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Fast, Feast, and Flesh

The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women

CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM

> In reading the lives of the [ancients] our lukewarm blood curdles at the thought of their austerities, but we remain strangely unimpressed by the essential point, namely, their determination to do God's will in all things, painful or pleasant.
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> —Henry Suso,[1] German mystic of the fourteenth century

> Strange to say the ability to live on the eucharist and to resist starvation by diabolical power died out in the Middle Ages and was replaced by "fasting girls" who still continue to amuse us with their vagaries.
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> —William Hammond,[2] nineteenth-century American physician and founder of the New York Neurological Society

Scholars have recently devoted much attention to the spirituality of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. In studying late medieval spirituality they have concentrated on the ideals of chastity and poverty—that is, on the renunciation, for religious reasons, of sex and family, money and property. It may be, however, that modern scholarship has focused so tenaciously on sex and money because sex and money are such crucial symbols and sources of power in our own culture. Whatever the motives, modern scholars have ignored a religious symbol that had tremendous force in the lives of medieval Christians. They have ignored the religious significance of food. Yet, when we look at what medieval people themselves wrote, we find that they often spoke of gluttony as the major form of lust, of fasting as the most painful renunciation, and of eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God. Theologians and spiritual directors from the early church to the sixteenth century reminded penitents that sin had entered the world when Eve ate the forbidden fruit and that salvation comes when Christians eat their God in the ritual of the communion table.[3]

In the Europe of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, famine was on the increase again, after several centuries of agricultural growth and relative plenty. Vicious stories of food hoarding, of cannibalism, of infanticide, or of ill adolescents left to die when they could no longer do agricultural labor sometimes survive in the sources, suggesting a world in which hunger and even starvation were not uncommon experiences. The pos-

sibility of overeating and of giving away food to the unfortunate was a mark of privilege, of aristocratic or patrician status—a particularly visible form of what we call conspicuous consumption, what medieval people called magnanimity or largesse. Small wonder then that gorging and vomiting, luxuriating in food until food and body were almost synonymous, became in folk literature an image of unbridled sensual pleasure; that magic vessels which forever brim over with food and drink were staples of European folktales; that one of the most common charities enjoined on religious orders was to feed the poor and ill; or that sharing one's own meager food with a stranger (who might turn out to be an angel, a fairy, or Christ himself) was, in hagiography and folk story alike, a standard indication of heroic or saintly generosity. Small wonder too that voluntary starvation, deliberate and extreme renunciation of food and drink, seemed to medieval people the most basic asceticism, requiring the kind of courage and holy foolishness that marked the saints.[4]

Food was not only a fundamental material concern to medieval people; food practices—fasting and feasting—were at the very heart of the Christian tradition. A Christian in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was required by church law to fast on certain days and to receive communion at least once a year.[5] Thus, the behavior that defined a Christian was food-related behavior. This point is clearly illustrated in a twelfth-century story of a young man (of the house of Ardres) who returned from the crusades claiming that he had become a Saracen in the East; he was, however, accepted back by his family, and no one paid much attention to his claim until he insisted on eating meat on Friday. The full impact of his apostasy was then brought home, and his family kicked him out.[6]

Food was, moreover, a central metaphor and symbol in Christian poetry, devotional literature, and theology because a meal (the eucharist) was the central Christian ritual, the most direct way of encountering God. And we should note that this meal was a frugal repast, not a banquet but simply the two basic foodstuffs of the Mediterranean world: bread and wine. Although older Mediterranean traditions of religious feasting did come, in a peripheral way, into Christianity, indeed lasting right through the Middle Ages in various kinds of carnival, the central religious meal was reception of the two basic supports of human life. Indeed Christians believed it was human life. Already hundreds of years before transubstantiation was defined as doctrine, most Christians thought that they quite literally ate Christ's body and blood in the sacrament.[7] Medieval people themselves knew how strange this all might sound. A fourteenth-century preacher, Johann Tauler, wrote:

> St. Bernard compared this sacrament [the eucharist] with the human processes of eating when he used the similes of chewing, swallowing, assimilation and digestion. To some people this will seem crude, but let such refined persons beware of pride, which come from the devil: a humble spirit will not take offense at simple things.[8]

Thus food, as practice and as symbol, was crucial in medieval spirituality. But in the period from 1200 to 1500 it was more prominent in the piety of women than in that of men. Although it is difficult and risky to make any quantitative arguments about the Middle Ages, so much work has been done on saints' lives, miracle stories, and vision literature that certain conclusions are possible about the relative popularity of various

practices and symbols. Recent work by André Vauchez, Richard Kieckhefer, Donald Weinstein, and Rudolph M. Bell demonstrates that, although women were only about 18 percent of those canonized or revered as saints between 1000 and 1700, they were 30 percent of those in whose lives extreme austerities were a central aspect of holiness and over 50 percent of those in whose lives illness (often brought on by fasting and other penitential practices) was the major factor in reputation for sanctity.[9] In addition, Vauchez has shown that most males who were revered for fasting fit into one model of sanctity—the hermit saint (usually a layman)—and this was hardly the most popular male model, whereas fasting characterized female saints generally. Between late antiquity and the fifteenth century there are at least thirty cases of women who were reputed to eat nothing at all except the eucharist,[10] but I have been able to find only one or possibly two male examples of such behavior before the well-publicized fifteenth-century case of the hermit Nicholas of Flüe.[11] Moreover, miracles in which food is miraculously multiplied are told at least as frequently of women as of men, and giving away food is so common a theme in the lives of holy women that it is very difficult to find a story in which this particular charitable activity does not occur.[12] The story of a woman's basket of bread for the poor turning into roses when her husband (or father) protests her almsgiving was attached by hagiographers to at least five different women saints.[13]

If we look specifically at practices connected with Christianity's holy meal, we find that eucharistic visions and miracles occurred far more frequently to women, particularly certain types of miracles in which the quality of the eucharist as food is underlined. It is far more common, for example, for the wafer to turn into honey or meat in the mouth of a woman. Miracles in which an unconsecrated host is vomited out or in which the recipient can tell by tasting the wafer that the Priest who consecrated it is immoral happen almost exclusively to women. Of fifty-five people from the later Middle Ages who supposedly received the holy food directly from Christ's hand in a vision, forty-five are women. In contrast, the only two types of eucharistic miracle that occur primarily to men are miracles that underline not the fact that the wafer is food but the power of the priest.[14] Moreover, when we study medieval miracles, we note that miraculous abstinence and extravagant eucharistic visions tend to occur together and are frequently accompanied by miraculous bodily changes. Such changes are found almost exclusively in women. Miraculous elongation of parts of the body, the appearance on the body of marks imitating the various wounds of Christ (called stigmata), and the exuding of wondrous fluids (which smell sweet and heal and sometimes are food—for example, manna or milk) are usually female miracles.[15]

If we consider a different kind of evidence—the *exempla* or moral tales that preachers used to educate their audiences, both monastic and lay—we find that, according to Frederic Tubach's index, only about 10 percent of such stories are about women. But when we look at those stories that treat specifically fasting, abstinence, and reception of the eucharist, 30 to 50 percent are about women.[16] The only type of religious literature in which food is more frequently associated with men is the genre of satires on monastic life, in which there is some suggestion that monks are more prone to greed.[17] But this pattern probably reflects the fact that monasteries for men were in general wealthier than women's houses and therefore more capable of mounting elaborate banquets and tempting palates with delicacies.[18]

Taken together, this evidence demonstrates two things. First, food practices were more

central in women's piety than in men's. Second, both men and women associated food—especially fasting and the eucharist—with women. There are, however, a number of problems with this sort of evidence. In addition to the obvious problems of the paucity of material and of the nature of hagiographical accounts—problems to which scholars since the seventeenth century have devoted much sophisticated discussion—there is the problem inherent in quantifying data. In order to count phenomena the historian must divide them up, put them into categories. Yet the most telling argument for the prominence of food in women's spirituality is the way in which food motifs interweave in women's lives and writings until even phenomena not normally thought of as eating, feeding, or fasting seem to become food-related. In other words, food becomes such a pervasive concern that it provides both a literary and a psychological unity to the woman's way of seeing the world. And this cannot be demonstrated by statistics. Let me therefore tell in some detail one of the many stories from the later Middle Ages in which food becomes a leitmotif of stunning complexity and power. It is the story of Lidwina of the town of Schiedam in the Netherlands, who died in 1433 at the age of 53.[19]

Several hagiographical accounts of Lidwina exist, incorporating information provided by her confessors; moreover, the town officials of Schiedam, who had her watched for three months, promulgated a testimonial that suggests that Lidwina's miraculous abstinence attracted more public attention than any other aspect of her life. The document solemnly attests to her complete lack of food and sleep and to the sweet odor given off by the bits of skin she supposedly shed.

The accounts of Lidwina's life suggest that there may have been early conflict between mother and daughter. When her terrible illness put a burden on her family's resources and patience, it took a miracle to convince her mother of her sanctity. One of the few incidents that survives from her childhood shows her mother annoyed with her childish dawdling. Lidwina was required to carry food to her brothers at school, and on the way home she slipped into church to say a prayer to the Virgin. The incident shows how girlish piety could provide a respite from household tasks—in this case, as in so many cases, the task of feeding men. We also learn that Lidwina was upset to discover that she was pretty, that she threatened to pray for a deformity when plans were broached for her marriage, and that, after an illness at age fifteen, she grew weak and did not want to get up from her sickbed. The accounts thus suggest that she may have been cultivating illness—perhaps even rejecting food—before the skating accident some weeks later that produced severe internal injuries. In any event, Lidwina never recovered from her fall on the ice. Her hagiographers report that she was paralyzed except for her left hand. She burned with fever and vomited convulsively. Her body putrefied so that great pieces fell off. From mouth, ears, and nose, she poured blood. And she stopped eating.

Lidwina's hagiographers go into considerable detail about her abstinence. At first she supposedly ate a little piece of apple each day, although bread dipped into liquid caused her much pain. Then she reduced her intake to a bit of date and watered wine flavored with spices and sugar; later she survived on watered wine alone—only half a pint a week—and she preferred it when the water came from the river and was contaminated with salt from the tides. When she ceased to take any solid food, she also ceased to sleep. And finally she ceased to swallow anything at all. Although Lidwina's biographers present her abstinence as evidence of saintliness, she was suspected by some during her lifetime of being possessed by a devil instead; she herself appears to have claimed that

her fasting was natural. When people accused her of hypocrisy, she replied that it is no sin to eat and therefore no glory to be incapable of eating.[20]

Fasting and illness were thus a single phenomenon to Lidwina. And since she perceived them as redemptive suffering, she urged both on others. We are told that a certain Gerard from Cologne, at her urging, became a hermit and lived in a tree, fed only on manna sent from God. We are also told that Lidwina prayed for her twelve-year-old nephew to be afflicted with an illness so that he would be reminded of God's mercy. Not surprisingly, the illness itself then came from miraculous feeding. The nephew became sick by drinking several drops from a pitcher of unnaturally sweet beer on a table by Lidwina's bedside.

Like the bodies of many other women saints, Lidwina's body was closed to ordinary intake and excreting but produced extraordinary effluvia.[21] The authenticating document from the town officials of Schiedam testifies that her body shed skin, bones, and even portions of intestines, which her parents kept in a vase; and these gave off a sweet odor until Lidwina, worried by the gossip that they excited, insisted that her mother bury them. Moreover, Lidwina's effluvia cured others. A man in England sent for her wash water to cure his ill leg. The sweet smell from her left hand led one of her confessors to confess sins. And Lidwina actually nursed others in an act that she herself explicitly saw as a parallel to the Virgin's nursing of Christ.

One Christmas season, so all her biographers tell us, a certain Catherine, who took care of her, had a vision that Lidwina's breasts would fill with milk, like Mary's, on the night of the Nativity. When she told Lidwina, Lidwina warned her to prepare herself. Then Lidwina saw a vision of Mary surrounded by a host of female virgins; and the breasts of Mary and of all the company filled with milk, which poured out from their open tunics, filling the sky. When Catherine entered Lidwina's room, Lidwina rubbed her own breast and the milk came out, and Catherine drank three times and was satisfied (nor did she want any corporeal food for many days thereafter).[22] One of Lidwina's hagiographers adds that, when the same grace was given to her again, she fed her confessor, but the other accounts say that the confessor was unworthy and did not receive the gift.

Lidwina also fed others by charity and by food multiplication miracles. Although she did not eat herself, she charged the widow Catherine to buy fine fish and make fragrant sauces and give these to the poor. The meat and fish she gave as alms sometimes, by a miracle, went much further than anyone had expected. She gave water and wine and money for beer to an epileptic burning with thirst; she sent a whole pork shoulder to a poor man's family; she regularly sent food to poor or sick children, forcing her servants to spend or use for others money or food she would not herself consume. When she shared the wine in her bedside jug with others it seemed inexhaustible. So pleased was God with her charity that he sent her a vision of a heavenly banquet, and the food she had given away was on the table.

Lidwina clearly felt that her suffering was service—that it was one with Christ's suffering and that it therefore substituted for the suffering of others, both their bodily ills and their time in purgatory. Indeed her body quite literally became Christ's macerated and saving flesh, for, like many other female saints she received stigmata (or so one—but only one—of her hagiographers claims).[23] John Brugman, in the *Vita posterior*, not only underlines the parallel between her wounds and those on a miraculous bleeding

host she received; he also states explicitly that, in her stigmata, Christ "transformed his lover into his likeness."[24] Her hagiographers state that the fevers she suffered almost daily from 1421 until her death were suffered in order to release souls in purgatory.[25] And we see this notion of substitution reflected quite clearly in the story of a very evil man, in whose stead Lidwina made confession; she then took upon herself his punishment, to the increment of her own bodily anguish. We see substitution of another kind in the story of Lidwina taking over the toothache of a woman who wailed outside her door.

Thus, in Lidwina's story, fasting, illness, suffering, and feeding fuse together. Lidwina becomes the food she rejects. Her body, closed to ordinary intake and excretion but spilling over in milk and sweet putrefaction, becomes the sustenance and the cure—both earthly and heavenly—of her followers. But holy eating is a theme in her story as well. The eucharist is at the core of Lidwina's devotion. During her pathetic final years, when she had almost ceased to swallow, she received frequent communion (indeed as often as every two days). Her biographers claim that, during this period, only the holy food kept her alive.[26] But much of her life was plagued by conflict with the local clergy over her eucharistic visions and hunger. One incident in particular shows not only the centrality of Christ's body as food in Lidwina's spirituality but also the way in which a woman's craving for the host, although it kept her under the control of the clergy, could seem to that same clergy a threat, both because it criticized their behavior and because, if thwarted, it could bypass their power.[27]

Once an angel came to Lidwina and warned her that the priest would, the next day, bring her an unconsecrated host to test her. When the priest came and pretended to adore the host, Lidwina vomited it out and said that she could easily tell our Lord's body from unconsecrated bread. But the priest swore that the host was consecrated and returned, angry, to the church. Lidwina then languished for a long time, craving communion but unable to receive it. About three and a half months later, Christ appeared to her, first as a baby, then as a bleeding and suffering youth. Angels appeared, bearing the instruments of the passion, and (according to one account) rays from Christ's wounded body pierced Lidwina with stigmata. When she subsequently asked for a sign, a host hovered over Christ's head and a napkin descended onto her bed, containing a miraculous host, which remained and was seen by many people for days after. The priest returned and ordered Lidwina to keep quiet about the miracle but finally agreed, at her insistence, to feed her the miraculous host as communion. Lidwina was convinced that it was truly Christ because she, who was usually stifled by food, ate this bread without pain. The next day the priest preached in church that Lidwina was deluded and that her host was a fraud of the devil. But, he claimed, Christ was present in the bread he offered because it was consecrated with all the majesty of the priesthood. Lidwina protested his interpretation of her host, but she agreed to accept a consecrated wafer from him and to pray for his sins. Subsequently the priest claimed that he had cured Lidwina from possession by the devil, while Lidwina's supporters called her host a miracle. Although Lidwina's hagiographers do not give full details, they claim that the bishop came to investigate the matter, that he blessed the napkin for the service of the altar, and that the priest henceforth gave Lidwina the sacrament without tests or resistance.

As this story worked its way out, its theme was not subversive of clerical authority. The conflict began, after all, because Lidwina wanted a consecrated host, and it resulted

in her receiving frequent communion, in humility and piety. According to one of her hagiographers, the moral of the story is that the faithful can always substitute "spiritual communion" (i.e., meditation) if the actual host is not given.[28] But the story had radical implications as well. It suggested that Jesus might come directly to the faithful if priests were negligent or skeptical, that a priest's word might not be authoritative on the difference between demonic possession and sanctity, that visionary women might test priests. Other stories in Lidwina's life had similar implications. She forbade a sinning priest to celebrate mass; she read the heart of another priest and learned of his adultery. Her visions of souls in purgatory especially concerned priests, and she substituted her sufferings for theirs. One Ash Wednesday an angel came to bring ashes for her forehead before the priest arrived. Even if Lidwina did not reject the clergy, she sometimes quietly bypassed or judged them.

Lidwina focused her love of God on the eucharist. In receiving it, in vision and in communion, she became one with the body on the cross. Eating her God, she received his wounds and offered her suffering for the salvation of the world. Denying herself ordinary food, she sent that food to others, and her body gave milk to nurse her friends. Food is the basic theme in Lidwina's story: self as food and God as food. For Lidwina, therefore, eating and not-eating were finally one theme. To fast, that is, to deny oneself earthly food, and yet to eat the broken body of Christ—both acts were to suffer. And to suffer was to save and to be saved.

Lidwina did not write herself, but some pious women did. And many of these women not only lived lives in which miraculous abstinence, charitable feeding of others, wondrous bodily changes, and eucharistic devotion were central; they also elaborated in prose and poetry a spirituality in which hungering, feeding, and eating were central metaphors for suffering, for service, and for encounter with God. For example, the great Italian theorist of purgatory, Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510)—whose extreme abstinence began in response to an unhappy marriage and who eventually persuaded her husband to join her in a life of continence and charitable feeding of the poor and sick—said that the annihilation of ordinary food by a devouring body is the best metaphor for the annihilation of the soul by God in mystical ecstasy.[29] She also wrote that, although no simile can adequately convey the joy in God that is the goal of all souls, nonetheless the image that comes most readily to mind is to describe God as the only bread available in a world of the starving.[30] Another Italian Catherine, Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), in whose saintly reputation fasting, food miracles, eucharistic devotion, and (invisible) stigmata were central,[31] regularly chose to describe Christian duty as "eating at the table of the cross the food of the honor of God and the salvation of souls."[32] To Catherine, "to eat" and "to hunger" have the same fundamental meaning, for one eats but is never full, desires but is never satiated.[33] "Eating" and "hungering" are active, not passive, images. They stress pain more than joy. They mean most basically to suffer and to serve—to suffer because in hunger one joins with Christ's suffering on the cross; to serve because to hunger is to expiate the sins of the world. Catherine wrote:

> And then the soul becomes drunk. And after it . . . has reached the place [of the teaching of the crucified Christ] and drunk to the full, it tastes the food of patience, the odor of virtue, and such a desire to bear the cross that it does not seem that it could ever be satiated. . . . And then the soul becomes like a drunken man; the more he drinks the more he

wants to drink; the more it bears the cross the more it wants to bear it. And the pains are its refreshment and the tears which it has shed for the memory of the blood are its drink. And the sighs are its food."[34]

And again:

Dearest mother and sisters in sweet Jesus Christ, I, Catherine, slave of the slaves of Jesus Christ, write to you in his precious blood, with the desire to see you confirmed in true and perfect charity so that you be true nurses of your souls. For we cannot nourish others if first we do not nourish our own souls with true and real virtues. . . . Do as the child does who, wanting to take milk, takes the mother's breast and places it in his mouth and draws to himself the milk by means of the flesh. So . . . we must attach ourselves to the breast of the crucified Christ, in whom we find the mother of charity, and draw from there by means of his flesh (that is, the humanity) the milk that nourishes our soul. . . . For it is Christ's humanity that suffered, not his divinity; and, without suffering, we cannot nourish ourselves with this milk which we draw from charity.[35]

To the stories and writings of Lidwina and the two Catherines—with their insistent and complex food motifs—I could add dozens of others. Among the most obvious examples would be the beguine Mary of Oignies (d. 1213) from the Low Countries, the princess Elisabeth of Hungary (d. 1231), the famous reformer of French and Flemish religious houses Colette of Corbie (d. 1447), and the thirteenth-century poets Hadewijch and Mechtild of Magdeburg. But if we look closely at the lives and writings of those men from the period whose spirituality is in general closest to women's and who were deeply influenced by women—for example, Francis of Assisi in Italy, Henry Suso and Johann Tauler in the Rhineland, Jan van Ruysbroeck of Flanders, or the English hermit Richard Rolle—we find that even to these men food asceticism is not the central ascetic practice. Nor are food metaphors central in their poetry and prose.[36] Food then is much more important to women than to men as a religious symbol. The question is why?

Modern scholars who have noticed the phenomena I have just described have sometimes suggested in an offhand way that miraculous abstinence and eucharistic frenzy are simply "eating disorders."[37] The implication of such remarks is usually that food disorders are characteristic of women rather than men, perhaps for biological reasons, and that these medieval eating disorders are different from nineteenth- and twentieth-century ones only because medieval people "theologized" what we today "medicalize."[38] While I cannot deal here with all the implications of such analysis, I want to point to two problems with it. First, the evidence we have indicates that extended abstinence was almost exclusively a male phenomenon in early Christianity and a female phenomenon in the high Middle Ages.[39] The cause of such a distribution of cases cannot be primarily biological.[40] Second, medieval people did not treat all refusal to eat as a sign of holiness. They sometimes treated it as demonic possession, but they sometimes also treated it as illness.[41] Interestingly enough, some of the holy women whose fasting was taken as miraculous (for example, Colette of Corbie) functioned as healers of ordinary individuals, both male and female, who could not eat.[42] Thus, for most of the Middle Ages, it was only in the case of some unusually devout women that not-eating was both supposedly total and religiously significant. Such behavior must have a cultural explanation.

On one level, the cultural explanation is obvious. Food was important to women religiously because it was important socially. In medieval Europe (as in many countries today) women were associated with food preparation and distribution rather than food consumption. The culture suggested that women cook and serve, men eat. Chronicle accounts of medieval banquets, for example, indicate that the sexes were often segregated and that women were sometimes relegated to watching from the balconies while gorgeous foods were rolled out to please the eyes as well as the palates of men.[43] Indeed men were rather afraid of women's control of food. Canon lawyers suggested, in the codes they drew up, that a major danger posed by women was their manipulation of male virility by charms and potions added to food.[44] Moreover, food was not merely a resource women controlled; it was *the* resource women controlled. Economic resources were controlled by husbands, fathers, uncles, or brothers. In an obvious sense, therefore, fasting and charitable food distribution (and their miraculous counterparts) were natural religious activities for women. In fasting and charity women renounced and distributed the one resource that was theirs. Several scholars have pointed out that late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century women who wished to follow the new ideal of poverty and begging (for example, Clare of Assisi and Mary of Oignies) were simply not permitted either by their families or by religious authorities to do so.[45] They substituted fasting for other ways of stripping the self of support. Indeed a thirteenth-century hagiographer commented explicitly that one holy woman gave up food because she had nothing else to give up.[46] Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, many devout laywomen who resided in the homes of fathers or spouses were able to renounce the world in the midst of abundance because they did not eat or drink the food that was paid for by family wealth. Moreover, women's almsgiving and abstinence appeared culturally acceptable forms of asceticism because what women ordinarily did, as housewives, mothers, or mistresses of great castles, was to prepare and serve food rather than to eat it.

The issue of control is, however, more basic than this analysis suggests. Food-related behavior was central to women socially and religiously not only because food was a resource women controlled but also because, by means of food, women controlled themselves and their world.

First and most obviously, women controlled their bodies by fasting. Although a negative or dualist concept of body does not seem to have been the most fundamental notion of body to either women or men, some sense that body was to be disciplined, defeated, occasionally even destroyed, in order to release or protect spirit is present in women's piety. Some holy women seem to have developed an extravagant fear of any bodily contact.[47] Clare of Montefalco (d. 1308), for example, said she would rather spend days in hell than be touched by a man.[48] Lutgard of Aywières panicked at an abbot's insistence on giving her the kiss of peace, and Jesus had to interpose his hand in a vision so that she was not reached by the abbot's lips. She even asked to have her own gift of healing by touch taken away.[49] Christina of Stommeln (d. 1312), who fell into a latrine while in a trance, was furious at the laybrothers who rescued her because they touched her in order to do so.[50]

Many women were profoundly fearful of the sensations of their bodies, especially hunger and thirst. Mary of Oignies, for example, was so afraid of taking pleasure in food that Christ had to make her unable to taste.[51] From the late twelfth century comes a sad story of a dreadfully sick girl named Alpaïs who sent away the few morsels of

pork given her to suck, because she feared that any enjoyment of eating might mushroom madly into gluttony or lust.[52] Women like Ida of Louvain (d. perhaps 1300), Elsbeth Achler of Reute (d. 1420), Catherine of Genoa, or Columba of Rieti (d. 1501), who sometimes snatched up food and ate without knowing what they were doing, focused their hunger on the eucharist partly because it was an acceptable object of craving and partly because it was a self-limiting food.[53] Some of women's asceticism was clearly directed toward destroying bodily needs, before which women felt vulnerable.

Some fasting may have had as a goal other sorts of bodily control. There is some suggestion in the accounts of hagiographers that fasting women were admired for suppressing excretory functions. Several biographers comment with approval that holy women who do not eat cease also to excrete, and several point out, explicitly that the menstruation of saintly women ceases.[54] Medieval theology—profoundly ambivalent about body as physicality—was ambivalent about menstruation also, seeing it both as the polluting "curse of Eve" and as a natural function that, like all natural functions, was redeemed in the humanity of Christ. Theologians even debated whether or not the Virgin Mary menstruated.[55] But natural philosophers and theologians were aware that, in fact, fasting suppresses menstruation. Albert the Great noted that some holy women ceased to menstruate because of their fasts and austerities and commented that their health did not appear to suffer as a consequence.[56]

Moreover, in controlling eating and hunger, medieval women were also explicitly controlling sexuality. Ever since Tertullian and Jerome, male writers had warned religious women that food was dangerous because it excited lust.[57] Although there is reason to suspect that male biographers exaggerated women's sexual temptations, some women themselves connected food abstinence with chastity and greed with sexual desire.[58]

Women's heightened reaction to food, however, controlled far more than their physicality. It also controlled their social environment. As the story of Lidwina of Schiedam makes clear, women often coerced both families and religious authorities through fasting and through feeding. To 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. In one of the most charming passages of Margery Kempe's autobiography, for example, Christ and Margery consult together about her asceticism and decide that, although she wishes to practice both food abstention and sexual continence, she should perhaps offer to trade one behavior for the other. Her husband, who had married Margery in an effort to rise socially in the town of Lynn and who was obviously ashamed of her queer penitential clothes and food practices, finally agreed to grant her sexual abstinence in private if she would return to normal cooking and eating in front of the neighbors.[59] Catherine of Siena's sister, Bonaventura, and the Italian saint Rita of Cascia (d. 1456) both reacted to profligate young husbands by wasting away and managed thereby to tame disorderly male behavior.[60] Columba of Rieti and Catherine of Siena expressed what was clearly adolescent conflict with their mothers and riveted family attention on their every move by their refusal to eat. Since fasting so successfully manipulated and embarrassed families, it is not surprising that self-starvation often originated or escalated at puberty, the moment at which families usually began negotiations for husbands for their daughters. Both Catherine and Columba, for example, established themselves as unpromising marital material by their extreme food and sleep depriva-

tion, their frenetic giving away of paternal resources, and their compulsive service of family members in what were not necessarily welcome ways. (Catherine insisted on doing the family laundry in the middle of the night.)[61]

Fasting was not only a useful weapon in the battle of adolescent girls to change their families' plans for them. It also provided for both wives and daughters an excuse for neglecting food preparation and family responsibilities. Dorothy of Montau, for example, made elementary mistakes of cookery (like forgetting to scale the fish before frying them) or forgot entirely to cook and shop while she was in ecstasy. Margaret of Cortona refused to cook for her illegitimate son (about whom she felt agonizing ambivalence) because, she said, it would distract her from prayer.[62]

Moreover, women clearly both influenced and rejected their families' values by food distribution. Ida of Louvain, Catherine of Siena, and Elisabeth of Hungary, each in her own way, expressed distaste for family wealth and coopted the entire household into Christian charity by giving away family resources, sometimes surreptitiously or even at night. Elisabeth, who gave away her husband's property, refused to eat any food except that paid for by her own dowry because the wealth of her husband's family came, she said, from exploiting the poor.[63]

Food-related behavior—charity, fasting, eucharistic devotion, and miracles—manipulated religious authorities as well.[64] Women's eucharistic miracles—especially the ability to identify unconsecrated hosts or unchaste priests—functioned to expose and castigate clerical corruption. The Viennese woman Agnes Blannbekin, knowing that her priest was not chaste, prayed that he be deprived of the host, which then flew away from him and into her own mouth.[65] Margaret of Cortona saw the hands of an unchaste priest turn black when he held the host.[66] Saints' lives and chronicles contain many stories, like that told of Lidwina of Schiedam, of women who vomited out unconsecrated wafers, sometimes to the considerable discomfiture of local authorities.[67]

The intimate and direct relationship that holy women claimed to the eucharist was often a way of bypassing ecclesiastical control. Late medieval confessors and theologians attempted to inculcate awe as well as craving for the eucharist; and women not only received ambiguous advice about frequent communion, they were also sometimes barred from receiving it at exactly the point at which their fasting and hunger reached fever pitch.[68] In such circumstances many women simply received in vision what the celebrant or confessor withheld. Imelda Lambertini, denied communion because she was too young, and Ida of Léau, denied because she was subject to "fits," were given the host by Christ.[69] And some women received, again in visions, either Christ's blood, which they were regularly denied because of their lay status, or the power to consecrate and distribute, which they were denied because of their gender. Angela of Foligno and Mechtild of Hackeborn were each, in a vision, given the chalice to distribute.[70] Catherine of Siena received blood in her mouth when she ate the wafer.[71]

It is thus apparent that women's concentration on food enabled them to control and manipulate both their bodies and their environment. We must not underestimate the effectiveness of such manipulation in a world where it was often extraordinarily difficult for women to avoid marriage or to choose a religious vocation.[72] But such a conclusion concentrates on the function of fasting and feasting, and function is not meaning. Food did not "mean" to medieval women the control it provided. It is time, finally, to consider explicitly what it meant.

As the behavior of Lidwina of Schiedam or the theological insights of Catherine of Siena suggest, fasting, eating, and feeding all meant suffering, and suffering meant redemption. These complex meanings were embedded in and engendered by the theological doctrine of the Incarnation. Late medieval theology, as is well known, located the saving moment of Christian history less in Christ's resurrection than in his crucifixion. Although some ambivalence about physicality, some sharp and agonized dualism, was present, no other period in the history of Christian spirituality has placed so positive a value on Christ's humanity as physicality. Fasting was thus flight not so much *from* as *into* physicality. Communion was consuming—i.e., becoming—a God who saved the world through physical, human agony. Food to medieval women meant flesh and suffering and, through suffering, salvation: salvation of self and salvation of neighbor. Although all thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Christians emphasized Christ as suffering and Christ's suffering body as food, women were especially drawn to such a devotional emphasis. The reason seems to lie in the way in which late medieval culture understood "the female."

Drawing on traditions that went back even before the origins of Christianity, both men and women in the later Middle Ages argued that "woman is to man as matter is to spirit." Thus "woman" or "the feminine" was seen as symbolizing the physical part of human nature, whereas man symbolized the spiritual or rational.[73] Male theologians and biographers of women frequently used this idea to comment on female weakness. They also inverted the image and saw "woman" as not merely below but also above reason. Thus they somewhat sentimentally saw Mary's love for souls and her mercy toward even the wicked as an apotheosis of female unreason and weakness, and they frequently used female images to describe themselves in their dependence on God.[74] Women writers, equally aware of the male/female dichotomy, saw it somewhat differently. They tended to use the notion of "the female" as "flesh" to associate Christ's humanity with "the female" and therefore to suggest that women imitate Christ through physicality.

Women theologians saw "woman" as the symbol of humanity, where humanity was understood as including bodiliness. To the twelfth-century prophet, Elisabeth of Schönau, the humanity of Christ appeared in a vision as a female virgin. To Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), "woman" was the symbol of humankind, fallen in Eve, restored in Mary and church. She stated explicitly: "Man signifies the divinity of the Son of God and woman his humanity."[75] Moreover, to a number of women writers, Mary was the source and container of Christ's physicality; the flesh Christ put on was in some sense female, because it was his mother's. Indeed whatever physiological theory of reproduction a medieval theologian held, Christ (who had no human father) had to be seen as taking his physicality from his mother. Mechtild of Magdeburg went further and implied that Mary was a kind of preexistent humanity of Christ as the Logos was his preexistent divinity. Marguerite of Oingt, like Hildegard of Bingen, wrote that Mary was the *tunica humanitatis*, the clothing of humanity, that Christ puts on.[76] And to Julian of Norwich, God himself was a mother exactly in that our humanity in its full physicality was not merely loved and saved but even given being by and from him. Julian wrote:

> For in the same time that God joined himself to our body in the maiden's womb, he took our soul, which is sensual, and in taking it, having enclosed us all in himself, he united it to our substance. . . . So our Lady is our mother, in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ, for she who is mother of our saviour is mother of all who are saved in our

> saviour; and our saviour is our true mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.[77]

Although male writers were apt to see God's motherhood in his nursing and loving rather than in the fact of creation, they too associated the flesh of Christ with Mary and therefore with woman.[78]

Not only did medieval people associate humanity as body with woman; they also associated woman's body with food. Woman was food because breast milk was the human being's first nourishment—the one food essential for survival. Late medieval culture was extraordinarily concerned with milk as symbol. Writers and artists were fond of the theme, borrowed from antiquity, of lactation offered to a father or other adult male as an act of filial piety. The cult of the Virgin's milk was one of the most extensive cults in late medieval Europe. A favorite motif in art was the lactating Virgin.[79] Even the bodies of evil women were seen as food. Witches were supposed to have queer marks on their bodies (sort of super-numerary breasts) from which they nursed incubi.

Quite naturally, male and female writers used nursing imagery in somewhat different ways. Men were more likely to use images of being nursed, women metaphors of nursing. Thus when male writers spoke of God's motherhood, they focused more narrowly on the soul being nursed at Christ's breast, whereas women were apt to associate mothering with punishing, educating, or giving birth as well.[80] Most visions of drinking from the breast of Mary were received by men.[81] In contrast, women (like Lidwina) often identified with Mary as she nursed Jesus or received visions of taking the Christchild to their own breasts.[82] Both men and women, however, drank from the breast of Christ, in vision and image.[83] Both men and women wove together—from Pauline references to milk and meat and from the rich breast and food images of the Song of Songs—a complex sense of Christ's blood as the nourishment and intoxication of the soul. Both men and women therefore saw the body on the cross, which in dying fed the world, as in some sense female. Again, physiological theory reinforced image. For, to medieval natural philosophers, breast milk was transmuted blood, and a human mother (like the pelican that also symbolized Christ) fed her children from the fluid of life that coursed through her veins.[84]

Since Christ's body itself was a body that nursed the hungry, both men and women naturally assimilated the ordinary female body to it. A number of stories are told of female saints who exuded holy fluid from breasts or fingertips, either during life or after death. These fluids often cured the sick.[85] The union of mouth to mouth, which many women gained with Christ, became also a way of feeding. Lutgard's saliva cured the ill; Lukardis of Oberweimar (d. 1309) blew the eucharist into another nun's mouth; Colette of Corbie regularly cured others with crumbs she chewed.[86] Indeed one suspects that stigmata—so overwhelmingly a female phenomenon—appeared on women's bodies because they (like the marks on the bodies of witches and the wounds in the body of Christ) were not merely wounds but also breasts.

Thus many assumptions in the theology and the culture of late medieval Europe associated woman with flesh and with food. But the same theology also taught that the redemption of all humanity lay in the fact that Christ was flesh and food. A God who fed his children from his own body, a God whose humanity *was* his children's humanity, was a God with whom women found it easy to identify. In mystical ecstasy as in communion,

women ate and became a God who was food and flesh. And in eating a God whose flesh was holy food, women both transcended and became more fully the flesh and the food their own bodies were.

Eucharist and mystical union were, for women, both reversals and continuations of all the culture saw them to be.[87] In one sense, the roles of priest and lay recipient reversed normal social roles. The priest became the food preparer, the generator and server of food. The woman recipient ate a holy food she did not exude or prepare. Woman's jubilant, vision-inducing, inebriated eating of God was the opposite of the ordinary female acts of food preparation or of bearing and nursing children. But in another and, I think, deeper sense, the eating was not a reversal at all. Women became, in mystical eating, a fuller version of the food and the flesh they were assumed by their culture to be. In union with Christ, woman became a fully fleshly and feeding self—at one with the generative suffering of God.

Symbol does not determine behavior. Women's imitation of Christ, their assimilation to the suffering and feeding body on the cross, was not uniform. Although most religious women seem to have understood their devotional practice as in some sense serving as well as suffering, they acted in very different ways. Some, like Catherine of Genoa and Elisabeth of Hungary, expressed their piety in feeding and caring for the poor. Some, like Alpaïs, lay rapt in mystical contemplation as their own bodies decayed in disease or in self-induced starvation that was offered for the salvation of others. Many, like Lidwina of Schiedam and Catherine of Siena, did both. Some of these women are, to our modern eyes, pathological and pathetic. Others seem to us, as they did to their contemporaries, magnificent. But they all dealt, in feast and fast, with certain fundamental realities for which all cultures must find symbols—the realities of suffering and the realities of service and generativity.

NOTES

This paper was originally given as the Solomon Katz Lecture in the Humanities at the University of Washington, March 1984. It summarizes several themes that will be elaborated in detail in my forthcoming book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: Food Motifs in the Piety of Late Medieval Women.* I am grateful to Rudolph M. Bell, Peter Brown, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Rachel Jacoff, Richard Kieckhefer, Paul Meyvaert, Guenther Roth, and Judith Van Herik for their suggestions and for sharing with me their unpublished work.

1. Quoted from Suso's letter to Elsbet Stagel in Henry Suso, *Deutsche Schriften im Auftrag der Württembergischen Kommission für Landesgeschichte*, ed. Karl Bihlmeyer (Stuttgart, 1907), 107; trans. (with minor changes) M. Ann Edward in *The Exemplar: Life and Writings of Blessed Henry Suso*, O.P., ed. Nicholas Heller, 2 vols. (Dubuque, Ia., 1962), 1:103.
2. William A. Hammond, *Fasting Girls: Their Physiology and Pathology* (New York, 1879), 6. Quoted in Joan J. Brumberg, "'Fasting Girls': Nineteenth-Century Medicine and the Public Debate over 'Anorexia,'" paper delivered at the Sixth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, 1–3 June 1984.
3. On the patristic notion that the sin of our first parents was gluttony, see Herbert Musurillo, "The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers," *Traditio* 12 (1956): 17, n. 43. For a medieval discussion, see Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologiae* 2–2.148.3. For several examples of very explicit discussion of "eating God" in communion or of "being eaten" by him, see Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), *De civitate Dei*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne [hereafter *PL*], 41, col. 284c; Hilary of Poitiers (d. 367), *Tractatus in CXXV psalmum*, in PL 9, col. 688b-c; idem, *De Trinitate*, *PL* 10, cols. 246–47; Mechtild of Magdeburg (d. about 1282 or 1297), *Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechtild von Magdeburg oder Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, ed. Gall Morel (Regensburg, 1869; reprint ed., Darmstadt, 1963), 43; Hadewijch (thirteenth century), *Mengeldichten*, ed. J.

Van Mierlo (Antwerp, 1954), poem 16, p. 79; Johann Tauler, sermon 30, *Die Predigten Taulers*, ed. Ferdinand Vetter (Berlin, 1910), 293.

4. See Fritz Curschmann, *Hungersnöte im Mittelalter: Ein Beitrag zur Deutschen Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 8. bis 13. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1900); Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968); and Piero Camporesi, *Il pane selvaggio* (Bologna, 1980).
5. For a brief discussion, see P M. J. Clancy, "Fast and Abstinence," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967), 5:846–50.
6. Lambert, "History of the Counts of Guines," in *Monumenta Germaniae historica: Scriptorum* (hereafter *MGH.SS*), vol. 24 (Hanover, 1879), 615.
7. See Peter Brown, "A Response to Robert M. Grant: The Problem of Miraculous Feedings in the Graeco-Roman World," in *The Center for Hermeneutical Studies* 42 (1982): 16–24; Édouard Dumoutet, *Corpus Domini: Aux sources de la piété eucharistique médiévale* (Paris, 1942).
8. Tauler, sermon 31, in *Die Predigten*, 310; trans. E. Colledge and Sister M. Jane, *Spiritual Conferences* (St. Louis, 1961), 258.
9. André Vauchez, *La Sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques* (Rome, 1981); Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago, 1982); Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, 1984). See also Ernst Benz, *Die Vision: Erfahrungsformen und Bilderwelt* (Stuttgart, 1969), 17–34.
10. For partial (and not always very accurate) lists of miraculous abstainers, see T E. Bridgett, *History of the Holy Eucharist in Great Britain*, 2 vols. (London, 1881), 2:195ff.; Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *A Dictionary of Miracles: Imitative, Realistic and Dogmatic* (Philadelphia, 1884), 508–10; Peter Browe, *Die Eucharistischen Wunder des Mittelalters* (Breslau, 1938), 49–54; Thomas Pater, *Miraculous Abstinence: A Study of One of the Extraordinary Mystical Phenomena* (Washington, D.C., 1964); and Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (Chicago, 1952), 341–83 and passim. My own list includes ten cases that are merely mentioned in passing in saints' lives or chronicles. In addition, the following women are described in the sources as eating "nothing" or "almost nothing" for various periods and as focusing their sense of hunger on the eucharist: Mary of Oignies, Juliana of Cornillon, Ida of Louvain, Elisabeth of Spalbeek, Margaret of Ypres, Lidwina of Schiedam, Lukardis of Oberweimar, Jane Mary of Maillé, Alpaïs of Cudot, Elisabeth of Hungary, Margaret of Hungary, Dorothy of Montau (or Prussia), Elsbeth Achler of Reute, Colette of Corbie, Catherine of Siena, Columba of Rieti, and Catherine of Genoa. Several others—Angela of Foligno, Margaret of Cortona, Beatrice of Nazareth, Beatrice of Ornacieux, Lutgard of Aywières, and Flora of Beaulieu—experienced at times what the nineteenth century would have called a "hysterical condition" that left them unable to swallow.
11. Possible male exceptions include the visionary monk of Evesham and Aelred of Rievaulx in the twelfth century and Facio of Cremona in the thirteenth; see *The Revelation to the Monk of Evesham Abbey*, trans. Valerian Paget (New York, 1909), 35, 61; *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx by Walter Daniel*, ed. and trans. F. M. Powicke (New York, 1951), 48ff.; *Chronica pontificum et imperatorum Mantuana* for the year 1256, *MGH.SS* 24: 216. In general those males whose fasting was most extreme—for example, Henry Suso, Peter of Luxembourg (d. 1386), and John the Good of Mantua (d. 1249)—show quite clearly in their *vitae* that, although they starved themselves and wrecked their digestions, they did *not* claim to cease eating entirely nor did they lose their *desire* for food. See Life of Suso in *Deutsche Schriften*, 7–195; John of Mantua, Process of Canonization, in *Acta sanctorum*, ed. the Bollandists [hereafter *AASS*], October: 9 (Paris and Rome, 1868), 816, 840; Life of Peter of Luxemburg, in *AASS*, July: 1 (Venice, 1746), 513, and Process of Canonization, in ibid., 534–39. James Oldo (d. 1404), who began an extreme fast, returned to eating when commanded by his superiors; life of James Oldo, in *AASS*, April: 2 (Paris and Rome, 1865), 603–4.
12. On food multiplication miracles, see Thurston, *Physical Phenomena*, 385–91. According to the tables in Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, women are 22 percent of the saints important for aiding the poor and 25 percent of those important for curing the sick, although a little less than 18 percent of the total.

13. Elisabeth of Hungary, Rose of Viterbo, Elisabeth of Portugal, Margaret of Fontana, and Flora of Beaulieu; see Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Sainte Elisabeth de Hongrie* (Paris, 1946), 39–42, n. 1; life of Margaret of Fontana, in *AASS*, September: 4 (Antwerp, 1753), 137; and Clovis Brunel, "Vida e Miracles de Sancta Flor," *Analecta Bollandiana* 64 (1946): 8, n. 4. We owe the story, first attached to Elisabeth of Hungary but apocryphal, to an anonymous Tuscan Franciscan of the thirteenth century; see Paul G. Schmidt, "Die zeitgenössische Überlieferung zum Leben und zur Heiligsprechung der heiligen Elisabeth," in *Sankt Elisabeth: Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige: Aufsätze, Dokumentation, Katalog*, ed. the University of Marburg (Sigmaringen, 1981), 1, 5.
14. Browe, *Die Wunder*, and Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, *La Stigmatisation: L'Extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes: Réponse aux libres-penseurs*, 2 vols. (Clermont-Ferrand, 1894), 2:183, 408–9. The work of Imbert-Gourbeyre is on one level inaccurate and credulous, but for my purposes it provides a good index of stories medieval people were willing to circulate, if not of events that in fact happened. See also Caroline W. Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 179–214.
15. See Thurston, *Physical Phenomena*, passim; E. Amann, "Stigmatisation," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol. 14, part I (Paris, 1939), col. 2617–19; Imbert-Gourbeyre, "La Stigmatisation"; and Pierre Debongnie, "Essai critique sur l'histoire des stigmatisations au moyen âge," *Études carmélitaines* 21.2 (1936): 22–59. According to the tables in Weinstein and Bell, women provide 27 percent of the wonder-working relics although only 18 percent of the saints. Women also seem to provide the largest number of myroblytes (oil-exuding saints), although more work needs to be done on this topic. Of the most famous medieval myroblytes—Nicolas of Myra, Catherine of Alexandria, and Elisabeth of Hungary—two were women. On myroblytes, see Charles W. Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra, Bari and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend* (Chicago, 1978),144–53; J.-K. Huysmans, *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (Paris, 1901), 288–91 (which must, however, be used with caution); and n. 85 below.
16. Frederic C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki, 1969); see entries for "abstinence," "fasting," "bread," "loaves and fishes," "meat," "host," and "chalice."
17. See, for example, *Tractatus beati Gregorii pape contra religionis simulatores*, ed. Marvin Colker, in *Analecta Dublinensia: Three Medieval Latin Texts in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 47, 57; and A. George Rigg, "'Metra de monachis carnalibus': The Three Versions," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 15 (1980): 134–42, which gives three versions of an antimonastic parody and shows that the adaptation for nuns eliminates most of the discussion of food as temptation.
18. See David Knowles, "The Diet of Black Monks," *Downside Review* 52 [n.s. 33] (1934), 273–90; and Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge, 1922), 161–236.
19. There are four near-contemporary *vitae* of Lidwina, one in Dutch by John Gerlac, two in Latin by John Brugman, and one by Thomas à Kempis. (Both Gerlac and Brugman knew her well: Gerlac was her relative and Brugman her confessor.) See *AASS*, April: 2, 267–360, which gives Brugman's Latin translation of Gerlac's Life with Gerlac's additions indicated in brackets (the *Vita prior*) and Brugman's longer Life (the *Vita posterior*); and Thomas à Kempis, *Opera omnia*, ed. H. Sommalius, vol. 3 (Cologne, 1759), 114–64. See also Huysmans, *Lydwine*.
20. Brugman, *Vita posterior*, 320; see also ibid., 313. It is also important to note that Lidwina at first responded to her terrible illness with anger and despair and had to be convinced that it was a saving imitation of Christ's passion; see *Vita prior*, 280–82, and Thomas à Kempis, Life of Lidwina, in *Opera omnia*, 132–33.
21. For parallel lives from the Low Countries, see Thomas of Cantimpré, Life of Lutgard of Aywières (d. 1246), in *AASS*, June: 4 (Paris and Rome, 1867), 189–210; and G. Hendrix, "Primitive Versions of Thomas of Cantimpré's *Vita Lutgardis*," *Cîteaux: Commentarii cistercienses* 29 (1978): 153–206; Thomas of Cantimpré, Life of Christina Mirabilis (d. 1224), in *AASS*, July: 5 (Paris, 1868),637–60; Life of Gertrude van Oosten (d. 1358), in *AASS*, January: 1 (Antwerp, 1643),348–53; and Philip of Clairvaux, Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek (or Herkenrode) (d. after 1274), *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum Bibliothecae regiae Bruxellensis*, vol. 1, part 1, ed. the Bollandists, in *Subsidia hagiographica*, vol. 1 (Brussels, 1886), 362–78.

22. *Vita* prior, 283; *Vita posterior*, 344; Thomas à Kempis, Life of Lidwina, 135–36.
23. *Vita posterior*, 331–32, 334–35. See Debongnie, "Stigmatisations," 55–56.
24. *Vita posterior*, 335.
25. See, for example, *Vita prior*, 277, 297. We are told that her relatives and friends benefited especially.
26. See *Vita prior*, 297; see also ibid., 280. And see Thomas à Kempis, Life of Lidwina, 155–56.
27. *Vita prior*, 295–97; *Vita posterior*, 329–35; Thomas à Kempis, Life of Lidwina, 155–56.
28. *Vita posterior*, 330.
29. *Vita mirabile et doctrina santa della beata Caterina da Genova . . .* (Florence, 1568; reprint ed., 1580), 106–7.
30. *Trattato del Purgatorio*, in Umile Bonzi da Genova, *S. Caterina Fieschi Adorno*, 2 vols. (Marietta, 1960), vol. 2, *Edizione critica dei manoscritti cateriniani*, 332–33. Catherine's "works" were compiled after her death, and there is some controversy about their "authorship" but all agree that the treatise on purgatory represents her own teaching.
31. It is quite easy to establish striking parallels between Catherine's behavior and modern descriptions of anorexia/bulimia. For accounts of Catherine's extended inedia, bingeing, and vomiting, see Raymond of Capua, Life of Catherine, in *AASS*, April: 3 (Paris and Rome, 1866), 872, 876–77, 903–7, 960; and the anonymous *I miracoli di Caterina di Jacopo da Siena di Anonimo Fiorentino a cura di Francesco Valli* (Siena, 1936), 5–9, 23–35. On Catherine's eucharistic devotion, see Raymond, Life of Catherine, 904–5, 907, and 909.
32. See, for example, letter 208, *Le lettere de S. Caterina da Siena, ridotte a miglior lezione, e in ordine nuovo disposte con note di Niccolò Tommaseo*, ed. Piero Misciattelli, 6 vols. (Siena, 1913–22), 3: 255–58; letter 11, ibid., 1:44; letter 340, ibid., 5:158–66; and *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York, 1980), 140.
33. See, for example, *Dialogue*, 170; letter 34, *Le lettere*, 1:157; letter 8, ibid., 1:34–38; letter 75, ibid., 2:21–24.
34. Letter 87, ibid., 2:92.
35. Letter 2* (a separately numbered series), in ibid., 6:5–6. Catherine is fond of nursing images to describe God: see letter 86, ibid., 2:81–88; letter 260, ibid., 4:139–40; letter 1*, ibid., 6:1–4; letter 81 (Tommaseo-Misciattelli no. 239) in *Epistolario di Santa Caterina da Siena*, ed. Eugenio Dupré Theseider, vol. 1 (Rome, 1940), 332–33; *Dialogue*, 52, 179–80, 292, and 323–24; and Raymond of Capua, Life of Catherine, 909.
36. On Hadewijch and Mechtild, see n. 3 above. On Mary of Oignies, see Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion." For Elisabeth, see Albert Huyskens, *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabeth Landgräfin von Thüringen* (Marburg, 1908); and Ancelet-Hustache, *Elisabeth*. For Colette, see the Lives in *AASS*, March: 1 (Antwerp, 1668), 539–619. For an analysis of the extent of food asceticism and food metaphors in the lives and writings of Francis, Suso, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, and Rolle, see my forthcoming book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Tauler and Rolle (like Catherine of Siena's confessor, Raymond of Capua) were actually apologetic about their inability to fast. And Tauler and Ruysbroeck, despite intense eucharistic piety, use little food language outside a eucharistic context. See also n. 11 above.
37. See, for example, Thurston, *Physical Phenomena*, passim; Benedict J. Groeschel, introduction to *Catherine of Genoa: Purgation and Purgatory . . .*, trans. Serge Hughes (New York, 1979), 11; J. Hubert Lacey, "Anorexia Nervosa and a Bearded Female Saint," *British Medical Journal* 285 (18–25 December 1982): 1816–17. Rudolph M. Bell is at work on a sophisticated study, the thesis of which is that a number of late medieval Italian religious women suffered from anorexia nervosa.
38. There is good evidence for biological factors in women's greater propensity for fasting and "eating disorders." See Harrison G. Pope and James Hudson, *New Hope for Binge Eaters: Advances in the Understanding and Treatment of Bulimia* (New York, 1984), which argues that anorexia and bulimia are types of biologically caused depression, which have a pharmacological cure. See also "Appendix B: Sex Differences in Death, Disease and Diet" in Katharine B. Hoyenga and K. T. Hoyenga, *The Question of Sex Differences: Psychological, Cultural and Biological Issues* (Boston, 1979), 372–90, which demonstrates that, for reasons of differences in metabolism between men and women, women's bodies tolerate fasting better than men's. For a sophisticated discussion of continuities and discontinuities in women's fasting practices, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, "'Fasting Girls': Reflections on Writ-

ing the History of Anorexia Nervosa," *Proceedings of the Society for Research on Child Development* (forthcoming).

39. See Browe, *Die Wunder*, 49–50; Jules Corblet, *Histoire dogmatique, liturgique et archéologique du sacrement de l'eucharistie*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1885–86), 1:188–91; and n. 10 above.

40. Even for the modern period there is much evidence that confutes a rigidly biochemical explanation of women's inedia. Most researchers agree that incidents of anorexia and bulimia are in fact increasing rapidly, although recent talk of an "epidemic" may be journalistic overreaction. See Hilde Bruch, "Anorexia Nervosa: Therapy and Theory," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 139, no. 12 (December 1982): 1531–38; and A. H. Crisp, et al., "How Common Is Anorexia Nervosa? A Prevalence Study," British *Journal of Psychiatry* 128 (1976): 549–54.

41. Lidwina, Catherine of Siena, and Alpaïs of Cudot (d. 1211) apparently saw their inedia as illness, although all three were accused of demonic possession. See n. 20 above; Catherine of Siena, letter 19 (Tommaseo-Misciattelli no. 92), Epistolario, 1:80–82, where she calls her inability to eat an infermità; Raymond of Capua, Life of Catherine, 906; and Life of Alpaïs, in *AASS*, November: 2.1 (Brussels, 1894), 178, 180, 182–83, and 200.

42. Peter of Vaux, Life of Colette, 576, and account of miracles performed at Ghent after her death, ibid., 594–95. See also the two healing miracles recounted in the ninth-century life of Walburga (d. 779) by Wolfhard of Eichstadt, in *AASS*, February: 3 (Antwerp, 1658), 528 and 540–42. Holy women also sometimes cured people who could not fast; see the Life of Juliana of Cornillon, in *AASS*, April: 1 (Paris and Rome, 1866), 475, and Thomas of Cantimpré, Life of Lutgard, 200–201.

43. Barbara K. Wheaton, *Savouring the Past: The French Kitchen and Table from 1300 to 1789* (Philadelphia, 1983), 1–26.

44. Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1984), 72, 106.

45. On Mary of Oignies, see Brenda M. Bolton, "*Vitae Matrum*: A Further Aspect of the *Frauenfrage*," in *Medieval Women: Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind M. T. Hill . . .*, ed. D. Baker, Studies in Church History, subsidia 1 (Oxford, 1978), 257–59; on Clare, see Rosalind B. Brooke and Christopher N. L. Brooke, "St. Clare," in ibid., 275–87. And on this point generally see my essay, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality," in Frank Reynolds and Robert Moore, eds., *Anthropology and the Study of Religion* (Chicago, 1984), 105–25.

46. Life of Christina *Mirabilis*, 654.

47. On this point, see Claude Carozzi, "Douceline et les autres," in *La religion populaire en Languedoc du XIIIe siècle à la moitié du XIVe siècle*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux, no. 11 (Toulouse, 1976), 251–67; and Martinus Cawley, "Lutgard of Aywières: Life and Journal," *Vox Benedictina: A Journal of Translations from Monastic Sources* 1.1 (1984): 20–48.

48. See Vauchez, *La Sainteté*, 406. For Francesca Romana de' Ponziani (d. 1440) and Jutta of Huy (d. 1228), who found the act of sexual intercourse repulsive, see Weinstein and Bell, 39–40, 88–89.

49. Life of Lutgard, 193–95. To interpret these incidents more psychologically, one might say that it is hardly surprising that Lutgard, a victim of attempted rape in adolescence, should feel anesthetized when kissed, over her protests, by a man. Nor is it surprising that the "mouth" and "breast" of Christ should figure so centrally in her visions, providing partial healing for her painful experience of the mouths of men; see Life of Lutgard, 192–94, and Hendrix, "Primitive Versions," 180.

50. Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (Rutgers, 1954; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 354–55.

51. James of Vitry, Life of Mary of Oignies, in *AASS*, June: 5 (Paris and Rome, 1867), 551–56.

52. Addendum to the life of Alpaïs, 207–8.

53. See above n. 29; Life of Ida of Louvain, in *AASS*, April: 2, 156–89, esp. 167; Anton Birlinger, ed., "Leben Heiliger Alemannischer Frauen des XIV–XV Jahrhunderts, 1: Dir erst Büchlyn ist von der Seligen Kluseneryn von Rüthy, die genant waz Elizabeth," *Alemannia* 9 (1881): 275–92, esp. 280–83; Life of Columba of Rieti, in *AASS*, May: 5 (Paris and Rome, 1866), 149*–222*, esp. 159*, 162*–164*, 187*, and 200*. This would also appear to be true of Dorothy of Montau (or of Prussia) (d. 1394); see Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 22–33.

54. See, for example, Life of Lutgard, 200; Life of Elisabeth of Spalbeek, 378; Peter of Vaux, Life of Colette, 554–55; Life of Columba of Rieti, 188*. This emphasis on the closing of the body is also found in early modern accounts of "fasting girls." Jane Balan (d. 1603) supposedly did not excrete, menstruate, sweat, or produce sputum, tears, or even dandruff; see Hyder E. Rollins, "Notes on Some English Accounts of Miraculous Fasts," *The Journal of American Folk-lore* 34.134 (1921): 363–64.
55. See Charles T. Wood, "The Doctors' Dilemma: Sin, Salvation and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought," *Speculum* 56 (1981): 710–27.
56. Albert the Great, *De animalibus libri XXVI, nach der Cölner Urschrift*, vol. 1 (Münster, 1916), 682. Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegardis Causae et Curae*, ed. P. Kaiser (Leipzig, 1903), 102–3, comments that the menstrual flow of virgins is less than that of nonvirgins, but she does not relate this to diet.
57. See, for example, Jerome, letter 22 *ad Eustochium*, PL 22, cols. 404–5, and *contra Jovinianum*, PL 23, cols. 290–312; Fulgentius of Ruspe, letter 3, PL 65, col. 332; John Cassian, *Institutions cénobitiques*, ed. Jean-Claude Guy (Paris, 1965), 206; and Musurillo, "Ascetical Fasting," 13–19. For a medieval preacher who repeats these warnings, see Peter the Chanter, *Verbum abbreviatum*, PL 205, cols. 327–28.
58. See Life of Margaret of Cortona, in *AASS*, February: 3 (Paris, 1865), 313, and Life of Catherine of Sweden, in *AASS*, March: 3 (Paris and Rome, 1865), 504. On the tendency of male writers to depict women as sexual beings, see Weinstein and Bell, 233–36.
59. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. W. Butler-Bowdon (London, 1936), 48–49.
60. Raymond, Life of Catherine, 869; Life of Rita of Cascia, in *AASS*, May: 5 (Paris and Rome, 1866), 226–28. (There is no contemporary life of Rita extant.)
61. Raymond, Life of Catherine, 868–91 passim; Life of Columba, 153*–161*.
62. On Dorothy, see *Vita Lindana*, in *AASS*, October: 13 (Paris, 1883), 505, 515, 523, and 535–43; see also John Marienwerder, *Vita Latina*, ed. Hans Westpfahl, in *Vita Dorotheae Montoviensis Magistri Johannis Marienwerder* (Cologne, 1964), 236–45, and Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 22–33. On Margaret, see Father Cuthbert, *A Tuscan Penitent: The Life and Legend of St. Margaret of Cortona* (London, n.d.), 94–95.
63. See above nn. 36, 53, and 61. On Elisabeth, see the depositions of 1235 in Huyskens, *Quellenstudien*, 112–40, and Conrad of Marburg's letter (1233) concerning her life in ibid., 155–60. See also Ancelet-Hustache, *Elisabeth*, 201–6 and 314–18. The importance of Elisabeth's tyrannical confessor, Conrad of Marburg, in inducing her obsession with food is impossible at this distance to determine. It was Conrad who ordered her not to eat food gained by exploitation of the poor; at times, to break her will, he forbade her to indulge in charitable food distribution.
64. On this point, see Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," and idem, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), chap. 5.
65. See Browe, *Die Wunder*, 34.
66. Life of Margaret of Cortona, 341; see also 343, where she recognizes an unconsecrated host.
67. See, for example, Life of Ida of Louvain, 178–79, and account of "Joan the Meatless" in Thomas Netter [Waldensis], *Opus de sacramentis* . . . (Salamanca, 1557), fols. 111v–112r. See also life of Mary of Oignies, 566, where James of Vitry claims that Mary saw angels when virtuous priests celebrated.
68. See Joseph Duhr, "Communion fréquente," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1953), cols. 1234–92, esp. col. 1260.
69. For Imelda, see Browe, *Die Wunder*, 27–28; for Ida of Léau, see Life, in *AASS*, October: 13, 113–14. See also Life of Alice of Schaerbeke (d. 1250), in *AASS*, June: 2 (Paris and Rome, 1867), 473–74; and Life of Juliana of Cornillon, 445–46.
70. Life of Angela of Foligno, in *AASS*, January: 1, 204. For Mechtild's vision, see Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 210, n. 129.
71. See Catherine's own account of such a miracle, *Dialogue*, 239.
72. The work of David Herlihy and Diane Owen Hughes, which argues that, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the age discrepancy between husband and wife increased and the dowry, provided by the girl's family, became increasingly a way of excluding her from other forms of inheritance and from her natal family, suggests some particular reasons for a high level of antagonism between girls and their families in this period. The antagonism would

stem less from the failure of families to find husbands for daughters (as Herlihy suggests) than from the tendency of families to marry girls off early and thereby buy them out of the family when they were little more than children (as Hughes suggests). See David Herlihy, "Alienation in Medieval Culture and Society," reprinted in *The Social History of Italy and Western Europe, 700–1500: Collected Studies* (London, 1978); idem, "The Making of the Medieval Family: Symmetry, Structure and Sentiment," *Journal of Family History* 8.2 (1983): 116–30; and Diane Owen Hughes, "From Brideprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe," *Journal of Family History* 3 (1978): 262–96.

73. Vern Bullough, "Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women," *Viator* 4 (1973): 487–93; Eleanor McLaughlin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Women in Medieval Theology," *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. R. Ruether (New York, 1974), 213–66; and M.-T d'Alverny, "Comment les théologiens et les philosophes voient la femme?" *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 20 (1977): 105–29.
74. See Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, chap. 4, and idem, "'. . .And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in *New Perspectives on Religion and Gender*, ed. Caroline Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman, to appear.
75. *Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth und die Schriften der Aebte Ekbert und Emecho von Schönau*, ed. F W. E. Roth (Brunn, 1884), 60; Hildegard, *Liber divinorum operum*, PL 197, col. 885; and idem, *Scivias*, ed. Adelgundis Führkötter and A. Carlevaris, 2 vols. (Turnhout, 1978), 1:225–306, esp. 231 and plate 15.
76. On Mechtild, see *Jesus as Mother*, 229, 233–34, and 244; and on Hildegard, see Barbara Jane Newman, "*O Feminea Forma*: God and Woman in the Works of St. Hildegard (1098–1179)," Ph.D. diss., Yale, 1981, 131–34. And see Marguerite of Oingt, *Speculum*, in *Les Oeuvres de Marguerite d'Oingt*, ed. and trans. A. Duraffour, R. Gardette, and R. Durdilly (Paris, 1965), 98–99.
77. *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York, 1978), long text: 292, 294.
78. See *Jesus as Mother*, chap. 4, and Jan van Ruysbroeck, *The Spiritual Espousals*, trans. E. Colledge (New York, n.d.), 43; idem, "Le Miroir du salut éternel," in *Oeuvres de Ruysbroeck l'Admirable*, trans. by the Benedictines of St.-Paul de Wisques, vol. 3 (3rd ed., Brussels, 1921), 82–83; Francis of Assisi, "Salutation of the Blessed Virgin," trans. B. Fahy, in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of Sources*, ed. Marion Habig (3rd ed., Chicago, 1973), 135–36; and Henry Suso, *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit*, in *Deutsche Schriften*, 264.
79. See P. V. Bétérous, "A propos d'une des légendes mariales les plus répandues: Le 'Lait de la Vierge,'" Bulletin *de l'Association Guillaume Budé* 4 (1975): 403–11; Léon Dewez and Albert van Iterson, "La Lactation de saint Bernard: Légende et iconographie," *Cîteaux in de Nederlanden* 7 (1956): 165–89.
80. See Bynum, "'. . . And Woman His Humanity.'"
81. On the lactation of Bernard of Clairvaux, see E. Vacandard, *Vie de saint Bernard, abbé de Clairvaux*, 2 vols. (1895; reprint ed., Paris, 1920), 2:78; and Dewez and van Iterson, "La Lactation." Suso received the same vision; see Life, in *Deutsche Schriften*, 49–50. Alanus de Rupe (or Alan de la Roche, d. 1475), founder of the modern rosary devotion, tells a similar story of himself in his Revelations; see Heribert Holzapfel, *St. Dominikus und der Rosenkranz* (Munich, 1903), 21. See also Alb. Poncelet, "Index miraculorum B. V. Mariae quae saec. VI-XV latine conscripta sunt," *Analecta Bollandiana* 21 (1902): 359, which lists four stories of sick men healed by the Virgin's milk. Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* (Venice, 1494), fol. 80r, tells of a sick cleric who nursed from the Virgin. Elizabeth Petroff, *Consolation of the Blessed* (New York, 1979), 74, points out that the Italian women saints she has studied nurse only from Christ, never from Mary, in vision. A nun of Töss, however, supposedly received the "pure, tender breast" of Mary into her mouth to suck because she helped Mary rear the Christchild; Ferdinand Vetter, ed., *Das Leben der Schwestern zu Töss beschrieben von Elsbet Stagel* (Berlin, 1906), 55–56. And Lukardis of Oberweimar nursed from Mary; see her Life in *Analecta Bollandiana* 18 (1899): 318–19.
82. See, for example, Life of Gertrude van Oosten (or of Delft), 350. For Gertrude of Helfta's visions of nursing the Christchild, see *Jesus as Mother*, 208, n. 123. There is one example of a man nursing Christ; see McDonnell, *Beguines*, 328, and Browe, *Die Wunder*, 106.

83. See *Jesus as Mother*, chap. 4, and nn. 35 and 49 above. Clare of Assisi supposedly received a vision in which she nursed from Francis; see "Il Processo di canonizzazione di S. Chiara d'Assisi," ed. Zeffirino Lazzeri, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 13 (1920), 458, 466.
84. See Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries," *The History of Childhood*, ed. L. DeMause (New York, 1974): 115–18, and *Jesus as Mother*, 131–35.
85. See above nn. 15 and 82. Examples of women who exuded healing oil, in life or after death, include Lutgard of Aywières, Christina *Mirabilis*, Elisabeth of Hungary, Agnes of Montepulciano, and Margaret of Città di Castello (d. 1320). See Life of Lutgard, 193–94; Life of Christina *Mirabilis* 652–54; Huyskens, *Quellenstudien*, 51–52; Raymond of Capua, Life of Agnes, in *AASS*, April: 2, 806; Life of Margaret of Città di Castello, *Analecta Bollandiana* 19 (1900): 27–28, and see also *AASS*, April: 2, 192.
86. Life of Lutgard, 193; Life of Lukardis of Oberweimar, *Analecta Bollandiana* 18 (1899): 337–38; Peter of Vaux, Life of Colette, 563, 576, 585, and 588.
87. For a general discussion of reversed images in women's spirituality, see Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols."

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