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### Hell Hath No Appetite Like a Woman: Food Imagery in the Lives of the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

Hell Hath No Appetite Like a Woman: Food Imagery in the Lives of the Wife of Bath and  
Margery Kempe

submitted by

Rhone O'Hara Class of 2020

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2020

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1: Bread, Beverages and Bacon: The Wife of Bath's Exploration of Identity Through Food.....	9
Chapter 2: Feasts, Fealty and Fulfilment in the Life of Margery Kempe.....	35
Chapter 3: The Measuring and Mastication of Medieval Wives.....	65
Conclusion.....	79
Works Cited.....	84



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## **Introduction:**

### **Beginning the Feast**

As the candles flicker throughout the Tabard Inn, the cool April breeze chills the bones of the pilgrims. Her tongue traces the gap between her two front teeth, and she looks out over the meal before her. An oversized, ten-pound headdress rests beneath her hat, covering the lingering grey strands. The silhouette of her hips casts a shadow in the low candle light of the tavern. Her costly scarlet stockings hug her plump calves that have carried her throughout this journey and will take her to Canterbury and beyond. Her fresh leather soles meet the dampened wooden floor. Crow's feet begin to form in the corner of her eyes as she lets out a hearty laugh, illuminating her plump, rosy cheeks. Slightly deaf, she leans to the center of the table to get a better listen to the Host's proposal of a storytelling competition on the way to Canterbury. Pressing her lips to her goblet of wine, Alisoun thinks about the tale she'll tell.

Completely engulfed in a postpartum psychosis, chains constrict her frail wrists, inhibiting her writhing body from movement. Her maids and keepers pace back and forth, exchanging glances of worry and disbelief. Her pale skin glistens as beads of sweat well up, bordering her upper lip as it quivers. Desperate for the keys to her cherished buttery, she longingly looks to her husband for approval. The tenderness in his eyes and the compassion he holds for her raises her spirits with relief. He orders her maids to fetch the keys. In pure frenzy, she races down the cobble steps, and her hand shakes as she clutches the key tightly in her palm.



She pushes the key into the lock and thrusts the door open. Finally, Margery's weak body and fragile mind are met with an abundance of food and drink, thanks to her beloved buttry.

In what follows, I will focus on the medieval texts of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Specifically, I will address how the Wife of Bath's and Margery's relationships with literal and figurative food define their experiences as middle-class medieval wives. The Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe are hungry women and fully actualized agents in their own story-telling and self-representation. Ultimately, I aim to illuminate how, through the use of literal food and figurative food language, both the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe authenticate themselves as transgressive medieval women, but more importantly, as radical medieval wives. The Wife of Bath and Margery's relationships with food establish these women as sexually independent businesswomen trying to negotiate their own autonomy. As these women insert themselves successfully into masculine systems of exchange, they exercise control over their bodies and social experiences.

It is through their relationships with food that the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe articulate various forms of desire for middle-class married women and widows during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This thesis will explore how food figures the multiple appetites of these wives as well as the ways they fulfill these appetites. Despite Alisoun's reputation as a seasoned pilgrim and Margery's transition into a life of mysticism, to their audiences, these women began as wives. As wives, the Wife of Bath and Margery are often compelled to act in accordance with the desires of their husbands; however, these women do so in a way that not only satiates the appetites of the men in their lives, but also fulfills their own.



The notion of appetite for the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe extends beyond the realm of the kitchen and into their lives as sexual beings, worshipers, mothers and people. Their strength as fictional and historical women illuminates our understanding of what it meant, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for women of their class and marital status to achieve their physical and emotional needs and desires. Scholarship regarding European medieval women and their relationship to food is almost exclusively linked with Christian food rituals like communion and family meals. What then does that scholarly focus mean for women, or wives rather, who have a relationship with food extending beyond the bounds of the kitchen or the church? Such research establishes that medieval women (in general) exercised some limited amount of agency, given the strict social and gender codes of the period, specifically because of their relationships with food. Nevertheless, scholars have paid little attention to what else food “means,” and how articulations specifically surrounding food and food imagery helped these medieval wives express their desires.

When we survey the scholarly landscape about medieval women and food, three major contributors to the field emerge. Since the early 1980s, the scholarship of Caroline Bynum, Rudolph Bell, and Carolyn Dinshaw has defined the study of medieval women and their relationships with food. These critics have generated discussion about the impact food had on the bodies of medieval women, their agency, and their control over social and spiritual situations.

Caroline Bynum’s *Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* explores the ways in which bodily penance, fasting and eucharistic consumption modulate the significance of food for women during the period. Bynum argues that



through eucharistic consumption, feasting and fasting, women were able to fully worship the mystical union with the body of Christ. In so doing, women assimilated their bodies physically into a life of devotion (4). Throughout this work, Bynum refers to medieval women as one class, meaning, she rarely differentiates between poor and rich, married or unmarried, mothers or not. It was not until three years later that Bynum, expanding her work on food relationships, differentiated between different types of women, categorizing them as saints, wives and mothers in her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast : The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. In this later work, Bynum argues that as food remained central to community building, relationships, family units and worship, women's roles as food preparers and servers gave them control over certain social situations. However, she only briefly mentions wives and daughters when she identifies Margery Kempe as a housewife whose relationship to food was strictly about her "ascetic practices" as a result of her relationship with Christ (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 221). Bynum contends that medieval women, perhaps, without even knowing it, were creating and controlling important social spheres through their regulation of food. Bynum's conclusion about the gendered nature of food relationships during the medieval period raises the question about how food was crucial for other types of women who weren't saints and didn't have formal associations with religious orders or organized communities.

Like the work of Bynum, Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* also explores the medieval practices of feasting, fasting and eucharistic consumption for practicing religious women. Bell takes his food analysis one step further than Bynum by purposefully differentiating wives and mothers from saints, abbesses, merchants and noble women. Bell's research and conclusions





further diverge from Bynum's in the way he traces the female practices of feasting and fasting as the origins of what our contemporary society considers to be anorexia nervosa. Bell's major purpose is to study medieval women's relationships to food from a contemporary psychological and medical perspective in order to better understand the history of the social perception of women in the Middle Ages. Ultimately, Bell's study of the implications of food for women concludes that the social context of the time did not force women to undergo practices of fasting, but rather rationalized and normalized them (150).

Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* tackles the social constructions of gender and consequently the role Chaucer plays in both perpetuating and challenging gender expectations and gender performance in the Middle Ages. Dinshaw claims that if we understand gender and sexual identities to be socially constructed, then those who know Chaucer can logically agree that he plays with "gender associations, hermeneutic values" and "power structures" (9). In turn, Dinshaw illustrates that Chaucer's "favorite" character, the Wife of Bath, is, in her gender performance, both "affirmative and adversative" (116). While never explicitly referencing food and food imagery, Dinshaw explores the question of appetite and argues that Eve's carnal appetite influenced the Wife of Bath's desire for sexual autonomy (39).

Through these examinations of medieval women and their relationships with food, we see that food is multifaceted, as are the stories of medieval women. Taken together, Bynum, Bell, and Dinshaw reveal that food was incorporated into the lives of medieval wives, mothers, saints, nuns, and noblewomen, primarily as a means of expressing social agency. As this field has been developed, however, there seldom is space dedicated to middle-class wives and specifically how



food and food rhetoric can figure their appetites. In this thesis, I will analyze and address the relationship between middle-class wives and food and how food and food imagery can help us to better understand the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe and their legacies in relation to one another.

In the first chapter, I will analyze the Wife of Bath's deployment of figurative and literal food located in her General Prologue portrait, the Prologue to her tale, and her Tale. I will discuss the Wife of Bath's complex appetites for sex, money and social control and how food and food language facilitate her self-actualized identity. In the second chapter, I will proceed to examine Margery Kempe's status as a medieval middle-class wife and her relationship with food. I will examine Margery Kempe's implementation of food language to reveal how Margery's appetites for spirituality supported her ability to navigate social and gender expectations. Finally, my third chapter will bring these two formidable women and their appetites together and highlight what we can learn about these medieval wives when we bring them into conversation with one another. The third chapter will further address the ways in which both the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe were able to satiate their own female appetites. In the end, I will address the literary legacies of both these women and how the analysis of food imagery in both their stories allows us to recognize the extent of their transgressiveness.



## CHAPTER 1:

### **Bread, Beverages and Bacon: The Wife of Bath's Exploration of Identity Through Food**

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer describes his legendary Wife of Bath as having “hipes large” and being “gat-tothed,” immediately endowing her with cultural signs of sexual power and sensuality (Chaucer et al. 118). Chaucer presents the Wife of Bath to his audience through her physical presence, with requisite feminine markers, such as her clothes and her frame, designed specifically for men. Her physical appearance takes shape in the audience’s mind through hyperbolic features like her “ten pound” headdress. The image of the Wife of Bath in the “General Prologue” reveals a self-assured and sexual character. In a mere thirty lines of the General Prologue, the narrator introduces the Wife of Bath with words that emphasize her bodily proportions, and in turn, her oversized portrayal evokes a term that she herself uses explicitly: “appetit.” Throughout the confessional prologue to her tale, the Wife of Bath’s appetites emerge. as a multifaceted hunger for money, sex, social control, marriage and food and drink itself. The description of Alisoun’s appearance suggests to the pilgrim audience and to the reader 1) that her sheer physical size is a product as well as a representation of her all-encompassing female appetite(s), and 2) that her voluptuous proportions play to male sexual fantasies.

In the Middle Ages, appetite frequently suggested sexuality as well as epistemological activities, such as acquiring knowledge and religious beliefs that included cycles of fasting and



feasting.<sup>1</sup> In religious contexts, food was often associated literally and figuratively with greed and excess. Recent critical scholarship suggests a similar medieval connection between food and gluttony. Food represents consumption of varying types, as Charlotte Boyce and Joan Fitzpatrick highlight in their *A History of Food in Literature: From the Fourteenth Century to the Present*. Fitzpatrick discusses the notion of gluttony as it appears in *The Canterbury Tales*. She even goes so far as to say that the Wife of Bath figures herself in terms of food within her marriages (though Fitzpatrick never explicitly addresses desire or appetite) (Fitzpatrick 19). Indeed, as I will argue, for the Wife of Bath, appetite - as revealed through food references - reflects her identity and desires as a heterosexual, marriageable woman. In other words, her appetite describes what she thinks she and other women “moost desiren.” The Wife has the desire -- and the pluck -- to feed her appetites.

In the Wife of Bath’s prologue, food imagery and its association with sexual, financial and social appetites show how the female body, in this case the Wife’s own, is marketed, sold and consumed like other commodities. Ultimately, and ironically, in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, our heroine reveals that what women “moost desiren,” or have an appetite for, is often not exclusively or solely defined by women themselves. Female appetite and desire are often contingent upon and configured by male appetite and the male social order. That said, however, the Wife plays with food and her female performance has striking double and even treble entendres. Her performance of food imagery and metaphors arguably gives the pilgrims (and readers) insight into the desires and appetite of other late fourteenth-century English wives.

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<sup>1</sup>This thesis focuses on the appetites of two medieval wives. For more about medieval and early modern appetites please see McAvoy and Walters.



This chapter seeks to examine some of the ways in which the Wife of Bath learns to recognize and then articulate male appetites as well as her own. In her dramatic performance, she gains agency and power as she employs food imagery in order to describe her place in a system that equates women with food, to be consumed and consumable. She shows how she consumes.

### **Food Language in the Wife of Bath's Prologue**

As the prologue to her tale begins, the Wife of Bath launches into an intense rumination about her body and her selfhood and how she has used her body in her marriages for financial and sexual gain. The Wife of Bath opens her prologue with her own understanding of sexuality by claiming that genitals

“. . . were maked for purgacioun  
 Of urine, and our bothe thinges smale  
 Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,  
 And for noone other cause: sey ye no?  
 The experience woot wel it is noht so;  
 So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,  
 I sey this, that they maked been for bothe,  
 This is to seye, for office, and for ese  
 Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese.  
 Why sholde men elles in hir bokes sette,  
 That man shal yelde to his wyf hir dette?  
 Now wher-with sholde he make his paiement,



If he ne used his sely instrument?  
 Than were they maad upon a creature,  
 To purge uryne, and eek for engendrure.”

(Lines 120-134)

The Wife of Bath unapologetically talks about the male and female genitalia and establishes that sex is used for pleasure and “engendrure.” She admits that, in her marriages, she uses her body to receive male “paiement,” sexual here, but as we will see later, also financial. In this discourse of “payment,” conventional as it is in medieval writings on marriage, sex becomes a system of exchange. But, for the Wife of Bath, this economic figuration of sex and sexual relations also becomes literalized into practice. One of the ways the Wife of Bath gains “maistrie,” agency and power, is by making sex in marriage profitable to herself. This relationship between sex and money suggests that the Wife of Bath uses (and enjoys the “maistrie” that comes from using) her body as a commodity to achieve financial power. In order to satisfy her appetite for money and power, the Wife of Bath must negotiate the sexual appetite of men, meaning that her personal satisfaction is contingent on her availability to men.

In *A History of Food in Literature*, Boyce and Fitzpatrick analyze *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Book of Margery Kempe* and more recent, contemporary literature. Boyce and Fitzpatrick highlight the ways in which food is central to the setting of Chaucer’s work: “what emerges in *The Canterbury Tales* is a consistent pattern whereby consistent attitudes towards food, as expressed by the poem’s narrator and its pilgrims, reveal wider attitudes towards society” (52).



They contend that it is through relationships with food that Chaucer's pilgrims warn their audience of the perils of gluttony, but they do not connect food with female agency. As a result, Boyce and Fitzpatrick may underestimate the ways the Wife of Bath uses food imagery to talk about her own agency within the patriarchal system of her world. The authors briefly mention that in her Prologue, the Wife of Bath figures herself in terms of bread, rather than meat (24). What they miss is the ways her intimate reflections reveal how closely she links sex and food. Throughout the prologue to her tale, Alisoun uses food imagery and metaphors to explore the sexual value of the female body in reference to the male body (and vice versa, as we will see with her old husbands). What the Wife of Bath includes in each part of her narrative is the idea of appetite and specifically the "hunger" she has and creates for herself.

Food language in the prologue reveals not only the Wife of Bath's desire for agency, but also her self-consciousness and anxieties about her own potential inadequacy. As time passes, she risks losing value in the marriage market. No longer a virgin, now widowed, aging, and unmarried, Alisoun is not at the top of the female sexual hierarchy. She has to negotiate male appetites even more carefully now, always cognizant of the ways she is perceived by men. Just as freshly cooked food grows stale over time, the Wife of Bath is aware of the ways in which her male audience perceives her. Her concern about her value derives not only from her position as a middle-class widow, but also from "her status in a world whose values are determined by men" (Fisher 82).

Given her age, the Wife of Bath is forced to change the way she navigates her sexual desirability within her social milieu. As Corrine Saunders argues in *"Middle Age in Romance:*



*Magic, Enchantment and Female Power*”, “middle-aged women are [were] more likely to find their power elsewhere, in virtue, in knowledge” since they were no longer objects of sexual desire (Saunders 39). While “the case for virginity [w]as superior to marriage,”<sup>2</sup> the Wife of Bath demonstrates her mercantile prowess by spending more than 800 lines explaining her social position and by ascribing value to herself despite her age. As Sheila Delaney contends in “*Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and The Book of Margery Kempe*,” as a woman, the Wife of Bath understands that she is both “merchant and commodity: her youth and beauty the initial capital investment, and her age- the depreciation of the commodity- a condition against which she must accumulate profit as rapidly and therefore as exploitatively as possible” (110). As a result, it is through equating herself to food that the Wife of Bath exploits her body in order to gain a profit beyond her “initial capital investment,” thereby satiating her desires, sexual and financial.

### **Bread**

The Christian valuation of the virtue of virginity, so rampant in the Wife of Bath’s culture, becomes prominent in the prologue to her tale because it is an understandable source of anxiety for the Wife. She has not been a virgin for some time. However, after the death of multiple husbands, the Wife clearly does not want to occupy the socially sanctioned role of the chaste widow, choosing instead to remain sexually active, though for the moment, she is unattached. In this way, the Wife of Bath pushes back both against the perception that women

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<sup>2</sup>See Warren S. Smith’s “The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome,” which further discusses how virginity was weighed in the marriage market of the Middle Ages.





lose sexual value as they age and against the traditionally narrow definition of chastity and its association with virtue. As she probes the question of virginity alongside the notion of chaste widowhood, the Wife of Bath observes:

“For hadde God comanded maidenhede,  
 Thanne hadde he dampned wedding with the deede  
 And certain, if ther were no seed ysowe,  
 Virginitee whereof thanne sholde it growe?”

(Lines 68-72)

With this first explicit reference to virginity, the Wife of Bath connects sexual “purity with growing seeds. She forefronts an obvious biological paradox: the purity of virgins comes from the sexual intercourse that created them. In this passage, intercourse and pregnancy are embedded in her seed metaphor. Alison here allows space for both virginity and sexual pleasure, because the one demands the other. Without sex, there would be no valued virgins. Alisoun suggests that sex and lust are human qualities, and also claims them as female qualities that she too possesses despite her status as a widow-wife. In this instance, the Wife of Bath uses food language to engage and challenge the value system of her world: to acknowledge her culture’s veneration of young virgins, but also to defend herself and her own ongoing value. Given the context of Alisoun’s aging, less desirable body, food imagery ascribes sexual value and appetite to herself, and by extension to older medieval wives.



The Wife of Bath explores (and explodes) the male investment in chastity and places a value on aging women. Continuing her diatribe about marriage and virginity. Alisoun asserts her lack of “envye” for virgins:

“Lat hem be breed of pured whete seed  
 And lat us wyves hoten barly- breed;  
 And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,  
 Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man”

(Lines 144-147)

Alisoun in this passage compares barley and white wheat bread, presenting barley as cheap and earthy in taste in contrast with the refined and more expensive white wheat. This wheat metaphor provides a double meaning as it represents Alisoun’s view of herself in contrast to virginal women. By likening herself (and other wives) to the ordinary “brown” barley bread, the Wife remarkets herself in a public sphere by objectifying herself at first as a common loaf in acknowledgement of her age and lack of virginity. However, she suggests that this type of barley bread, like herself and other wives, is nourishing and sustaining. What’s more, the sexual undertones of “refresshed” suggest that brown bread can feed male appetite in more ways than one. She positions herself as a viable option for a potential sixth husband.

The Wife of Bath’s association of her body with food can also assume a more poignant and introspective tone than her assertion of the value of barley bread. Later in her Prologue, she



ruminates on aging and her own current value in the distinctly mercantile context that characterizes her imagination:

“The flour is goone, there is namoore to telle,  
The bren, as best I kan, now I must selle”

(Lines 477-478)

“Flour” for the Wife of Bath here means at least two things. The *flower* of Alisoun’s youth is gone, a reiteration of the flower imagery conventionally associated with women and virginity<sup>3</sup>. But “flour” here also means the central ingredient of bread, the starch and grain seed that was a crucial “aliment” for the “survival and pleasure of the people” in the medieval diet (Montanari 14). For centuries, flour served as an integral constituent in food (bread). What is implied here by “flour” is not only that flour is essential for survival, but that it also is associated with pleasure. Here, the Wife of Bath suggests that she is not only a commodity available for consumption, but rather that she, and other older wives, are still capable of providing pleasure, even if their value on the marriage market has begun to decline. She is both “flour” as food and bread for man, and the sexual “flower,” with the resultant “honey” prized and sought by bees and men.

As bread is more than simply flour, women are more than virgins, young, marriageable sexual beings, and reproductive objects. After the “flour” goes, the Wife of Bath exclaims, “the bren, as best I kan, now I must selle.” “Bren” (bran) is an explicit reference to the link between “flour” and “bren” in the medieval era. In the process of bread-making, flour and bran were

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<sup>3</sup>Stott 61-77 provides a further analysis of the literary tradition that likens women to nature.



separated in order to use the flour to make higher-quality loaves (Davis 487). The distinction between flour and bran here relates to the way in which the Wife of Bath describes first virgins and then non-virgins, older women, wives and widows.

Virgins are represented as the pure, high-quality flour, and women like the Wife are the common bran, by-product of sexual experience, marriage, aging, and widowhood. It should be noted that during the period, bran was available, affordable, and sold in large quantities even though the wider population did not prefer the taste. Bran was essentially the outer husk of grain, easily accessible, but not savory in flavor (Davis 489). Consequently, flour and bran in the Middle Ages could signify different qualities of consumption, taste and cost, as her travel mates would have understood. In promoting the fact that she will sell her “bran” the best she can, the Wife of Bath slyly commodifies herself and establishes that she is even more available than flour for consumption. And never mind the taste.

In “Love and Marriage in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” Emma Lipton argues that while many critics have traditionally interpreted the Wife of Bath’s sexuality as a form of female empowerment, given the view of sex as sinful in the fourteenth century, the Wife of Bath is actually “engaging in paradigms of clerical teaching” (Lipton “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”). As the institution of marriage was directed, in large part, by the Church, the Wife of Bath was both representing tradition and rebelling against the system. As historians have shown, middle-class women, including cloth weavers like the Wife of Bath, “exercised the greatest choice of marriage partners” (Lipton “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”). Alisoun’s status in the marriage system is enhanced by her own deployment of food and bread imagery.



## Beverages

As the Wife's audience moves through the prologue of her tale, the Pardoner interrupts and attempts to challenge her. The Pardoner states that the Wife of Bath makes him hesitate to marry! What is noteworthy is the Wife of Bath's compelling response:

“Abyde,” quod she, “my tale is nat bigonne.  
 Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne  
 Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.”

(Lines 169-171)

In her retort, the Wife defends herself with references to beer. She tells the Pardoner that she has yet to begin her tale and that, by the time she's through, he will drink from another barrel of beer that will taste worse than ale.<sup>4</sup> In effect, she equates her tale with bitter ale and warns the Pardoner that he will consume both before she's done. The ale of the tale that he will “drynken” will “savoure wors” because of the bitter “truth about women” she is about to share. The Wife offers “wors than ale” to teach her listeners about women, men, their appetites and sexuality.

The Wife does two things here: she exposes her audience to the Pardoner's relationship with alcohol – a drunken pardoner who is in need of (and frightened of) a sexually “hungry”

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<sup>4</sup>Ale was an alcoholic drink made in Medieval England. Ale was enjoyed by the upper and middle class but was primarily the drink of the middle class, as aristocratic people could afford alcohol other than ale and the lower class could not. For more about the differentiation between ale and other medieval alcohol and who enjoyed each, refer to Unger, “Early Medieval Brewing”.



wife, even “tail.” The pardoner is a perfect foil because he is an unmarriageable eunuch trying to pose as a whole man, and gain courage from drink to mask his terror of sex with women. Simultaneously, Alisoun shows herself to be a fierce woman who unabashedly links her identity to food and alcohol. Her story will be so long that he’ll have to “drynken of another tonne” before she’s done giving him a taste of something “wors,” like female sexual power and female appetite.

An important component of the Wife’s connection with food involves her own love for wine, that we first see after the Pardoner’s interruption. The Wife says:

“Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale:

As evere moote I drynken wyn or ale

I shal seye sooth, of tho housbondes that I Hadde

As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde”

(Lines 192-196)

By using the term “as evere,” the Wife of Bath admits, boasts even, that she enjoys wine and ale. Here, she directly links her appetite for wine and ale with the truth she’ll tell of her “appetite” for/with many husbands. *In vino, veritas*. Of course, as the Wife’s audience knows, the consumption of wine increases sexual appetite and lowers sexual inhibition for both women and men.

Alisoun’s desire for wine and ale is not limited to her conversation with the Pardoner. Reflecting and expanding on her love for wine, the Wife of Bath introduces her fourth, unfaithful



husband as a pleasure seeker and suggests that when she was young and full of spirit, and with the help of wine, she would sing and dance so much that not even Metellius,<sup>5</sup> a medieval literary character known for killing his wife because she had been drinking, could stop her from enjoying wine (Chaucer et al. 116). Specifically she says:

“Metellius, the foule cherl, the swyn,  
 That with a staf birafte his wyf hir lyf,  
 For she drank wyn, thogh I hadde been his wyf,  
 He sholde nat han daunted me fro drynke!  
 And after wyn on Venus moste I thynke,  
 For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl  
 A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl.  
 In wommen vinolent is no defence,  
 This knowen lecchours by experience.”

(Lines 460-468)

Along with this assertion of her fearlessness, and shamelessness the Wife of Bath explicitly reveals her personal association of wine with sex. When she is in her cups, sexual curiosity is not far behind. The wine increases her appetite. In explicitly articulating her love of wine, the Wife

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<sup>5</sup>Metellius, killed his wife because she had been drinking; recorded in a Medieval schoolbook, the *Memorabilium Exempla* of Valerius Maximus.



of Bath expresses her own sexual appetite and desires at the same time that she promises that potential husbands will have their own appetites fulfilled.

Traditional drinking culture in the Middle Ages involved both religious and secular celebrations such as weddings, community gatherings, or family events. Alcohol was always served, of course, at feasts since it was an accepted part of medieval life. It was closely associated with the festive culture that provided an environment in which townspeople could congregate. Alcohol consumption outside the home, for men, was common in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For women, alcohol consumption was often restricted to inside the home but selling and making wines and especially ales provided a good livelihood for women, (doing so only later became central to social and business activities for men) (McErlain 34). While friars and other religiously affiliated men as well as secular men consumed alcohol, as we today would call, recreationally; women during the period, specifically widows, often opened domestic breweries to support themselves (Gilchrist 148). It was only on special occasions that alcohol was provided for men and women in equal measure. An important example is ‘Bride-ales’<sup>6</sup> for newlyweds, which involved members of the local community “contributing to a fund which would finance the preparation of a special ale brewed for the occasion” (Nicholls 6). Given the history of medieval alcohol consumption, then, Alisoun’s character emerges as transgressive since she, like her male counterparts, clearly enjoys alcohol because it gives her pleasure and increases sexual appetite.

## **Bacon**

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<sup>6</sup>For more about common ales such as bride-ales and church-ales and their philanthropic purposes see both James Nicholls and Bennett.





The Wife of Bath begins her autobiographical narrative with images of bread, flour and bran. Then she adds wine, beer and ale before she gets to the meat of it all, specifically bacon. About her first three old husbands, the Wife of Bath exclaims: “the bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe, that some men have in Essex at Dunmowe” (Chaucer et al. 113). She here refers to a local custom, originally from southeastern England, that rewarded married couples for not arguing for a year.<sup>7</sup> In this instance, the bacon was not awarded to / received by the couple because the Wife had many quarrels with her older husbands. The Wife’s reference suggests too much arguing and probably too little sex. But then bacon is invoked some 200 lines later when the Wife describes the intimacies of her sex life in her first three marriages and struggles with finding pleasure from old men. The Wife of Bath admits:

“For wynnynge wolde I al his lust endure

And make me a feyned appetit-

And yet in bacon I nevere delit.

That made me that evere I wolde hem chide . . .”

(Lines 416-419)

Just as she remarkets herself through her bread and bran imagery, here is another example where the Wife of Bath finds agency and voice within a patriarchal Christian system. In these lines, the Wife reveals the two specific types of appetite for which she is famous: her financial appetite and her sexual appetite. Alisoun confesses that, in order to make her marriages profitable to herself, she is willing to tolerate her old husbands’ lust, such as it is, despite the fact

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<sup>7</sup> Translation of this concept and further information can be found on Chaucer et al. 113.



that she seldom receives pleasure from their sexual encounters. In these instances, she “feyned” sexual appetite in order to seal the deal. The Wife exposes her older husbands’ sexual inadequacies by referring to them as ‘bacon.’ In this context, bacon is any kind of cured pork that lasts a long time because of preservation (Harvard University Glossary). Here, it is old men who are figured as meat, “difficult for the Wife to stomach in the same way that bacon was considered hard to digest” (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 51-52).

At this point in her prologue, as the Wife of Bath talks of male sexual inadequacies, she reminds her audience of the many options she has:

“For if I wolde selle my bele chose,  
 I koude walke as fressh as a rose,  
 But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth,  
 Ye be to blame, by God, i sey yow sooth”

(Lines 445-449)

Alisoun here recognizes men’s appetites and actively negotiates her response to their needs in order to fulfill her own. She can differentiate between her own sexual appetite and the appetite, taste, and desire of her older husbands. In this passage, the Wife reminds her audience that she has full license to take her “bele chose” elsewhere, to other men, but she will remain faithful and reserve herself for her husband’s own “tooth,” or own taste, presumably because it is to her profit to do so (Chaucer et al. 116). It is not the Wife’s appetite, taste, or desire that is prominent here, it is her husband’s, as well as his need to know he has not been cuckolded. As we will see, the public prominence of male appetite, desire, and privilege could even overpower a woman as



“hungry” as the Wife of Bath. Nonetheless, she continues to work within the limits of the system to feed her appetites.

### **Implicit Food References**

In addition to the Wife of Bath’s explicit and intentional use of food imagery in relation to appetites, she salt-and-peppers her narrative with smaller, implicit food references. For example, as the Wife of Bath exposes the intricacies of her marriage to her unfaithful fourth husband, she reveals her own opinion on the marriage. She speaks openly about their physical relationship and emphasizes her anger at the thought of his adultery. In true Wife-of-Bath fashion, she expresses outspoken female agency. This time, the metaphorical food comes out of the frying pan and almost into the fire as the Wife is ready figuratively to cook or “frye” her husband “in his owne grece.” Alisoun explains how she gets her revenge on him:

“Nat of my body, in no foul manere,  
But certainly, I made folk swich cheere,  
That in his owne grece I made hym frye  
For angre, and for verray jalousye.”

(Lines 485-488)

The Wife of Bath is not above using her body in order to pretend to seduce other men and to prompt outbursts of jealous anger from her fourth husband and thus to “frye” him. Her sexual and emotional power over her husband is compelling. The ancient idiom of “frying in one’s own grease” is synonymous with another culinary saying, “to stew in one’s own juice;” her husband should suffer the consequences of his emotions or actions (Palmatier 145). In addition, the Wife



illustrates her capacity to create a hell on earth for her husband that is figured as frying in his own grease. The Wife's exercise of agency holds real weight. This graphic visual of the frying pan and the grease creates a dramatic and memorable moment that illuminates how medieval wives like Alisoun could and did demonstrate agency and autonomy within the confines of heterosexual marriage traditions of the fourteenth century.

By the end of her prologue, Alisoun reveals to her audience the abusive nature of her marriage with fifth husband, Jankyn, who left her half-deaf as a punishment for tearing a page from one of his books. The Wife reflects on her marriage with Jankyn and notes that he used to read to her. The Wife learns from Jankyn about notable, religious, military and generally historic "male" texts. Among the classical and biblical figures she encounters, Alisoun seems to fixate on the "transgressive" wives who "han slayn hir housbondes," (Chaucer et al 121). Women who murdered their husbands by poisoning their drinks:

"Somme han yeve poysoun in hire drynke.  
 He spak moore harm than herte may bithynke,  
 And therwithal he knew of mo proverbs  
 Than in this world ther grown gras or herbes"

(Lines 771-774)

This passage, then, reveals Jankyn's knowledge of tales of disastrous women; as the Wife implies, he knows more of these proverbs than there are grass and herbs. This implicit mention of food alludes to Jankyn's appetite for these specific proverbs. And the explicit danger of a



husband's poisoned drink cannot be missed by male pilgrims listening and drinking themselves in their wayside taverns. The context of these murderous wives extends beyond the Wife of Bath. As it pertains to the women who poisoned their husbands, Jankyn's proverbs "apply to a woman who kills a husband whom she has come to hate because of his unfaithfulness. Clearly, Jankyn's 'wikked wyves' are all of a special sort- lethal" (Palomo 310). The Wife of Bath's interest in these women reveals what the Wife finds admirable about them, and in the same breath, they reveal what Jankyn fears the most: a strong, vengeful, even murderous woman.

Throughout the "General Prologue" and the prologue to the Wife of Bath's tale, food is central to the Wife of Bath's conceptual framework. Whether it be her oversized description in the "General Prologue," or her self-justification in her confessional prologue, the Wife of Bath uses food language to describe and legitimize herself. She knows that her audience associates her with the procurement and consumption of commodities, like money and sex, just as her corporeal reality is centered around male appetite. Much of the food imagery creates a language to evaluate herself. The Wife of Bath uses food imagery that illuminates female agency within a system created to prioritize male appetite.

### **Food Language in the Wife of Bath's Tale**

In the Wife of Bath's performance, there is a clear difference between her use of food language and imagery in her prologue and in her tale. The overt omission of food-related comparisons, metaphors, analogies, stories and descriptions in the Wife's tale is significant not only to the tale itself, but also in the ways it comes to represent her. As the Wife of Bath sets



forth her tale, she reveals the motive and the moral of her story: that is, to explore feminine hunger and appetites, or in other words, to reveal what women “moost” truly “desiren.”

While the whole aim of the Wife’s tale is to entertain and reveal female secrets to a gathering of men, it does so in order to advertise female availability. The only time appetite and food language appear within the tale is when they are associated with the sexual desire and appetite of men, not women. The purposeful exclusion of food terminology provides an important analytical opportunity. As we move away from the Wife of Bath’s quotidian reality and into the realm of fantasy within this adaptation of an Arthurian romance, we move closer to the Wife of Bath’s internal dilemma. No matter what the Wife says in her prologue and in her history of her marriages and her sexual experience, this tale is about male appetite, reinforced through oblique food imagery, and her attempt to leverage that male appetite to her own ends.

“The Wife of Bath’s Tale” follows the fate of a young knight in the days of King Arthur. While riding in the forest one day, the knight encounters a beautiful woman and “by verray force” rapes her (Chaucer et al. 123). When word of this crime gets back to King Arthur, he sentences the knight to death. However, the Queen and other noble women speak on behalf of the Knight and persuade the King to reconsider. Now in charge of the Knight’s punishment, the Queen proposes a quest for the Knight to determine whether he lives or dies. If the Knight is able to answer the Queen’s question, “what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (Line 904), the Queen will spare him.

The initial irony of the question cannot be overlooked: men (especially this knight-rapist) do not know what women desire most. In short, over the course of the Knight’s journey, he must



ask many women and hear many answers to the Queen's question. Ultimately, he finds an unattractive, old woman. The Knight agrees to do as the old woman asks ... if she reveals to him the answer to the Queen's question. The old woman proceeds in telling the Knight what women desire the most:

“Wommen desiren to have sovereyntee  
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,  
Anf for to been in maistrie hym above.”

(Lines 1038-1040)

These famous lines reveal the old woman's lesson to the Knight. Women want power and mastery over their husbands and their love. In turn, “the Wife also challenges the conventional understanding of the rights associated with the husband's role in marriage, claiming female sovereignty here, too. To her, sovereignty is not something to be acknowledged by right, but power that any woman can win by force, by guile, by maistrie” (Green 21). Here we discover that appetite is not solely a male phenomenon or prerogative. But what unfolds after the Knight is given the answer to this question continues to reveal the Wife of Bath's identity as it reiterates her anxieties about losing value in her commodified, sexualized reality for women.

Without knowing it, the Knight has agreed to marry the old woman. Horrified by this fate, the Knight repeatedly degrades the old woman's appearance and uses terms such as “foul(e)” in order to describe the extent of her undesirability (Chaucer et al. 125). The irony here lies in the character of the old woman, inspired by Jean de Meun's and Guillaume de Lorris' *Romance of the Rose* written roughly 100 years prior to *The Canterbury Tales*. *Romance of the*



*Rose* influenced Chaucer's writing and construction of female characters. The Wife of Bath and the old woman within her tale share stark similarities to the old woman in *The Romance of the Rose*. For one, de Meun's old woman and the Wife of Bath and her old woman emphasize and agonize over their fading youth and beauty. The obsession with fading youth becomes increasingly important throughout the Wife of Bath's Tale as one of the major plot points is the fact that the old woman ultimately uses her magic to restore her own youth and beauty, a trick that not even the Wife of Bath can pull off. "In the end, the knight is rewarded with 'joye' and 'blisse' (III 1252, 1253), [and] not made to repay a debt to the victim or to society" (Lipton "Contracts, Activist Feminism, and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*" 340).

But before the old woman turns herself back into the desiring and desirable woman of her youth, she seeks to marry the reluctant Knight. And about the marriage, the Wife of Bath tells her audience:

"Now wolden som men eye, paraventure,  
 That for my necligence I do no cure,  
 To tellen yow the joye and al th array  
 That at the feeste was that ilke day.  
 To which thyng shortly answer I shal:  
 I seye ther nas no joye ne feeste at al.  
 There nas but hevynesse and mucche sorwe."

(Lines 1073- 1079)





The *only* time food language appears in the Wife of Bath's Tale is when the Wife herself acknowledges that she is not speaking about food. While verbally recognizing her omission of food (and feast), the Wife states that she is not being negligent by excluding the description of the feast, which in this context is synonymous with a large celebratory meal. Instead, the Wife emphasizes that there was no "feeste," or "joye" at all (Chaucer et al. 125). The marriage between the young noble and the old hag is characterized by sorrow and despair, marked all the more starkly by the lack of food. No marriage or wedding feast and no "sexual feast" for these newlyweds.

The institution of marriage in the Middle Ages linked women, sexual purity and inexperience with property and dowry, all indicators of male desire and male "pricing" and valuing of the commodity. In the context of the Middle Ages, marriage included celebration and feasting, the consumption of food and meals. Beyond that, the tradition of marriage feasts was "seen as a more fundamental rite of passage for the woman than the man" (Peters 87). Thus, what is critical is that along with her devalued and aging body, the old woman in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is denied traditional practice and ritual involved in marriage, a feast and "bride-ales," leading to sexual consummation and satisfaction. In "The Wife of Bath's Tale" of rape, our narrator does not address female sexual appetite. The Wife of Bath instead fixates on the idea that the old woman is able to restore her youth, which will then be consumed by her husband. This reversal reiterates that, despite the Wife of Bath's best efforts, female appetite is contingent on male appetite, both in her own life and in the tale she tells.



Chaucer's food-related language elaborates and enriches the ways we see and understand how the Wife of Bath reasserts herself as a "worthy womman al hir lyve" (Chaucer et al.19). The complex aspects of female identity within *The Canterbury Tales* continue to thrill and challenge our modern sense of gender and heterosexual appetites. The consciously hyperbolic and sexualized description of Alisoun in "The General Prologue" suggests her character as one that is guided by a desire to consume, and also, it turns out, to be consumed.

In her Prologue, the Wife of Bath makes it clear that she does not (apparently) care about male appetite; instead, she is overt about asserting her own sexual and financial prowess. It is through food imagery and food-related language that she is able to articulate the important aspects of her identity, mainly, her appetite and desire for money and power. And yet, the very components of her identity that matter most to her are marginalized as she tells her tale. While there are signs of the Wife of Bath's narrative fingerprints on the tale, i.e. an old woman losing her sexual and social value, the reality of her life is overpowered by the fantasy she creates as she tells her tale. While the Wife of Bath claims to disregard male appetite in her prologue, her tale tells a different story. Instead, hidden in her tale is the notion that despite all that the Wife of Bath wants her audience to believe, in the patriarchal world of the Middle Ages, male appetite always prevails over a female one.

As the Wife of Bath's Prologue focuses on her own appetite, the tale she chooses to tell exposes the priority of male appetite in her world. The Wife's character reveals more than the oppressive characteristics of a male-dominated society, such as the value placed on female virginity. The Wife in her Prologue uses her public tale-telling in order to share her private



identity by using food metaphors with mostly male pilgrims. The Wife of Bath seeks to be understood by her audience. Chaucer's deliberate and evocative use of bread, wine, beer, ale, bacon, and frying meat creates a language for Alisoun to communicate her own agency, mercantile mindset, availability for marriage, and anxieties about her age in a public sphere. Age, virginity, sexual desire and appetite as well as female autonomy inform the Wife of Bath's texts. Nevertheless, the Wife of Bath, despite her apparent "maistrie" and power over men, sexually and narratively, is always aware of male desire, need and power.

In the figurative and literal ways the Wife of Bath explores her relationship with food, she portrays and reveals the desires of medieval wives and women. In the exchanges she makes, her appetite is shaped by and contingent on male appetite. Nevertheless, she expresses her desires and reveals a female ability to satiate them. The Wife of Bath, because she is not entirely controlled (sexually or financially) by the male-dominated society of the late fourteenth century, manages to exercise agency and self-possession. She enacts and demonstrates her multifaceted agency in her stunning ability to articulate a woman's relationship with food and wine and to speak powerfully and openly about her own female appetite. The Wife is able to ascribe value to herself through negotiations of her sexual, financial and social appetites and ambitions.

What is notable and exciting is that "appetit" is something created, expressed and controlled by the Wife of Bath through food language. Appetite for Alisoun is malleable and has the ability to be applied to more than her enjoyment of sex, men, food and wine. It is through the verbal articulation of her various female appetites that the Wife of Bath creates a sense of self and consequently fulfills the myriad appetites she has and continues to acknowledge as she gets



older. Not only does the Wife of Bath use food to explain lust and desire, to create an appetite for herself and explain female desire (“what is it womyn moost desiren”), she uses that same food idiom to represent the very appetite her husbands’ cannot satisfy without her. As a medieval wife, keeping men “hungry” is a trick of coquetry, supreme intelligence, and self-awareness and, finally, it is the gift of her own powerful sexuality and fully actualized female appetite.



## CHAPTER 2:

### Feasts, Fealty, and Fulfillment in the Life of Margery Kempe

In Caroline Walker Bynum's 1985 *Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, she identifies and places food at the center of the Christian tradition during the Middle Ages. Specifically, she argues that for women and female saints, eucharistic consumption was closely tied with mystical visions and fasting.<sup>8</sup> Throughout her work, Bynum references many prominent saints, such as Catherine of Siena, her sister Bonaventura, and Rita of Cascia, known for their religious devotion in terms of their feasting and fasting rituals. Bynum suggests that these female saints and their food habits and customs support her claim that often women used medieval rituals of feasting and fasting to exercise control over their family units. Bynum specifically contends, "[t]o an aristocratic or rising merchant family of late medieval Europe, the self-starvation of a daughter or spouse could be deeply perplexing and humiliating. It could therefore be an effective means of manipulating, educating, or converting family members" (Bynum, *Fast, Feast, and Flesh*, 12). It was not until Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, published two years later in 1987, that she made the distinction between these saints and Margery Kempe, stating, "Margery gloried in relating to God as wife and mother" (291). This

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<sup>8</sup>Eucharistic consumption, religious food ceremonies, and female food ritual are not central to this project; therefore, see Bynum, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women" 1–25 for additional analysis.



clarification is essential for this chapter, because Margery Kempe's position as a wife and a mother differentiates not only her religious relationship with Christ, but also her sexual and marital appetites.

Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* argues that women in the medieval period used food for reasons beyond religious abstemiousness and connection with Christ. Instead, because women could control food, by extension they could also control their bodies and the social spheres within which they operated. Bynum posits that Margery Kempe, like other wives of the time, used fasting as a means of escaping the traditional role of food "preparer or nurturer" (289). She argues that looking at food helps us understand the scope of autonomy for devoutly religious women during the Middle Ages. With that said, Bynum, like other medievalists in their focus on saints and holy women, devotes little attention to the various appetites of wives and common women. For Margery Kempe, like the Wife of Bath, patterns of food imagery indicate various forms of appetite, including sexual, financial, religious, and relational desires.

Often referred to as the earliest surviving autobiography written in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is an extraordinary view into the life of a medieval woman, one which presents an intersection between secular and spiritual female experience. Margery Kempe's narrative, while autobiographical, is written in the third person and recounts her struggles with religion, marriage and agency (or lack thereof) as a medieval woman-wife. She may have had as many as three male scribes (a son, a priest and another man, "the German") to whom she told her story of religious experience, travel and eventual denunciation of married life. Her text offers a nuanced



and even dramatic representation of this complex medieval woman through profound and powerful food imagery.

In 1934, the lost manuscript of Margery's fifteenth-century *Book* was recovered from a Catholic family, the Butler-Bowdons. Margery's autobiography begins in the medieval port city of [then] Bishop's Lynn in Norfolk in 1373. In her book, Margery, the daughter of John Brunham<sup>9</sup>, does not reveal much about her childhood, but moves directly into her married life with John Kempe at the age of 20. The so-called "action" of Margery's life is heightened as she retells the horror story that is the birth of the first of her fourteen children. Margery recounts the physical sickness of her pregnancy and the distress her body endured while in labor. Afterwards, she enters a period of postpartum psychosis that lasts nine months, during which she felt crippling, hellish effects. Although she did not expect to survive this trauma, it is actually then that Margery has her first mystic vision of God. Throughout her *Book*, Margery traces the story of her life as a mystic, her relationship with God, and her voyages as a pilgrim. As a relatively upper-middle-class woman in medieval England, Margery's position as a wife and a mother set her apart from most other female mystics of the period, aside from Saint Bridget, to whom Kempe often compares herself. Throughout her narrative, Margery is forced to negotiate this identity as a devout, pious woman, wife, and mother of some means. Through the lens of food and food imagery, literal and figurative, it becomes clear that Margery challenged traditional notions of what it meant to be a holy woman in her day.

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<sup>9</sup>John Brunham, Margery's father, was the mayor of Lynn, parliament member, coroner, justice of the peace, and an alderman of the Trinity Guild. For more about John Brunham's prominence and legacy in Bishops Lynn see Kempe and Windeatt 9-22.



It is evident that her story is not told in chronological order, and rather vacillates between flashbacks to the past and then pictures of the “present day.” Her non-linear storytelling is a part of its effectiveness because it adds a kind of unpolished truth-telling and veracity to her often all-too-human accounts. However, one recurring device emerges to unify the narrative: food. As a result, while her story and plot line may jump in both geographical space and time, food remains a constant. Beginning with her first tumultuous experience of childbirth, food is always present and often symbolic. After her first mystical vision of Christ that ends her months of postpartum psychosis, during which she has been tied to her bed, Margery asks her husband for the keys to her buttery to “takyn hir mete & drynke as sche had don be-forn.” Later she notes that she ate and drank “as hir bodyly strength wold seruyn hir & knew hir frendys & hir meny & all oþer þat cam to hir” (Kempe et al 8). In this instance, food for Margery is transformative. As women of any period will attest, once in labor no woman eats anything of substance for days or hours. Childbirth, hard physical and emotional work, is an actual fast from most solid food. The food she craves immediately after her first mystical vision is life-affirming and critical. That food in the buttery literally lifts her away from the mouths of devils and out of the cruel experience of childbirth, and begins to replenish her and return her to a state of good physical health and mental stability. While Christ may save her, food ends her postpartum psychosis and physical exhaustion and depletion.

Not long after Margery recounts the life-threatening physical realities of childbirth, she describes a different food relationship: her involvement with brewing. Historically speaking, Margery’s entrepreneurial status is not entirely unique. During the Middle Ages in northern





Europe, the business of brewing commonly fell to women (Unger, *Beer in the Middle Ages*, 209). Brewing and the sale of beer helped stabilize household or farm incomes. Alongside other food-related practices such as bread making, the responsibilities of brewing were often designated to women and wives during the fourteenth century. In fact, it wasn't until nearly the fifteenth century that men took on a more public role in the enterprise of brewing (Unger, 210). However, women would often sell the leftover batch beer and malt for profit, and as a result established important transactional relationships. Female-produced beer and ale were common in medieval society until the establishment of male guilds for such products became more commonplace.

While female brewers were not unusual, Margery's introduction into this business was unique. No more than three pages into the story of her life, Margery recounts, "and þan, for pure coveytyse and for to maynteyn hir pride, she gan to brewyn" (Kempe et al. 9). Unlike other wives in England during the Middle Ages, Margery did not take up brewing in order to satisfy the economic needs of her family. Margery admits that out of pride and greed, she took up the practice after the birth of her first child and was quite successful, despite having had no previous experience in brewing. Over the course of three or four years, Margery came to be known as "on of þe grettest brewers in þe town" (Kempe et al. 9). But her rapid achievement ended in unexpected failure. As she narrates, "for, thow sche had neuyr so good seruawntys & cunningg in brewyng, 3et it wold neuyr preuyn wyth hem " (Kempe et al. 9). The inexplicable turn of events prompted Margery to believe that the failure of the brewery was God's way of punishing her. Ultimately, this is the first food-related obstacle Margery tries to overcome in her journey to



mysticism. The public success and failure of Margery's brewery is a worldly, secular test God gives Margery, literally through her relationship with food.

Margery's public involvement with food industries does not stop at her stint with brewing. In this same part of her narrative, Margery discloses that, after the closing of her brewery, she did not give up on the world entirely. She instead created a new enterprise for herself, "sche had an horsemille. Sche gat hir tweyn hors & a man to gryndyng mennys corne & þus sche trostyð to getyn hir leuyng (Kempe et al. 10). The business of milling for Margery immediately helps her to further infiltrate the realm of intentional self-promotion. Unlike the motivations behind her brewing adventure, meant to increase her public reputation and pride, when it came to milling, Margery was only concerned about making a profit. Her ability to insert herself into already complex systems of exchange emerges early in her text in her stories of her entrepreneurial connection to food.

In medieval England, the milling industry was complicated. Four distinct types of mills emerged during the period: demesne mills, tenant mills, domestic mills and borough mills (Ambler and Langdon 5). Demesne mills and their operation were closely monitored and controlled by lords. The medieval aristocrats had full control of demesne mills, but did not have total ownership of the milling industry as many of the tenant mills would challenge both the success and popularity of demesne mills (Ambler and Langdon 6). In large part, tenant mills were owned and operated by the tenants of the lord, maintaining a competitive presence since the early twelfth century (Ambler and Langdon 27). The horse-mill that Margery, as an upper-middle class wife, opens falls under the category of a domestic mill or borough mill.



Domestic mills were completely disassociated from land tenure (Ambler and Langdon 6). This would then mean that Margery's enterprise was a practical possibility for a woman of her class and marital status. Aside from horse-mills like Margery's, hand-mills were more popularly known as domestic mills, and often associated with the peasant class. Horse-mills, on the other hand, were found in both the peasant class and often in the upper and royal classes. Lastly, borough mills were independent mills which "fell outside the manorial/seigneurial framework that dominated the rest of England," much like Margery's (Ambler and Langdon 5).

Like medieval brewing, medieval milling had significant gender implications. Milling was a fairly fluid enterprise in terms of gender-designated work, and most notably, hand-milling was exclusively seen as women's work (Ambler and Langdon 7). Without the strict implementation of gender roles, the milling industry became a space for women, like Margery herself, who assumed public roles with financial autonomy. Margery establishes herself as more than simply wife, mother, and parishioner. She is also a clearly successful entrepreneur with business interests centering on food and drink. In this way, the earlier phases of Margery's adult life further differentiate her from the saints and other pious women of the time.

Unfortunately for Margery, her status as a miller came and went like her reputation as a brewer did. Margery shares that the business venture of milling did not last long. On the eve of Corpus Christi, also known as the Feast of Corpus Christi,<sup>10</sup> Margery's horses, despite being well-fed, unaccountably refused to pull and operate the mill. After the failure of her brewery and her mill, Margery reverts to old anxieties and fears. She believes these losses and setbacks are God's punishment, which in turn compels her to contemplate a life of religious devotion.

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<sup>10</sup> For additional information on the food practices involved in this ceremony, see Thurston 394-397.



Margery's spiritual journey begins when she states, "þan sche askyd God mercy and forsoke hir pride, hir coueytise, and dede grett bodyly penawnce, and gan to entyr the wey of euyr-lestyng lyfe, as shchal be seyde aftyr" (Kempe et al. 11).

What then are the implications of food and food business failures within the very first chapter of the *Book*? By the close of the first chapter, we as an audience are introduced to Margery's initial desires as a wife and mother. Margery's appetite extends beyond her desire for the food and drink inside her buttery, which she seeks after her postpartum illness is over. Margery yearns for social status and financial autonomy as she launches herself, at first quite successfully, into two major food enterprises. Margery's social and financial ambitions are thus fostered and supported by her relationship with food and her ability to transform food and drink not only to satisfy her own physical and financial appetites, but also to reflect her civic and social class ambitions as well. As we will see, throughout Margery's lifetime, she becomes the master at satisfying or trying to satisfy her various and changing appetites.

### **Margery Breaks Bread**

As stated at the outset of this chapter, I argue that Margery's use of food, both literal and figurative, just as it is in real life, is unpredictable, purposeful, *and* accidental. Margery's references to food within her narrative are often deceptively casual and perhaps seemingly unintentional. I suggest "unintentional" because most of her meals, while she is traveling, are taken on an unplanned and impromptu basis. As a result, her interactions with and narratives about food appear, at first glance, unimportant or mundane. On her journey as a mystic, she embarks on pilgrimages of her own (not unlike the Wife of Bath). During them, Margery is



shaped by various situations involving the communal sharing of food, predominantly in traditional meal settings. At other points in her journey, Margery shares communal food with other people in both formal meal settings and informal gatherings. The conscious hunger and manipulative intentionality of the Wife of Bath's relationship with and use of food gives way to Margery Kempe's changing hunger and social use of food. For Margery Kempe and her reader, food is not always strategically and overtly symbolic and endowed with intention, because meals can seem "accidental" and "incidental." Even so, we must not underestimate the narrative import, humor, heft or meaning of the "accidental" bowl, underdone potato, pork chop or mutton leg or of a medieval woman's appetite.

Communal meals in the medieval context were primarily formal and choreographed events associated with religious practice and devotion. Specifically, meals in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries represented the Christian Eucharistic ideologies of sacrifice, devotion, and social harmony as well as social order (French 42). Such meals were considered a family and community practice that centralized Christ and his physical body and focused on religious education, repetition and dedication. Meals as formal means of prayer and worship were ritualized, by and large reducing any sense of individuality, as they brought Christ into focus. Katherine French writes, in "Gender and Changing Foodways in England's Late-Medieval Bourgeois Households," that when it came to female social roles in relation to food and meal preparation, "the women's meals are egalitarian or communal" (50). In this sense, women were actually able to reconfigure existing social hierarchies, as they controlled what food would be



prepared and how and when it would be served, sometimes subverting traditional meal settings and redirecting focus to community rather than religion.

During this period, the socialization of women is often historicized through scenes of women eating and drinking together, which was sometimes seen as problematic, especially under the “male gaze” and under male control (French 43). As a result, women were forced to manage their social rituals around food carefully. On the one hand, food preparation and meal presentation afforded wives agency within a social setting. On the other, traditional rituals restricted them in terms of how and with whom they were able to share food and social space. Interestingly, throughout her life, Margery was subject to attendance at meals, but not all were exclusively organized and presented by men. Instead of an observant or behind-the-scenes female helper, Margery was usually a public, female participant and dinner guest.

The first communal (and formal) meal Margery shares in her narrative comes at the request of the Bishop of Lincoln: an invitation that comes only after she has waited three weeks to speak with him about her intention to present vows of chastity to her husband. Margery relates: “another day this creatur cam to mete at þe request of the Bysshop” (Kempe et al. 34). Also attending the meal were clerks, priests, and squires, all of whom targeted Margery as the topic of conversation. Margery maintains that while she was at the meal with these men, it was thanks to Christ that she was able to answer the questions she was asked well enough to impress the Bishop. Following this meal, Margery is awarded a private conversation with him. Despite what surely would have been the male dynamics of the bishop’s dinner, Margery was an equal participant in this male-dominated meal. Praised for her social and religious grace, by the end of



her visit with the Bishop, Margery has successfully received information about her pilgrimage to Jerusalem as well as about her pending chastity vows. At the same time, Margery has used the occasion to “offer proof” of her reliability by relaying a message to the Bishop from Christ over dinner.

Given a woman's life in the 1400s and given Margery's religious devotion and intense reactions to her visions of Christ, at times, Margery was not always believed as a “reliable narrator,” nor was she always well-received by her male companions, who must have considered themselves her spiritual betters. After her “official” religious conversion, she hears heavenly music while laying in bed. Margery begins weeping: “hir wepyng was so plentyuows and so contwning pat mech pepul wend þat sche mygth wepyn & leuyn whan sche wold, and perfor many men seyð sche was a fals ypocryte” (Kempe et al. 13).

Santha Bhattacharji writes in *Tears and Screaming: Weeping in the Spirituality of Margery Kempe* that Margery's mystic weeping caused constant controversy throughout her life. In fact, her weeping, prompted by her conversations with and visions of Christ, caused both positive and negative reactions from her audiences; many believed in the creature, but others were her enemies (230). Bhattacharji argues that Margery's weeping stems from “several different, though overlapping perceptions within her” (229). Bhattacharji identifies the motives for uncontrollable weeping and classifies them as penitence for her own sins, penitence for the sins of the world, and an intense “compassion for the sufferings of Christ” (229). Consequently, throughout various parts of her pilgrimage, pilgrims, clerks, priests and townspeople grow



increasingly bothered by her wailing and weeping. For many, Margery's excessive weeping is socially intrusive and disruptive, if not a fabricated and therefore hypocritical self-dramatization.

In response to the negative reactions Margery receives on her journey, and as she and her companions arrive at Constance to see an English Friar (a respected clerk, and the Pope's legate), Margery tells the friar about her troubles. She explains (thereby providing her own interpretation) that her weeping is part of God's will and is a sign of the various revelations that Christ has given only to her. Following this conversation, Margery is accepted by the legate, who said he would support her despite the "ill will of her companions." He even joins Margery and her companions for a meal (Kempe and Windeatt 99). It is not long before social tensions rise again when Margery refuses to speak or eat meat. Here Margery plays a power game of verbal and physical fasting in front of male religious power and authority. This female fast and insistence on a private relationship to Christ are part of Margery's attempt to elevate her position and place at the table and in her religious orbit. "Whan thei had etyn, þe company mad gret compleynt vp-on þis creatur to the legate, and seyde vttyrly sche xulde no lengar be in her company les than he wolde comawndyn hir to etyn flesch as þei dedyn" (Kempe et al. 63).

After the meal, Margery's male companions have many complaints about her as a female dinner guest. They charge that she does not engage verbally (nor genuflect, submit or "play" the woman), and she does not eat as much as her male counterparts. Margery does not share in the bounty of the table, nor in the meat that the religious men obviously enjoy. In effect, they accuse her of one-upping them in her spiritual show by pointing out the size of their male "appetites." Her gendered performance of Christian faith at the shared meal is threatening, transgressive, and





based on their responses, even subversive. Their male religious sensitivity and anger at Margery reveal that her food performance (her fast) and her spiritual claims to an authentic connection to Christ challenge male claims to patriarchal church authority, as she positions herself as “holier-than-thou.” Margery’s rejection of food here (and sex later) allows her to make a female claim to an exalted position in the religious (and very male) world she inhabited in the fifteenth century.

After the legate threatens to force Margery to eat meat with them, the doctor defends Margery. He says he will not force Margery to eat meat because if she follows the word of the Lord, she will become a better messenger. In this instance, Margery publicly abstains from eating meat. She makes this choice by stating that she is obeying the orders of Christ; ironically she knows (and the reader knows) that in doing so she is actively defying the male social order during a religious meal. Margery denies a physical appetite in order to fulfill a spiritual (and social) appetite. Her physical hunger for meat, in this case, and her appetite for social acceptance at this ceremonial table are controlled and ultimately negated in order to fulfill greater appetites that include spiritual freedom and even a later-in-life female self-determination.

By the time Margery reaches Bologna, she is confronted with another formal meal setting. This time, her hosts directly address her manners and her idiosyncratic expressions of individuality at table. One of her pilgrim companions invites her to a dinner party where he says to her that, if she wishes to remain in their travel party, she must join all meals and stop her talk of the Gospels, “*3yf 3e wyl gon in owyr felawshep, 3e must makyn a new comnawnt, & þat is þis, 3e schal not speke of the Gospel wher we come, but 3e schall syttyn styll & makyn mery, as*



we don, bothin mete & at soper” (Kempe et. all 65). Margery agrees to these conditions and is welcomed back into the travel party. Yet, as the group reaches Venice, Margery runs into trouble once again.

At a meal in Venice, Margery disobeys the orders of her fellow pilgrims and begins to recite the Gospel. Banished by her fellow companions, Margery is forced to take her meals alone in her chamber for six weeks. For the other travelers, food is connected to religious devotion and also to social interaction and companionship. But Margery is unable or perhaps unwilling to engage in traditional meal practices, whether religiously mandated or socially dictated. Margery, time and time again, disregards social expectation and convention in order to fulfill her personal desires as they involve her individual experience of Christ, even if that means subjecting herself to public humiliation or social exile.

Food for Margery brings both acceptance and punishment. She understands only too well that those who accept her and her mystic’s messages often offer her food and invite her to meals as a reward and a desire to be near to the apparently chosen. Similarly, those who do not approve of Margery’s weeping jags and social disobedience punish Margery by excluding her from formal meals. As a result, it is not just food shared, denied or disputed that is at issue, but also the ongoing and fascinating battle over communal food sharing and its symbolic place. Margery, in her own way and on her own kind of pilgrimage, is just as savvy as Chaucer’s Wife of Bath about the importance and symbolism of food and food performance.

As Margery is often excluded from some meals, she is also invited to and accepted at others. For example, after her vision of Christ on the cross on Mount Cavalry, Margery is invited



to a meal by the Grey Friars,<sup>11</sup> “whech had led hir fro place to place receyued hir in-to hem & sett hir wuth hem at the mete that she xuld not etyn a-lone”( Kempe et al. 73). The practice of eating alone is thus seen as a form of social outcasting, exclusion and punishment. Similarly, on the day after Corpus Christi Day, one of the largest religious feast days in the medieval Christian tradition, Margery meets a man named Thomas Marchale from Newcastle, who often invites Margery to meals in order to hear her speak of God. After she meets with Thomas Marchale, she is summoned by the Bishop of Worcester, who had known of Margery through her father, John. The Bishop is so impressed with Margery that he invites her and Thomas Marchale to join him for a meal. Margery’s case is emblematic of its larger medieval setting. While women were in charge of the physical preparations and serving of domestic meals, men still organized and controlled formal and public meals and invitations to them. It comes as no surprise that, in addition, men directed discussion at the table. For Margery in her journeys, her social, political, financial, religious and gender positions (woman, wife, mother, businesswoman, faithful Christian) at these organized meals are constantly in flux and uncertain.

Either as a topic of praise and interest or as a social outcast, Margery’s appetite for and attitude towards food are variable. At times, food and meals allow her opportunities for transgressive performances. And at other times, participating in social conventions surrounding meals, like eating meat and being companionable, allows her strategically to accommodate existing male religious power structures as doing so suits her purpose. Like other medieval wives, Margery has the ability to shift, subvert, and change mealtime conversations. Margery

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<sup>11</sup>For more on how Margery Kempe and other pilgrims were escorted about Jerusalem, the Holy Land, by friars refer to Margery Kempe and Windeatt 303-305.



Kempe is adept at making herself the center of conversation, whether she is actually at the table or when she is exiled and dines alone.

### **The “Creatur”, her Body, and her Cake**

The public display and performance surrounding food and meals are central to medieval life and sharply define female roles during the period, as we have seen. But food does not only appear within the public realm of celebration, communion and worship. Food, as it happens today, is also in the Middle Ages an essential component of personal and family relationships. Margery’s personal relationship with food in this domestic context becomes a means through which she responds to the appetites of the two most important men in her life, while still trying to fulfill her own appetites and satisfy her own female hunger. Beyond the spiritual duties and devotions to Christ, her savior, and the appetites of her earthly husband, Margery, too, has her own sexual and spiritual appetites (which sometimes seem to commingle) that she attempts to satisfy. She negotiates and feeds her own appetites, all while responding to the duties and desires of the two dominant men in her life.

Throughout most of her book, Margery’s most obvious appetite is her spiritual appetite. On the surface of her as-told-to autobiography, she seems to enlarge her religious focus in order to seek a kind of spiritual fame for herself as a woman. This is thus, for her, a unique and actualized female authorial ambition, remarkable in a woman who claims to be illiterate. After the birth of her first child when Christ comes to the rescue, Margery is given (or receives or believes in) her first taste of mysticism. According to her own claims, it is at this moment that her desire for more spiritual connection and acceptance is awakened. It is this “hooly” desire for



intimacy with Christ that drives Margery to adapt her lifestyle sufficiently to please John, her worldly husband, and at the same time to please Christ, her savior. Sacrificing her fasting to join John at Friday meals and sacrificing a life with her family for Christ, Margery acclimates herself to please both John and Christ. Margery's ambitions to travel and her actual success (after having 14 children) in a church world run primarily by men are noteworthy as she defies strict social and gender codes of motherhood.

Margery's emotional and sexual relationship with her husband is directly affected by her relationship with Christ. First, it is Margery's connection and apparent "need" (appetite) for Christ that inspires her to propose a life of celibacy to her husband, after twenty years of marriage and fourteen children. Margery's appetite to please Christ potentially puts her at risk of physical harm when she negotiates her sexual relationship with her husband. In Conor McCarthy's chapter, "Marital Sex" in *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature and Practice*, the potential danger that Margery faces in trying to convert her marriage to a chaste one becomes clear. McCarthy claims that Margery's text reveals a great deal of hostility towards her from many people, one of whom, not surprisingly, is her "reluctant" husband. While Margery is able eventually to convince her husband to embrace a life of celibacy, she still initially meets with his disapproval. Often throughout her narrative, hostile men seem to her to embody the possibility of rape, which Margery desperately fears, even as an older woman, at the end of her story (McCarthy 123). Consequently, it is clear that Margery both publicly and privately risks both her reputation and personal safety in order to fulfill her own spiritual appetite. For it is not



Christ that commands her directly (except through influence, vision and faith) to live a life of chastity; it is Margery herself who controls her changing desires.

One of the major turning points in Margery's life occurs when she has to convince her husband to enter a chaste marriage. This purposeful, private negotiation takes place with food and drink present:

“It befel up-on a Fryday on Mydsomyr Evyn in rygth hot wedyr, as þis creatur was komyng fo-3 orke-ward beryng wyth bere in hir hand & hir husbond a cake in hys bosom” (Kempe et al. 23).

Margery with beer in hand, John with cake in hand -- the two speak about vows of chastity. Well provisioned for a simple travelers' meal, they begin their negotiations about bodies, control, sex, and conjugal rights. At this crossroads, when these negotiations are over, Margery and her husband will consume food and drink, just as for twenty years, Margery's body and John's have been available to each other to fulfill their appetites. But unlike John, as a mother, her body in the past twenty years has been constantly available to fulfill her children's physical appetites, just as her body has been available to her husband to satisfy his/their sexual appetite. In this scene, Margery negotiates a new chapter and new modes of consumption as she speaks of her bodily needs and her spiritual appetites.

Framing this dramatic midsummer scene are John's startling initial question and his enlightened final answer. By the time of this negotiation, Margery and John have been chaste for eight weeks, but John is reluctant to accept this new lifestyle of celibacy as a permanent arrangement. And so he asks Margery:



“Margery, yf her come a man wyth a swerd & wold smyte of myn hed les þan I schulde comown kendly with 3ow as I haue do be-for, seyth me trewth of 3owr consciens- for 3e sey 3e wyl not lye- whethyr wold 3e suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr me to medele wyth 3ow a-3en as I dede sum-tyme?” (Kempe et al. 23).

To John’s dismay, Margery responds, “for-so þe I had leuar se 3ow be slayn þan we schuld turne a-3en to owyr vnclennesse” (Kempe et al. 23). Margery here asserts her seriousness of purpose and her religious anxiety about “unclean-ness” before eating this meal of cake and beer. In profound ways, Margery Kempe at this climactic moment challenges and transforms traditional medieval dynamics of gender roles and sex relations.

Margery does not immediately escape the confines of marriage for two reasons: one, she has to ask her husband’s permission to enter a life of chastity, and second, John has some conditions of his own that Margery ultimately complies with:

“Margery, grawnt me my desyr, & I schal grawnt 3ow 3owr desyr. My fyrst desyr is þat we xal lyn styll to-gedyr in o bed as we han do be-for; þe secunde þat 3e schal pay my dettys er 3e go to Iherusalem; & þe thrydde þat 3e schal etyn & drynkyn wyth me on þe Fryday as 3e wer wont to don” (Kempe et al. 24).

John requests that Margery sleep (chastely) in his bed, pay his debts before she leaves for Jerusalem, and stop her religious fasting on Fridays in order to join him in a meal. He requires



Margery to sacrifice an aspect of her spiritual desires in order to fulfill his emotional desire(s). He will grant Margery her desire, which allows her to satisfy her spiritual appetite, but not without a trade-off and sacrifice of another appetite.

As Bynum posits, saints and nuns during the Middle Ages were widely granted their status as pious women because of their status as virgins. In contrast with these women, Margery, a wife and mother, attains her special status differently. Margery curbs her own sexual appetite and restricts her husband's sexual desires in an effort to practice a new chastity that can lead to a nun-like "marriage" to Jesus Christ. Margery seeks to suppress her own sexual appetite, even as she transforms and projects those same powerful desires onto a charged spiritual, emotional, and sometime eroticized relationship with Christ. Margery has fulfilled, some might argue to excess, her physical and sexual desires in marriage. Now what she pursues is heavenly reward, beyond a worldly husband. She goes from a full heterosexual marital "feast," to a complete and total sexual "fast." Margery's own appetites move beyond her sexual relationship with her husband to fulfill herself in her relationship with Christ. Margery's brilliant "last supper," as it were, with husband John echoes, backshadows and foreshadows the "body and blood" of the Eucharistic moment in the very cake (bread) and beer (wine) of their meal at the crossroads. By the end of their negotiation, John's response compels the couple to craft new vows, and consecrate them with the earthly meal of cake and ale in what amounts to an almost eucharistic moment that changes what her body does and means.

During the Middle ages, fasting, like feasting, played a central role in Christian devotional practice. Unlike female religious, laywomen like Margery were not known to express





their religious commitment through fasting. Records ranging from late antiquity through the fifteenth century show more than thirty female saints who survived by eating nothing but the Eucharist, whereas there are records of only two men who did the same (Bynum, *Fast, Feast and Flesh* 11). Fasting was more common among medieval religious women than among their male counterparts because there were other benefits women perceived themselves gaining through cycles of intense fasting. The bodily control women gained from fasting was not just symbolic of female agency. Rather, fasting worked very real effects upon the body. It helped to diminish excretion and caused amenorrhea, which religious women saw as physical benefits (Bynum, *Fast, Feast and Flesh* 11).

Because public notions of female starvation and fasting were considered embarrassing to family units, it is not surprising that fasting and self-starvation began at the onset of puberty for young women (Bynum, *Fast, Feast and Flesch* 11). Additionally, many devout young women were predisposed to what we now think of as eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa.<sup>12</sup> To that end, most if not all medieval women saints began their obsession with fasting at a young age. In contrast (although, admittedly, we are not privy to details about her adolescence), Margery's strict practices of fasting start much later in life, after she has been married twenty years, and after she has given birth fourteen times. As a younger woman, her corporeal appetites for sex and food are confirmed in her eating, drinking and the sensual enjoyment she admits experiencing, although she later rejects. No female fasting here.

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<sup>12</sup>For more about fasting defined as early anorexia nervosa, see Rudolph M. Bell's *Holy Anorexia* that discusses the ways in which cycles of fasting of young women became a 400-year-old tradition of female bodily control.



At various points in her life, before and after her mystic's transition, when Margery is confronted by problems such as the failure of her brewery and her mill, she repents by fasting. Margery states that fasting did not trouble her: "sche mygth wel dure to fastyn, it greuyd hir not" (Kempe et al. 24). The first time Margery is forced to negotiate her physical appetite to appease Christ is on the Friday before a Christmas Day. Christ comes to her while she prayed, and desperately wept in the Church of Saint Margaret, commanding her to give up that which she loved most, meat:

"Also, my derworthy dowtyr, þu must foresake þat þow louyst best in þis world, & þat is etyng of flesch. And in-stede of þat flesch þow schalt etyn my flesch & my blod, þat is þe very body of Crist in þe sacrament of þe Awter" (Kempe et al. 17).

At this point, Margery's spiritual appetite replaces her physical desire to consume meat. Meat -- "flesch" -- is transfigured into "my flesch & my blod" -- the physicality of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. By agreeing to give up meat, Margery controls and satisfies not only her desires, but also her understanding of the desires of Christ. In doing so, Margery fulfills the wishes/directions of Christ and strengthens her relationship with him. In turn, Margery appeases her guilt by satisfying her own hunger for spiritual connection. Margery's ability to transform food by abstaining from it satiates her new appetite for devotion and submission to Christ.

In addition, as discussed earlier, Margery is in charge of balancing three appetites: her own, her husband's and Christ's. The appetites and needs of all three often overlap, intersect, conflict. For example, the Friday fast that John Kempe demands that she break, and that Christ



has enjoined, potentially places a constraint on the terms of her negotiated chastity. Earlier in *The Book*, after Margery has prayed to Christ about living a chaste life with John, Christ responds, “þou must fastyn þe Fryday boþen fro mete & drynke, and þow schalt haue þi desyr er Witsonday, for I schal sodeynly sle þin husbonde” (Kempe et al. 21). The trade-off works in Margery’s favor because, by ordaining this cycle of fasting, Christ may help Margery remain chaste and provide for her a rationale for deterring her husband from having sex with her. What’s more, the fasting becomes a negotiating tool for them both and certainly in the even more fraught issue of establishing a chaste marriage.

Because she has fasted as Christ commands, Margery needs to discuss and rearrange the terms of her agreement both with Christ and with John. She is caught, over this issue of her own food consumption, between the two men in her life. And so, at this critical juncture, again she uses food to reestablish her desires and consequently to fulfill them. Margery’s desire and appetites have changed; her “hunger” has moved from the sexual and physical toward the fasting, literal and figurative, involved with the religious practice of living a chaste life. Margery prays to Christ, “for, 3yf I wold brekyn þat maner of fastyng wech þow comawndyst me to kepyn on þe Fryday wyth-owtyn mete or drynk, I wuld now haue my desyr” (Kempe et al. 24). Thus, Margery requests a change in the cycle of fasting in response to her husband’s own negotiations of his desires.

Examining Margery's participation in communal meals closely, we find that over and over again she deliberately and consciously partakes in or abstains from food in order to satiate her own female desires as well as the desires of the patriarchal world within which she is



trapped. Margery's interaction with food is, at times, accidental and unintentional in nature, for she does not know how people will react to her, treat her, or internalize her social and religious positions. As a result, Margery's relationship with literal food arises out of the conjunction of real-life contingencies and female decision-making. If we are to believe Margery's scribe(s), and I think we should, then Margery the character, as much as Margery the narrator of her story, has power and authorial intention as well (Staley 238).

The unpredictability and drama of Margery's experiences at meals reveal one woman's sophisticated narrative management and manipulation of food in social settings. Margery's accounts of food and meals are matters not just of plot and dialogue, but of profound character development. As a result, Margery's relationship with food is not entirely unintentional, situational or simply accidental after all. She has the social control, intelligence and ability to use food strategically; the moment at the crossroads with her husband when she negotiates a new married life of chastity and earlier when she ends her postpartum psychosis by entering and frenzy-feeding from her own larder.

Physical and figurative food (food for body and food for spirit/soul) are part of a system of exchange between Margery and her husband, Margery and religious authorities, and Margery and Christ. When Christ "says" fast, the denial of food satisfies her spiritual hunger and appetite. When her husband demands she join him in meals on Fridays, she obliges, with Christ's consent, for if she satisfies his hunger, she is able to negotiate and then satisfy her desire to be chaste. Margery's desire to satiate herself and the men around her is illuminated again and again by her responses to her appetites and theirs. Her extraordinary deal-making abilities are evident as she



authors a late-life female chapter freed from marital sex. Contemporary readers cannot miss the female agency and choices that Margery expressed in her own words more than 600 hundred years ago.

### **The Savior and the Stockfish**

As a wife and mother, Margery relates to her own female body and to food differently than men or virginal women. The figurative language of eroticism that is common in expressions of medieval mysticism recurs throughout her autobiographical text. She aspires to be close to and at times physically intimate with Christ. Explicit even in medieval male texts is the sexually suggestive notion of the mystical, erotic union between two bodies, those of Christ and the congregant (Lakeland 258). When women participate in this ecstatic mystical joining in relationship to Christ, the heteronormative society of the Middle Ages offers to devout women, like Margery, an invitation to join Christ and “be his wife.”

Margery, as a mother, wife and mystic, appears to take literally her relationship with Christ. In the process, Margery is much more earthly in her articulations about food in her narrative than other medieval female mystics. For example, she wishes to suffer in the body like Christ. Her physicality in this instance involves fasting in terms of actual food. But when Margery uses food metaphorically, the literary membrane between literal food and figurative food becomes permeable as Margery posits food in a spiritual context. As a result, her Christ retains an earthy reality and corporeality. Once again, like the Wife of Bath, Margery’s various female appetites are made accessible to her readers through her articulations of hunger and food, physical and symbolic.



Throughout much of Margery's book, we find repeated key adjectives that have to do with taste, starting with the moment Margery first becomes a mystic. Margery relates that, "on a nygth, as þis creatur lay in hir bedde wyth hir husbond, sche herd a sownd of melodye so swet & delectable, hir þowt, as sche had ben in Paradyse" (Kempe et al. 11). Margery uses "swet" and "delectable" to describe the heavenly melody that awoke her that night. Immediately, Margery internalizes this song and its religious symbolism, and expresses her emotional connection to Christ and to her spirituality with descriptors that relate to food.

Margery's status as a medieval wife and mother is not lost on her audience thanks to the role that food rhetoric and imagery plays within the world of her spirituality and of her mystical experiences. In another example, Margery recounts Christ's words when he demands that she give up meat: "þow xalt ben etyn & knawyn of þe pepul of þe world as any raton knawyth þe stokfych" (Kempe et al. 17). According to Christ, Margery's spiritual devotion to him will cause her to be gnawed by people just as rats gnaw on stockfish, which was in high demand in England as early as 1200 after the start of fish import-export businesses in Norway (Barrett 2). Margery's body may no longer be consumed through motherhood or marital sex. But here, as Christ likens her body to stockfish, Margery becomes figurative food in this very earthy image, even as she gives up actual food. Socially and emotionally, Margery is commodified by or commodifies herself in the practice of submission and "marriage" to Christ.

As Margery reflects on her journey to Venice, she is adamant about the way her companions have treated her. After her conversations with bishops, pilgrims and homeless people, Margery feels emotionally exhausted from dealing with the treatment of others. After



seeing her praying and weeping in the yard of St. James Chapel, many people entertain theories about what exactly is wrong with her. Some think she drank too much, some say she was physically sick, others think she is mentally ill. Their judgements ultimately echo Christ's words about the rats and the stockfish. About such experiences, Margery tells her scribes: "sche was slandered, & etyn and knawyn" by the people's talk (Kempe et al. 192). She has become symbolic food herself, that metaphorical Norwegian stockfish for the people (rats) to gnaw on (slander). If Margery registers, understands and creates the world through food and food imagery, it is not surprising that she also negotiates her body and her life as a Christian mystic in terms of food. In this way, she positions herself to become an emblematic English medieval mother and wife.

Earlier in her book, before committing to a life of chastity, Margery, with raw truthfulness, reveals that, at one point in her life, she was sexually tempted by someone other than her husband. A man in her parish comes on to her and suggests to her that his desire for her is so strong that he will have her, whether she likes it or not. After wrestling with herself, she decides to make herself available to him. But for some inexplicable reason, he has had a change of heart. In rejecting her sexual offer, the man responds, "he ne wold for al þe good in þis world; he had leuar be hewyn as smal as flesch to þe pott" (Kempe et al. 15). This man speaks figuratively here, of course, when he says he would rather be ground up like meat for the pot than to sleep with Margery. But the metaphor is so vivid, so domestic, so earthy that it seems almost literal. The significance of this response lies in the graphic visual, taken from the world



of the kitchen. Margery internalizes this graphic rejection in a literal way, falling to her knees in despair, and weeping.

Most importantly, Margery's relationship with Christ is sexualized as Christ displaces and replaces John Kempe. Susan Morgan writes in *"Symbolism in the Book of Margery Kempe"* that "medieval female mysticism was not a spiritual culture borne primarily out of defensive, gender-based frustrations - on the whole, women saw themselves less in terms of gender and more in terms of physicality and humanity" (Morgan 438). In this light, in Margery's discourse about her union with God and Jesus Christ, there is an unmistakable physicality to their relationship. The way Margery, as a mystic, experiences the world and, in particular, verbalizes her relationship with Christ is not necessarily unique. However, Margery is different and notable in the way in which she communicates that relationship through food language that connects with the ways in which she voices a distinctive physical/sexual relationship with Christ..

Margery describes her union with and visions of Christ as all-consuming and appetizing enterprises. With words such as "sweet", "savoury", "bitterly", "sauced" and "hunger", Margery's overall appetite for Christ seems insatiable. She admits:

" on a tyme, as þe forseyd creatur was in hir contemplacyon, she hungryd ryth sor aftry Goddys wod & seyde, 'alas, Lord, as many clerkys as þu hast in þis world, þat þu ne woldsynt sendyn me on hem þat myth fulfillyn my sowle wyth þi word & myth redyng of Holy Scriptor, for alle þe clerkys þat prechyn many not fulfillyn, for me thynkyth þat my sowle is euyr a-lynch hungry'" (Kempe et al. 142).





Margery reveals to Christ that all the clerks and holy scripture cannot satiate her spiritual hunger and appetite. As a result, Margery asserts this desire above all else, acknowledging that the only thing that satiates this appetite is her physical efforts like fasting so that she may approach a mystical relationship with Christ.

Margery's life story as told to three male scribes gives her audiences, six hundred years later, a compelling exploration of the life of a medieval middle-class wife and mother who challenged traditional notions of gender, social, and religious roles. Margery's experience with communal meals helped to govern her relationships with men and male institutions in her life. It is through food that Margery acts as an agent to exert control over her own life. Not only are the bodily negotiations made possible by Margery's deliberate engagement with food, but her ability to tell her story is made richer through her use of food imagery and the language of literal and figurative food and drink.

Margery Kempe, like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, is a medieval woman who has independent, nuanced desires and appetites. She is hungry in ways twenty-first century readers in general and women in particular can understand. These medieval middle-class wives were and still are unconventional in their ability to manipulate food and food language in order to communicate themselves and their desires to their audiences. These women work within the realm of the patriarchal Middle Ages by first adhering to and then appeasing male appetites. But make no mistake: the Wife and Margery Kempe satiate their own female appetites and feed their own hunger. Their moving, honest and dramatic narratives give us lasting and powerful, eternal food archetypes, metaphors and meaning about women and desire. Food imagery in "The Wife



of Bath's Prologue and Tale" and *The Book of Margery Kempe* connect us not just to female hunger, but also to human longing and appetite, whether those desires are emotional or sexual, economic or spiritual.

These texts have not only earned their place in the medieval literary canon, but they also inform, foreshadow and in some ways transcend our own twenty-first century notions of female voice, agency, gender, spirituality, marriage, sex and appetite. Reading Chaucer and Kempe feeds the mind with much more than simply food for thought. We are nourished with the textual representations of hungry medieval wives, and we are moved by their stories of the literal and figurative food they serve, and consume, with such passion and appetite.



### CHAPTER 3:

#### The Measuring and Mastication of Medieval Wives

Her robust figure reclined against the wooden chair surrounded by other elaborate turnery. The soft flutter of the lantern next to her demarcated what was left of her glass of wine. She let out a slight sigh as she leaned back and crossed her plumb legs, one on top of the other as she reached to her left to grab another piece of slightly burnt bread. The brisk wind bent the tree outside her home, causing incessant tapping. The noise didn't bother her, for it only reminded her she was home, back in Bath, alone, just the way she liked it. She grabbed her goblet of wine to wash down her final piece of bread and removed her headdress and placed it on the intricate chest beneath her feet. She peered into her empty goblet, reminiscing about her time in Canterbury, letting her mind wander to the places she wished to travel next. For Alisoun, going on pilgrimage was not so much an act of faith, as an act of self-definition, even



self-actualization, in the face of male authority. Her rosy cheeks raised slightly as she smiled to herself and again filled her goblet, knowing she had completed another successful journey.

The chattering from the dinner table traveled back to her room and filled the air like the smell of stockfish did. Her old and aching knees barely supported her restless body as she clasped her hands together and began her prayers. She shut her eyes as the summer breeze lifted her dress above her ankles and back down again. When she finished her prayer, she slowly stood up from the ground, her right foot stabilizing her on the worn timber floor, then her left. The last to arrive at the meal, she joined her fellow worshippers at the table, where she grinned at the thought of indulging in meat. It had been three long months without it. Finally back in her hometown, she was surrounded by those who cherished and valued her mysticism. Margery turned to listen to the Bishop as he instructed the table to begin their meal. She glanced at the wrinkles on her hands as she reached toward the pork at the center of the table. She thought to herself, after her many years of traveling and fasting, there was no place better to feast than Bishop's Lynn.

In recent years, many historians and medievalists have begun to deconstruct the textual traditions of medieval women. It is important, at the same time, to recognize that these women are not just literary women, or merely literary characters; instead they are significant and substantive representatives of historical medieval wives. While the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe are known to their audiences through their extraordinary textual existence, their rich histories and compelling narratives both show and tell of broader trends and patterns characterizing medieval female appetite and autonomy. Through the voices of two medieval



wives, Alisoun and Margery, we hear two female narrators and the verbal power inherent in their respective uses of food. Food and meals appear at plot crossroads and intersections, and food and drink, literal and figurative, function in both private and public moments. The gift of these two classic texts is available to contemporary readers from a distance of more than six hundred years.

These two medieval wives are afforded extraordinary textual space to tell their life stories (and earn the accompanying literary spotlight). Both are rightly renowned for their contributions to our literary canon. Nevertheless, it may have seemed that the Wife of Bath occupies the more significant literary and historical space than does Margery Kempe. That is at least until 1935 and the re-discovery of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. As a result, the critical reader should ask in 2020 if the Wife of Bath's legacy is more influential because her female story is created and told by Geoffrey Chaucer, by a canonical male author? Perhaps the literary tradition of our Western and English canon have underestimated just how transgressive Margery Kempe actually is. Through the food metaphors and imagery of her text, in the dialogue of her as-told-to autobiography, Margery Kempe's nonconformity and verbal sophistication may begin to rival the towering reputation of the Wife of Bath as one of the most famous literary characters to emerge from the medieval period.

It remains central to our reading that both the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe are created textually by a male author or male scribes. The voices of these textual women are in large part dictated by men, and this poses potential limitations to their female narratives and to their authenticity. The narrative voice of the Wife of Bath is created by her male author, Chaucer. In short, Chaucer's imaginings of this earthy woman and her relationship to food could



well be simply experiential, theoretical or hypothetical fourteenth-century English male reflections and projections. Similarly, Margery Kempe's narrative is transcribed and articulated by her male scribes, a circumstance which leaves her audience to question what aspects of her narrative are fabricated, exaggerated, constructed or omitted altogether by her (auto)biographers. Whether or not Alisoun and Margery's narratives are restricted or compromised as byproducts of male writers, the two wives do exert a certain amount of control over their stories. What is undeniable is the way these women cook food into their narratives to define, explain and sustain their multifaceted desires and appetites that lends authenticity to these women and their texts.

In Sheila Fisher's "Women's Voices in Late Middle English Literature: Who Gets to Speak, and How?," Fisher emphasizes that only certain women had the opportunity to give textual voice to their own subjectivities in medieval England, middle- and upper-middle class wives and religious women. Furthermore, Fisher extends Marshall Leicester's assertion that there is no Wife of Bath, that she is, rather, the creation of a male narrator; her voice is mediated by a male author (Fisher 213). Ultimately, Fisher's framework poses a broader question: if the Wife of Bath is created by her author, to what extent, then, are we prepared to accept Margery in the same way? Even though she is an historical figure, Margery exists for her audience through the male scribes who retell her story. And while to some extent Margery may "ventriloquize" her scribes, as Fisher argues, she also ventriloquizes a version of God that she tailors to her own needs (Fisher 213). Nonetheless, the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe occupy texts that are heavily rooted in the body, meaning that their audiences are constantly reminded, for both these wives of the physical nature and the worldly immersion of their life experiences. The physical



nature of the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe's life experiences as medieval wives is represented through their relationships with food, both literal and figurative, even as those relationships are mediated by their male authors.

In Lynn Staley's essay "Authorship and Authority," she argues that in the case of Margery Kempe, "the scribe was an essential component of the authority of the life itself" (Staley 238). Furthermore, while a scribe may have served as some sort of legitimization of the female voices of the medieval period, Margery's repeated mention of the amount of time spent with her scribe makes it likely she had a great deal of control over her text (Staley 238). Therefore, while Margery's story is told through her scribe, her relationship with food is presumably one that she communicates to him. In doing so, Margery provides her scribe, and as a result her audience, insight into and commentary about her own appetites. Unlike Alisoun, Margery is not a product of literary creation; instead she occupies space as a historical actor in her own book, spinning her own tale for a predominantly male audience.

Perhaps most compelling, Staley writes, "if control is one of the issues most pertinent to the subject of scribes, Kempe, like Chaucer, found a way to control scribes by writing them into a work, where they function as keys to the authorial strategy and design" (Staley 241). As a result, if we follow Fisher's and Staley's arguments, it seems that both the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe exercise at least some control over their own narratives, despite the apparent male-authorship of these two medieval wives. The question then becomes: to what extent does food and food language facilitate the self-expression and self-fulfillment of the Wife of Bath and



Margery Kempe? And, as a result, do these extraordinary female voices further transgress established notions about women and their appetites in heterosexual, Christian medieval society?

Starting with the first hyperbolic images of the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's "General Prologue," with her "brood" body and "boold" face, we are meant to notice her outsizedness (Lines 458, 471). From there, we are constantly reminded of her appetites and desires throughout the prologue to her tale and the tale itself. From the moment the audience meets Alisoun, we are unable to ignore the connection between her worldly, savvy, social success and her multifaceted appetites. As we get to know her character better, it becomes clear that Alisoun has successfully infiltrated medieval systems of exchange, particularly as they involve the enterprise of marriage. Along the way, Alisoun works within male systems to satiate her own desires. For example, in her early marriages, as she sacrifices sexual pleasure for monetary gain, the Wife of Bath substitutes one desire for another, and in turn fulfills one of her many appetites. This can be seen during her Prologue as she states,

"I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,  
 But evere folwede myn appetit,  
 Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;  
 I took no kep, so that he liked me,  
 How poore he was, ne eek of what degree."

(Lines 622-626)





Alisoun is well-versed in the enterprise that was medieval marriage and in large part uses her knowledge of systems of exchange to achieve her own successes. She is able, through five marriages, to fulfill her appetites sexually, financially, and physically.

Unlike the “General Prologue” descriptors that indicate the Wife of Bath’s appetites, *The Book of Margery Kempe* doesn’t give us a sense of Margery’s looks or how her looks might indicate her character and desires. While Chaucer’s narrator fixates on Alisoun’s size and shape (her hips, her headdress, her rosy cheeks, and gap teeth, neither Margery nor her scribe specify her physical traits. That said, however, Margery’s story is told in such a way that we are unable to ignore her physical body and its patterns of consumption or abstention. Margery’s physical body remains the locus of her story, from childbirth to sexual activity and then abstinence, to feasting and fasting, and to weeping and wailing. Margery does not share her exterior attributes, but instead feeds us images of her body’s visceral reactions and emotions.

While her body at one point was available to fulfill the appetites and needs of her family as wife and mother, Margery, later in life, transforms her body into a spirit / personhood that fulfills her own changing appetites through her seemingly corporeal relationship with Christ. Like the Wife of Bath, Margery replaces one appetite or desire with another in order to satiate herself and her spiritual longings. For instance, Margery’s husband John is largely displaced as Christ occupies his position both erotically and emotionally. Christ even addresses Margery’s loyalty with food language, “dowtyr, for þu art so buxom to my wille & cleuyt as sore on-to me as þe stokfysche cleuyth to a mannys handys whan it is sothyn” (Kempe et al. 91). Margery’s willingness to put her body through various forms of physical hardship such as fasting is, on the



one hand, in response to Christ as the most prominent “man” in her life. On the other hand, Margery’s desires are not lost in these bodily sacrifices; instead, in the process of placating and answering to Christ, she also tends to her own spiritual needs and physical desires, thus fulfilling her own appetite.

Margery’s use of bodily regulations to manifest devotion to God involves for her the relationship between food and worship. That is, to deny oneself food is equated to chastity, and denial of sexual appetite is equated to the spiritual appetite for Christian salvation. Margery’s formulation of the concepts of her own “appetites,” her sexual past (as wife and mother), and her relationships with others are made visible through her reactions to food and mealtimes. Parts of Margery’s experience and understanding of her own body are expressed through her outlook on food. For instance, Margery’s incessant fasting allows her to manifest her religious devotion because her body is the physical representation of the sacrifices she has made to satiate her other appetites.

Similarly, parts of the Wife of Bath’s female experience are seen and understood through her relationship with food. She is clearly depicted as a woman with considerable appetite for more than just food. When it comes to self-fulfillment in terms of transgressing the boundaries of the medieval heteronormative marriage systems, both the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe, with the help of their relationships with literal and figurative food, push back against traditional systems of exchange. Both these medieval wives do so in a way that, while still responding to male appetites, manages to facilitate the satisfaction of their own appetites as well. While Alisoun uses food as a way to communicate herself and her worth in the system of marriage as



well as to fulfill her various appetites, she does not do much to break out of or away from this system. Similarly, as a younger woman, Margery Kempe works within existing systems of exchange, for example in her experiences with brewing, milling, and marriage.

Based on my analyses of the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe in the two previous chapters, what then materializes when we place these medieval wives into conversation with one another? What further conclusions can we make about these women that we potentially have missed in reading them separately? When we look at these figures in relation to the deployment and meaning of food and food imagery in their texts, is the unexpected result that the historical narrative of Margery Kempe and her mysticism emerges as more transgressive than those staples of feminist criticism, the Wife of Bath and her texts? While the Wife of Bath effectively and profoundly challenges the qualifications of heterosexual medieval marriage traditions to get her needs met, Margery Kempe virtually operates outside of those boundaries altogether.

Both medieval wives exhibit an intentionality with food. Alisoun's conscious understanding of her status within the marriage market is made richer through her food references to bread, flour, and grains. These deliberate uses of food imagery not only make Alisoun more digestible to her audience, but food also demonstrates that Alisoun knows her audience as well as she knows the systems in which she exists. As a medieval wife, Alisoun creates a language to communicate herself and her value through food imagery that her fellow pilgrims can easily understand. As a result, while some of the content Alisoun explores in her prologue and tale challenges the social order of medieval gender expectations, such as her transactional views of sex, Alisoun as a character is not profoundly subversive. By framing her



desires in food-related terms, Alisoun is not only able to communicate effectively to her audience, but she is also capable of getting her needs met. Food helps Alisoun to figure herself as a commodity for male desires, in turn making her own desires achievable.

Clearly, Margery's intentions with food are directly related to her spiritual appetite, whether it is negotiating her life of chastity with her husband over a meal, or purposefully indulging in or refraining from food. Margery, as a mother, is subject herself to consumption as "food" for her children as well as in sexual activity with her husband. As a nearly forty-year-old, married mother of fourteen, Margery is harder to accept as a stereotypical medieval mystic. Unlike most other canonical mystics of her period, aside from Saint Bridget,<sup>13</sup> Margery's journey to mysticism is unique. For example, while having children already, she openly expresses continuing sexual temptation and discusses her involvement in food-related industries, whereby she earns her own money.

In her fascinating essay, "Margery Kempe: 'Whete-Breed or Barly-Breed?'" Laquita Higgs brings together the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe and begins to plumb greater depths concerning these women and their food metaphors. Higgs focuses on how the Wife of Bath's understanding of 'whete-breed' and 'barly-breed' can be applied to the story of Margery Kempe. Higgs ultimately employs the Wife of Bath's words as a lens through which to see Margery's spiritual relationship with Christ. Higgs concludes that "it is the barley bread nature of 'sensuality' that Margery had difficulty navigating and ultimately consecrating" (62). In short,

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<sup>13</sup>While this thesis only briefly discusses how prominent Saint Bridget was in the life of Margery Kempe, further information about Margery's fascination with Saint Bridget and their similarities can be found in Charity Scott Stokes' "Margery Kempe: Her Life and the Early History of Her Book."



Margery's physical and erotic needs permeate and inform her relationship with Christ and her faith.

While Caroline Bynum's work tends to speak in broad terms about medieval women, Higgs' research on the other hand, differentiates the experience of medieval married women from unmarried women. Higgs includes the conflict between the religious ideals of chastity and the reality of the lives of married women. She focuses specifically on Margery's sexual negotiations and how the roles of lover, wife and mother are all encompassed in her relationship with God (57). Still, the only food that remains central to Higgs' work is the figurative use of the terms 'whete-breed' and 'barly-breed'. These two kinds of bread help describe the difficulty Margery faces in negotiating a chaste marriage after twenty years of married heterosexual desire and fourteen children. The literal use of food for Higgs begins and ends with the prominence of eucharist consumption for pious women during the period. Consequently, even though Higgs makes the critical differentiation between medieval women and medieval wives, the wider concept of food and how it relates to the worldly experiences of the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe are largely left unexplored.

Sheila Delany's "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and The Book of Margery Kempe" brings the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe into closer critical proximity. She specifically focuses on their economic status as middle-class women. Delany coins the term "sexual economics" to describe the particular skill sets the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe hone and use as they relate to their respective sexual mores and their status as bourgeois women. Ultimately, Delany contends that these two women have the mental and emotional wherewithal



to recognize their sexuality as their key to capitalistic trade (Delaney 104). In comparing these women and their perspectives on their sexuality, Delaney concludes that the Wife of Bath uses her sexuality and turns it into a profit, whereas Kempe's sexual desires lead her to bankruptcy as, for example, when she travels through Rome, begging for food and clothes. In bringing these women together, Delany highlights Alisoun's lust for monetary gain; she writes, "[i]n brief, then, Margery Kempe was what the Wife of Bath would have liked to be: socially prominent and well-to-do, a member of one of the most prominent families in one of England's richest towns" (Delany 108). While effectively bringing these medieval wives into conversation with one another, Delany overlooks the nuance, detail and depth of food and appetite in their narratives.

The assertions of both Higgs and Delany make it clear that there is much to discover when we evaluate Alisoun and Margery side by side. When it comes to the ways in which these medieval wives adapt food language and imagery to their stories, they both challenge the mainstream culture of the Middle Ages. But what exactly does food tell us here?

First, food, feasting and fasting affirm that literary and historical space should be afforded to these two memorable medieval wives. Second, Margery Kempe deserves more credit than she often gets. If the Wife of Bath is considered Chaucer's most acclaimed character, one that is often said to cross into feminist territories, then to what extent can the same be said of Margery? While Alisoun works within the system of medieval marriage, it can be argued that Margery breaks out of that system altogether. When it comes to the heteronormative transaction that was medieval marriage, Margery uses her relationship with food to virtually escape the bounds of matrimony. Able to negotiate her body and her needs, Margery continuously



challenges not only what it meant to be a medieval wife and mother, but also what it meant to be a medieval mystic. Both the Wife of Bath's and Margery Kempe's management and manipulation of food and appetite help these women navigate their relationships with men, whether husbands, potential lovers, or Christ.

In recent scholarship about medieval women and food, like that of Caroline Bynum, Susan Morgan, Conor McCarthy, and Lynn Staley, the nexus of research remains female agency, food in relation to devotional food practices, and social control in the role of the female food-preparer. The elastic concept of female appetite in the context of the medieval period has been relatively overlooked, especially as it relates to middle-class medieval *wives*.

Throughout her narrative Alisoun as the serial wife brings her audience back, finally, to her social duty as a woman (to be a wife). She teaches men and readers about her (and other women's) desires: the desire to conquer, to consume, and to have "maistrie." The nature of Alisoun's character and the role she plays as well as the tale she tells are unforgettable. Her audience on the pilgrimage, and Chaucer's readership alike, take notice of her status and legitimacy as a powerful woman, wife, widow. There is no denying her humor, social clout, and agency.

Margery Kempe's status grows as her audience is reminded of her responsibilities as a wife, her adventures as a businesswoman, and responsibilities as a mother. Unexpectedly, she gives us small glimpses of domestic life: moments where she directly refers to her husband John and at the end of her story when her son falls ill and dies. Aside from very specific, limited



instances, Margery creates a version of her life, after the birth of her fourteenth child, in which she does not fall subject to the gender roles of the fourteenth and fifteenth century.

With the management of food, its quantity and her intake (feast/fast, meat/no meat), Margery as an older woman takes control of her marriage and spiritual life in a way the Wife of Bath never does. On the one hand, Alisoun notoriously trades sex for financial independence, commodifying herself and appealing to men to satisfy her desires for power, control and monetary gain, but she exercises this power primarily as a younger woman. On the other hand, Margery negotiates a life of chastity with her husband and successfully devotes herself to her travels and her relationship to Christ. This fluid female identity puts Margery in a category of her own. While Alisoun expresses and exercises agency within the marriage system, Margery wields autonomy outside of this network of exchange. In fact, Margery escapes the confines of the patriarchal-religious social milieu. Through her savvy responses, often through food, to her own changing appetites, Margery Kempe “retires” from her traditional duties as a wife and mother to pursue her appetite for greater spiritual connection and ostensibly a life-everlasting in Christ. Alisoun, for her part, works within the limits of the marriage to get her needs met and, in fact, may still be looking for another husband! Margery fulfills her own needs and almost completely escapes those same patriarchal and matrimonial limits by seeking a life in Christ, even as she remains married, in name only, to her husband until his death.





### **Conclusion:**

#### **Plagues and Pandemics: Alisoun and Margery as Iterations of Female Preservation**

Like the Wife of Bath, Margery and her relationship with food allow her audiences to understand and recognize her as a hungry medieval wife. Margery, like Alisoun, carefully manages her relationships with men, in part, because she has a social obligation to do so. There is no doubt, however, that, in the process, she leverages and satisfies her own needs and appetites. Perhaps more disruptive is the way in which she confronts and ultimately rejects her roles as a medieval wife and mother.

In Kempe's autobiography and in Chaucer's Wife of Bath, female bodies are objectified and desired, much like food and wine, beer and mead. The intentionality of food and food



imagery in the stories of both medieval wives helps us find a substantial presence of female agency. Twenty-first century feminist conceptions of women's agency and autonomy, in large part, began with women's suffrage in the United States a century ago and gained momentum during the 1970s with the rise of second-wave feminism. Nevertheless, such expansions of the scope of women's agency are not limited to these recent times and familiar places alone.

The changing nature of contemporary society generally includes and celebrates evolving gender roles as social, sexual and performative constructions. While it is important not to project our own twenty-first century ideas about gender and sexuality onto the context of the Middle Ages, we cannot help but notice how these two medieval wives, the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe, challenged traditional culture and gender expectation when they first expressed their own fourteenth- and fifteenth-century female aspirations and desires. The literal and figurative use of food in the texts of the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe gives us transcendent literary characters, female characters and voices that enable their audiences to see not only their struggles as medieval wives, but also their triumphs. In myriad ways, women in today's Trumpian and neo-conservative societies have been forced (again) to create counter-cultures and voices that challenge the patriarchy. The female appetite for getting and protecting our sexual, financial and social needs, just as Margery and Alisoun did, is as real today as it was six hundred years ago.

In the era of COVID-19, what would the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe have done? And what can we learn from their life examples? Both lived in an era with outbreaks of the plague and would probably not have been surprised by this twenty-first-century pandemic. While



the Black Death was one of the most devastating pandemics ever recorded in human history (it killed more than one-fourth of Europe's population in only three years)<sup>14</sup> these smart, resourceful women would have been holed up with their families, practicing social distancing and presumably enjoying food and drinks like “quarantinis” (or at least the Wife would have).

Alisoun and Margery would have just finished their challenging travels around the world and hurried home to self-quarantine. These women fought within stringent patriarchal systems, whether in the midst of a global pandemic or the everyday life of a woman, wife or widow. The Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe show us that female aspiration, appetite and desire are not subsidiary and certainly not secondary to male needs, even in the most taxing of times. In a global pandemic, or in the everyday life of a woman, wife or widow, these women struggle for themselves within stringent patriarchal systems. In fact, in their narratives, these women epitomize, figuratively and literally, the importance of exercising “maistrie” over our innermost female ambitions, hungers and compulsions. As an enlightened audience, and as women, it is our job to learn from Alisoun and Margery both to voice and satiate our own appetites, no matter the circumstances.

As grocery stores run out of toilet paper and food-hoarding surges to the top of daily preoccupations, we are drawn to global food supplies and death count headlines. Our relationship with food, how and where we buy it, how much we eat and how much we hoard (and with whom) is all changing. More than 100 priests have died in Italy trying to serve the faithful, and as of Easter morning 2020, more than 21,000 people had died in the United States (Reuters 2020).

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<sup>14</sup>For specifics see Wyman 441-452.



This global emergency has stopped much more than international and interstate travel, it has compelled hundreds of millions to self-isolate and self-quarantine. Women face domestic abuse from their partners and husbands in rising numbers and in quarantined situations where they feel trapped, isolated and vulnerable. Male domestic violence at home in 2020 underlines fourteenth- and fifteenth-century women's anxieties and vulnerabilities as exposed by Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Kempe herself.

Furthermore, xenophobic, racist, sexist, and able-ist perspectives have been widely exposed, and those perspectives have fueled criminal and violent behavior. The United States President perpetuates destructive language in response to this global pandemic. People across the globe avoid East Asian cuisine and neighborhoods and disproportionately ridicule others. At a time when cultural relationships towards food and travel seem to be more fragile than ever, it is helpful to wonder how Alisoun's and Margery's relationships with food intersect with this pandemic.

Alisoun and Margery were able to embark on extensive solo travels during their narratives by means of religious pilgrimage. Without their husbands, these women traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East. Their relationships with food facilitated their travel experiences in that they were able to successfully satiate their economic and religious needs, and eat well. Alisoun, as the ultimate representation of the consumer, would find solace in the food-hoarding practices of the last few weeks in the United States. That is, until either her supply ran out or the current situation prevented her from achieving her financial goals. It is likely she would have faced the coming deep recession or depression (more than 16.6 million Americans



are currently unemployed) with bravery and financial discipline and courage. For Margery, her appetite for an intimate relationship with Christ would take precedence over even her most imperative physical needs. If food-hoarding and COVID-19 allowed Margery to safely practice her cycles of feasting and fasting, she would have been able to satiate her spiritual appetite and remain safe in absolute isolation in a life of prayer and reflection. Margery would have filled her larder and buttery with everything she needed for six months and mapped her consumption day by day through the crisis.

In the end, the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe did survive medieval European plagues and quarantine. These protean and extraordinary women fulfilled their sophisticated and prodigious appetites, both physical and spiritual in the most challenging of times. There is no reason we cannot do the same, especially if we learn from the Wife and Margery to live with humor, balance, and self-awareness about food and our own female appetites and the human hunger writ large.



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