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‘Fals flesch’: Food and the Embodied Piety of Margery Kempe

Melissa Raine

One of the most conspicuous ways in which the heightened religious experience of Margery Kempe is communicated to those around her is through the violation of certain norms of everyday bodily regulation: Margery weeps, howls, all but collapses in her contemplative ecstasies. The sheer inability to regulate her own physicality signifies piety in these instances. Yet this lack of regulation is, perhaps ironically, also a highly conformist gesture, as these losses of self-control signify Margery’s participation in a tradition of female affective piety. However, it is not only the flamboyant physicality of Margery’s piety that demonstrates the ambiguity of notions of control and its loss, and of conformity as distinct from singularity or individuality: other, more everyday forms of self-regulation are also intrinsic to communicating Margery’s exceptional spiritual experiences to her audiences. In particular, Margery’s network of popular support is also negotiated, or made apparent to others, through practices involving food.¹

The importance of the social aspects of food and feeding have been hinted at but not pursued in recent criticism. Lynn Staley, for example, argues that whereas fasting in the lives of other religious women is used to suggest their ‘otherworldliness’, ‘Kempe uses food as a signifier of both Margery’s private and public communities’.² As Staley points out, Kempe’s food rules are formulated in private conversations with Jesus, demonstrating ‘Margery’s allegiance to a community of the spirit

¹ The concept of a negotiable self is taken from Susan Crane, The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War (Philadelphia, 2002). Crane’s “negotiable self” or “self in circulation” is distinct from ‘modern individuality’, which resides in private thoughts and feelings (p. 20); rather, “what is “individual” is most of all what one can put into circulation” (p. 20). For passing affirmations of Margery’s piety expressed through food, see the successful meals shared with a lady of Norwich (4:8 ll. 2–3), and with the monks of an undisclosed location (5:1 l. 28–26 l. 6).

² Lynn Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions (University Park, Pa., 1994), 90–1.
by describing her adherence to a private rule for living. But Staley also acknowledges that the food practices in the Book seem more vivid and coherent when connected with Margery’s circulation within contemporary society: ‘of even more interest is Kempe’s use of food to indicate the nature of the contemporary English community, which thrusts Margery from its midst because her eating practices are different’. While I agree with Staley’s suggestion that the dynamic relationship between food and community conveys far more complexity within The Book than the mysteries associated with fasting and the eucharist, I do not always share her interpretation of specific episodes, as discussed below.

Sarah Beckwith’s study of embodiment focuses on eucharistic consumption, describing Margery’s imitation of the suffering body of Christ as a form of mimesis of Christ which makes the body of a text, and a form of internalized devotion that makes her written text itself the resource of sacramentality. Such an exchange can only operate through the symbol of Christ’s body, which is both body and word. Many of Margery’s food practices are not strictly part of her imitation of Christ, and are not addressed by Beckwith; nevertheless, Margery’s relationship with food beyond her eucharist consumption demonstrates important variations on the text-body relationship that Beckwith associates with Margery’s mimesis of Christ.

This essay provides a more extended analysis of Margery Kempe’s food practices, adding new dimensions to the discussions found in recent criticism. More broadly, it contributes to the ongoing debate concerning the relationships between food, the female body, and religious practices in medieval Europe associated with the work of Caroline Walker Bynum.

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6 Ibid.
12 For instance, in the late fourteenth century, the Bishop of Lincoln objects to the blessing of bacon and eggs in the parish church of Nettleham, arguing that ‘the chosen people were forbidden...’ (Dorothy L. Owen, *Bacon and Eggs: Bishop Buckingham and Superstition in Lincolnshire*, *Studies in Church History*, 8 (1972), 141–2: 142).
powerfully expressive activities, capable of articulating highly nuanced versions of religious devotion. Complementing the complex significance of religious food practices, the symbolic meanings of particular foodstuffs, the manner of preparation, presentation, and service, and the modes in which food was consumed, participated powerfully in the world of social distinction. This essay discusses Margery Kempe’s extensive use of the richly symbolic dynamics of food in the negotiation of her spiritual authority.

Margery Kempe: The Madwoman in the Pantry?

After a short discussion of her former, secular self and her descent into madness, the story of the converted Margery begins with her first vision of Christ, which causes her to recover from this period of mental instability. Following the vision, the text recounts what is both Margery’s first act of sanity and the beginning of her spiritual enlightenment:

And a noon so waivers was stapsedly in hir wyttys & in hir reson as well as eury sche was be-forn, and preyd hir husband ... Dat sche myght haue ke keys of ke botery to takyn hir mete and drynyke as sche had don before. Hyr maydens & hir kepars cowserdale hym xulde delyuyyte hir ke no keys, for pei seyd sche xulde but 3eue away swch good as per was, for sche wyst not what sche seyd as pei wende [imagined]. Neuyr pe lesse, hir hوسbund, euyr haying tendynys & componyon of hir, co-mawndy pe xulde delyuyyte to hir pe keys. And sche toke hir mete & drynyke as hir bodylyy strength wold seruyyn hir & knew hir frendys & hir meny [household] & all ocher peat cam to hir to se how owyr Lord Ihesu Crist had wrott hys grace in hir. (81. 25—9 L. 1)\(^{15}\)

Thus Margery’s first meeting with Christ prompts her to eat, and the world’s (including the reader’s) first witnessing of the blessed Margery is to watch her having an ordinary meal. In order to understand how this event contributes to Margery’s spiritual authority at this crucial point in its development, it is necessary to consider why she was denied access to the household food supplies by other household members. It is not difficult to infer that Margery told her servants of her vision; after all, their reason for blocking her access to the buttery is that ‘sche wyss not what sche seyd’: they do not believe that Margery’s sanity has been restored to her. (Similarly, the claim that all who observed her eating saw how Christ had ‘wrot hys grace in hir’ suggests that Margery’s audience had been told of her encounter with Christ in order to reach such a conclusion.) Margery’s maidens and keepers seem to be responding to an unspoken connection between Margery’s claims of personal contact with Christ, and the act of giving away ‘swch good as per was’.

The drama of this episode affords us a glimpse into some nuances in the reception of models of female piety during this period. As Bynum points out, tales of religious women flouting the authority of their husbands and households through covert charitable food distribution circulated widely in medieval Europe, and there is reason to think that the maidens and keepers might be interpreting Margery’s request as a move in this direction. Baskets of food that devout women take from their family stores to give to the poor are miraculously turned into baskets of roses when the theft is discovered by a member of the household; this trope is associated with Elizabeth of Hungary, Florence of Beaulieu, Rose of Viterbo, Elizabeth of Portugal, and Margaret of Fontana. An elaborate triptych of the late fifteenth century shows Godelieve of Ghislatte taking a basket of food from her parents’ home, which turns into wood shavings when a servant confronts her; no details of any such food thefts are recounted in her eleventh-century life.\(^{18}\) The accretion of this episode to the


\(^{14}\) Margery’s failed brewing and mulling ventures are presented as aspects of her pre-conversion sinfulness (for a discussion, see Stealer, Margery Kempe’s Denying Fictions, 48).

\(^{13}\) Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (eds.), The Book of Margery Kempe: The Text from the Unique MS owned by Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon (London, 1940). All quotations are from this edition.

\(^{16}\) Although the buttery is usually a storage room for alcohol, this passage suggests either that other comestibles may also have been stored there in this household, or that the beverages locked away were considered to be essential components of the normal meal; on the importance of ale to the diet, see Christopher Dyer, Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c.1200–1520 (Cambridge, 1989), 57–8.


Godelieve legend, as well as its presence in so many other lives of holy
womesthesia, suggests the enduring popularity of this tradition throughout
medieval Europe. Such tales were supposed to exemplify exceptional
piety, but the possibility of Margery giving away 'wretched good as she was'
interpreted by her maidens and keepers as the ravings of a mentally
incompetent woman.

If such tales are obliquely alluded to in the servants' and keepers' fears,
then Margery is rejecting a food practice which signals a version of pious
female behaviour that is rebellious towards familial and secular authority,
and interpreted by those around her with scepticism (treated as insanity)
and hostility. Margery chooses instead to express her spiritual encounter
to the world through the simple, orderly consumption of a meal, in which
her experience of Christ is communicated through her obedience to
everyday domestic conventions. It is instructive to watch how such a
banal activity is transformed, in Margery's hands, virtually into a religious
ritual, as eating food is presented by Margery to her observers as concrete
proof of her bond with Christ.

The value of food in this episode resides not only in its ability to
nourish Margery and allow her to begin her new vocation 'as her bodily
strength wold seruyn hir': eating is represented here, and repeated-
ly in The Book, as a visible activity. In this case, the table is transformed
into a stage upon which Margery's sanctity is displayed for anyone who
will come and look: a first, important step in having herself taken seri-
ously as a religious figure. She opts for an available version of piety; as
a result of Christ's intervention, Margery in this episode is someone
with whom a meal can be shared, not someone whose behaviour is
remote, like that of an ascetic, or furtive, like that of some holy women
who pilfer from their families. For all of Margery's supposedly outrageous
and individualistic behaviour, her first Christ-inspired act is one of utter
social conformity.

Georges Duby, 'The Matron and the Mismatched Woman,' in idem (ed.), Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages, trans. Jane Dunnett (Chicago, 1988), 36–51. The triptych is reproduced in Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen, From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1998), 126–7.\footnote{The triptych itself is an example of the 'increasing numbers of individuals... desirous of portraits, alabapes, and other types of devotional works' who turned to the painters of Bruges from the mid- to late fifteenth century to paint popular compositions, resulting eventually in a mass market for painting (Jean L. Wilson, Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages: Studies in Society and Visual Culture (University Park, Pa., 1998), 189–90). A small indication that Godelieve's story had reached England can be found in the Canterbury Tales, where the Host's wife's name is Goodlely; see The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), 240 l. 1994.}

This first unassuming and conformist religious food practice of Margery's
career seems to contrast starkly with her various acts of food deprivation
and her consumption of the eucharist, which unequivocally proclaim
Margery's singularity. However, there are marked parallels between these
food practices and the episode discussed above: fasting, abstinence, and
eucharistic consumption also provide visual evidence for potential sup-
porters of Margery's individual experience.

Abstinence and fasting were amongst the most fundamental rituals of
medieval Christianity; Bossy refers to fasting as 'a domestic observance,
one of the few domestic rites which medieval Catholicism possessed', an
observation that underscores the importance of fasting in everyday life, in
all reaches of medieval society.\footnote{John Bossy, Christianity in the West, 1400–1700 (Oxford, 1987), 91.} From Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, and during the rest of the year on Fridays, meat was strictly forbidden, as were 'white meats' (all animal-derived foods, but especially milk, butter, cheese, and eggs).\footnote{The strictness of this period of abstinence was possibly being eroded in parts of Europe, including the south of England, from the early fifteenth century (Bossy, Christianity, 91). This is supported by Dyer's observation that eggs frequently accompanied fish (Standards of Living, 63).} In more pious households, meat was also prohibited before and during Advent,\footnote{See Harvey, Living and Dying, 92.} as well as on Wednesdays and Saturdays (except under special circumstances, such as illness). Some orders, such as the Carthusians, abstained from meat entirely, and Nicholas Love, prior of the Carthusian Priory of Mountgrace, pointedly describes Jesus as maintaining the same regime in the highly popular Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, a text that heavily influenced Margery.\footnote{Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 5787 and 6688, ed. Michael G. Sargent (New York, 1992), 149. Love explains that the only time Jesus ate meat was at the Last Supper, 'more for mystery than for bodily need' (p. 149 ll. 35–6). The Carthusian rule demanded abstention from meat, although fish could be consumed if given to the monks (p. 221). One of the annotations in the Book, believed by Meech to be the work of a monk at Mountgrace, is 'beysese' (p. 161) in response to Christ asking Margery to eat meat (The Book, p. 336).}\footnote{Richard Rolle's Incendium Amoris, a text known to Margery, declares that 'a man who gives up this world completely and attends closely to reading, prayer, meditation, watchings, and
religious orders, but, as a member of the lay population, this practice also individualizes her.

Christ formally demands the incorporation of a two-part food practice into her piety in the form of abstaining from meat and substituting Christ’s flesh on a weekly basis:

\[\text{\textit{\textbf{\nu must forsaç \textit{\textbf{\nu} bow louyst best \textit{\textbf{\nu} in\textit{\textbf{\nu} world, \& \textit{\textbf{\nu} is etynge of flesh. And in\-stede of \textit{\textbf{\nu} flesh bow schalt etyn my flesh\& my blod, \textit{\textbf{\nu} is \textit{\textbf{\nu} very body of Christ \textit{\textbf{\nu} Sacrament of \textit{\textbf{\nu} Awter. Thys is my wyl, dowyn, \textit{\textbf{\nu} te receyue my body every Sunday, and I schal flowe so mych grace in \textit{\textbf{\nu} al alle \textit{\textbf{\nu} world xal merelyn \textit{\textbf{\nu} of \textit{\textbf{\nu} peul of \textit{\textbf{\nu} world as any racion \textit{\textbf{\nu} knawyn \textit{\textbf{\nu} stokysch.}}}}}}}}}}}}\]

(17 ll. 9–17)

The discomfort of abstinence does not seem, in any direct way, to enhance Margery’s spiritual enlightenment; the only reference made here to any actual experience of Margery’s is that she is partial to eating meat, ‘\textit{\textbf{\nu} bow louyst best \textit{\textbf{\nu} in\textit{\textbf{\nu} world’}.\textsuperscript{25} Nor does Margery need to abstain as a penance: before asking her to give up meat, Christ assures Margery that ‘\textit{\textbf{\nu} for\-\textit{\textbf{\nu}e \textit{\textbf{\nu} synne of \textit{\textbf{\nu} vterest point . . . And I grawnt \textit{\textbf{\nu} con\textit{\textbf{\nu}trysisyn in\-
\textit{\textbf{\nu} to \textit{\textbf{\nu} lyues ende’}}}}}}}}}}\]

(16 ll. 34–5–17 ll. 2–3).

This remission implies liberation for Margery from the penitential associations of the act and the season (the Friday before Advent is, as Hope Emily Allen points out, a time of penance). As Allen makes clear in her note on this line, this forgiveness is reiterated many times in the \	extit{Book}, and yet Margery continues to participate in activities that will absolve her.\textsuperscript{26}

It is important not to mistake Margery’s abstinence from meat as merely an \textit{absence}, a symbolic and literal denial of bodily lusts and worldly

fastings, will gain purity of mind and conscience, to such an extent that he would like to die through his supermal joy, for he longs to depart and to be with Christ’ (The Fire of Love; Translated from the Latin into Modern English with an Introduction by Clifton Wobler (Harmondsworth, 1972), 121).

\textsuperscript{25} The closest that the \	extit{Book} comes to locating fasting as isolated from the world is when it mentions Margery’s intention to consume bread and water with an anchor on Our Lady’s Eve (119 ll. 19–24).

\textsuperscript{26} There is considerable mistrust of the act of fasting in the \	extit{Book}. Margery admits to abusing the penitential benefits of fasting in her pre-conversion life, using it to avoid the sacramental powers of confession (6 l. 32–7 l. 8); Christ tells Margery that he values being able to speak directly to her soul far more than he values fasting and other ascetic practices (89 ll. 19–27). Beckwith sees Christ’s downplaying of fasting in this episode as part of a larger struggle about clerical authority versus Margery’s self-authorizing piety, which often takes its cues directly from Christ, thus circumventing clerical authority (‘Uses of Corpus Christi’, 91–2). But when put together with other discussions of fasting, as well as the very fact that Christ brings it up himself numerous times, a more general ambivalence about its merits is apparent throughout the \	extit{Book}.

orientation; it is also a positive step towards a readily recognizable pious identity, because Margery’s refusal to eat meat would have been easily perceived at the medieval table (indeed, the pilgrims \textit{en route} to Jerusalem specifically objected to it, 61 ll. 16–18), where most dishes were communal, and where meat was a highly prized component of a meal. While her eucharist consumption was visible at the altar, her abstinence from meat was demonstrated at the many tables at which we are told Margery dined.

The social \textit{visibility} of Margery’s fasting and abstaining is an implicit feature of Margery’s exchange of her Friday fasts for sexual abstinence:

\textit{Anop\-\textsuperscript{er} tyme, as \textit{\textbf{\nu} creatur prayd to God \textit{\textbf{\nu} sche myt leyn\textit{\textbf{\nu} rive} chast be leue of \textit{\textbf{\nu} hir husband, Cryst seyd to \textit{\textbf{\nu} mende, \textit{\textbf{\nu} bow must fastyn \textit{\textbf{\nu} Fryday bo\-\textit{\textbf{\nu} en f\textit{\textbf{\nu} mete\& drynke, and \textit{\textbf{\nu} bow schalt haue \textit{\textbf{\nu} desyr er Whitsunday, for \textit{\textbf{\nu} schal sodenely sle \textit{\textbf{\nu} hin husbonde’}}}}}}}}}}}}\]

(21 ll. 8–12)

When the married couple finally negotiate a resolution to their grievances, the transaction is reinforced by the added condition that Margery pay her husband’s debts as well:

\textit{\textbf{\’Sere, y\textit{f} it lyke \textit{\textbf{\nu} w, \textit{\textbf{\nu} schal grawnt me my desyr, \& \textit{\textbf{\nu} schal haue \textit{\textbf{\nu} wyr desyr. Grawnytth me \textit{\textbf{\nu} w} schal not ken\textit{s}yn in my bed, \& I grawnt \textit{\textbf{\nu} wyr to qytwe \textit{\textbf{\nu} deths er I go to Jerusalem.\& m\textit{akyth my b\textit{ody\textit{f}} to God so \textit{\textbf{\nu} w} ney\textit{r\textit{m}} ma\textit{k}e no chal\textit{enyng\textit{g}}\textit{n} in me to askyn no d\textit{ett\textit{m}} of mar\textit{it}\textit{eny af\textit{ty\textit{r} \textit{\textbf{\nu} s\textit{y\textit{d\textit{y\textit{w}}}\textit{\textbf{\nu} leyn,\& I schal etyn \& dry\textit{n}k\textit{yn\textit{y\textit{\nu} o\textit{f} Fryday at \textit{\textbf{\nu} wyr byd\textit{yn\textit{g}}.\textit{Th\textit{en seyd h\textit{ir\textit{\nu} husband a\textit{-\textit{\textbf{\nu} n\textit{e\textit{\nu} to hir, ‘As \textit{\textbf{\nu} w\textit{f} mot \textit{\textbf{\nu} wyr body\textit{\nu} ben to God as it hath\textit{\nu} ben to me.’}}}}}}}}}}\]

(25 ll. 4–13)

Beckwith has described this transaction as ‘John Kempe’s trade of his conjugal debts for the repayment of his financial debts. . . . It indicates the interaction of earthly and heavenly social roles at the most concrete material level—the exchange of hard cash. Kempe literally buys the right of her own body back from her husband.’\textsuperscript{27} Beckwith’s silence on the food component of this transaction implies that financial matters form a more significant bargaining chip than Margery’s food practices. But if John Kempe was only interested in the money, why was it necessary for Margery to give up this fast at all? Bynum surmises that he was ‘obviously ashamed of her queer penitential clothes and food practices’, implying

\textsuperscript{27} Beckwith, ‘Use of Corpus Christi’, 86. Aes does not refer to the food aspect of this transaction in his discussion of the episode, ‘The Making of Margery Kempe’, 95–6. Thomas J. Heffernan, in \textit{Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages} (Oxford, 1988), argues that ‘she convinces her husband that if he attempts to sleep with her, God (who has revealed this to her) will kill him’ (p. 187), making no mention of the fasting or payment of debts.
that Margery's religious persona is bemusing to John.28 However, the 'obviousness' of this shame is not clearly communicated, if it is present at all, in this episode. Margery's personal conversion represented something of a political victory for the powerful religious sections of Lynn over the burgesses; thus, her Friday fasts represent her obedience not only to Christ, but her alignment with the adversaries of John Kempe and his peers.29 John's compensation for his renunciation of sex—by having Margery as a table companion on Fridays—seems to reside in the symbolic restoration of his authority over his own household; Margery agrees, after all, to eat at '5owr byddyn'.

The other component of Margery's pact with Christ, the frequent consumption of the eucharist, could be described as the apex of her spiritual food practices: eating Christ's flesh and blood overwhelms her on many occasions. Nevertheless, as with her fasts, Margery's eucharist consumption does not clearly evoke an interiorized spiritual experience.30 For instance, when Margery receives the eucharist in Jerusalem, it provides the same benefit to her as to any other pilgrim, 'for in his place is plenyr remysyon' (72 ll. 20–1, my emphasis).31 Despite numerous personal assurances from Christ that she is absolved of all sin, a preoccupation with penance displaces other more contemplative forms of experience. Even Christ privileges the communication of her singularity to the general populace as the primary benefit of Margery's eucharist consumption. By likening her body to food—"pou xalt ben etyn & knwynf pe pepul of pe world as any raton kownyth pe stofkysch"—Christ displaces the emphasis from Margery's experience of her relationship with him, to her relationship with the public.32

Charity, Hospitality, and Commensality

More than her fasts and abstinences, the religious and social associations of giving and receiving food demonstrate the complicated negotiations made by Margery Kempe as a lay woman aspiring to a career in piety. Almsgiving in medieval England was sometimes presented as an act of self-interest for the rich:

yn pe day of dome pore men schull be domes-men wyth Crist, and dome pe ryche. For all pe woe pat pore men hauen, hit ys by pe ryche men; and bogh bay haue moche wrong, pat may not gete amendes, tyl by come to pat dome; and by pe schall hauve all hor one lust of hom. . . . Wherfor, syrs, for Godys loue, whyll 3e byn here, maketh amendes for your mysdedys, and maketh hom your frendes pat schall be our domes-men, and tryst 3e not to hom pat schall com afyry you, lest 3e ben deseyct, and drechyth pe payne of hell pat schall last wythouten any ende.33

In this formulation, the poor are endowed with tremendous moral power over the consciences of the rich, in lieu of any actual power over their own fates. Margery Kempe makes great use of the idealization of poverty, from the perspective of the materially comfortable, as a holy state of existence. Margery also echoes popular sentiments about the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor in her objections to the raising of funds for a charming but needy stranger by a priest (her first amansensis).34 She insists that alms would be better directed towards 'many powyr

Assimilating Margery's consumed flesh to an implicitly feminized act of 'nurture' seems tenuous, given the extremely negative overtones of the image. There is a reference to the literal nourishing of vermin on the body of Thomas Becker in John Mirk's sermon 47; see Mirk's Festial. A Collection of Homilies, ed. Theodor Erbe, Early English Text Society, 86–86 (London, 1905), 197 ll. 20–4. Margery also sees herself as being gnawed at by hostile people (154 ll. 23–4). A similar image is used by her potential lover in order to reject her advances (15 ll. 27–8).

33 Mirk's Festial, ed. Erbe, 4, 1. 33–5. 1. 11.
34 See Miri Rubin, Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge (Cambridge, 1987), 293, for a discussion of distinctions between recipients of charity. See also Harvey for a preference at Westminster Abbey, from the mid-fourteenth century, for giving alms to the 'established local poor, the respectable poor with addresses' (Living and Dying, 31). This distinction is also discussed by David Acers, 'Piers Plowman and Problems in the Perception of Property: A Culture in Transition', Leeds Studies in English, 14 (1989), 5–7, especially in relation to the distinction by Richard Fitzralph between those who beg by necessity and those who do not (p. 9). See also Aaron Jenkins Perry (ed.), Tresiart's Dialogue inter Militem et Clericam byo Finzralp and Be Bygynynge of pe World, Early English Text Society, os 167 (London, 1923), 88 ll. 13–18. This formulation is taken up by the Lollard William Taylor; see Anne Hudson (ed.), Two Wycliffite Texts: The Sermon of William Taylor 1406, the Testimony of William Thorpe 1407, Early English Text Society, os 301 (Oxford, 1993), p. 100, notes to ll. 41–9. Another distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor can be found in Arthur Brandeis (ed.), Jacoby Welle, An English
neyboures which *bei knewyn wel a-now*, who 'hadyn grete neede to ben holpyn & releved, & it was mor almes to helpyn hem *pat* bei knewyn wel for wel dysposyd folke & her owyn neyboures fan opet strawyners whech *bei knew nor*, for many spekyn & schewyn ful fayr owtoward to *bei* sygth of *bei* pepyl, God knowyth what *bei* arn in her sowlys' (56 ll. 19–25, my emphasis). Margery believes that her community is vulnerable to exploitation by interlopers whom we would be inclined to call 'con-men'; therefore, it is preferable to help only those whose circumstances are known personally to the donors. The opinions expressed here identify Margery with the *givers*, not the *recipients*, of charity, and thus, as someone in a position of privilege.

Felicity Heal points out that in medieval usage, 'the canonists employed the term "hospitality" interchangeably to refer to the care of strangers and the general support of the local poor.' Although food given at one's own table in a convivial social setting can thus be seen, like almsgiving, as a morally correct act, in *The Book of Margery Kempe* these activities are in fact clearly distinguished from each other. the *Book* 's description of a meal taken by Margery Kempe with the Bishop of Lincoln illustrates this lucidly:

Another day *his* creature cam to mete at *bei* request of *bei* Byshopp. And sche saw hym *gives* wyth his hands, er he set hym to mete, to xiii powyr men xiiij pens & xiiij lowys wyth opet mete, & so he ded every day. *His* creature was steryd by *his* sygth & *bei* God preysyn & worshypyn & *bei* grace to don *bes* good dedys wyth plentyowys wepyng, in so mych that alle *bei* Byshoppys men wyf gretely merveleyng what *hier* eyled. And sythen sche was set to mete (seated at the meal) wyth many worthy clerks & prestys & swyers (squires) of *bei* Byshoppys, and *bei* Byshopp hym-self sent hir ful gentely of his owyn mees (portion of food). (34 l. 26–33 l. 2)

By giving alms with his own hands, the bishop demonstrates both that he is not repulsed by poverty and also that he takes his charitable obligations seriously, as feeding the poor was usually carried out by lesser household members, who were therefore in a position to purloin the foodstuffs. By seating Margery amongst the gentle ranks of his household, and showing her the great courtesy of sharing food with her from his own mess, the bishop reinforces her social worth and validates her piety at the same time. Christ warns Margery that public almsgiving is rife with the potential for hypocrisy (205 ll. 28–33), but because Margery's tears and sobs occur only during spiritually powerful moments, they guarantee for the reader the absence of hypocrisy in the bishop's behaviour. By validating the scene before her, Margery, approving as she does of the seating and eating arrangements for herself, the gift of bread to the indigent, and the bishop's personal contact with the poor, signals her tacit approval of the form and function of charity during the period.

Margery's meditations on Mary are marked by charitable acts of food provision. For Mary, Margery begs (59 ll. 13–18), cooks a cauldle (195 ll. 7–8), fasts (162 ll. 11–13), and carries foodstuffs (discussed below); Mary, in turn, ordains food for Margery (93 ll. 15–17), and implores Margery to eat and keep herself healthy (162 ll. 13–17). In contrast to the food practices associated with Christ (which tend to be asocial, in theory at least), which Margery undertakes as mandated, with Mary, Margery often takes the initiative, and the acts themselves are usually somewhat domestic in nature. Or rather, Margery *appears* to take the initiative, since these activities are laid out as appropriate modes of behaviour in other texts, most notably Love's *Mirror*. Love's Mary gives away human food to the poor (20 ll. 41–3), as well as feeding the holy family on simple, homely foods; we move *eneke* how *bei* pre eten to gedire every day at one litel borde, not precious & delicatet metes bot symple & sobre as was onely nedeful to sustenance of *bei* (64 ll. 42–4). Love also details Mary's role in procuring wine at the wedding feast at Cana (82 ll. 3–26). Mary is

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37 Beckwith describes Margery's tears and cries as 'legitimizing symptoms of her compassion with Christ and the stages of her becoming Christ... [and] also simultaneously the signs of a rampantly competitive and quantified display' ('Uses of Corpus Christi', 88).
38 Love suggests that the devoted feed the grieving Mary, as Allen notes (the *Book*, 335–6). Staley includes Margery's making of a cauldle for Mary as an example of her allegiance to her spiritual community; however, all the other practices that Staley lists in this category are acts of abstinence in one form or another. Terence Scully refers to a French recipe for a cauldle in 'The Sickdish in Early French Recipe Collections', in Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall, and David Klausner (eds.), *Health, Disease and Healing in Medieval Culture* (New York, 1992), 332–40. It is included amongst recipes for the sick, and made of egg yolks & wine (p. 133). The *Middle English Dictionary* distinguishes between two kinds of cauldle, one of which is a restorative food.
39 When angels come to Christ at the end of his temptation in the desert and ask 'Oure wort bi lorde je haue longe fastode, & it is now your tyme to eate what is your wille but we ordynay for 300w', Christ replies, 'Gofe to my dere moder, & what maner of meate she haue redy bringhet to me, for *bei* is none boody mete so lykyng [pleasing] to me as *bei* is of hir dihtyng [arranging] & so of *bei* symple mete but she hade ordynet to hir seil & Joseph *bei* anges tokene with a lofe & a towel, & oter necessaries, & brouhten to Jesu, & perantere [perhaps] perwih a fewe smale fishes but our lady hade ordynet *ben*, as god wolde' (76 ll. 31–44).
presented as a model feeder whose example is at once imperative but impossible to follow, whose capacities for feeding seem to be amplified by her son. Margery emulates Mary, and Mary, Love emphasizes, provides food.

But Margery does not draw exclusively on Love for her meditations on the Virgin. Love admonishes those who glamorize Mary, insisting instead upon her lowly social status and her poverty:

Now take hede how þat blessed lady qwene of heuen & of erpe goð alone with hire spouse & þat not vp on hors bot on fote. She ledē not with hire many knyhtes & barones nor þe grete compayne of bour e maidenes & damyseles, bot soperly þere goð with hire a wele better compayne, & þat is Poure, Mekenes, & honest Shamfastnes, 36 & þe plente [abundance] of alle vertues, & þe best of alle þat isoure lorde god is with hire. She haþ a grete & wiþchfulp compayne, bot not of þe vanye & þe pompe of þe world. (30 ll. 26–34)

Despite her heavy reliance on the Mirror, Margery resorts to precisely the version of Mary against which Love rails. In her first meditation on Mary, Margery carries a container of pyment (spiced, sweetened wine) and spices to Elisabeth: ‘þan went sche forth wyth owry Lady wyth lospe, beryng wyth hir a potel [2-quart container] of pyment & spycys þerto’ (18 ll. 33–5). This choice of activity seems lowly, but Margery’s chosen foodstuffs tell us much concerning what is envisaged here. Sweetened wines were a fashionable luxury item during the early fifteenth century, and spices were also expensive and highly desirable.40 As part of her entourage, she bears the sign of Mary’s largesse, the wine, and spices, widely associated with hospitality, honourable behaviour, and the highest standards of living. In this scenario, Margery is a member of a model aristocratic household, and her submission here is in fact social advancement. In this instance, Mary, contrary to Love’s insistence, is not a lowly woman, but most decidedly a lady.

Margery’s devotion to Mary is described in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* as unusual amongst holy women (p. 269). Bynum explains it as ‘less a reverence for a “representative woman” than a reverence for body, for the bearer and conduit of the Incarnation’ (p. 269), pointing out that Margery and Ida of Louvain ‘sometimes identified with Mary as she


suckled Jesus or received visions of taking the Christ child to their breasts’ (p. 270).41 But Bynum makes no reference to the social and communal food-related activities that form bonds between Mary and Margery. To claim that Mary is conflated with her breast milk and reduced to a ‘conduit’, no matter how venerable, is inadequate for assessing the extent of Margery’s relationship with Mary, particularly where food is involved.

Margery’s attitudes towards poverty prove to be extremely sensitive to context. Aware of the considerable symbolic capital of holiness that poverty yields, Margery taps into the spiritually rich vein of indigence by giving all her money away in Rome. In an environment where her sacrifice is recognized and rewarded, she uses the charitable distribution of food by others to usurp the role of the poor in the obligation upon the wealthy to give away superfluous goods to those in need, and begs cheerfully for her own food on the limited number of days when she is not invited to sit at someone’s table (84 ll. 20–4; or indeed, sent away with a hamper to tide her over, as by her beloved Lady Florentine 93 ll. 33–7). This period of Margery’s version of poverty is notable for the lack of discomfort she suffers: money, good food, and wine flow quickly and abundantly in her direction, as indeed Christ promises they will. But, we find, there are the poor, and then there are the poor. Particularly infatuated with poverty after receiving a cup of wine from an impoverished young mother suckling an infant boy, she declares herself a ‘partrynyr wyth hem [the poor] in meryte’ (94 l. 24). But why ‘partner’? Why is she not simply one of them? At the bishop’s dinner, the men rounded up for the distribution of alms were clearly in a different social category from those seated at his boards. It is noteworthy, then, that even when Margery devests herself of her money in Rome, others often share their table with her. Presumably, there are aspects of Margery’s self-presentation, and perhaps a network of recommendations, that help her to avoid the humiliating lineup she so approved of at the bishop’s meal.

Margery does not, in this narrative, offer hospitality in her home. She begins her religious career by publicly rejecting the opportunity to give her own household’s food to the poor. Nevertheless, Margery engages in charitable feeding not as the head of an affluent household, but by begging on behalf of others. Her vision of the newly delivered Mary aside, her

41 Margery is told, ‘Dowyt, he sowkyn eunyn on Crystys brest’ (81 l. 2) by an anchorite, a conventional image of eucharistic piety promoted in Cistercian writings (Beckwith, *Uses of Corpus Christi*, 86); Margery does not describe herself in this way.
fitst worldly act of charitable feeding occurs when she begs for a poor, old woman in Rome (85 ll. 33–6), not by her own volition, but by order of her confessor:

Than be good prest he confessor bad [asked] hir be vertu of obediens & also in party of penanses bat sche xulde seruyyn an hold woman bat was a pore creatur in Rome. & sche dede so sex wekses. Sche seruyd hir as sche wolde a don owyr Lady. & sche had no bed to lyn in ne no clothys to be cured [covered] wyth saf hir own mentyl. & pan was sche ful of vermyyn & suffryd gete peyn perwyth. Also sche fet hom watre & styklys in hir nekke for be pore woman and beggyd mete and wyn bothyn for hir. And, when the pour womens wyn was sowr, his creatur hir-self drank bat sowr wyn & 3af be powr woman good wyn bat sche had bowt for hir owyn selfe. (85 l. 33–86 l. 7)

As Staley observes, this pact seems most significant to Margery for the bond it provides between herself and the priest: 'bound by their love of Christ, they contract a new society'; he endures ill will on her behalf, and the service she gives the old woman beroken her obedience to him. Margery confirms her sense of her own high social status by agreeing to 'seruyyn' this lowly poor woman 'as sche wolde a don owyr lady' (85 ll. 35–6), an almost parodic choice of words, a luxurious dabbling in the idea of poverty as a token of how far she will bend (on a temporary basis) to show her obedience to the priest. Margery's service of the old woman can indeed be compared with the service that she provides for Mary in her meditations, particularly with her role as a kind of lady-in-waiting, the situation where the verb 'seruyyn' would be most appropriate. Whereas Margery carried pyment and spesces to Elisabeth as part of Mary's familia, by consuming the old woman's sour wine and magnanimously giving her the wine she had bought for herself, the reader is not permitted to forget that in truth, she retains superior economic and social powers.

Somewhat paradoxically, Margery's willing embrace of poverty shields her from its true misery. However, this is not the case when she is forced into an insecure position, rather than adopting it of her own volition. Margery's romantic brushes with poverty in Rome contrast strongly with her later trip to Prussia, where she makes no attempt to disguise her disgust at the company of the poor that she is obliged to keep after being abused and abandoned by various fellow-travellers, a situation in which she prefers to buy food rather than beg with her destitute companions:

So sche was receuyd in-to a cumpany of powr folke, & whan be comyn to any towe, sche bowte hir mete & hir felaschep went on beggyng ... Nede compelyd hir to abyden hem & prolongen hir jurne & ben at meche mor cost pan sche xulde ellys a ben ... Sche kepe forthe hir felaschep wyth gret angwis & disese. (237 ll. 17–29)

Far from finding this an occasion to exercise charity (or to imitate Christ's poverty, for that matter), she resents the poor and refuses the symbolically communal act of procuring her food with them. Considering the attachment to commensality with kindred spirits that Margery displays elsewhere, it is important to note here that she does not accuse them of lacking piety; they are merely poor and dirty. She reaffirms her superior social status by buying food (and complaining of their dirtiness). Margery likes to beg when it is a matter of choice, and prefers, in her fantasies, to beg for Mary rather than to be forced into genuine association with the genuinely poor.

During meals consumed with her fellow pilgrims en route to Jerusalem, where Margery has paid her own way and has plenty of gold in reserve, she turns to the ideal of commensality itself to achieve singularity. Far from the standard set by her meal with Master Aleyn—'per was a dyner of gret joy & gladnes, meche more gostly pan bodibly, for it was sawcyd & sawyrd [made savoury] wyth talys of Holy Scriptur' (170 ll. 21–3)—the Book suggests that Margery's pilgrimage companions practise a debased, secular version of commensality. Because the pilgrims wish to punish Margery for her refusal to eat meat and drink wine, and her insistence on talking of Christ at the table, behaviours which disturb their version of commensality, they effectively demote her social standing by forcing her to sit in the place reserved for the lowest rank of participant in the meal; 'bei madyn hir to sryttyt at fe tabelys ende be-nethyn alle ope[|h]at sche durst ful euyl spekyn a word' (62 ll. 19–20). But Margery's vindication comes through the same system; outsiders to this group encountered during the journey manage to see Margery's virtue despite the hierarchical slight, and demonstrate their approval of her by feeding her from their own messes, as did the Bishop of Lincoln:

not-wythstondyng al her malyce, sche was had in more worship pesbei wher-|bat-euyr|bei comyn, & be good man of he hows pesbei wer hostellyd, bow sche

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42 Staley, Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions, 112.
43 Clarissa Atkinson, Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe (Oxford, 1988), sees Margery as a loving daughter-in-law (p. 83), but, as I have argued, the relationship is also more formal. For a discussion of the ‘feudal submission’ shown to Mary by Elizabeth of Hungary, see Sarah McNamer, The Two Middle English Translations of the Revelations of St. Elisabeth of Hungary (Heidelberg, 1996), 104.

44 See also 63 ll. 1–64 l. 13, where a doctor of divinity comes to Margery’s defence at the dinner table.
Margery does not abandon the hierarchical model of the table, but rather is reincorporated into the group through a shared meal within a meal. The significance attributed by Margery to the politics of table practices signals her acceptance of, and dependence upon, some of the profound injustices in the medieval social order that are represented in the microcosm of the table.

**Appetite/Glutony/Hypocrisy**

Just as the public aspect of Margery’s contact with Christ began with a meal in which she demonstrated self-control and an adherence to everyday conventions, her last engagement with the secular world takes place at a meal where, once again, Margery’s bodily regulation is the key issue in the public perception of her vocation. However, far from seeing the episode as ‘masterly’, as Staley does, I see authorial control at this point in the text as weak indeed, as it grapples with a particularly persistent accusation against Margery of a failure in bodily regulation.

Whilst travelling anonymously through London on her way home from Aachen, Margery is confronted with a slanderous proverbial refrain uttered at mealtimes far and wide, at her expense, and with which she is personally humiliaded as she dines anonymously at ‘a worscheple wedows hows in London’ (244 l. 11):

> Sum on person er elles no persony, deceyued hee gostly enny, contiynyd þis tale not long afer þis convension of þis sayd creatur, seying þat sche, sitying at þe mete on a fisch-day at a good manmys tabyl, seruyd wyth dyuers of fyschyys as rede hering & goode pyke & sweche oþer, þus sche xulde a seyd, as þei reportyd, ‘A, þu fals flesch, þu woldeist now eynx xeed hering, but þu xaltn not han þi wille.’ & berwryth sche xet a-wey þe rede hering & ete þe goode pyke. & sweche oþer þus sche xuld a seyd, as þei seydyn, & þus it sprong in-to a maner of prouerbe a-þen hir þat summe seydyn, ‘fals flesch, þu xaltn ete non hering.’ (243 l. 34–244 l. 7)

The final chapter is dominated by interactions within the sacralized space of Sheen, and then with Margery’s confessor on her return to Lynn, making the episode that I am about to discuss her last true encounter with secular society.

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45 The final chapter is dominated by interactions within the sacralized space of Sheen, and then with Margery’s confessor on her return to Lynn, making the episode that I am about to discuss her last true encounter with secular society.


Margery, as she stands accused, supposedly refuses the lowly red herring (associated with Lenten privation) under the pretense of disciplining her fleshly cravings, ironically ‘punishing’ her flesh by taking instead the highly desirable pike, which often forms the centrepiece of fish-day feasts. Margery is guilty here of glutony for craving the richer food-stuff, but the sin is immediately subsumed by the proverbial utterance to which it leads, strongly suggesting that the delight taken in the circulation of this verbal fragment of the original episode derives from the exposure of hypocrisy. The focus of the episode is therefore displaced from the purported lapse in bodily regulation on to the power of language, in the form of gossip, over reputation and authority.

Margery and the amanuensis stridently deny any basis in reality for this refrain:

> þer was neytr man ne woman þat euyr myth preuyþ þat sche seyd swech wordys, but euyr þei madyn oþer lyars her autotys, seying in excusyn of hem-self þat oþer tem telde hem so. On þis maner wer þes fals wordys howsyn [dervised] þow þe Deuelys suggestyon. (243 l. 30–4)

Words in themselves are not evil: it is the lack of (reputable) authorities, and the absence of Christian love that is the problem. But apart from these admittedly serious deficiencies, what the authors identify is remarkably similar to the informal means through which Margery’s reputation has been established. The very means of negotiation that Margery has employed are being turned against her, discrediting her displays of bodily regulation and overwhelming her claims to spiritual authority. This presents a harsh irony, and a considerable hurdle for the Book itself to overcome; Margery is represented as having worked assiduously to establish a reputation for piety, having made it her business to commune with people searching for spiritual aid, in many cases accepting their food and proclaiming the ardour of her devotions through her abstinences at the tables of the pious. The fame that is implicitly craved within the Book, the desire for the name of Margery Kempe to be uttered no less than proverbially, far and wide, is grotesquely realized when Margery is
finally brought face to face with this sly ridiculing of her religious identity, which has apparently dogged her since the early days of her conversion.

The irrepressible Margery of the text immediately launches into a form of damage control as she attempts to assimilate this bad publicity to the kinds of public contempt that she had often faced before this, countering her mortal authority is regained hostility with irreproachable sanctity. Her moral authority is regained through a shift which is at once discursive and performative. Confronted to her face with this disrespectful refrain, she defends herself with this ‘rebuke’ to her fellow diners:


The conspicuousness of Margery’s body as it refrains from eating certain items offers her no assistance here; if anything, her bodily performance at the table is now a liability, as it would inevitably serve as a reminder to those familiar with this accusation of hypocrisy. Margery’s change of tactic involves a shift to a different mode of bodily regulation; that she is ‘not meyud’ suggests a mildness of delivery that implies that she has all but removed herself personally from involvement in the incident, and speaks only as a kind of channel for Christian morality. This neutrality of delivery conveys such complete bodily control that the result is a denial of embodiedness, just the dissociation required from a body accused of betraying her.

However, this disembodied Margery Kempe is not sustained by the text. After this rebuke is made, Margery ‘spak boldy & mytyly wher-so sche cam in London a-gyn swearers, banners [cursers], lyars & swich ofer vicious pepil, a-gyn þe pompws ayy borpin of men & of women. Sche sparyd hem not, sche flateryd hem not, niepyr for her 3ifris, ne for her [their] mete, ne for her drynke’ (245 l. 7–13). This sounds remarkably like a series of sermons, and the implied forcefulness of Margery’s delivery represents a dramatic shift from the mild persona of the previous rebuke.

The accusation against Margery of hypocrisy, based on an incident that occurred a long time ago, has already been firmly refuted several times over. Nevertheless, the text continues to deny that Margery flatters people in exchange for food and drink in her current circumstances. It seems as though the numerous earlier refutations have not dispelled the charge completely; rather, more discourse on the topic of bodily regulation is produced, apparently in the hope of burying the accusation under the substance of as many denials as possible. Rather than successfully resolving the problem, the repeated denials seem, if anything, to imbue the slander with considerable power.

Margery’s last encounter with an ungrateful secular world features an event that turns upon a purported loss of self-control, giving considerable prominence to the relationship between Margery’s bodily regulation and her exceptional piety. The episode reveals the true Achilles’ heel of this method of seeking a popular base for Margery’s spiritual authority; her heavy reliance on reputation is established not only through her more extravagant pious behaviours, but also through accessibility, mobility, and the public orientation of her holiness, including the support won at meals shared at many tables, where the evidence of her bodily regulation for Christ’s sake could be displayed. The near breakdown of that system here clearly demonstrates its limitations.

While it is impossible to know whether or not the words attributed to Margery in the ‘herring episode’ were ever spoken, and if so, under what circumstances, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine anyone but an uncharacteristically irreverent Margery—that is, atypical of the textual Margery—uttering those words. The considerable difference between this unauthorized representation of Margery Kempe and the Margery endorsed by the Book alerts us to the complexities of composing an authoritative text amid competing judgements of Margery’s piety. The almost compulsive denial of Margery’s guilt in the herring matter suggests that it was a troubling incident for the authors to relate. Its placement close to the end of the narrative gives the episode such prominence that it seems reasonable to ask whether the Book itself might have had a specific relationship with this slander. The almost organic circulation of gossip contrasts strikingly with the rather fragile process of authorization that is the project of the historical Margery Kempe and her amanuensis, whose repeated condemnation of this gossip seems to confirm, rather than to dissipate, the potential of the threat to undermine the authority of their own text. The Book itself could thus be seen as an attempt to shore up the clerical authority that would offer some protection from the vagaries of popular support by recasting Margery Kempe in firmly hagiographical (and thus, textual) conventions. Without such support, the authority of Margery’s body for the purpose of establishing her piety is condemned to instability. The Book itself may have served as a potential replacement for
he identifies and the version of embodiment that is put forward in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* through its singular treatment of food.

In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, the fullest discussion of the roles of food and eating in medieval culture are found in the first four pages. In this short space, Bynum moves quickly from very general observations about food, to the eucharist as *the* quintessential medieval food; to eat is a 'powerful verb. It meant to consume, to assimilate, to become God' (p. 3). Thus, the meaning of eating has been circumscribed and hierarchized right at the outset of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, with the eucharist placed at the pinnacle of this hierarchy. It is declared to be both the ultimate edible substance and the ultimate act of eating, neatly subsuming the business of everyday living to religious devotion. Work on the eucharist since the publication of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* challenges this idealized view of eucharistic devotion in medieval Europe. But more significant for the purposes of this discussion is the conflation of the meaning of eating with the meaning of the eucharist, through which Bynum implicitly removes from consideration many of the explicitly religious aspects of food consumption that have been addressed in this essay.

Bynum regards the correlation between women’s relationship with the eucharist and their secular role as food providers as a natural extension of the biological fact of lactation: ‘women’s bodies, in the acts of lactation and giving birth, were analogous both to ordinary food and to the body of Christ, as it died on the cross and gave birth to salvation’ (p. 30). Thus, the ‘distinctive spiritualities’ of the religious women studied by Bynum are said to form ‘a threefold pattern’ of fasting, feeding, and eating (p. 186), through which they express desire for closeness to Christ. These *exceptional* and exceptionally pious women express themselves through these food practices because of the innate sense, shared by all women, of themselves as feeders, as controllers of the giving of food. This universal association of women with ‘feeding’—to prepare food is to control food... food is not merely a resource that women control; it is the resource that women control—both for themselves and for others’ (p. 191)—is modelled on the nuclear family, where a mother breast-feeds her own children and prepares family meals in the kitchen of a private domestic dwelling. However, as Gail Kern Paster has pointed out in relation

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*the literal dependence upon Margery’s embodiedness for communicating her spiritual authority to her supporters.*

**Conclusion**

I have attempted to identify the importance of food-related activities for the negotiation of Margery Kempe’s spiritual identity. These negotiations rely on the communal nature of eating, where the hierarchized rules of conduct in play at the medieval table constantly demonstrate social standing through seating and serving arrangements, and through inclusion and exclusion. I have referred to specific differences in my interpretation of some episodes from those offered by Caroline Walker Bynum in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. I wish now to draw out more fully the underlying premises concerning gender and food that inform our respective projects.

None of the critiques of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* has dealt extensively with food per se in this widely influential text. Kathleen Biddick’s forceful reassessment of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* focuses on representations of history and gender, having very little to say about food. For David Aers, who argues that eucharistic devotion is less the fulfillment of natural feminine impulses than the interpellation of women as good daughters of orthodoxy that upholds the interests of a powerful clerical hierarchy, Bynum’s argument that women were empowered by their religious food practices is unconvincing. However, while his discussion of food offers some important corrections to Bynum’s arguments, it is limited to food production. Nicholas Watson addresses the very success of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, arguing that, despite its shortcomings, its most important legacy is the prominent role of empathy within it. Thus, Watson presents a case for greater acknowledgement of affect—specifically, for desire of the past—amongst medievalists.

Watson identifies an important and hitherto unacknowledged aspect of the success of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, but he does not consider the relationship between the empathy that

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53  Roger Chartier discusses the shortcomings of cultural divisions based on gender in *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford, Calif., 1994).
to the early modern period (although her observation is also relevant to the Middle Ages):

it is clear that material differences in infant-feeding practices between early modern culture and our own are evidence of fundamental changes in understanding of the female body and its products. For us, sucking a baby is an intimate bodily act between two persons related by blood. . . . Mother's milk has been removed from the sphere of commodity exchange, excluded from its former 'natural' place within the system of other commodifiable foods. Its responsibility can be seen clearly in the responsibility of women (and Bynum argues that it is 'a fact cross-culturally that food is particularly a woman-controlled resource', p. 189), it is particularly misleading to claim that it automatically gives women 'control'; on the contrary, such responsibility can create situations where women must please men, where an unsatisfactory meal can challenge masculine authority in patriarchal families, sometimes resulting in violence. There is no reason to assume that medieval food preparation created fewer complexities for people than is the case now; as Aers points out, the activity of food preparation in the Middle Ages existed within networks of power, chains of command, and financial resources dominated by men.

For Bynum, the self-starvation, the feeding of others, and the eating of the apparently inedible are not, 'at the deepest level, masochism or dualism but, rather, efforts to gain power and give meaning' (p. 208). This state of affairs stands in stark contrast to that facing modern women, as it is laid out in the Epilogue of Holy Feast and Holy Fast: modern attention to the topic "women and food" appears to be very much more one-sided than medieval practice and symbolism (p. 298). The Epilogue is, I argue, the raison d'etre of Bynum's study. It offers a form of empowerment to modern women: 'if their images and values cannot become our answers, they can nonetheless teach us that we need richer images and values. Perhaps also they can point the direction in which we should search' (p. 302).

Throughout the Epilogue, Bynum emphasizes the absence of the medieval meanings that she found in her study of piety from the practices of a modern secularized world. Food manipulation is transformed from a source of self-liberation, where women cultivate 'closeness to God' (p. 298), to the material for self-imprisonment, where 'refusal to eat' is associated 'with the question of control' (p. 298). Identification with Christ is the key to changing what seem to be the same practices from negative into positive. Bynum's generalizations about food and women's relationship with it are intended to expose the bedrock of the female body beneath the topography of historical change; even when women held little collective or individual power, they were still able to express their devotion to Christ forcefully. They used their bodies, the most reliable resource that they had, and still do have. Bynum's project is one of building links between women through the concept of worship; it relies not only on detailing historically specific interactions of gender, culture, and food, but rather on their suppression. In other words, Holy Feast and Holy Fast reads more coherently as a theological treatise than as an argument about history.

Holy Feast and Holy Fast makes the point that powerful aspects of embodied experience had previously been overlooked in scholarship, and its attention to this subject perhaps contributes to its enduring popularity, or at least this suggestion should be considered alongside Watson's argument for empathy. However, Bynum's methodology does not, in the end, assist with the negotiations involved in understanding the nature of embodied experience in the Middle Ages through the limited access provided by sexuality. Indeed, Bynum's assessment of The Book of Margery Kempe constrains and distorts the meanings associated with Margery Kempe's religious food practices. That Margery Kempe is female is inextricable from the form of her piety; without the possibility of participating legitimately within the institutional structure of the Church, she negotiates a range of behaviours acceptably performed by women, participating in a paradoxical dance of conformity and singularity. Her experiences of childbirth and her sexuality inform her piety, as do the social limitations imposed upon women. But her physical femininity does not define her pious food practices in accordance with Bynum's model. The intimate bonds that Margery forms with Christ are not enhanced by her eucharist consumption or her abstinences; these practices are more useful for...
demonstrating their purported intimacy to others. Her acts of charitable feeding suggest her to be a tourist amongst the poor, rather than demonstrating the enactment of any innate desire to feed. Many of the food practices favoured by Margery, from receiving food as alms to sharing tables with other devout people, do not distinguish sharply between the sexes, and perhaps even assist Margery by de-emphasizing gender. Eating, as an obligatory bodily practice, provides an important point of reference for how embodied selves are imagined and experienced, and Margery’s embodied relationship with food consistently reveals her to be preoccupied with the recognition of her own standing. However, while Margery’s food practices are based on communally shared presuppositions about social status, gender, and forms of devotion, they do not represent a formulaic acting out of convention. Rather, they demonstrate the active negotiation of expectations governing social and spiritual behaviour in late medieval England from a highly motivated and individual perspective.

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