In a florid passage in Letter Book I (13 Henry IV. 1412), a lengthy preamble to an ordinance concerning the importation of Dutch eels, John Carpenter, the great fifteenth-century compiler of London records, described the oversight of London’s food supply.

Of all cities in the West, this City of London, the most ancient, is rendered praiseworthy and famous by the governors thereof, men known to be and to have been persons of experience, and refulgent by their discreetness; and, more especially, because that at the present day its rulers do unweariedly labour to end what is for private advantage only, and to increase the public weal; nay even more than this, it is their object that, in these modern times, it may not be for anyone to rave about the supply of anything, and of victuals more especially.

Carpenter’s praise of the vigilance the mayor and aldermen exercise over the victualling trades uses language that is only slightly more exaggerated than appears in cases of fraud that came before the civic court. The mayor’s oath of office concludes with “in all things which unto the mayor of the said city it pertaineth to do, as well in regulation of victuals as in all other things, well

---

1. Research for this essay was conducted at the Newberry Library with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.
and lawfully you shall behave yourself.”

Carpenter’s reference to the possibility of a popular “rave” if victuals are not abundant was not an idle comment. Medieval governments knew that food shortages could give rise to unrest, and they shared in the dominant moral views of the time that the poor must be fed. As the court cases in this essay show, the mayor, sheriffs, and aldermen pursued fraud vigilantly, particularly among bakers. Contemporary poets also expressed disapproval of fraudulent practices in the victualing trade.

For London and its pursuit of the common good, all contemporary media were employed to ensure a supply of good victuals. Bread, the staff of life in the Middle Ages, was most carefully watched. While statutes and ordinances spoke in emphatic language about the quality of bread and other victuals, the whole process including weighing grain, presenting freshly baked bread, and punishing fraudulent bakers was done in public so that all could see the city officials at work. In addition, each loaf was marked with a registered maker’s mark so that fraud could be traced to its source. For other victuals such as pies and roast meats and wine, a panel of experts were called to assess the comestible worth of the suspected pies. The court cases use emotive and dramatic words to describe the deceit of the perpetrators and the harm to the victims and to the reputation of the city of London. The dry, bureaucratic phrases of our regulatory services express none of these concerns for the welfare of the people at large and the reputation of the state itself. The whole process was based on the assumption of shared values that contributed to the common good. The written word was not adequate to convey the outrage of the citizens and their government when the code was broken and fraud occurred. Very public, humiliating punishments were prescribed for the offenders, including being drawn on a hurdle to the pillory. Even with all the current emphasis on literacy in the late Middle Ages, the physical messages that one could see and hear were of major importance. The interplay between oral and written, popular and high culture, official law and folk-law has been discussed in Richard Firth Green’s A Crisis of Truth. These all come


4. In this essay I will use only writers working in English, although Gower also wrote a condemnation of fraudulent bakers in French. W. B. Wilson, ed., Miroir de l’homme (The Mirror of Mankind), by John Gower (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues, 1992), pp. 341–46.

5. Richard Firth Green, A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). Green takes as a base for his study the work of Michael T. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) but moves the story forward into the late fourteenth century. London in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries kept many of its oral traditions. Oaths were still permitted to clear a person’s reputation, and oral recitations of the city’s ordinances were also used to inform the illiterate about London’s laws.
into play, along with the material evidence, in punishing the perpetrators of fraud in medieval London.

Turning first to the written word, what motivated the writers of ordinances covering food or those recording the court cases that arose from violations? James Davis, an economic historian, has argued for market morality in medieval business. He has made a strong case for internalized, informal constraints that influenced people’s market choices. These informal constraints went beyond regulations and enforcement procedures and were shared, self-imposed codes of behavior. Indeed, these shared moral values made enforcement easier because the expectation was that those participating in the market conformed to the norms. Thus formal laws and ordinances worked in tandem with the internal constraints. Rational self-interest impelled people to follow the code of behavior because they feared that failure to do so could lead to a loss of business partners in reciprocal arrangements and at worst result in legal sanctions against them. Because the markets depended on shared values, outsiders such as aliens, foreigners, and hucksters, who were beyond the social constraints, were looked at with particular suspicion. For those who did not participate in the consensus about values, ostracism, physical or financial punishment, and eviction from the city were essential. Davis investigates the ways that the shared values of the marketplace arose from the culture of the society at large. He cites sermon literature, wall paintings on parish churches, poetry, and the very language of the laws and the court cases that expressed the indignation against those who violated the dominant morality.\(^6\)

Carpenter’s lengthy preamble that begins this chapter expresses the market morality concisely. He establishes the honor of the city as having been founded by Brut. This founding myth was a staple in London’s identity, which permitted it to trace its origin back to Troy and the grandson of one of the dispersed Trojans.\(^7\) He goes on to describe the perfection of behavior expected of magistrates: discreet, diligent, and dedicated to the commonweal. These virtues of probity were thought to be desirable among the merchants and craftsmen of the city as well. The Dutch aliens, the outsiders, were selling medium-sized eels for large eels and small eels for medium-sized ones, and this was “found to be very pernicious.” The mayor, together with the aldermen, provided a “fitting and opportune remedy” with an ordinance concerning the sale of eels that was “pleasing of God, and for the common good and profit of the people of the city of London, and of all other persons repairing there unto.” The entry in the Letter Book sums up the moral assumptions

---

7. *Liber Albus*, p. 54 includes the founding myth.
governing the market as well as the behavior expected of the people living in the city and trading there. Both God and the people must be served.

As Davis points out, nowhere were the moral assumptions about the marketplace more important and more often vocalized than the provision of bread and other victuals for the population. Bread, particularly that made from wheat, was the staple of the English diet, providing most of the caloric intake of the population. In both the countryside and the cities, bread was baked for sale rather than being baked in the home. Only the wealthiest London houses had facilities for a bake oven. Many people lived in rooms in the upper stories of the houses and could not have fires. They relied on bakers for their bread and also for roasted meats, meat pies, and other prepared foods. City officials had reason to be concerned about both the supply of bread and the wholesomeness of victuals in their cities for fear of bread riots. The city was not alone in needing to regulate the quality of bread. In the thirteenth century the Crown mandated the Assize of Bread and Ale, requiring that standards be met for the weight of bread and the quality of the ale, the two staples of the English diet. Violations of the Assize of Ale in London did not involve quality but rather the measures and the prices. Those who sold short measure did not cause nearly the disapprobation that bakers did.

8. James Davis, “Baking for the Common Good: A Reassessment of the Assize of Bread in Medieval England,” *The Economic History Review, n.s.*, 57, 3 (2004): 481–85. He points out that the theory of just prices not only was a theological position but also was assumed by the royal government. Bakers had to make some profit, but not excessive profit.

9. Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 151–54. The nutritional need of a modern Western adult male is 2,000 to 3,000 kilocalories per day. Bread and ale made up a large proportion of calorie intake. See Bruce M. S. Campbell, James A. Galloway, Derek Keene, and Margaret Murphy, *A Medieval Capital and Its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London Region c. 1300*, Historical Geography Research Series 30 (London: Institute of British Geographers, 1993), pp. 31–36. These researchers estimate that 75 percent of the diet was grains. Ten percent of the grain calories were consumed as ale. Given the poor water quality, ale was a safe drink. It was often small ale of a low alcohol content. In London, brown-bread bakers outnumbered white-bread makers, an indication that most of the population ate brown bread.


The administration of the Assize of Bread and Ale varied little across England. Tables for the Assize were recorded in town documents. One of the most complete is that of the Oak Book of Southampton.\(^{13}\) The idea was to control the price of a farthing loaf of bread since that coin was the smallest one in circulation and thus keep bread available to the poor. A farthing would buy a loaf of wastel, the most common wheat bread. Since the price of grain varied considerably from harvest to harvest, the weight of the loaf would vary as well. When the price of wheat went up, the weight of the farthing loaf went down, so that in times of bad harvest the consumer would get less bread for his or her farthing. The Assize made no attempt to control the price of grain, but concentrated on regulating the supply of bread and ale. The moral imperative behind the legislation was to make sure that the poor would have access to the staff of life.\(^{14}\)

Wastel was made with wheat flour that had been bolted (sieved). It was wastel that the Prioress fed to her little dogs (I.147), so one knows that it was of fine quality.\(^{15}\) The best-quality white bread was simnel (\textit{panis Dominicus}, or \textit{demaine}, or \textit{pandemaigne}). It was pale cream in color because it contained wheat germ, but it did not have bran in it. It was twice-bolted wheat. The name \textit{panis Dominicus} came from the effigy of the Savior on the loaf. The bread was boiled before it was baked, or it was baked twice. Chaucer used the white appearance of the bread to describe the complexion of Sir Thopas: “White was his face as payndemayne” (VII.725). French bread, or “pouf,” was to be of the same quality and bolting as wastel but had the addition of milk and eggs. Cocket was a cheaper white bread, not bolted, but with the bran removed, and tourte was a brown bread of wheat with husks in it and perhaps peas and beans as well. A bread of rye and wheat was called maslin. And finally, there was horse bread, coarse bread made from peas, beans, and intended for horses but perhaps also eaten by the very poor. The bread hierarchy matched the hierarchy of social status. The wealthy had white bread, and those of the lower ranks ate brown bread.\(^{16}\) The Assize regulated only

---


\(^{15}\) All quotations of Chaucer are from \textit{The Riverside Chaucer}, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), cited by fragment and line number.

wastel, but the weight and prices of the other breads followed the same market-value strategy. In London the more sophisticated market also required regulation over pouf and demeine bread. Pouf had to be of the same weight as wastel, and a half-penny of demeine should weigh the same as a farthing loaf of wastel.\textsuperscript{17}

Control over the supply of bread began with milling the grain. London had elaborate regulations for the milling and bread-baking. The opportunities for fraud were numerous, so that careful scrutiny was essential. As they were reiterated in 1419, “By virtue of the first writ the good men of the city had ordained the punishment of the hurdle for bakers offending against the Assize of Bread and for millers who stole corn.” To catch dishonest millers the city weighed all corn sent out of the city to be milled and also weighed all the flour coming back into the city. This was to “prevent the practices of mixing chalk, white sand and bran with the flour.” The city maintained weights, balances, and weighing houses and charged the millers one half-penny for each quarter (8 bushels) weighed.\textsuperscript{18} Millers who were guilty of stealing flour or other frauds had their mill horse impounded. The owner of the mill had to pay to redeem the horse and make satisfaction for the stolen flour. The guilty miller was to be put to the hurdle. If both the owner and the miller showed contempt, “all persons shall be forbidden to go to his mill with corn for grinding until such satisfaction shall have been made.”\textsuperscript{19} In other words, having failed to come into line with the regulations and the moral business mentality, the mill owner and the miller were to be denied trade.

Using humor rather than outright castigation, Chaucer’s two descriptions of thieving millers appeal to the prejudices of his audience. The Prologue describes the Miller as a thief charging for corn three times the value of grinding it: “Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries / And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, pardee” (I.562–63).\textsuperscript{20} The tricks of a thieving miller appears again in the Reeve’s Tale: “A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele / And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele” (I.3939–40). The Reeve tells a story of two young students at a Cambridge College, Soler Hall, who go to the miller’s

\textsuperscript{17} Liber Albus, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{18} Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London, vol. 1, 1313–1364, ed. A. H. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. 5 (1324). For 1298 the king ordered that all corn that was ground in mills within or without the city be weighed before being ground, and the millers were to answer in light weight in flour coming from the mills. Riley, ed., Memorials, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{19} Liber Albus, p. 307.
\textsuperscript{20} The note on these lines in The Riverside Chaucer suggests that the miller’s golden thumb is from a proverb stating that there are no honest millers. I wonder, rather, if it is not that the miller put his thumb on the scale and pushed it down when weighing flour.
house because he has been cheating the manciple of their college. They plan to observe the miller closely, but the miller has a strategy of his own. “The moore queynte crekes that they make / The moore wol I stele when I take / In stide of flour yet wold I yeve him bren / The grettest clerkes been noght wisest men” (I.4051–54). The miller releases the warden’s horse, and while the students chase it across the fens, he makes good his plan.

The manciple from an inn of court would never have let the miller get away with such tricks. “For to be wise in byynge of vitaille / For whether that he payde or took by taille / Algate he wayted so in his achaat / That he was ay biforn and in good staat” (I.569–72). The role of the manciple was important in dealing with cheaters in the victualing trade. Oxford University had such a problem with the city bakers that the university got permission from the king to administer the Assize of Bread. The university colleges were the primary buyers, and they had accused the city of colluding with the bakers to cheat them.21

To comply with the Assize of Bread and Ale, London appointed four assayers to determine the weight of bread each year. Coming to the Guildhall, they took an oath before the mayor and aldermen to do the assay well and faithfully “for the profit of the common people of the city and for others coming there.” At the feast of St. Michael (Michaelmas or September 29), the men were “to buy three quarters of corn, one namely upon the Pavement of the Chepe, one at Greschirche or at Billyngesgate, and a third at Queen-Hythe.” In other words, they were to buy grain at the various grain markets from the year’s harvest. The assayers were not connected to baking or milling, but rather came from a variety of trades. They might serve a number of years in this capacity, indicating that they had acquired an expertise in calculating the ratio of a quarter of grain to the number of loaves. Assaying was such an important position that many of the assayers were aldermen or later became civic officials such as chamberlains, sheriffs, and even mayors.22 The prestige of their membership indicates the importance that the city put on the assay and suggests that some of the men carrying out the assay were also responsible for the rhetoric of the court cases. These were men who might write up the cases or influence the wording of ordinances. Their position carried both legal and moral authority.

21. Salter, ed., *Medieval Archives of the University of Oxford*, 2:138–39. In Oxford, which has a series of records for the Assize of Bread from 1309 to 1335, 163 cases were for deficient weight of wastrel, and in 199 cases the cocket bread was too light. These were the most common breads. The high-quality simnel bread was underweight in only fourteen instances, and the low-quality dark bread was underweight in ninety cases. In Oxford the bakers were fined for deficiencies in weight and, as in London, were drawn on the hurdle as repeat offenders.
After the Feast of St. Michael these assayers gave the grain to bakers to make “wastrel, light bread, and brown bread.” After baking the bread, “with great diligence” they were to present the hot loaves to the mayor and aldermen, who were to weigh them while still hot. The weight of the loaves was used to calculate how many half-penny loaves could be baked from a quarter of grain, calculating the price of the grain in half-pennies. These loaves, then, became the standard weight for the sale of bread of these qualities in the city for the year. The price of the loaf was determined by the price of grain and taking into consideration the expenses in producing the bread. In other words, the bakers were allowed a profit from their baking of 9 1/4 pence in addition to bran.23 The process was hardly an exact science, but it endured into the eighteenth century and obviously offered stability for the bread market. The public nature of the assay offered a visible reassurance to consumers of the effectiveness of the civic government and gave transparency to the process. It advertised the honesty expected in providing a basic staple and made clear that those not following the prescriptions of the assay would be punished.24

In addition to weight and quality of bread, the bakers had other restrictions on their production. So that each loaf could be traced to its maker, a baker had to have an individual seal that he could impress on his loaves “so that the same may be more easily and readily known.” Bakers of white bread were not to bake brown bread, and vice versa. The bread had to be sold from a basket in the market and not at the baker’s house or at his oven.25 Bakers were to give hucksters thirteen loaves for twelve, or “a baker’s dozen.”26

Oversight of bread production and bakers was strict, with bakers submitting hot loaves for inspection once a month. Suitable punishments were outlined in the Liber Custumarum. A baker making bread that was bad or light in weight would be drawn on a hurdle through the greatest streets from the Guildhall to the baker’s house, with the faulty loaf hanging from his neck. For a second offense, he would be drawn on a hurdle through the great street of the Chepe to the pillory on Cornhill, where he would stand for an hour. The

24. Davis, “Baking for the Common Good,” pp. 71–76. He concludes that the bakers got adequate recompense for their labors making and selling bread. Another entry permitted adjustments depending on the variation of the price of grain sold over the year. The assay of bread would not be done again that year, but bakers were given regulations that would permit them to adjust the quantity of loaves made per quarter of grain according to the price. If grain went up in price, bakers could produce loaves of bread at a lighter weight than was established for the year. Liber Albus, pp. 304–5, 308.
third offense called for the forfeiture of the whole oven of bread to the king. The fourth offense led the loss of the oven of bread and expulsion from the trade of bakers. 27 Only the most egregious cases and recidivist received the humiliating and economically devastating punishments; others were warned and fined. 28

In the apprehension and punishment of bakers committing fraud, the combination of the written text deploring their practices and the visual example of the hurdleing and pillorying of offenders come together. The ride on the hurdle and time on the pillory gave the public, literate and illiterate, an opportunity to see and hear the offender’s punishment. Rough music accompanied the spectacle so that a crowd could quickly assemble. Helen Carrel has pointed to the medieval preference for carrying out punishments in the arena in which the offense was committed and in front of the victims. Victualers, therefore, were punished in public. 29 Seabourne notes that the illustration at the beginning of the Liber de Assisa Panis shows a prosperous man at his oven, but in the next picture he is bareheaded, unshod, with his hands and feet bound, and being dragged on the hurdle; the offending dough is hanging from his neck. The exposure of his flesh, the bare head and feet, was typical of medieval humiliation rituals. The pillories are also illustrated and appear to be tall enough for people to easily see the offender. There are holes for both hands and the head, and a board across the upright beam for the person to stand on. Women were allowed a seated pillory, called a thew. Seabourne concludes that the humiliating punishment was meant to bring the proud and prosperous baker down. 30 While Davis concludes that the provision of the Assize of Bread did make provision for a decent living for the bakers, they were not among the best-paid urban craftsmen. 31 The Bakers Gild ranked nineteenth in order of precedence among the livery companies of London. While the punishment


30. Seabourne, “Assize Matters,” pp. 43–48. She found that some of the offenders rode the hurdle backwards.

31. Davis, “Baking for the Common Good,” pp. 473–79 and throughout the rest of the article. In the thirteenth century, the pay of nine and a quarter pence was quite good compared with that for a skilled carpenter, who got three pence a day. The problem was that the formula had not changed even in the fifteenth century. Thrupp, Worshipful Company of Bakers, p. 1.
of the hurdle and stocks was degrading and painful, the additional economic punishment must have hurt as well. Consumers would know not to buy bread from the offender.

Despite the harsh punishment the law provided, a poem fragment attributed to John Lydgate spelled out worse punishment for thieving millers and bakers. His recommendation for the pillory is one that had a hole for the head and arm holes so wide that the offenders would be uncomfortable. Eggs should be thrown at the thieves until they were completely “gilded.”

Put out his hed / lyst not for to dare,  
But lyk a man / upon that tour a-byde,  
For Cast of eggs / wil no oonys spare,  
Tyl he be quaylled / body, bak, and syde,  
His heed endooryd / and, of verray pryde,  
Put out his Armys / shewith abrood his face,  
The fenestrals / be made for hym so wyde,  
Cleymyth to been / a capteyn of that place.

He would not spare youth or the middle aged and advised leaving them to hang there.\textsuperscript{32} William Langland also advised punishment of brewers, bakers, butchers, and cooks on pillories and “pynynge stooles” because they poison people.\textsuperscript{33}

Moving from the visual and oral punishments to the written word, the cases cited in the city records show what Davis has described as the moral culture that indicates market constraints. The language reflects the disapprobation of violations to presumed good business practices. In the case of John Bird’s fraud in 1327, the wording illustrates the emotional implications for the community at large of a baker cheating his customers and the sense of violation of trust. On June 4, 1327, Bird was attached to answer “certain falsehood, malice, and deceit [\textit{falsitate, malitia, et deceptione}] by him committed to the nuisance of the common people.” His falsehood consisted of “skillfully and artfully” causing a hole to be made on his table, called a molding board, on which he kneaded the dough and made loaves. The hole was designed like a mousetrap with a wicket that could be opened or closed. When his neighbors


brought dough or materials for making bread to him to form into loaves and bake, he would hide one of his servants under the table. The servant would open the wicket and when John kneaded the bread, the servant would “falsely, wickedly [necquiter] and maliciously” collect bits of dough until he had a great deal of dough. The loaves he baked were underweight according to the standards of the Assize of Bread. This practice was “to the great loss of all his neighbors and persons living near, and of others who had come to him with such dough to bake.” But it was also “to the scandal and disgrace of the whole city” [scandalum et dedecus] and especially the mayor and bailiffs who were charged with keeping the Assize.

Brought before the court, Bird denied the “fraud [fraude], malice, and deceit.” Seven bakers and two bakeresses were also found to have practiced the same fraud. The jurors found them guilty as charged. The mayor and aldermen concluded that the matter be judged as a species of theft and that it was “neither consonant with right nor pleasing to God that such falsehood, deceit, and malice shall go unpunished.” The tables were to be utterly destroyed, and the offenders would be drawn through the street on a hurdle with some of the dough hanging around their necks. They were to stand at the pillory for a day until Vespers at St. Paul’s cathedral. If they committed the offense again, they would have to stand at the pillory for the whole day and be expelled from the city.34

The most common offense was selling underweight bread. Some of this bread came from outside the city. Bakers from Totenham were ordered to sell their bread for less, so that a loaf that cost 3d. would have to be sold for 2 1/2 d. Rather than coming themselves, they sent their wives to sell bread, because the women were less likely to be punished.35 Other bakers were punished for selling tourt bread that was of deficient weight.36 But the city court could be lenient as well. John Tonard, arrested for selling bread of deficient weight, was spared the hurdle because it was a first offense. When he offended again, however, he was condemned to the hurdle.37 Another baker was too old to undergo the rigors of the hurdle and was forbidden to bake unless he could find someone else to undergo the punishment for him.38 No one volunteered.

34. Munimenta Gildhallae Londoniensis: Liber Albus, Liber Custumarum, et Liber Horn, ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1857), 3:416–17. See also Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 2:44. Memorials, pp. 162–65. The two women were to remain in Newgate prison until it was ascertained if their husbands were responsible for their actions.
35. Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1:97 (1332).
37. Letter Book K, p. 56 (1425). Another baker made his bread from water from his house that was so foul “that his bread was a great danger and nuisance of all men who eat it.”
38. Liber Albus, p. 308.
The other offense in selling bread was adding filth to it, thus providing bulk but also making it unwholesome. To avoid the introduction of foreign matter into bread, a London ordinance forbade bakers to start their fires with ferns, stubble, straw, or reeds.\(^{39}\) But the potential impurities that might enter into bread from these practices pale in comparison to some of the charges that appear in the Assize. John de Strode was accused of making bread that contained filth and cobwebs, and Richard Heyne not only sold short weight, but also mixed sand in his bread. Both were forced to stand at the pillory. Heyne had the offending bread carried before him on a lance.\(^{40}\) William de Somerset sold bread that was “putrid, and all together rotten, and made of putrid wheat, so that persons by eating that bread would be poisoned and choked.”\(^{41}\)

Horse bread, loaves made with beans and peas with bran but no grain, could be fraudulently sold also.\(^{42}\) Since horse bread was not covered by the Assize, cheating was rampant among hostellers who bought bread in Southwark or made bread in their own ovens. A city ordinance directed them to buy horse bread from city bakers and to insure the quality with the maker’s mark on it.\(^{43}\) Richard le Young was accused of a number of fraudulent practices for which he was put to the hurdle. He had sold horse bread without the proper baker’s mark and sold loaves of lightweight using a false peck measure.\(^{44}\) A baker who sold sixteen loaves of deficient horse bread was paraded on a hurdle with a loaf of the bread hanging from his neck in the front and a bundle of hay on his back.\(^{45}\)

Bakers did not take punishment for their fraud passively. In 1331 an ordinance complained that the bakers hid themselves, “like foxes,” in mills outside the city so that they could not be prosecuted for their false bread, and that they had their servants bake and sell the loaves instead. The ordinance was proclaimed in the street so that people knew to mistrust those bakers.\(^{46}\) One baker, Richard Davy, who underwent the discomfort and humiliation of riding the hurdle accompanied by rough music, got off the hurdle at his home,
went inside, and came out with a big bone, which he threw at the tabor and broke it through the middle.\textsuperscript{47} Another baker accused the mayor and aldermen of lying about the quality of his bread and was forced to stand with a whetstone around his neck at the pillory.\textsuperscript{48}

Bread was the staple of the diet, but other baked goods and ingredients were of major importance.\textsuperscript{49} FitzStephen’s well-known description of twelfth-century London praises the public cook shops and the ready availability of food. “On a daily basis there, depending on the season, can be found fried or boiled foods and dishes, fish large and small, meat—lower quality for the poor, finer cuts for the wealthy—game and fowl (large and small).” Unexpected guests can “pay a quick visit to the riverside, where anything they might desire is immediately available. No matter how great a number . . . or at whatever hour of day or night, so that those arriving do not have to go without a meal for too long or those departing leave on empty stomachs, they can choose to detour there and take whatever refreshment each needs.” Geese, guinea-hens, woodcock, and other delicacies are all readily available. “This is an exemplar of a public cook shop that provides a service to a city and is an asset to city life.”\textsuperscript{50}

The description of the Cook in the Prologue would appear to carry on the tradition that FitzStephen praised. “He koude rooste, and seethe, and broille, and frey / Maken mortreux, and well bake a pye” (I.383–84). But Chaucer hints at the duplicity of cook-shop owners when he has the Host accuse the Cook of selling fraudulent pies. “For many a paste hastow laten bloo d / And many a Jakke of Dovere hastow sold / That hath been twies hoot and twies coold” (I.4346–48). These were meat pies that were not sold the day they were made, but the gravy was taken off and they were reheated for sale the next day. The Host further accuses the Cook of selling geese to pilgrims that were fed on stubble rather than on grain. These people were passing through London and could not stay to complain. Furthermore, the shop is full of flies. The cook does not deny the charge (I.4348–57).

The city relied on expert cooks to decide whether cooked food was wholesome. When Robert de Pokebrokie, a chaplain, complained that Henry de

\textsuperscript{47} Calendar of Early Mayor’s Court Rolls Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of City of London at the Guildhall, a.d. 1298–1307, ed. A. H. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), p. 67.

\textsuperscript{48} Memorials, p. 423.


Walmesford, a cook, had sold him veal that was “hashed up, stinking and abominable to the human race, to the scandal and opprobrium of the City and the manifest danger of the plaintiff and his friends,” six cooks testified independently that the meat was good. The mayor and aldermen had a further examination, and all experts testified that the meat was “good and wholesome.” On the other hand, Henry Pecche prosecuted Henry de Passelewe, a cook, in 1351 for selling him two capons baked in pastry that were putrid. Pecche and his guests, who were hungry, ate through almost the whole of the first pastry before they discovered that it was “putrid and stinking.” Henry Pecche opened the second one and found that it was as well. Pecche protested that Henry de Passelewe had sold putrid and stinking capons that were “an abomination to mankind, to the scandal, contempt, and disgrace of all the city” and risked the life of the plaintiff and his friends. The cook said that they were good when he sold them. The court brought in “good and trusty men of the trade” of pie-bakers to examine the second capon. They concluded that the birds were rotten when they were sold. Henry de Passelewe was to be taken to the pillory with the capon carried before him, and he was to stay there for the space of one league’s journey in the day, and a public announcement was to be made at the pillory about his offense.

Cooks and pie-bakers were sworn to inspect their trade periodically to make sure that the prices were reasonable and the food healthy. They were to report offenses to the mayor and aldermen. In 1379 a special ordinance was passed pointing out that the pastelers of the city have “baked in pasties rabbits, geese, and garbage (giblets) not befitting and sometimes stinking, in deceit of the people and have baked beef in pasties and sold the same for venison.” A schedule of punishments was proclaimed for those who sold such pies.

With lack of refrigeration, poultry, meat, and fish could quickly become unfit to eat. For those who sold putrid fowl, meat, and fish, the usual punishment was a public proclamation of the deficiency of the items, a time standing at the pillory, and the punishment of having the spoiled birds or fish burned under their noses. For example, John Russelle was accused of trying to sell

---

51. Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1:251 (1355).
53. Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 2:263 (1373). Sometimes the cooks and pie-bakers also inspected ingredients before they were cooked. Thus a poulterer was found by two pie-bakers and five cooks to be selling pigeons that were unfit to eat. Letter Book G, p. 176 (1365). See also Memorials, p. 328.
thirty-seven pigeons that were “putrid, rotten, stinking and abominable to the human race” as well as being a disgrace to the city. The poulters who were called to testify found that the pigeons were rotten, and the sentence was that they should be burned under John’s nose as he stood at the pillory.\footnote{Memorials, pp. 328, 448.}

Among the victualing trades that Chaucer ridicules, that of the vintner is notably absent. Although wine plays a major role in \textit{The Canterbury Tales}, no hint that it might be spoiled or fraudulently doctored ever emerges. Was Chaucer too close to the trade, coming as he did from a long line of London vintners, to make a joke about how to turn bad wine into good? London was very concerned about bad wine, as a number of cases in the court books show. In 1419 the city passed an ordinance that virtually gives a recipe for making fraudulent wine. The ordinance complained, “For as much as many gret, now a dayes and long tyme hertofore, bothe Englishmen and aliens, in comone harme of alle the peple, and gret sclaundre of this City, naught charginge her owne untruth and disceyt, daylich usyn within this Citee thair wyne of Spayne, Rochell, and other remenauntz of brokyn, sodyn, reboyllid, and unthriftly wynes of other contrees, whan thei are feblyd in colour, and noght in value, to put yn diuers buttyys and othir vessels, that are here rasyd and gummyd with picche, code, and othir horrible and unholsome things, for to reduce and bryng ayen, in disscyeyte of the peple, a plausant colour to the sight, and a liykly manere drynkying of Romeney to the smell and taste.” In this method they “sophisticate” and “counterfeit” the wine so that it tastes and looks like a Romeney. Any coopers who prepared the barrels for this purpose should be punished. The wine is to be confiscated and thrown in the gutter, the offender to be fined and taken to the pillory. Two years after this ordinance, William Horold followed the recipe and made false Romeney. “Therefor the Meir and Aldermen, wyllyng that euery man the rather shold eschewe such falsnes and disceyt in tyme coming, haue aftir the fourme of the aforesayd Ordenaunce awardid, that he shal stonde here on the pillory this day an hour.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 670–72. Letter Book I, pp. 214–15.}

An inquest in 1427 held before the mayor and aldermen put the vintners under oath to tell the truth about Gerard Galganet, an alien, who had “sophisticated” wine. He had six casts of old wine from La Rochelle. It was pale in color and of bad taste. To these he added new Spanish wine, and then he “colored, composed, and sophisticated them with wine cooked and colored to give them a pleasant appearance and delectable taste.” These he put into thirteen butts “which had been smeared and lined with diverse gums and resins
with the result that it tasted of a good Romeney wine. With recipes like this, he was able to sophisticate a number of other wines as well. The jurors condemned him for his “deception of the king’s people and . . . contempt of the good ordinances of the city”.

A foreign merchant and a couple of “coupers” were accused of “falsely and decevably contrefeted coloured dubbed and medled vi pipes of white Rochell wyne olde and feble of colour and tast themne in the celer of the said Austyn there beyng with rede wyne called teynt and with eggs alom gummies and oth ere horrible and unholsome thinges for to induce and bring ageyn a pleasant color to the sight and liklky maner drinking of rede wyne to the tarrage smelle and taste of the people,” contrary to the ordinance.

Those taverners who knowingly sold bad wine were severely punished. John Penrose was convicted of selling red wine to the common people “to the shameful disgrace of the officers of the city.” While there was a call to have him imprisoned for a year and a day, instead he was sentenced to drink a draught of the wine at the pillory and have the remainder poured over his head. He was also expelled from the vintners guild.

Food is important to the stability of a society, but perhaps more so in conditions where scarcity is a constant threat. Fraud, on the other hand, seems to be always with us. Poets could joke about cheating millers and piebakers or prescribe violent punishment, but city officials had to deal with the realities of detection and punishment. To explore their thinking, we have a written record of their highly emotive language. What permeates the city ordinances and the wording of the cases themselves is a sense of the reputation of the city and the common good of the population. For the city officials a broader sense of civic values and civic pride assumed dominance in the language of their records. They had some abstract ideas about purity of the body politic as well as the bodies of the citizenry. Bad bread, sophisticated wine, and poison pies were bad for the reputation of the city, bad for the health of inhabitants, and a disgrace to elected officials. It was horrible, abominable, foul, unhealthy, and fraudulent to produce bad products, and they did not hesitate to use such language. As Davis has argued, the concept of the common good relied on a shared culture of market morality. Often the language speaks of fraudulent foods as offensive to God, or to the dishonor of the city and its officials, or to the deceit of the populace. The tone of the remarks is

58. Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 4:212 (1427). He was also accused of sophisti cating ten casks of unsound La Rochelle wine and of having sophisticated eight casks of old, sour-sweet Spanish wine. He was a “common sophisticator.”


60. Memorials, p. 318 (1364). He was later reinstated.
very much that of Langland or Lydgate, reflecting commonly shared values of the marketplace and abhorrence at the violations of these values.

The records we have examined show the interplay of the written, official law and folk-law. The written accounts of the cases try to reinforce expected modes of behavior in their choice of words and spoke to mores of the urban elite. The folk-law elements in these punishments, identified by Green, took the didactic lessons of the hurdle and stocks beyond the written word into the popular, public arena.\textsuperscript{61} Sentences were pronounced and read at the pillory and sometimes also announced as the person was paraded on the hurdle.\textsuperscript{62} The city imposed very public spectacles of humiliation that indicated to consumers whose products to avoid. The hurdle was an education to present and future perpetrators as well as consumers about the city’s dietary and behavioral standards. The written, oral, and visual (accompanied by rough music) all carried the city’s message of food standards and behavior.

\textsuperscript{61} Green, \textit{A Crisis of Truth}, pp. 191–92.

\textsuperscript{62} Riley, \textit{Munimenta}, 3:421.