

OF STOCKFISH AND STEW: FEASTING AND FASTING IN THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

Cristina Mazzoni

*Department of Romance Languages, University of Vermont,
Burlington, Vermont*

Cooking is one of those arts which most requires to be done by persons of a religious nature.” (Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead)

What do food and spirituality have in common? Nothing, I would say, and everything. If food represents the selfish pursuit of bodily self-preservation, and spirituality the annihilation of the self in God, then not much can meaningfully join them. If food writing is a narcissistic reflection on one’s “foodie self,” as it so often seems to be, and spiritual writing is a mirror for the divine, again, nothing much can be shared by the two. The same incompatibility holds true, as well, if the sharing of food allows us to reach others, and spiritual questing inevitably leads us back to our own self; if the corporal acts of mercy (to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry) impel us to the practice of charity, and spiritual introspection begets a spirit of pride. But if food binds us together as generations, families, friends, and fellow human beings, and if spirituality bonds us to one another and to the divine, then much can be learned by bringing together these two indispensable aspects of our humanity. In the words of Martin Versfeld, who has written an insightful little book entitled *Food for Thought: A Philosopher’s Cookbook*, “An eaten world is an intelligible world, a world in which body and spirit are united.”¹

Address correspondence to Cristina Mazzoni, Department of Romance Languages, Waterman Building, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405. E-mail: cmazzoni@zoo.uvm.edu

1. Martin Versfeld, *Food for Thought: A Philosopher’s Cook-Book* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1983), 11–12.

In what follows, I focus on the writings of Margery Kempe, that troublesome and eccentric English lady in white whom my former teacher Valerie Lagorio so appropriately called a “noisy contemplative.”² Margery Kempe was born around 1373 in the town of Lynn, Norfolk, England, then a prosperous port. Her spiritual conversion, full of ecstasy and visions, did not come about until she was 40, after she had borne fourteen children in twenty years of marriage. At that point, she talked her husband into a mutual vow of chastity and went off on long, perilous journeys through England, Europe, and the Holy Land, alone, with little or no money, and no knowledge of foreign languages. Margery was threatened with burning as a heretic, and she often could not sleep at night for fear of being assaulted, but, physically and spiritually restless, she kept traveling nevertheless. Margery could neither read nor write, and thus she dictated her adventures to a scribe toward the end of her life. Unlike many spiritual writers, Margery was fond of expressing her experience in daily, domestic terms, often involving encounters with and images of food. Her manuscript, discovered in 1934, is now regarded as the earliest known example of autobiography in the English language; it is also our only historical source for Margery Kempe’s life.

Three idiosyncrasies may be said to characterize Margery Kempe. First, is her transgressive, polemical decision to dress in white, despite the ridicule that a 40-year-old mother of 14 dressing like a girlish virgin would and did arouse. The white costume signals her honorary, spiritual virginity, and that she must not be approached sexually. Second, are her irrepressible outbursts of loud and public sobbing, weeping, and crying at the sheer thought of divine love, and reproducing the Virgin Mary’s own sorrow at the foot of the cross. Third, she made repeated, almost obsessive references to food and drink even at the height of her spiritual experiences. Indeed I would make the same claim about food in Margery’s *Book* as Kathy Lavezzo makes about her tears, namely that “Margery’s affective mourning exerts a unifying effect that is twofold, binding together both the *Book* itself and, at times, the women represented in it.”³ (We will see below, for example, how gifts of food and wine seal Margery’s friendships.)

That drink should figure prominently in Margery Kempe’s memoirs is not surprising, given that she was, as her own book explains, “one of the

2. Valerie Lagorio, “Defensorium Contra Oblectatores: A ‘Discerning Assessment of Margery Kempe,” in *Mysticism: Medieval and Modern*, ed. Valerie Lagorio, (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1986), 29–48, 29.

3. Kathy Lavezzo, “Sobs and Sighs Between Women: The Homoerotics of Compassion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero with the assistance of Kathy Lavezzo (New York: Routledge, 1996), 175–198, 180.

greatest brewers in the town of N. for three or four years until she lost a great deal of money.”⁴ Margery’s brewing skills were not enough to counteract what was probably poor business sense combined with bad karma—or, more likely, undesirable microorganisms in the air of her alehouse: “for when the ale had as fine a head of froth on it as anyone might see,” Margery writes, “suddenly the froth would go flat, and all the ale was lost in one brewing after another” (44).

Margery’s profession as alewife places our mystic in a specific economic and cultural context, allowing us to integrate in yet another way the exceptional qualities of mysticism with the daily experience of a medieval Englishwoman. As Judith Bennett details in her fascinating book *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, at Margery’s time brewing was a vital English enterprise (because people normally avoided water, which was often contaminated, and thus drank ale as a regular part of their daily diet), and it was a small-scale, unorganized, local enterprise in the hands of women. Significantly, with the introduction of beer and the transformation of the brewing industry into a centralized, large-scale, profitable business, women were squeezed out of this industry and men came to dominate it.⁵ Margery’s ale was brewed with fermented malted barley, since beer, that is, ale brewed with hops, only became common in England as the 15th century progressed. Hops contain natural preservatives that ale lacked, and thus before the advent of beer it was necessary to frequently brew that beverage which medieval people consumed in vast amounts: Ale deteriorated very quickly and it tasted best when produced locally (and you thought local microbreweries were a recent phenomenon!). And brewing, as I mentioned, before the introduction of hops and beer, was done primarily, if not exclusively, by women—“alewives” or “brewsters” (both terms referred to female brewers only), such as Margery Kempe herself, who often sought to supplement the

4. Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans B.A. Windeatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 44.

5. Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women’s Work in a Changing World, 1300–1600* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). More generally, Bennett notes that “The coincidence of the rise of beerbrewing in England with the decline of brewsters is a specific instance of an important general trend: the association of new technologies with men” (78). But she also reminds us that “the history of brewing offers no evidence of a medieval ‘rough and ready equality’ between the sexes or of a medieval ‘golden age’ for women. When women brewed, it was a humble employment, offering little prestige and little profit. Compared to the other sorts of work available to women, it was a good option, but compared to the sorts of work available to men, it was a poor option indeed” (147). On brewing and cooking in the Middle Ages, see P. W. Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval England* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993).

household income. Margery saw her brewing failures as a sign from above that brewing was not her true calling, especially if undertaken “out of pure covetousness” (44). As a good early consumerist, Margery was never satisfied with the worldly goods in her possession. On the flat surface of her ale, she read the writing of God’s will and/as her future.

Her failure as an alewife must have left its mark on Margery’s psyche and tastebuds, for in the rest of her book she no longer refers to ale but prefers wine—the eucharistic drink, after all—and, on an occasion, even the still uncommon beer. She gives her good-quality wine to an old needy Roman woman, taking her sour wine in exchange, so as to better serve her, and through her, Christ (122). She herself receives very good wine from an abbot as a way of comforting her tears (155). A housewife steals wine from her husband’s locked-up reserve in order to take care of Margery, who is “terribly thirsty,” “begging her to conceal the pot and cup, so that when the good man came back he might not notice it” (169); Margery’s own “tears are angels’ drink, and are truly to the angels like spiced and honeyed wine” (200): for prebottling medieval times, the wine drunk in England was new and harsh. Honey and spices made this drink more palatable to medieval people, who tended to have a sweet tooth, anyway. So it is “a good hot drink of gruel and spiced wine” that busy, solicitous Margery Kempe offers Mary of Nazareth in order to comfort her after the death of her son Jesus: in her meditations on the Passion, Margery is actively involved in the care of both Jesus and Mary. The preparation and serving of this hot drink of gruel and spiced wine seal the reality of her spiritual imagination, and affirm her ability to nurture in a bodily fashion the mother of God. Indeed, in a previous vision, Margery recounts how she maternally had nourished Mary of Nazareth herself with “good food and drink” from her birth until she was twelve (52).

The preparation and ministrations of food complete and complicate Margery’s relationship with Mary as being based on identification. This identification has been noted by critics, who have related it historically to the reverence for the Virgin Mary that is characteristic of east Anglian women such as Margery Kempe.⁶ Margery’s *imitatio Christi* is thus also her *imitatio Mariae*, for not only does Margery affectively identify with Mary as the

6. On Margery Kempe’s identification with Mary, see for example Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 193. Gail McMurray Gibson has suggested that Mariology in East Anglia verged on Mariolatry, an adoration of Mary at times superior to that of Christ himself. See her *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 138.

mother of Christ—with the consequent abundance of tearful sorrow at the contemplation of his Passion. Margery is so identified with the role of mother that her maternal performance turns on Mary herself: By nourishing Mary “with good food and drink” while Mary was a child, by comforting Mary after Jesus’ death with “a good hot drink of gruel and spiced wine,” Margery mothers Mary even as she becomes one with her. Margery bore 14 children, after all, and identifies her first major spiritual crisis as having taken place after giving birth for the first time. This crisis, in turn, is resolved when, after her vision of Christ, Margery speaks her first calm words: “[She] asked her husband, as soon as he came to her, if she could have the keys to the buttery to get her food and drink as she had done before” (43). For this woman, food and drink signal normality and, even more, divine grace.

But let me briefly return to Margery’s maternal identification with Mary as Christ’s mother and with Mary’s own mother. This second maternal figure, Christ’s grandmother, as it were, is not literally Saint Anne, but still a mother figure nevertheless. It is true that there would be nothing new in Margery’s maternal relation to Christ. Religious historian Caroline Walker Bynum has noted that both the medieval female laity and the medieval female religious “acted out [a] maternal . . . role in the liturgy, decorating life-sized statues of the Christ child for the Christmas crèche.”⁷ This maternal behavior toward Jesus represents one of the ways in which women transposed their “ordinary nurturing roles over into their most profound religious experiences” (Bynum, 198). Yet in the passages cited above Margery is mothering not so much Christ, but his mother. So, although this is not the place to perform an in-depth reading, what we have in these texts is a touching example of the mother–daughter bond, the very relationship rarely represented in Western narratives—as feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich and Luce Irigaray have rightly lamented.⁸

Without doubt, Margery Kempe loved her wine, and she loved food just as much. This positive attention, even delight in food distinguishes Margery from the numerous medieval women who fasted prodigiously and feasted on the eucharist exclusively. Margery, unlike the “holy anorexics”⁹ of old

7. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1991), 198.

8. See for example the chapter “Mothers and Daughters” in Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976). Luce Irigaray even goes so far as to state that the patriarchal regime has made the love between mother and daughter “impossible,” and gives practical, political suggestions for ways of making this bond more visible in society. See Luce Irigaray, “Each Sex Must Have Its Own Rights,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 1–5.

(to borrow historian Rudolph Bell's evocative term), does not reject regular food, nor does she feel sick in its presence. Although she practices fasting and, especially it seems, abstinence from meat and wine, like many other Christians of her time, Margery does not starve herself as holy women such as Christina Mirabilis and Mary of Oignies did. And this is what impelled me to write this essay on wine and stockfish and stew: While historians and cultural critics have been quick to add their research to the rapidly growing body of knowledge on holy women's refusal of food, the appreciation of food as a potentially pleasurable and usually necessary bodily sustenance, and not just as transubstantiated bread, as eucharist, has gone largely unexplored. Bynum's brilliant book on medieval holy women's ambivalent relationship with food, for example, evocatively entitled *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, refers to Margery Kempe several times, but it never discusses the positive images of eating and food preparation present in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.¹⁰ By dwelling on Margery's fasting and its association with married sexuality (Margery's husband agreed to granting her sexual abstinence in private in exchange for her return to normal cooking and eating in public), Bynum limits Margery's feasting to her eucharistic devotion.

But food, I would argue, has an even more complex role in the lives of many holy women than Bynum's extensive and persuasive account acknowledges. To consider another example of the link between food preparation and spiritual experiences, we can turn to Angela of Foligno's *Memorial*, where the medieval Italian mystic recounts: "on the same day, when I was about to wash some lettuce, a certain deceptive voice joined in and said: 'What?! Are you worthy to wash lettuce?!'"¹¹ Here, too, the act of preparing food (like Margery, Angela also had been married with children) occasions the encounter with the supernatural, although this time it is a negative encounter with a demon. The meaning of the passage is ambiguous, depending on the devil's intention (is Angela too good or not good enough to wash lettuce?), but the connection established is clear: It is not only in prayer and fasting, but also in eating and cooking that demonic temptation and divine grace, both leading to self-knowledge and conversion, can unfold, transform, unite.

Food gave Margery physical and spiritual strength (43). Food is what she

9. Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). These books describe numerous examples of prodigious fasting by Christian holy women.

10. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 88, 215, 221.

11. Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*, ed. Cristina Mazzoni, trans. John Cirignano (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 56.

repeatedly shared with her friends, creating relationships, celebrating life (60). Eating alone—a common practice in today’s busy world—is clearly regarded as undesirable, and letting others eat alone is uncharitable at best. For example, although her fellow pilgrims often banned her from the table on account of her annoying habit of loud weeping and sobbing, so that “she ate her meals alone by herself,” others, such as the Franciscan “Grey Friars,” “took her in with them and seated her with them at meals, so that she should not eat alone” (Kempe, 109). Food is, in Margery’s own words, where she can find “joy and comfort” (240). When she is faint, her fellow travelers put spices in her mouth (103). Margery is most explicit when she admits that the eating of meat is what she loves best in this world (50). Fasting and abstinence, that is, do not seem to be paired in her experience with the anorexia and disgust that characterize some of her contemporaries.

And it is precisely the eating of meat and drinking of wine, that sweet spiced wine, that God intermittently will ask Margery to give up. Through the sacrifice of meat and wine, foods which inspire desire and not revulsion, God impels Margery to both become stronger and to prove that she is strong already; she abstains from meat and wine, for example, for four years before starting on her pilgrimage (97). “Vegetarianism,” as Margaret Visser explains, “was for strong people. It was closely allied with fasting, where people retire from human fellowship (of which sharing a meal is a primary symbol) to think and pray and steady their resolve. The word ‘fast’ and the word ‘steadfast’ are both cognate with German *fest*—‘firm.’”¹² The strength of meat is confirmed, for example, by the classification of meat eaters, in the Western world at least, as inedible themselves, and by the central location of meat in meals that include it. Not to mention the fact that, in transubstantiation, bread becomes the flesh of Christ. In languages such as Italian and Latin the word for meat and the word for flesh are the same, so that, for example, Angela of Foligno says that the eucharist “most certainly has the taste of meat, but of a meat that has a most flavorful taste.”¹³

Food and drink, then, and abstinence from them—especially meat and wine, paired by Roland Barthes too as belonging to a “sanguine mythology”¹⁴—are some of the ways in which Margery presents herself as an everyday, plain, yet strong witness to God. So also Hadewijch, the 13th-century Flemish Beguine famous for her poems of intimate, erotic love of

12. Margaret Visser, “The Sins of the Flesh,” *Granta* 52 (December 1995): 111–132, 122.

13. Angela of Foligno, 61.

14. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 62.

God, employs an aphoristic image of food to clarify the connection between love, eating, abstinence, and God. In the ninth of her poems in couplets, Hadewijch concludes: "But although I have no fish, / I do not want any frog; / Or any elderberries either, / Instead of a bunch of grapes: / Although I have no love, / I do not want anything else, / Whether Love is gracious to me or hostile."¹⁵ Through these lines, Hadewijch compares the highest love with the best food, which no ersatz—frogs for fish, elderberries for grapes—can replace: Fasting is better than second-rate food, as lovelessness is preferable to the absence of divine love. Food and drink, material as well as metaphorical, also show a quotidian rather than a heroic Margery Kempe, a woman of God who—instead of sublime renunciations, lifelong trials, terrible penances—presents us with the small details of a domestic, undignified, humble life; a woman whose difficulties are often quite similar to the ones many of us still encounter. Her fasting is not self-destructive but self-empowering, both proving her strength and improving it: "For, my beloved daughter, this was the reason why I ordered you to fast, so that you should the sooner obtain your desire, and now it is granted to you. I no longer wish you to fast, and therefore I command you in the name of Jesus to eat and drink as your husband does" (60).

This brings us to meat and fish. Practicing Catholics today are asked to abstain from meat, and traditionally eat fish, on every Friday of Lent, that is, the 40 days preceding Easter. But religious dietary rules in medieval and early modern times were considerably stricter: Christians were to eat only fish throughout Lent (except Sundays), and normally on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays throughout the year, as well as on the eve of major holidays such as Christmas. This hard rule on abstinence and fasting promptly generated the odd classification of beaver tail, barnacle geese, and puffins as fish, that is, as permitted fare on days of abstinence. During Margery's time, salt fish, fresh fish, and eggs replaced mutton and beef on fish days, with bread and ale providing the essential accompaniments. Naturally these rules had different effects on the rich than on the poor, for while the latter could rarely eat meat four days a week, regardless of religious interdictions, the rich could obey the letter yet undermine the spirit of the fasting rules by feasting lavishly on all that was in fact allowed.¹⁶ Be that as it may, for Margery Kempe, as for many others, meat came to be associated with feast-

15. Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, trans. with an introduction by Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 335.

16. For more on fasting, feasting, and the distribution of foodstuffs, see Stephen Mennell, "On the Civilizing of Appetite," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), 315–337.

ing and gastronomic pleasure, while fish evoked bodily discipline and thus had to be imposed.

To Margery Kempe, the symbolism of food, fasting, and feasting was meaningful and very much alive. Historians have noted the particular bond between women's spirituality and food in the medieval world. While men controlled the economic resources, women controlled the resource of food; fasting was thus one way for women to exert control over their environment. Fasting and feasting permeated not only Margery's encounters with actual food and drink, but her spiritual vocation as well. Throughout her perilous travels, God is Margery's only consistent companion—literally, someone with whom she eats bread (com+panion, *cum*, with, and *panis*, bread). After all, Jesus of Nazareth, whom Margery Kempe was so passionate, was that very gastronomic radical, explicitly criticized, the Gospels report, as a glutton and a drunkard, who ate indiscriminately and with anyone, setting up a meal-centered worldview, breaking all sorts of dietary rules and table manners—to the point of instituting a ritual meal, the eucharist, as the eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood. It is no coincidence that Christianity, unlike many religions, tolerates the eating of absolutely any food (though not at all times, as we have seen), and yet allows people to reject any food that does not appeal to them.

It is not only meat in general that Margery refers to. She sometimes speaks, specifically, of stew—a very popular food staple, at least among those who could afford it, in Margery's time. The regular, weekly gifts of hampers filled with all the ingredients necessary for a nourishing stew, "enough to serve her with two days' food" (130), including a bottle of good wine, seal the friendship between Margery and her Italian companion Dame Margaret Florentyne. Even though the two women could not speak the same language, Dame Margaret shared her lavish Sunday meal with Margery, even serving "her her food with her own hands" (130), at a time when our English mystic would have otherwise needed to beg for food—as she frequently did at other times during her travels. The stew, with its precious meat, became for Margery the opportunity to praise and thank God for the loving companions sent her way.

As a pilgrim and a beggar, Margery could ask and be gifted with food, yet she could not, for obvious reasons, reciprocate in kind. So what she does offer in gratitude for all she received from others is a prayer of self-giving. May her body, nourished by the stew of friends, become, through God's intercession, a sacrifice of stew: "If it were your will, Lord, I would for your love, and for the magnifying power of your name, be chopped up as small as meat for the pot" (181). She offers herself as gift of stew both for the love of God and, later, for the love and salvation of all human beings, when she

repeats the odd words that she would be “chopped up as small as meat for the pot for their love” (245). Through the cooking pot, Margery undergoes a profound transformation, perhaps even a sort of transubstantiation from subject of religious experience to object of sacrifice, from object of love (Dame Florentyne’s gifts of stew), to its subject through self-sacrifice. Instead of investing literal words with allegorical meaning, daily occupations with a supernatural interpretation, Margery performs the opposite task: It is the otherwise incomplete spiritual vision that she equips with a delightful measure of daily reality, a pot of stew. This constant anchoring to the solid domestic sphere manages to keep Margery’s exceptional story naturally modest, simply understandable.

But as we know, in medieval and early modern times, meat was not always allowed, much less available. This too is reflected in Margery’s memoirs. So let us turn to another popular medieval foodstuff: stockfish. Stockfish is dried cod, different yet similar to salted cod—popularly known as *baccalà* in Italy, *bacalhau* in Portugal, *morue* in France. Stockfish was an important part of the English diet during the Middle Ages, and enormously large amounts of stockfish were imported into England during that time, mostly from Iceland and Norway (today the latter is still the prime producer of stockfish). Stockfish was so hard that, in addition to being soaked for several days, it had to be hammered with a special hammer for as long as one full hour! On the other hand, under the right storage conditions, it would keep for years preserving a high nutritional value. Before refrigeration, this was a considerable asset, so that very many people by necessity would not have acted according to W. H. Auden’s comment about dried fish, namely that “the tougher kind tastes like toenails, and the softer kind like the skin off the soles of one’s feet.”¹⁷ Now, on the other hand, stockfish and salt cod have been replaced in many households by canned tuna and frozen fish sticks (although since the decline of religious observances overall consumption of fish among Christians, despite the fact that Christ himself was piscivorous, has decreased considerably).¹⁸

Margery Kempe must have eaten her share of stockfish in her days, what with all those Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and long Lents; and she

17. Quoted in Sean French, “First Catch Your Puffin,” *Granta* 52 (December 1995): 195–202, 198. This essay, by the way both hilarious and thoughtful, is a must-read for anyone interested in food and the precarious distinction between the edible and the inedible; as French puts it, “Some of the most wonderful food of all teeters on the boundary of what’s edible” (199).

18. See Adrian Franklin, “An Unpopular Food? The Distaste for Food and the Decline of Fish Consumption in Britain,” *Food and Foodways* 7.4 (1997): 227–264.

must have prepared and cooked quite a bit of it for her husband and children. So it is not strange to read that God spoke of Margery's love in terms reminiscent of the caveats in a recipe for stockfish: "Daughter, you are obedient to my will, and cleave as fast to me as the skin of the stockfish sticks to man's hand when it is boiled" (127). The mingling of love and food is not new, nor is the central place food holds in religious belief and ritual. But as we read the autobiography of this brave and unconventional lady, the image of love as sticky stockfish skin jumps out of the page to claim a place deeper and wider than that of a trite simile. It reminds us of that spiritual hunger which can motivate our actions much as physical hunger impels us to put food in our mouth. It confirms that when we prepare food for those we love we give them of ourselves. As our fingers, hands, skin touch the various ingredients, getting them ready for the pot and for the table, an impalpable part of us—love?—cleaves to them, infusing foodstuff with that *je ne sais quoi* which can turn a simple *brandade de morue* (to stay with French and the dried cod metaphor) into an intimate act of love. And the stubbornly sticky skin of the stockfish physically reminds us of other, more pleasantly sticky effects of food. Cooking and, more commonly, eating together binds us to our loved ones. In celebrating life, breaking bread joins us in our shared need for both food and one another—as the skin of a stockfish is bound, tied fast, connected to the hand which prepares (to eat) it. For as God says to Margery, echoing Isaiah 49:16, "I may not forget you and how you are written upon my hands and my feet" (65). It is at the table, too, that God wants Margery to remember him as her lover: "keep me always in your mind as much as you can, and do not forget me at your meals, but always think that I sit in your heart" (224).

Food can be used to think of numerous social and cultural issues, ranging from health and politics to ethics and aesthetics and more. Through food, through Margery's stockfish and stew, we can sample cultures (England, for example) and get a taste of the past (the Middle Ages). By at least occasionally fasting, we can have an idea of what it feels like to go truly hungry—as much of the world's population does and has done through the ages (food supplies were most certainly precarious during medieval times). Eating binds us to our own past as well, since, as Joyce Carol Oates points out, "eating is one of the very few volitional human activities—perhaps it is the single one—that continues uninterrupted from birth to death, its source 'infantile' and its refinements 'adult.'"¹⁹ We have a wealth of sources about food and eating and starving in the Middle Ages. Scholars have devoted many efforts to discovering who ate what and how. But I propose that in metaphors of real food from holy people who, although they did not write specifically about food, still clearly loved and thought and prayed about

their food, we can find out something else, something which menus and recipes may not be able to convey, at least not in the same way, and perhaps not to the same depths. These writings may be hard to find, for, as Buddhist Abbess Koei Hoshino has pointed out, "When we examine various religions we find that those engaged in ascetic practices are not those engaged in preparing the meals. Usually the ones who prepare meals do not do the spiritual practices. . . . It is only in the Zen sect that the priests also cook and consider it part of their spirituality."²⁰ Although she is generally correct, what the abbess was not taking into account is the experience of women like Margery Kempe and Angela of Foligno, for example, holy women who gave themselves fully to their spiritual path after a life devoted to cooking and caring for a family, and who to some extent continued to take care of their own and others' bodies through meal preparation. It is a reverent attitude about food that I read in the pages of Margery Kempe's book. It is the sense in which food may fit in and complete a person's view of the world in the continuity between its material and its spiritual aspects. The awareness, above all else, that food may mean something beyond what we eat, that food is about love and life, and, even, death, too. Years of feeding herself, her children, her husband, impressed this knowledge in Margery's mind, her body, her soul. Margery sustained life through love and cooking, and the love she put into her preparation of food spilled on the food itself. Thus, I want to conclude with a memorable scene recounted toward the end of her book, but placed shortly after her conversion. I propose that we accept and read against the grain an anecdote which Margery's supporters instead dismissed as a slanderous falsity. Sitting at a rich table on a fish day, Margery chose to eat the good pike instead of the humbler red herring, exclaiming: "'Ah, false flesh, you would now eat red herring, but you shall not have your will.' And with that she set aside the red herring and ate the good pike" (288). Rather than hastily reject it as false and even defamatory, we could instead choose to read this story as the portrayal of a situation where, in tune with her harmonious life passages to and from feasting and fasting, Margery identifies excessive abstinence as sinful, and enjoyment of good food as a divine grace.

19. Joyce Carol Oates, "Food Mysteries," *Antaeus* 68 (Spring, 1992): 25–37, 25.

20. The interview is published in *The Spiral Path: Explorations in Women's Spirituality* (Saint Paul, MN: Yes International Publishers, 1992), 159–167, 164.