

# Medicine and the Seven Deadly Sins in Late Medieval Literature and Culture

The seven deadly sins have been a staple of Christian thought and morality for centuries. They are: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. These sins are considered to be particularly dangerous because they can lead to eternal damnation. In late medieval Europe, the seven deadly sins were a major concern for both religious and secular authorities. Medical texts and practices played a significant role in shaping understandings of sin and morality, and literary works reflected and challenged these views.



## Medicine and the Seven Deadly Sins in Late Medieval Literature and Culture (The New Middle Ages)

by Amy Leigh Mercree

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## Medical Texts and the Seven Deadly Sins

Medical texts from the late Middle Ages often discussed the seven deadly sins in relation to health and illness. For example, the influential medical treatise "The Regimen of Health" by the Arab physician Ibn Sina (Avicenna) warned that pride could lead to high blood pressure, while greed could

cause indigestion. Other medical texts linked lust to venereal disease, envy to jaundice, and wrath to heart problems. These associations between sin and illness were based on the belief that the body and the soul were closely connected. If the soul was corrupted by sin, it was believed that the body would also suffer.

Medical practitioners also played a role in the enforcement of moral values. In some cases, doctors were called upon to testify in court cases involving accusations of sin. For example, in one case from the 14th century, a doctor was asked to determine whether a woman was guilty of adultery. The doctor examined the woman and found no physical evidence of sexual intercourse. However, he concluded that she was guilty of adultery based on her "lascivious" demeanor.

### **Literary Works and the Seven Deadly Sins**

Late medieval literature also reflected and challenged the views of sin and morality that were prevalent in medical texts. Some literary works, such as the "Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer, depicted the seven deadly sins as comic vices. In the "Prologue" to the "Canterbury Tales," Chaucer describes a group of pilgrims who are traveling to Canterbury Cathedral. Each pilgrim represents a different social class and has a different set of vices. The pilgrim who represents the knight is guilty of pride, while the pilgrim who represents the merchant is guilty of greed. Chaucer's depiction of the seven deadly sins as comic vices suggests that he did not believe that they were as serious as the religious authorities claimed.

Other literary works, such as the "Divine Comedy" by Dante Alighieri, depicted the seven deadly sins as serious moral offenses. In the "Divine Comedy," Dante travels through Hell and Purgatory, where he encounters

sinners who are being punished for their crimes. The sinners who are punished for the seven deadly sins are depicted as being in great pain and suffering. Dante's depiction of the seven deadly sins as serious moral offenses suggests that he believed that they were a major threat to the soul.

The relationship between medicine and the seven deadly sins in late medieval literature and culture was complex and multifaceted. Medical texts and practices shaped understandings of sin and morality, and literary works reflected and challenged these views. The seven deadly sins were a major concern for both religious and secular authorities, and they played a significant role in the construction and negotiation of moral values in late medieval society.



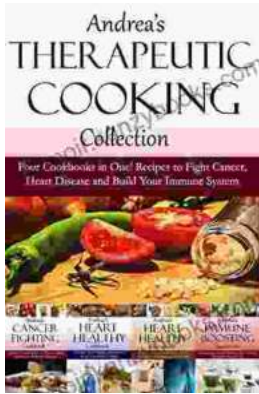
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