but, on the other hand, quite often he sees excessive consumption as the root of evil, crime and decadence, especially in case of powerful men.

The devastating consequences of alcoholism have been known since people started to produce the drinks. Especially clergymen warned their sheep of self-indulgence, but they did not often follow Jesus and did not lead the simple life of poverty and humility themselves. And the priests, monks and others, who committed all the possible mortal sins in spite of the fact that they preached leading an unblemished life. Chaucer criticised the two-faced clergymen. Especially he hated various pardoners and others who wheedled money out of the naive people by offering and selling various valueless things as rare relics, medicines or magic tools.

In a short article *John Wycliffe: Did You Know?*<sup>1</sup> is mentioned the possible relationship between Chaucer and John Wycliffe. Both of them had the same protector, John of Gaunt, 1st Duke of Lancaster. Wycliffe, philosopher, preacher, philosopher and university teacher and his followers, so-called Lollards, started the first steps to reformation. As we know, his ideas influenced also famous Bohemian priest, philosopher and university teacher Jan Hus (John Huss). How important was the issue of communion under both kinds, i. e. not only the Christ's body, but also his blood for the church reformators!

The teaching was spreading over the country and Chaucer saw the negative phenomena in church and among the clergymen and, in whole, all the society.

### 3.2 Bread

Bread. The universal and the most common food. How ordinary and how rare it is. The symbol of certainty and sufficiency of food. Eaten with the most of the meals. The first solid food that a child is given. And the last in the form of sacred bread. The bread, that transforms into the body of the Lord has become an inseparable part of human's collective consciousness. It is one of the most common archetypes.

Unlike wine, bread has never been a symbol of debauchery and immoderation. Bread has always been only the innocent means of relieving hunger, but also a symbol of home, a symbol of a family eating together. Bread has ever represented the traditional values. How was e.g. the term *breadwinner* created? Most languages connect bread with earning money for basic needs. Bread was offered to the visitors as the first meal according to an ancient Czech folk custom and „he does not have money even for bread“ expresses an extreme poverty or the lack of money even today.

*To live on bread and water* means to survive with the minimal food. Idiom *bread and butter* express something that a person cannot be without, something, which is the most basic need. *Bread and games* was the popular strategy of the Roman rulers how to care about the people. Bread appears in lots of fairy tales, legends and ancient stories, denied to poor orphans by their stepmother or to the poor by their masters.

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<sup>1</sup> *John Wycliffe: Did You Know*. Christianity Today Library.com. July 1 2012

## 4. Conclusion

Generally said, food, especially bread and wine were seen from more angles of view. We can especially distinguish the materialistic point of view – seeing food and drink as the means for surviving for the poor and a source of pleasure for the rich. On the other hand, the second view is quite different. Yes, the most sacred and mysterious part of our material world, that in eyes of the faithful can transform matter into spirit, when the spirit and matter are not in opposite, but blend together. And now, through transubstantiation, Christians feel the touch of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, most young people of today do not think much about food. They have never experienced a lack of anything; they have never suffered from hunger or even starving. They do not need to worry about droughts, floods or hailing. In case of the bad crops all the food can be imported from abroad. Even the children brought up in farmer's families needn't worry. Yes, their family can get poorer when the season is bad, but they would not probably die of hunger.

Food is something that is necessary to buy somewhere in the supermarket, something, that is possible to buy in anywhere and anytime we need. They can see plenty of food thrown to the rubbish bins. This is the reason, why the contemporary society is often accused of superficiality and consumerism. There is no reason to think about food. Why should the young pay a special attention to it? Yes, they have heard about starving children in the third world countries, but it is a fairy tale for them.

Yes, *The Canterbury Tales* is a kind of fairy tales as well. But, being written by a man whose thoughts and experience are reflected in the verses, the collection can help to change the meaning or the students at least a little bit.

On the other hand, there have been aspects of life that have not changed and that will last for ever. Mother's and father's love, family, love between a man and a woman, joy, entertainment, everyday work, but also suffering, disappointment, betrayal, trick, longing for power and money.

We have always been people good and bad, loving, hating, worrying, caring, helping about also hurting the others.

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## 6. Appendix



Beginning of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, c.1450-1460

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