The fat body in early modern European imagery was most often used to symbolize transgressions of moral and social boundaries. Reflecting the Christian dichotomy between flesh and spirit, the fat body was used as a negative symbol in the depictions of sins such as Gluttony, Otium and Ignorance, and for figures found in social customs and celebrations representing boundary breaking, such as Carnival. These negative depictions of the fat body were usually male, although female counterparts of gluttons were sometimes visualized as a reflection of their spouses, and therefore fat (Walker 1987: 79–80).

This essay will delineate the use of the fat body as a negative religious and social symbol in Northern European art of the 15th and 16th centuries. I will discuss the dependence of such a representation on Christian theological sources and trace the relation of the negative religious connotations to the use of the fat body in a social and political context.

The disparaging view of the fat body was based on the Christian distinction between flesh and spirit (or body and mind). The body and its flesh were regarded by early Christian theologians as a site of sin and weakness. In his *Confessions* (397–400) St. Augustine perceives the relationship between the body and the mind as a constant struggle, the loss of which leads to sin: “Placed among these temptations, then, I struggle every day against uncontrolled desire in eating and drinking” (Aug. conf. 10.31.47). In order to avoid sin, one has to control these bodily temptations by reason, and find the correct balance between body and mind, a process which is painful and tormenting: “So we may conclude the account of the temptations of the lust of the flesh which still assail me, despite my groans and my ‘desire to be clothed with my habitation which is from heaven’ (2 Cor. 5:2)” (Aug. conf. 10.34.51). Although Augustine does not speak of the fat body, he condemns sensations and temptations, among these eating and drinking.

Gregory the Great clearly spoke of the relation between the fat body and the sin of gluttony. In *Pastoral Care* he writes: “When the belly is distended through gluttony, the virtues of the soul are ruined by impurity” (Pastor. 3.19). Thus, the bulging belly is understood by Gregory to be a sign of destroyed virtue, as if the expansion of flesh supplanted spiritual righteousness.
Thomas Aquinas further explicates this understanding when he defines gluttony as the lack of control of reason and “inordinate concupiscence” (Aquinas 1265–1274/1981: II–II, Q. 148, Art. 2). Moreover, Aquinas relates gluttony to uncleanness, manifested in the discharge of excess from the body, in the form of vomiting, and especially in the emission of semen (ibid.: Art. 6). Thus, flesh, and its desires was perceived as a seat of corruption and sin in the Christian tradition, and eating and drinking were viewed as a threat to the moral uprightness of believers when the physical body took precedence over the mental and spiritual abilities of the brain (Schimmel 1992: 142).

The negative approach towards the fat body was most adamantally taken up by Martin Luther in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15. The fat body is condemned because it is seen as an earthly prison for the soul. Luther distinguishes between the fat solid body and the fat bloated body. The solid body is the righteous body nourished through God. The bloated body, in contrast, consumes food and is characterized by a protruding paunch, and likened to a windbag. The animal most associated with this body by Luther is the pig, whose fat body is bloated and unstable (Gilman 2004: 54–58).

In early modern imagery the fat body was many times depicted in light of the aforementioned condemning perception of flesh, as a signifier of sin. In addition, the aesthetic understanding of the ideal body in European culture contributed to the reading of the fat body as an affront to beauty as well as to morality. From the time of ancient Greek culture, the fat body was considered ugly, and outward appearance was perceived to parallel the inward state of the soul (ibid.: 35–39). The ideal of the body as thin and muscular was first called into question in Albrecht Dürer’s Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion (Four Books of Human Proportion, 1528). Dürer gives the proportions of five male and female body types, in which the head is the measurement for the body. The types which he finds, ranging from “coarse and rustic” to “long and thin” are denoted by a head to body ratio from 1:7 to 1:10 (Panofsky 2005: 166). The stout body type, called type ‘A’ was of a 1:7 ratio, and is both shorter and thicker than its mean counterpart, type ‘C’, which is 1:8. Although Dürer did not show the fat or obese body as one of his types, he created a system of relative beauty, preferring variety and difference between body types over one “ideal beauty” (ibid.: 265–267). However, it would take some time before the depiction of the fat body was somewhat freed from
social and moral condemnation, as in the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens in the first half of the 17th century.

The religious interpretation of the fat body as representing sin is most clearly seen in Hieronymus Bosch’s *Allegory of Intemperance* in the Yale University gallery (1495–1500, *fig. 1*). This panel was part of a dismantled triptych from 1495–1500, and formed the bottom part of the left wing. The *Ship of Fools*, today in the Louvre, formed the upper part of the wing. A pendant to this wing was the painting *Death and the Miser*, today in the Washington National Gallery, which concentrates on the sin of Avarice (Morganstern 1984: 295–302). The missing middle panel is presumed to have shown the other Deadly Sins.

In the Yale panel, Gluttony is a fat figure dressed in peasants’ clothing, sitting on a barrel. He is being pushed from behind by three figures, while another one swims in front of him to fill his bowl with wine from the barrel. Gluttony’s belly is accentuated in relation to his thin legs. The wine barrel he is seated on is both a comparison to his barrel-like physique and hints at excessive drinking as a source of his excessive body. In the right part of this fragment, a couple hide their amorous relationship in a tent. The glass of wine held by the man in the tent relates the sin of lust to that of gluttony, and thus designates both as sins of excessive carnality.

The use of the fat body as a signifier of sin continues in Bosch’s *Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* (1505–1510). In the center is a figure of Christ showing his wounds, under which a warning is written: “cave cave deus videt” (Beware, Beware, God is watching) (Büttner 2016: 120). The sin of Gluttony (*Gula*) is seen in the center above the image of Christ. It takes place at the dining table. A fat man sits in a chair holding a jug of wine in one hand and a chicken leg in the other. On the table in front of him are remains of an eaten fish, cow leg and lamb ribs, as well as a pie. The consumption of food is limitless. The housewife has just entered the room with a roast chicken, and a sausage is grilling on a small bonfire in the foreground. The glutton is unkempt, his toes peeping out of his right worn shoe. His toddler son has gotten up from his chair, which doubles as a potty, and left his games behind, in order to ask...
his father for some food, showing the sinful ways passed on from father to son, and also the lack of boundaries between what exits the body and what enters it. On the right of Gluttony a thin man empties the remains of a jug of drink, to the glutton’s dissatisfaction (Gibson 1973: 33–37). The Glutton’s heavy body is contrasted with the thin body of the wounded Christ in the center, reminding the sinner that he is watching.

Bosch’s formulation of the fat peasant body as a representation of Gluttony was also used in later Nether­landish art. In a painting by an anonymous Southern Netherlandish painter today in the National Museum of Naples, Gluttony is represented allegorically as a corpulent peasant sitting next to a table laden with empty vessels, and holding a jug of drink.2) The woman to his right is reminiscent of the housewife in Bosch’s Tabletop, who has come to tend to his needs. A pig, the attribute of Gluttony, is on his right-hand side, and two merry companies are seen behind him on either side, alluding to the indulgence in sensual pleasures.

Emblematic depictions of the sin of gluttony tended to synthesize the fat and fleshy body with other attributes of sin. In Andrea Alciati’s Emblematum libellus (Venice, 1546) the emblem Gula shows a nude, fleshy man sitting in a landscape holding a bird (Alciati 1546/2004: 109; fig. 2). The text describes the man as having a long gullet like a crane as well as a bloated stomach. The bird is identified in the text as a pelican or a seagull, symbolizing insatiable lust and appetite, as is indicated in the emblem In garrulum et gulosum. The text also compares the glutton to Dionysius and Apicius, two famous gourmands (ibid.: 114).

In Gluttony by Jacob Matham after Hendrik Goltzius’ depiction in his series of the seven vices, gluttony is a fleshy female figure (fig. 3). As opposed to the male representations of gluttony which usually showed a rounded belly as a symbol of excess, the female figure’s flesh is accentuated through its exposure: her breasts, belly and most of her leg are exposed by her clothing. The pig accompanies her as an attribute of gluttony, as seen in the anonymous Netherlandish example. The text underneath reads: “Lauta Gula facies et splendidia mensa Lyai/ Heu quot praceipites dat, dedit atq’dabit” (Gluttony, the praised image and splendid table
of Lyaius, alas how many teachings it gives, gave and will give) (Coté 2014: 24)\(^3\). The allusion in the text to the luxurious table of Lauis, Oedipus’ father, highlights the ties between material excess and corpulence. This relation is strengthened by the tray held by the figure of gluttony, which has a pie with a crane’s head on it, similar to the Alciati attribute of gluttony. The rim of the pie is clearly molded like a crown, connecting gluttony and the fat body to political power and appetite as well. By referring to Lauis, such political appetite is connected to the destructive outcome of a way of life perverted by the indulgence of bodily urges, as exemplified in the story of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother.

The use of the corporeal body as a signifier of sin and transgression was not restricted to religious motives. The portrayal of the fat body lent itself to the reprimanding of any individual or group who were seen to disobey political, social and cultural norms. Building on the use of the fat body as a signifier of sin, extreme corpulence was often used to berate unruliness related to social rank and profession. One of the condemned professions was that of food providers, to whom Sebastian Brant devoted a chapter in *Ship of Fools* (1494/1944). He characterized them as belonging to a cunning and deceitful profession of people who use food to control their masters and waste their funds while consuming ample quantities: “And when at night our masters snore and locks and bars are on the door, we drink the wines with comrades boon and tap the largest barrel soon [...] and we can skillfully prepare a wealth of dishes served with care [...] of sugar, condiments a lot we do prepare an oxymell, so that our master vomits well [...] this recks us not, for we can treat ourselves: we'll have more food to eat [...]” (ibid: 266–67).

The peasants were also chided by Brant, who accused them of wickedness, gluttony and fraud: “While now on drinking wine they’re set. They plunge themselves in heavy debt and though their corn and wine sell well they borrow more than I can tell, and payments are always belated [...]. From peasants spring all knavery – each day a new discovery [...]. Of wealth the peasants have no dearth, they hoard their corn and wine by stealth and other things inducing wealth, thus driving prices ever higher [...]” (ibid.: 269).

In imagery, a moderate example of the berated lower classes is found in Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *The Cook and His Wife* (1496) (Hollstein 1962: 7: 79). The cook stands with a pan and

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\(^3\) Translation by Coté. For further information see: Walter Strauss 1980: 4:249, no. 272 (199).
spoon in his right hand, a knife tied to his belt and a goose on his left shoulder. In between the cooking implements and the goose which is going to be prepared is his large protruding belly, barely contained by the shirt he is wearing, which threatens to burst. The excessive body is related to his profession, situated between the cooking tools and the goose, hinting of his abuse of this profession: he eats too much of what he makes.

Hans Weiditz developed the disparaging depiction of food providers and peasants in a number of woodcuts done shortly before the German peasant wars of 1525–26. Weiditz was active in Augsburg until 1522, where he studied with Hans Burkmair, before the outbreak of the peasant revolt in three districts of Swabia, in December 1524 and February 1525 (Geisberg 1974: 4: IX). According to Tom Scott and Bob Scribner, the peasants used the carnival time to rally support, marching from village to village, finally creating a Christian Union uniting the rebelling regions (1991: 25–27). The peasants referred to the Gospel as a support for and justification of their demands, as is attested to in a document from 1525 written to the Town of Ehingen on the Danube: “We wish to inform you that on Fastnacht Monday [27 February] we held a Christian assembly and unanimously agreed to negotiate solely according to the wording and content of the divine Word, which one should know and experience through learned Christian men [...]. But since we have many enemies who oppose the Word of God, we therefore humbly request to know from you as our gracious lords and from the entire commune, how we are to regard you [...]. Dated in haste on Shrove Tuesday” (ibid: 127).

The peasants’ identification with the divine Word was also seen in religious propaganda of the early Reformation, which, between 1520 and 1525, created the figure of the evangelical peasant. This figure, propagated through popular prints, showed the peasant in a new and positive light, as wise and knowledgeable in Scripture. He was not fat, comic or vulgar (Scribner 1976). Despite being based on Lutheran preaching, this image of the peasant disappeared after 1525, stemming from the reform of popular culture as termed by Peter Burke, which attempted to clean popular culture from its pagan roots and sinful traditions (1978). Hans Weiditz’s woodcuts scorn the peasants and depict them as grotesque and sinful. Their dating to the turbulent years preceding the outbreak of the peasant revolt makes them a continuation of a tradition which presented the peasant as bawdy and foolish, as well as a response to the evangelical peasant (Uhrig 1936).
In *Mair Ulin and his Wife* a grotesquely fat man and wife are carrying eating utensils, such as a plate and spoon, as well as a wine jug and a goose (Geisberg 1974: 4:1480). The text accompanying the image identifies the figure of Mair Ulin as a food provider making his way to Hans. While the wife carries the strapped goose and the wine jug, her partner, Mair Ulin, carries the implements with which they will serve the meal: a plate on his chest, a spoon dangling from his belt and a wine pitcher tied to his sleeve. Mair Ulin explains his job as filling Hans’s throat (feeding him) so that Hans will reward him. The target of this fleshy entourage, Hans, alludes to the grotesque comic character *Hans Wurst*, a German carnival character, whose name and attribute of a sausage, refer to the custom of eating meat and emphasizing the temptations of flesh during the festival. Martin Luther referred to Duke Henry II of Brunswick as Hans Wurst in his book *Wider Hans Worst* (1541), in order to insult and berate him. Luther writes that he is not the first to use this phrase, referring to its use in Brant’s 1519 edition in Low-German of *Ship of Fools* (Luther 1541/1967: 322). The extreme physicality of Mair Ulin and his wife makes them a grotesque show of flesh, which serves the insatiable appetite of Hans, proving the client of these two to be no better.

In another image by Hans Weiditz, *Winebag and Wheelbarrow* also from 1521 the figure is so fat that he must use a wheelbarrow to carry his stomach. This image was reproduced in 1521 with an accompanying text, in which the speaker admits to being a “wineskin.” Thus, his fatness is compared to the wine bag tied to his back. In this example, the body becomes only a vessel for the over consumption of wine. Similar to Dürer’s image of the cook, his clothing threatens to burst, as the strings holding his shirt together seem to be stretched to the limit. This inability to contain himself is seen also in the fluid exiting his mouth. The extreme overindulgence in drink is clearly tied to his exaggerated physique. In the text above he admits to the foolishness of his way of life, knowing that in his old age his huge belly will be empty.

This confession is very similar to Brant’s characterization of the glutton and feaster in *Ship of Fools*: “He kills all reason, is not sage, and will regret it in old age.” (Brant 1494/1944: 97). Thus, his extreme corpulence is a sign of his overindulgence in wine, up to the point of bursting, and of his inability to plan for the future. It is also reminiscent of Luther’s designation of the fat bloated body, as being just a windbag.
Weiditz’s woodcuts relate the peasants’ perceived social transgression in the early Reformation discourse to the abuse of eating and drinking, reflected in the unseemly physical depictions of their bodies. The fatness of the peasants’ bodies alludes to their vice, the deadly sin of gluttony. The importance of compliance with one’s social position and the dangers of sin were also found in Protestant teachings. In 1520, Luther referred to the importance of each person knowing his place in society in his *Appeal to the Ruling Class*: “A shoemaker, a smith, a farmer, each has his manual occupation and work; [...] Every one of them in his occupation or handicraft ought to be useful to his fellows, and serve them in such a way that the various trades are all directed to the best advantage of the community, and promote the well-being of body and soul” (1520/1961: 410).

Luther saw the indulgence in food and drink as a local characteristic, and preached against it: “The next thing is the abuse of eating and drinking, a matter which gains us no good repute abroad, but is thought a special failing of ours.” (ibid.: 482–483). Luther also recommended fasting as a way to discipline and control the body, as he writes in his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* from 1520: “Now let us turn to the second part, to the outward man [...]; here a man cannot take his ease; here he must, indeed, take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors and other reasonable discipline, and to make it subject to the spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inward man and to faith, and not revolt against faith [...] as it is the body’s nature to do if it be not held in check.” (1520/1943: 328).

The peasants’ transgression of their social role, expressed in the two woodcuts by Weiditz, was adamantly expressed in Martin Luther’s *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (1525), in which he scorns the peasants for committing three grave sins against both God and man, meriting death in body and soul, and accuses them of serving the devil under the cloak of Christianity: “The peasants have taken on themselves the burden of three terrible sins against God and man, by which they have abundantly merited death in body and soul. [...] Nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. [...] Our peasants, however, would have other men’s goods common, and keep their own goods for themselves. [...] [T]he peasants are not contending any longer for the Gospel, but have become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious murderers, robbers, and blasphemers.” (1525/1931: 248–251). The physical deformity of Weiditz’s peasants,
although earlier than Luther’s scornful writings, is read as a spiritual deformity, emphasized by their depiction as foolish.

The use of the fat body as a political symbol was not limited to the peasant wars: An image by an anonymous artist titled *Satire of Gluttony in Germany* (1560–1575)\(^{11}\) was copied and reprinted with additional text in Martin Weigel’s *Allegory of Gluttony* (1570–1580)\(^{12}\) turning it into a condemnation of the nobility. The image shows a man dressed in sausages, tripe and blood, holding a pig’s head on a skewer. The text in the earlier image recalls Sodom and Gomorrah, stating that Christ and St. Paul will have to intervene on account of the sinful ways of the German people. Lastly, the text says that Germany is wilder on the inside than on the outside, thus leaving the inner ugliness to the imagination of the viewers and readers.\(^{13}\) While the earlier, anonymous text only mentions the godly intervention needed in such a state of sin, the text printed alongside Weigel’s image condemns the upper classes. Alluding to the clothes made of bloodied animal parts, the prince and count are said to have covered themselves in the blood of the poor.\(^{14}\) This character in the image is not as fat as the peasant figures by Weiditz. The transgression of boundaries alluded to by the fat bodies of Weiditz’s peasants is here signified by the bloody inner parts worn as part of the figure’s clothes. The tripe, sausages and blood are shown on the outside, as though the figure flaunts the innards of its gluttonous stomach.

Under the moral gaze, the fat body lent itself easily to the expression of a variety of transgressions. The expansion of the physical boundaries of the body was often used as an indication of defiance, either political, cultural or social. Moreover, the same image could serve to condemn different subjects. This is seen in the adoption of Weiditz’s wheelbarrow man for Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s drawing of *Gluttony*, part of a series of the seven deadly sins, completed between 1556 and 1558, and followed by a series of the seven virtues.\(^{15}\) The center of the composition depicts the personification of gluttony in the form of a fat woman with a pig under her skirt, standing next to the table and drinking from a jug. In the left mid-ground Bruegel has quoted the wheelbarrow man, clearly depicting him as an expression of gluttony.

The figure of the wheelbarrow man was adapted and used in two later prints, detaching its original meaning in the context of the peasant wars, and re-contextualizing it as an image of social transgression. The first is the *Bacchus Brotherhood*, by Lorentz Schultes.\(^{16}\) The figure in Schultes’ print copies the position of

11) For the anonymous print see: Eugen Diederichs 1908: 1: 193.


15) For the image see: Nadine Orenstein 2001: cat. 44.

Weiditz’s wheelbarrow man. However, the proportions are even more distorted, comprising a ratio of 1:5 between the head and body, as opposed to 1:6 in Weiditz’s print. As opposed to Weiditz’s figure, which belongs to the peasantry, the figure in Schultes’ print is part of the Bacchic brotherhood, as designated by the title. His head is covered by an overgrown wreath of vine in which large clusters of grapes and other fruits grow. He has a pretzel pinned to his shirt, and a sausage strapped to his belt. While the pretzel is conspicuous, pinned on his breast, the sausage is almost hidden, thus alluding to his hypocrisy. While the pretzel, a devotional baked good produced in a cloister (Heyne 1901: 277), shows this figure to be part of a brotherhood, the sausage gives away the gluttonous character of this brotherhood, relating him to the figure of Hans Wurst. The subtitle explicitly states that the guild of Bacchus dedicates itself to gorging and guzzling, as a consequence of which the stomach grows.17)

The very same image was used again at the end of the 17th century to characterize a newcomer from America, which is also referred to as a Land of Cockaigne (Richter 1984: 67). The “general of glutton-village and paunch-house,” according to the title, explains his corpulence as a result of excessive eating, drinking and smoking.18) He emphasizes that these activities go on around the clock, where he comes from: he smokes a hundred pounds of tobacco for breakfast, stuffs himself during midday and night, and does not forget to drink ten buckets of beer during the day.19) To conclude, the image of the fat body carried with it many negative religious and social connotations. Starting with its relation to the sin of gluttony, the expansion of the body was perceived as resulting from a lack of control of the mind over the body, and surrender to bodily urges. These negative qualities of the gluttonous subject were further developed to connote social divergence and political disobedience, and tied mostly to low-class professions. The images of the fat body discussed here associate its physical qualities, seen, for instance, in the bulging belly, with mental, moral and social misbehavior, constantly supervised and judged by a higher authority.

17) “Die Figur aigentlich abbildt/ Das Bacchi Zunftt/ die sich einfait/ Mit fressen/ sauffen also hart/ Das der Bauch thondrund tracht die schwardt.”
18) The title reads: „Der aus America und Schlaraffenland neu angekom­mene General von Fressdorf und Wansthausen."
19) „Dass in so dikem Staat ich mich hie präsentier,/ Macht, weil mittags und nachts ich tafier um mich fresse,/ Auch überdiss alltag noch Zehen Eymer Bier./ Und hündert pfund tobaks züm früstük nicht vergesse."
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THE FACES OF FATNESS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Sara Benninga

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