

# Food and Fasting in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

## Introduction

In her seminal book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum explored the diverse ways medieval women expressed their inner-self and exerted control over their lives through the act of eating and the lack thereof.<sup>1</sup> However, as Cristina Mazzoni points out, the significance that either food or fasting played in the fourteenth-century mystic-writer, Margery Kempe's life recounted in her autobiographical *The Book of Margery Kempe*<sup>2</sup> is not discussed in detail in Bynum's work save for the brief mentions on Margery's fasting practice pertaining to her conjugal sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, food and fasting carry much weight in Margery's life on both devotional and material levels, and while some of their aspects resonate with the experiences of many other medieval women, others are idiosyncratic to Margery. Through the exploration of the spectrum of roles food and fasting play in Margery's life, firstly, in relation to her mystic experiences and secondly, as physical activity, this essay attempts to situate her in the rich history of female engagement with food and fasting in the Middle Ages.

Food and eating, throughout Margery's life, principally serve as the sensual symbolism

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Cristina Mazzoni, 'Of Stockfish and Stew: Feasting and Fasting in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Food and Foodways*, 10 (2002), 176.

of her mystic experiences. Within the context of medieval Christianity, the physical act and the psychological image of eating and drinking are closely associated with Eucharist.

Eucharist, in Bynum's word, is 'symbolic cannibalism' where the Christians, emulating the Last Supper, consume the bread and wine metamorphosed into Christ's flesh and blood.<sup>4</sup>

Through this symbolic yet literal act of 'eating God', Christians experience spiritual unity with God and ultimately the 'audacious deification' of the self.<sup>5</sup> Such imagery of Eucharist as 'eating God' is explicitly present in *The Book*, too. For instance, in Chapter 5, Christ, who appears in Margery's vision to console her, commands her precisely to 'etyn my flesch and my blod'.

In fact, the association of eating and the human soul's desire to know and be united with God is a longstanding tradition within Christianity, dating back long before the establishment of Eucharist, to the Song of Songs where the metaphor of feasting, often juxtaposed with that of sexual intercourse, plays a significant role as a highly symbolised, sensual imagery.<sup>6</sup> This correlation of food image and sensuality persisted throughout the medieval Christendom, providing the medieval mystic-writers, including Margery, with the perfect conduit to verbalise their mystical experiences that are also sensual in nature. As Bynum argues, 'almost all medieval mystics sometimes speak of "tasting God"', and the verb 'taste' itself yokes together 'the physical act of eating the host and the inner experience of resting in the sweetness (*fruitio*) of mystical union'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

Notably, this imagery of ‘tasting God’ and the sensual ‘sweetness’ of mystical experience was more preferably and frequently adopted by female mystics. Bynum explains that women’s tendency to express mystical experiences as bodily phenomena is reflective of the medieval religious attitude that associates the theologically inferior ‘body’ with female, and in turn the superior ‘soul’ with male.<sup>8</sup> This ‘woman is to man as body is to spirit’ mentality could be – and indeed was – held against women with misogynistic intentions in some religious contexts and beyond. Yet, what the mystical works written *by women* suggests is that the association of women and physicality did not so much discourage medieval women as affected them positively to embrace their own bodiliness, for instance, as the sign of closeness to Christ’s Eucharistic corporeality.<sup>9</sup> According to *The Book*, Margery seemed to have shared in this notion.

In *The Book*, as Margery recalls her mystic experiences, her use of words such as ‘sweet’ or ‘sweetness’ is persistent. The otherworldly and, at times, ecstatic ‘sweetness’ visits her in the form of taste, hearing, and smell whenever she has a vision of Christ or any other holy figures. Sometimes ‘sche felt swet smellys wyth hir nose’ (Chapter 35), and other times she heard ‘Crist Jhesu, whos melydiows voys swettest of alle savowrys softly sowndyng in hir sowle’ (Chapter 41). In particular, the mystic experience she recalls with gustatory ‘sweetness’ appears in Chapter 71: ‘sche felt a wondyr swet savowr and an hevynly that hir thowt sche myth a levyd therby wythowtyn mete or drynke yyf it wolde a contynuyd’. This passage is worthy of attention in that the rhetoric used is analogous to that which appears in the *vita* of Mary Magdalen in

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<sup>8</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, where fasting Mary is provided with celestial aliments by the angels: 'she was fed and filled with right sweet meats, and then was brought again by the angels unto her proper place, in such wise as she had no need of corporal nourishing'.<sup>10</sup> As Susan Eberly speculates, the legend of Mary Magdalen must have been available to Margery not only in the forms of written sources but also as visual images such as stained glass windows, statues, and wall paintings, and made a considerable contribution to Margery's fashioning of mystical sensibility.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Christ in Margery's vision encourages her to 'have mend ... what Mary Mawdelyn was' (Chapter 29), Margery is comparable with Mary Magdalen in various aspects of life: both women initially led a secular, at times sinful, life, but their encounter with Christ inspire them to convert to the life of holiness and become the privileged Bride of Christ. The two women also share an overwhelming abundance of tears: in Chapter 29, the Virgin appears to Margery and consoles her not to be ashamed to weep for the Passion of her Son as Mary Magdalen was not. From the way Margery identified herself with Mary Magdalen and aspired to emulate her, one might presume the rhetorical similarity as indicative of Margery's self-conscious effort to emulate Mary. One might also infer that such emulation extends to her fasting practice, for Mary Magdalen throughout the Middle Ages was imagined as a role model of female fasters. As Bynum points out, this notion derives from the legend as told in *Legenda Aurea*, in which Mary is said to have fasted for thirty years in the desert outside of Marseille after the Ascension of Jesus. Although there is no explicit mention in *The Book* indicating Margery's conscious imitation of Mary in fasting, it is still tempting to think so.

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<sup>10</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, 'Of Mary Magdalene' in *The Golden Legend (Legenda aurea)*, Englished by William Caxton (1483) <<http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG1293/>> [accessed 13 December 2020].

<sup>11</sup> Susan Eberly, 'Margery Kempe, St Mary Magdalene, and Patterns of Contemplation', *The Downside Review*, 107 (1989), 212.

However, returning to the comparison of the two women's rhetoric of 'sweetness', the fundamental yet revealing difference between them is that while Mary Magdalen's sentiment of inedia is literal, Margery's is metaphorical. In other words, Mary Magdalen in the legend – though allegedly – did live only on the 'sweetness' provided by the angels without any corporal sustenance, whereas Margery's sentiment of not needing any food or drink is a mere figure of speech, which is evident from her use of subjunctive mood. Margery, unlike legendary Mary Magdalen, is a historical laywoman whose fasting practice was affected by many secular restrictions. Therefore, to examine further her engagement with fasting, comparisons between Margery and other historical medieval women are necessary.

The historian Rudolph Bell coined the term 'Holy Anorexia' to describe the orientation of medieval women who rejected the secular food entirely and took their fasting to extremes, which was 'similar in important ways to clinical description of modern-day sufferers of anorexia nervosa'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, some scholars hold back from this view on the basis of the intrinsic difference between the anorexic behaviour of the present-day women and that of the medieval women in terms of their motivation rooted in different social and cultural contexts.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this essay, focusing on the disavowal of earthly food as the primary aspect of what constitutes anorexic behaviour – clinical or holy, deems Bell's conception effective as a robust criterion in contrasting Margery's relationship with food and fasting with that of her peers.

One epitomising example of the Holy Anorexic is Catherine of Sienna, a fourteenth-

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<sup>12</sup> Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. ix.

<sup>13</sup> Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, 'Margery Kempe's Fasting: Towards the Recovery of Virgin Identity', in *Art of Eating*, ed. by Akihito Suzuki and Hisao Ishizuka (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2005), p. 47.

century mystic-saint and Margery's contemporary, whose fasting practice is among the most extreme. Catherine of Sienna expressed intense disgust with any secular food and vomited by sticking a twig up her throat 'if so much as a bean remained in [her] stomach'.<sup>14</sup> As the primary source of nutrition, she relied on the consecrated host alone. She defied the direct orders of her confessors to eat, and even risking the condemnation as of heresy, continued her fasting. Catherine's stoic fasting practice affected her health so fatally that starvation is said to have become the direct cause of her death.<sup>15</sup> Another prime example of Holy Anorexic is the female Beguine mystic, Mary of Oignies, who is Margery's predecessor and referred to in *The Book* as her source of great inspiration, for Mary too was a woman with abundant tears like Margery (Chapter 62). Mary of Oignies was a prodigious faster and said to have fasted as many as thirty-five days consecutively. She often resorted to self-harm due to the guilt she felt after consuming non-Eucharistic food, and once, after having been severely ill and required to eat, she inflicted on herself an emulation of stigmata to allay the guilt.<sup>16</sup> In the end, Mary 'was so afraid of taking pleasure in food that Christ had to make her unable to taste'.<sup>17</sup>

*The Book* recounts Margery's recurrent fasting practice throughout her life as an integral part of her penance. Margery's fasting, however, is far less ascetic and more sporadic than that of the women like Catherine of Sienna or Mary of Oignies. On the contrary, *The Book* contains numerous instances upholding the idea that Margery's attitude towards fasting is inherently different from – or even opposite to – that of the Holy Anorexics: Margery loves

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<sup>14</sup> Bell, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

to eat. For example, in Chapter 5, when Margery is commanded by Christ to exclude meat and wine entirely from her everyday diet, eating of meat is described as ‘that thow lovyst best in this world’. In Chapter 82, when Margery is suddenly drained of her ability to weep, she complains that ‘sche cowde fynde no joye ne no comferte in mete ne drynke’, from which one can deduce that Margery is usually able to find ‘joy and comfort’ in her eating and drinking. Moreover, in several accounts where Margery mentions the occasions of banquet during her pilgrimage, she always recalls them with great enthusiasm. These examples illustrate that unlike the Holy Anorexics, corporeal food does not repel Margery, and contrarily, her attitude towards food is generally affirmative. As Mazzoni points out, Margery’s ‘positive attention, even delight in food distinguishes Margery from the numerous medieval women who fasted prodigiously and feasted on the Eucharist exclusively’<sup>18</sup>— and Margery’s such positive attitude to eating extends to the attitude with which she confronts fasting.

Aside from the everyday penitential fasting, the most distinctive instance of Margery’s fasting is recounted in *The Book* from Chapter 9 onwards. Awakened to the love for Christ, Margery is now determined to lead a chaste life by terminating sexual relationship with her husband and prays to Christ to see to it. In Margery’s vision, Christ replies that she ‘must fastyn the Fryday bothen fro mete and drynke, and thow schalt have thi desyr er Whitsonday, for I schal sodeynly sle thin husbonde’: this prophecy is indeed fulfilled three years later. In Chapter 11, when Margery is pressed to resume sexual intercourse by her husband, who is dissatisfied with her abstinence from both sex and food, Christ encourages Margery to strike a deal with her husband: in return for recommencing Friday meals, she should maintain sexual

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<sup>18</sup> Mazzoni, 175.

abstinence. Her husband concedes, and Margery succeeds in obtaining the chaste life she long wished for. This instance embodies the stark contrast between Margery's fasting and that of Holy Anorexics: while the fasting of the latter is often masochistic in its motivation and self-consuming in its result, Margery's is not an act of penance *per se* but functions as a practical stepping-stone to achieve an objective beyond. As Bynum observes this case and comments that Christ and Margery have conspired together and 'tricked the male',<sup>19</sup> Margery herself appears to be fully conscious of this practicality as well. Her fasting, in a word, is 'self-empowering'<sup>20</sup> in the most pragmatic sense.

Despite such difference, however, Margery and the Holy Anorexics do share a crucial trait: their fasting practice is a manifestation of control over their lives as a medieval woman. Bynum argues that for the medieval women, food is 'the basic resource over which they have most control',<sup>21</sup> and the act of '[n]ot eating is ... an experience of control – control of self, which they substitute for the control of circumstances they are unable to achieve'.<sup>22</sup> Namely, the Holy Anorexic Catherine of Sienna in her youth started fasting to 'conquer bodily urges that she considered base obstructions in her path of holiness'.<sup>23</sup> This echoes the ulterior purpose underlying Margery's fasting.

Yet, what is so striking about Margery's fasting is that she is not only in control of its installation but also in touch with its cessation. In *The Book*, there are two critical moments

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<sup>19</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>20</sup> Mazzoni, 178.

<sup>21</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>23</sup> Bell, p. 15.



that prompt Margery's absolute parting with fasting.<sup>24</sup> Firstly, it is in Chapter 36 when Christ accepts Margery as His Bride and declares that she no longer needs penitential fasting to please his will. Secondly, it is in Chapter 66 when Christ withdraws the prohibition of meat-eating completely, and the Virgin Mary appears to reaffirm it. From these moments on, not only fasting but penance in general recedes from the foreground of the text, and the focus of Margery's devotion shifts from active, bodily penance to contemplation altogether.

Presence of such cessation alone renders Margery's fasting practice idiosyncratic, for the major characteristic of anorexic fasting experienced by many medieval women is its never-ending, ritualistic repetitiveness. For them, fasting and the accompanying physical pain are key to ensure the elusive knowledge that they are on their way to salvation, that is 'to know for sure that [they] had sacrificed enough'.<sup>25</sup> Though less stoic, Margery too in the earlier stages of devotion shares in this view and seeks to acquire such knowledge through painful fasting. Therefore, it is precisely when Christ receives her as His Bride and confirms that she should receive 'the same mede in hevyn' (Chapter 66) that she stops fasting. The general stance of the Holy Anorexics, however, is that they *cannot* eat rather than they try not to, whereas Margery's attitude is the exact opposite: she finds joy in eating but avoids it so that she may lead a more devout life. In other words, as long as it pleases Christ's will, she is ready to accept the 'enjoyment of good food as a divine grace'.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the words of the Virgin Mary in Chapter 66 that eating of meat would strengthen Margery's body and help her endure the 'perfeccyon of wepyng' – the stamina-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Mazzoni, 182.

consuming religious practice which comprises the centre of Margery's devotional life – endows Margery's appreciation of secular food with divine affirmation, allowing her to take advantage of her secularity she once considered burdensome.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Margery, by bringing the food and eating back into her secular life whilst framing it as supportive of her devotional life, successfully conjoins the two, often contradicting lives as one 'best lyfe' (Chapter 36), which consequently leads to the ultimate change and reinforcement of her faith that no longer relies upon the physical sufferings as the tangible evidence of salvation. If Margery's initial inclination to fasting is what marks the beginning of her devotional life, her break with fasting and the re-placement of eating into her religious effort allow her to ground her devotion on both material and spiritual levels, that is the two defining faces of the life of Margery Kempe.

### **Conclusion**

Food and fasting occupy a significant place in Margery Kempe's life, and her relationship with them simultaneously assimilates her experience into and differentiates it from how other medieval women engage with food and fasting. Food image characterised by its 'sweetness' are vital to Margery's mystical experience, and its use aligns her mystical sensibility not only with that of her peer women mystics but also with that of legendary Bride of Christ, Mary Magdalen. Likewise, the fundamental motivation underlying Margery's fasting practice as a manifestation of control over her life resonates with that of other medieval women, while her pragmatic approach to fasting built upon her appreciation of

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Morgan, 'Body Symbolism in *the Book of Margery Kempe*', *New Blackfriars*, 77 (1995), 438.

earthly food renders her experience idiosyncratically secular-based and constructive. Thus, by finding Margery's place in the history of medieval women's engagement with food and fasting, not only are we provided with a lens through which we read Margery's life but also prompted to understand such engagement as a whole as a phenomenon with yet more diverse possibility.

(2999 words; excluding the bibliography)

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