

INTRODUCTION

St. Bernard compared this Sacrament [the eucharist] with the human processes of eating, when he used the similes of chewing, swallowing, assimilation, and digestion. To some people this will seem crude, but let such refined persons beware of pride, which comes from the devil; a humble spirit will not take offense at simple things.

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(FOURTEENTH CENTURY)¹

Recent studies of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century spirituality have focused on poverty and chastity as the basic motifs of religious life. Over the past fifty years, poverty has been studied not only as the doctrinal issue that split the Franciscan order apart but also as the essential ingredient in literal "imitation of Christ" and as the basic metaphor for the renunciation of wealth and power practiced by the upper and middle classes of medieval Europe.² Chastity has been emphasized as the sine qua non of religious status, as the reflection on earth of the life of the angels, and as a requirement that laid a heavy burden of self-hatred on those individuals—especially women—who were unable to assert control over their own lives.³

Sex and money . . . again and again modern scholars have emphasized the guilt engendered by their seductiveness, the awesome heroism required for their renunciation. Yet this modern focus may tell us more about the twentieth century than about the late Middle Ages. In our industrialized corner of the globe, where food supplies do not fail, we scarcely notice grain or milk, ever-present supports of life, and yearn rather after money or sexual favors as signs of power and of success. But even in today's world, it is not everywhere so. For the hungry, food forces itself forward as an insistent fact, an insistent symbol. Guided by our knowledge of impoverished modern countries, we should not really be surprised to find that food was, in medieval Europe, a fundamental

economic—and religious—concern. Medieval people often saw gluttony as the major form of lust, fasting as the most painful renunciation, and eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God. Peter Brown has commented that even though Paul discounted the importance of food and food practices for Christians (Rom. 14:17), “in the straitened Mediterranean [world], the kingdom of heaven had to have something to do with food and drink.”⁴

In the Europe of the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries famine was on the increase again, after several centuries of agricultural growth and relative plenty.⁵ Vicious stories—of food-hoarding merchants, of cannibalism, of infanticide, of sick adolescents left to die when they could no longer work—survive in the sources, suggesting a world in which hunger and even starvation were not uncommon.⁶ The possibility of over-eating and of giving away food to the unfortunate was a mark of privilege, of aristocratic or patrician status—a particularly visible form of what we call conspicuous consumption, what medieval people called magnanimity or largesse.⁷ Small wonder, then, that gorging and vomiting, luxuriating in food until food and body were almost synonymous, became in folk literature an image of unbridled sensual pleasure;⁸ that magic vessels forever brimming over with food and drink were staples of European fairy tales; that one of the most common charities enjoined on religious orders was to feed the poor and ill, pilgrims and wanderers; or that sharing one’s own meager food with a stranger (who might turn out to be an angel, a fairy, a god, or Christ himself) was, in hagiography and folktale alike, a standard indication of heroic or saintly generosity.⁹ Small wonder, too, that self-starvation, the deliberate and extreme renunciation of food and drink, seemed to medieval people the most basic asceticism, requiring the kind of courage and holy foolishness that marked the saints. To repress eating and hunger was to control the body in a discipline far more basic than any achieved by shedding the less frequent and essential gratifications of sex or money. As Christ supposedly said in a vision granted to Margaret of Cortona (d. 1297): “In this life, Christians cannot be perfect unless they restrain their appetites from vices, for without abstinence from food and drink the war of the flesh will never end; and they feel and suffer most from the rebellion of the flesh who refuse this saving remedy.”¹⁰ Or as Gunther of Pairis, the Cistercian historian and poet, said in a treatise on prayer and fasting written about 1200: “Fasting is useful for expelling demons, excluding

evil thoughts, remitting sins, mortifying vices, giving certain hope of future goods and a foretaste [*perceptio*] of celestial joys.”¹¹ In the late fourteenth century, Catherine of Sweden’s hagiographer attributed to her the opinion that “abstinence prolongs life, preserves chastity, pleases God, repulses demons, illumines the intellect, strengthens the mind, overcomes vices, overpowers the flesh, and stirs and inflames the heart with love of God.”¹² An anonymous satire on hypocritical monks, probably from the high Middle Ages, states explicitly that food and drink are harder to renounce than sex: “Many who are not lured by more serious faults are cast down by overindulgence in food and drink. . . . Indeed, thinned by fasting or vigils and repeated prayers, the stomach thinks not of a woman but of food; it meditates not on lust but on sleep.”¹³

Eating in late medieval Europe was not simply an activity that marked off fine calibrations of social status and a source of pleasure so intense and sensual that the renunciation of it was at the core of religious world-denial. Eating was also an occasion for union with one’s fellows and one’s God, a commensality given particular intensity by the prototypical meal, the eucharist, which seemed to hover in the background of any banquet.¹⁴ Because Jesus had fed the faithful not merely as servant and waiter, preparer and multiplier of loaves and fishes, but as the very bread and wine itself, *to eat* was a powerful verb. It meant to consume, to assimilate, to become God. To eat God in the eucharist was a kind of audacious deification, a becoming of the flesh that, in its agony, fed and saved the world. Thus, to religious men and women, renunciation of ordinary food prepared the way for consuming (i.e., becoming) Christ, in eucharist and in mystical union. Mechtild of Magdeburg (d. 1282?), who spoke of ecstatic experiences as “eating God,” said of the mass:

Yet I, least of all souls,
Take Him in my hand
Eat Him and drink Him
And do with Him what I will!¹⁵

The thirteenth-century Flemish mystic Hadewijch wrote:

In the anguish or the repose or the madness of Love,
.....
The heart of each devours the other’s heart.
.....

As he who is Love itself showed us
 When he gave us himself to eat

 . . . love's most intimate union
 Is through eating, tasting, and seeing interiorly.¹⁶

John Tauler, preaching on John 6:56 ("For my flesh is meat indeed"), said:

There is no kind of matter which is so close to a man and becomes so much a part of him as the food and drink he puts into his mouth; and so God has found this wonderful way of uniting Himself with us as closely as possible and becoming part of us.¹⁷

And William of St. Thierry (d. ca. 1148) spoke thus of the meaning of the Incarnation:

It is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones.¹⁸

It was not the least of the chief reasons for your incarnation that your babes in the church, who still needed your milk rather than solid food, . . . might find in you a form not unfamiliar to themselves.¹⁹

Not only was food a more significant motif in late medieval spirituality than most historians have recognized, food was also a more important motif in women's piety than in men's. For certain late medieval women, fasting became an obsession so overwhelming that modern historians have sometimes thought their stories preserve the earliest documentable cases of anorexia nervosa. Women all over Europe served Christ by feeding others, donating to the poor the food that husbands and fathers felt proud to be able to save and consume. The eucharist and related devotions, such as those to the body, wounds, heart, and blood of Christ, were at the very center of women's piety. Eating God in the host was both a sweet tasting that focused and transcended all hunger and an occasion for paramystical phenomena of the most bizarre and exuberant sort.

In this book I explore the implications of food-related religious practices and of food images in the piety of medieval women. Although I have tried to cite enough cases to demonstrate the centrality of food in both practice and texts, my concern has been less to collect metaphors or to count cases of food asceticism, eucharistic devotion, or feeding mira-

cles than it has been to show the manifold meanings of food and its pervasiveness in religious symbolism. Rather than mention every woman who fasted or saw visions of the Christ child in the chalice, I have concentrated on women whose life stories and writings survive in sufficient detail for us to trace, across the distance created by many centuries and by vastly different modern assumptions, the rich and paradoxical meanings of eating and not eating. Although I am aware of modern clinical definitions of food obsession, I have avoided using them, at least initially, because I find that medieval attitudes toward food are far more diverse than those implied by the modern concepts of anorexia nervosa and hysteria. To religious women food was a way of controlling as well as renouncing both self and environment. But it was more. Food was flesh, and flesh was suffering and fertility. In renouncing ordinary food and directing their being toward the food that is Christ, women moved to God not merely by abandoning their flawed physicality but also by becoming the suffering and feeding humanity of the body on the cross, the food on the altar. However absurd or vulgar some medieval practices and language may seem to casual modern observers, we do well to heed Tauler's warning (quoted above) not to take offense. Deeper study of these "simple things" suggests that food and body can be powerful ways of encountering suffering and fecundity—aspects of the human condition from which even we in the twentieth century cannot hide completely.

Because I intend this book both for medievalists and for readers with a general interest in the history of women or the history of Christianity, I have provided background material for both groups. The first chapter is a brief account of the religious options available to medieval women; the second explains the major food practices of medieval Christians—fasting and eucharistic devotion—with attention to their roots in early Christianity. Both chapters contain much material that will be familiar to specialists, although I have presented it in a new way. The third chapter, which discusses the nature of the evidence, is provided primarily for scholars. It examines some of the problems raised by the use of hagiographical material; it also gives a close reading of several male figures to strengthen the case for characterizing food practices and metaphors as "female." The fourth and fifth chapters present the stories about women and the writings by them on which this book is based. I have chosen to tell some of these stories as *stories* before turning to a

more analytical discussion because it is only by recounting the stories themselves that I can demonstrate to—and evoke for—readers the extent to which many food motifs tend to be woven into a single life. The last five chapters are the heart of the argument. In them I provide what might be called, respectively, a functionalist and a phenomenological explanation of the prominence of food metaphors and food practices in women's piety. In other words, I show, first, how women were able to use food practices to shape their experience and their place in both family and community and, second, what food-related behavior and symbols actually meant to medieval women. In doing this, I suggest both a new interpretation of late medieval asceticism and a new understanding of the significance of gender in medieval religion.

The last five chapters indeed become a complex refutation of the standard interpretation of asceticism as world-rejection or as practical dualism and of the standard picture of medieval women as constrained on every side by a misogyny they internalized as self-hatred or masochism. Rather, I argue that medieval efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborate changes rung upon the *possibilities* provided by fleshliness than as flights from physicality. I also demonstrate the extent to which religious women derived their basic symbols from such ordinary biological and social experiences as giving birth, lactating, suffering, and preparing and distributing food. The identification of this characteristic of women's symbols—which contrasts sharply with the enthusiasm contemporary males felt for symbols of reversal (especially the renunciation of wealth and power)—enables me to raise fundamental questions about differences in male and female religiosity.

Three introductory comments may be helpful. The first concerns chronology. Despite the fact that some of the most spectacular cases of fasting or eucharistic frenzy discussed below come from the fifteenth century, I have limited the bulk of my analysis to, and taken most of my examples from, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. I have chosen this chronological focus because my goal is to explain the origins of a particular emphasis within women's piety. I have not tried to follow that piety down into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although one could argue that it persisted that long (and even longer) in Europe, especially rural, Catholic Europe. I shall, however, leave the subsequent history to others. My purpose is to put the inception of that piety into as

broad a context as possible, to show that topics such as eucharistic devotion, fasting, and miraculous bodily changes should not be discussed in isolation from each other. To demonstrate the interconnection of devotional practices and symbols in one period, I had to avoid carrying the history of any of them too far forward in time. I have also concentrated more on delineating the overall pattern of symbols within the culture than on ferreting out chronological change. I have felt this to be necessary in order to make the pattern clear, but I hope I have not ignored change entirely.

Second, I am fully aware that most of the women I am discussing are exceptional. Mary of Oignies (d. 1213) and Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) are no more typical of religious women (or of women generally) than *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Divine Comedy* are typical of medieval literature or of medieval life. Indeed, medieval hagiographers pointed out repeatedly that saints are not even primarily “models” for ordinary mortals; the saints are far too dangerous for that. Like Christ himself, they could not and should not be imitated in their full extravagance and power. Rather (so their admirers say), they should be loved, venerated, and meditated upon as moments in which the other that is God breaks through into the mundane world, saturating it with meaning. And yet, in the discussion that follows, I move from these particular, exceptional women to their religious and social worlds, explaining the women by their context and the context by the women. Two things, speaking very generally, justify this endeavor. The first is that the evidence we can garner from chronicles, law codes, sermons, and so on suggests that some of the practices of exceptional women—their fasting, food distribution, psychosomatic changes, etc.—were found in ordinary religious women as well. The behavior of saints such as Elizabeth of Hungary (d. 1231) or Catherine of Genoa finds dozens of mundane parallels in women such as the mother of Peter of Luxembourg (d. 1387), the fourteenth-century laywoman Margery Kempe (d. after 1438), and the fasting girls noticed in passing by sixteenth-century broadside writers. The second justification is that those holy women of whom we have records, especially those who were canonized or widely revered, were *chosen* by their contemporaries as heroines, mirrors, and lessons—as lenses through which God’s power and human aspirations were focused toward each other. Like a poem or romance whose manuscript tradition attests that it was widely read, women such as Catherine of Siena reflect what at

least some of their contemporaries found valuable and awe-inspiring. It is therefore not unwarranted to take the stories most commonly told about saintly women—however atypical or abnormal they may appear to medieval or modern common sense—as important evidence about the assumptions of the people who admired the saints.²⁰

Finally, it should hardly be necessary to comment that I am not concerned with whether medieval accounts of phenomena such as stigmata, levitation, miraculous bodily changes, extended inedia, visions, and food-multiplication miracles are “true.” As a phenomenologist would say, I “bracket” the question of cause, either natural or supernatural, for such events. I am interested in what medieval people experienced; and while I have a historian’s skepticism about all evidence, I also, as a historian, prefer to start my study of the past with what people in the past said themselves. Medieval people had several different models for understanding phenomena such as eucharistic visions or extended and total abstinence. Where they themselves suggest that what some see as a miracle is fraud or demonic possession or illness, I am interested in their models; where they note the difference between meditation and vision, or between visions of the inner and the outer eyes, I am curious about why they found such distinctions important. But when they do not employ categories or explanations that modern people find necessary, I try to avoid such terminology. Thus when I say, for example, that a certain holy woman lived for years without eating, I do not mean to imply that this statement is true (or false) by twentieth-century standards of reporting or of scientific verification. I mean that such a story interested medieval people enough for them to record it and that it expressed a way of finding value and giving meaning that holy women, their chroniclers, and their admirers all shared.²¹

My work has implications for modern problems and obsessions that will not be lost on many of its readers. I have touched on these in my epilogue. I have, moreover, tried to write in a manner that is accessible to those who are not medievalists. This is nonetheless a scholarly, not a popular, book.²² It is a book about then, not about now. It is animated most fundamentally neither by horror at the problems of women in the modern world nor by delight at their advances, whatever I may feel of both emotions. My commitment, vision, and method are historical; I intend to reveal the past in its strangeness as well as its familiarity. My



point is to argue that women's behavior and women's writing must be understood in the context of social, economic, and ecclesiastical structures, theological and devotional traditions, very different from our own. If readers leave this book simply condemning the past as peculiar, I shall have failed. But I shall have failed just as profoundly if readers draw direct answers to modern problems from the lives I chronicle.