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Food, Eating, and Digestion in *La vie seinte Audree* of Marie de France

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Abstract

This study provides an analysis of feasting, fasting, and digestion in *La vie seinte Audree*, a medieval French poem attributed to Marie de France. The text's sparse allusions to food commend a practice of "moderated moderation," which combines daily consumption, feasting, and fasting as integral components of holy eating. Through a particular focus on the tropes of hospitality, eels, and excretion, the poem similarly positions the human digestive system as a site of spiritual sanctification.

keywords: Marie de France; Medieval hagiography; Eels; Feasting and fasting; Medieval French poetry.

Introduction

A verse hagiography of 4625 lines, *La vie seinte Audree* (*The Life of Saint Audrey*) is typically attributed to Marie de France, one of the most celebrated women poets of the Middle Ages[1]. The poem, written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets around 1200 AD (Mccash,

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1 Despite her importance for the history of medieval literature, Marie de France's historical identity remains a mystery and an ongoing object of speculation. R. Howard Bloch took up the question in his seminal *The Anonymous Marie de France*, which emphasized the obscurity of Marie's identity across the sparse moments of self-identification that appear only fleetingly in her attributed works (Bloch, 2003). Whatever Marie's identity may have been, scholars consistently identify Marie as the author of the *Lais, Fables*, and *L'Espurgatoire seint Patriz*, likely written between 1160 and 1215 (Mccash, 2002, p. 748); whether the author of these three texts also wrote *La vie seinte Audree* remains a disputed question whose early history has been summarized by Whalen (Whalen, 2008, p. 159-163). My article

2002, pg. 756), recounts the life of St. Audrey, a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon royal, as well as stories of miracles that she performed after her death. The *Vie* presents Audrey as a saint defined by her unwavering chastity. Of less apparent significance is Audrey's relationship to food, which is eclipsed by the poem's primary occupation with sex[2]. Perhaps owing to this thematic imbalance, the poem's rare but decisive depictions of food have yet to be studied as a coherent series of tropes across the work[3]. This study offers such an attempt to consider the poem's food imagery, discerning an emergent construction of holy eating as a practice grounded in an admixture of moderation and ascetical excess. As we will see, this nuanced vision of holy eating coincides with the poem's effort to dignify the entire human digestive process as a potential site of human sanctification or its various impediments.

Food as Hospitality – Sharing, Medicine, Blessing

Like many medieval hagiographies, *La vie seinte Audree* is divided into an initial section recounting the life of the saint and a second portion describing the miracles that posthumously confirm the saint's holiness. Particularly in the first half, the poem presents a (not always) linear chronology of its subject matter. At times, the narrative seems to loop back on itself, telling and retelling the histories of Anglo-Saxon dynasties, nobles, and

does not aim to advance the question one way or another, affirming instead McCash's optimistic evaluation—based on linguistic, textual, and historical evidence—that *La vie seinte Audree* has "as much right to be considered among the works of Marie de France as the other three that scholars have attributed to her" (2002, p. 776). McCash went on to modify this claim slightly in 2011, arguing that the *Vie* can be reliably grouped with at least the *Lais* and *L'Espurgatoire* as the possible work of a single author (Mccash, 2011, p. 237). For a recent introduction to the text and manuscript history of *La Vie seinte Audree*, see Löfstedt, 2015. Finally, Pickens provides a summary and analysis of Marie's Latin source material from which the *Vie* is derived (Pickens, 2011, p. 267-303).

2 Jocelyn Wogan-Browne has established the thematic association of virginity and martyrdom that broadly characterized depictions of women in Anglo-Norman hagiography including Marie's hagiography (Wogan-Browne, 1995, p. 27-56).

3 A discernable body of articles has considered the role of animals in Marie de France's poems, notably June Hall McCash (1995). However, little if any of the scholarly literature focused on *La vie seinte Audree* has considered the poem's depictions of food in a single organized study. See, however, Sayers's discussion of hazel rods and medieval diets in Marie de France's poetry (Sayers, 2004, p. 15).

knights who provide the historical context in which the central narrative develops. Marked from a young age by exemplary piety, Audrey enters into two successive marriages in which she manages to persuade each husband to live chastely for a time. While the second husband initially allows Audrey to live in a religious community, he eventually reverses course and attempts to hunt down Audrey to force her into a more traditional model of domestic (and consummated) marriage. Escaping the clutches of her second husband, Audrey gathers a burgeoning community of fellow ascetics around her on the Isle of Ely, performing miracles and engendering good works. After her death, Audrey continues to incite miracles and punish wrongdoing in ways that confirm her status as a holy woman.

As a trope, food appears rarely in this episodic structure. The paucity of examples therefore makes the poem's literary representations of food freighted with significance. In the first portion of Audrey's hagiography recounting her life from childhood to death, the plot contains several initial digressions. The first two involve food. In the first case, the poet interpolates a description of the marshlands (*marais*) on the Isle of Ely that Audrey receives as a dowry from her first husband. The region, we are told, is full of eels (v. 310)[4]. These animals appear again as a source of food in an account of Audrey's postmortem miracles, to which I turn below. Secondly, the poet interjects the unconnected story of a holy shepherd named Eucalist who is visited by strangers who are sent to test Eucalist's chastity in marriage. Eucalist offers his guests a meal, but they refuse to eat until they have put the man's ascetical commitment to the test. Eucalist swears that he is chaste, though he seems to initially misunderstand the nature of his guests' interrogation: rather than accounting for his sexual practices, Eucalist explains how he and his wife divide their food into three portions which they share between themselves, the poor, and guests needing hospitality:

> Kant que Deu nos preste o ses dons
> En treis parties les partons:
> As povres est l'une partie,
> De l'autre sustenons la vie,
> La tierce en hospitalité
> Ky nos requiert la charité.

4 All citations from *La vie seinte Audree*—both the Old French text and its English translation—are from Mccash & Barban (2006).

Whatever God gives us from this bounty
we divide into three parts—
one part for the poor,
with another part we sustain our own lives,
and the third part is used in hospitality,
which is required of us out of charity.
(vv. 445-450)

Only after announcing his household's ethics of food distribution does Eucalist go on to affirm that he and his wife have never engaged in sexual activity (vv. 451-452). So while Eucalist's guests aim to evaluate their host's asceticism through the criterion of sexual morality, Eucalist presumes that any rigorous examination of holiness must naturally begin with a moral assessment of how he eats and provides food for others to eat. This telling misunderstanding throws into relief the importance of food for the poem's account of holiness, even as food tropes appear rarely in *La vie seinte Audree*.

As in many hagiographies, this early narrative interpolation establishes an association between food and hospitality that looms in the background of the text. Another story recounts a godly woman whose piety gained the attention of nearby monks. The poet relates how these monks "[la] peisseient" (fed her, v. 3939) owing to her holiness.[5] In an even briefer story, the poet describes a chronically ill man on the isle of Ely who was similarly fed by monks. A key detail marks the passage: the monks perform this habitual act as a prognostic effort to heal the man of his physical affliction: "Les moins leenz le peisseient / Ke la maladie ennoient," (the monks living there started feeding him / to help combat the illness, v. 4006). In both stories, the key verb "to feed" (*peistre*) denotes gestures of monastic charity. In the first story, monks feed the godly woman as a response to the holiness they perceive in her. The brothers feed the sick man, by contrast, in an attempt to heal him from bodily illness. In short, the second group of monks supply a physical remedy for what presents as a physical illness.

In these stories, the act of feeding summons food as a medium of salutary intentions. The monks produce food where it was absent as an agent of material healing or as a response to holiness in others. In the case of the sick man, food functions as medicine.

5 Brackets in original.

These brief episodes from the later portion of the poem reflect Eucalist's charitable habit of giving food to the poor and to guests. As distinctive social demographics, the poor and guests lay claim to two thirds of the shepherd's food as part of his programmatic emphasis on the demands of charity. In these scattered episodes, then, Marie de France fashions food as the material of hospitality ordered toward medicinal, honorific, and self-sacrificial purposes.

Food as Excess: Overeating and Fasting

In medieval hagiography, food is signified through absence as much as through presence. In some cases, food is absent as a consequence of scarcity brought on by famine or war. Other times, this absence is deliberate in the form of fasting. In *La vie seinte Audree*, fasting is one of the key activities by which Audrey demonstrates her holiness in life. While her chastity is the primary index of her sanctity, the poem consistently emphasizes Audrey's commitment to *jeüner* and *vellier* (fasting and vigilant prayer). In at least one instance, fasting unambiguously connotes bodily harm. The poet recalls, for example, how Audrey "[t]ormentoit" (tortured, v. 1474) her body "[e]n jonne" (in fasting, v. 1473)[6]. These extreme gestures of monastic asceticism cast Audrey in the archetypal image of the Christian martyr. The hunger (*feim*, v. 1491) of the saint's body renders her a martyr (*martir*, v. 1489), suggesting that her rejection of food in fasting serves holy ends. This extreme form of fasting appears to embody certain traits of contemporary forms of anorexia, which a pair of contemporary psychologists have attempted to diagnose in medieval women mystics such as Catherine of Sienna (Espi Forcen & Espi Forcen, 2015, p. 650-653).

In other episodes, however, the poet develops a portrait of Audrey's eating as a habit ordered by moderation. We learn that she ate once a day (v. 1751). The poet also relays that Audrey would eat in greater quantities on liturgical feast days in order to honor the holy purposes of the occasion *and* to lighten the ascetical burden of her fellow monastics by example (vv. 1755-1756). In short, Marie's Audrey does not categorically

6 Virginia Blanton discusses the martyr typology and its relation to disciplining the flesh in *La vie seinte Audree* (Blanton, 2010, p. 96-97). Blanton's treatment of Audrey's self-discipline only discusses the saint's sexual desires, never her appetite for food.

reject food or embrace starvation *in se* as a holy act. Rather, the saint engages in a practice of daily eating which is occasionally augmented by festive consumption or reduced through acute deprivation. Virginia Blanton, who devotes much thought to Audrey's self-discipline in the *Vie*, affirms that Marie's overall portrait of Audrey's sexual abstinence ultimately emphasizes forms of agency among aristocratic women (Blanton, 2010, p. 114). My reading aligns with Blanton's, affirming that Audrey's abstinence from food (much like sex) is neither absolute nor without crucial caveats that nuance her occasionally extreme behavior.

We also learn that Audrey detested overeating (vv. 1753-1754). This detail foreshadows an episode of the poem introduced much later, taking place after Audrey's death. In this second part of the poem, the author recounts a long series of miracles attributed to St. Audrey: a woman afflicted with chronic bodily stiffness is healed at St. Audrey's shrine; a mute man recovers the capacity for speech; a girl blind from birth gains the power of sight (vv. 2461-2480). These examples variously identify the human body as the site of healing associated with the cult of St. Audrey[7]. In the context of these healing narratives, the poet recounts how a certain Brithmar of Haverhill contracts an illness during a pandemic that ravages the people of London. Brithmar acquires a ring endowed with healing properties, but the sickness persists after a series of strange visions in which the man is struck by a stranger wielding an iron. Brithmar is only cured from his sufferings once he seeks out the Isle of Ely, the site of Audrey's life, relics, and cult. In the final phase of his illness, the poet reports that Brithmar was "nearly insane from hunger" (*feim*, v. 4335). He purchases an abundance of eels (*anguillies*), the only available food, and "tant en manga / Por un petit k'il ne creva" (ate so many of them, / that he almost burst!, vv. 4337-4338) The story concludes with an indication that many would have perished from eating so many eels, yet Audrey healed (*garir*) Brithmar from the effects of his rapid overconsumption (v. 4330).

Why eels? In the European Middle Ages, eels were dually significant for economic and cultural reasons. Eels were common in medieval English diets, notably among the

7 Despite addressing St. Audrey briefly in portions of *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*, Kinoshita and McCracken refer only once to Audrey in their chapter devoted to "Bodies and Embodiment: Characters" (2012, p. 165). My analysis of food here aims to substantiate the importance of embodiment as an essential feature of *La vie seinte Audree*.

poorer classes who purchased eels as a cheaper alternative to other sources of protein (Schweid, 2002, p. 15)[8]. On fast days, Christians of varied social classes consumed eels since other forms of meat were forbidden according to liturgical observance[9]. Eels therefore maintained cultural associations with poverty and fasting. In my view, both these forms of cultural value are discernable in Brithmar's story. As I noted, Audrey's career of holiness—both in life and in death—is rooted in the specific geography of her beloved Isle of Ely, the land where Audrey took refuge from her lustful second husband and where she established a range of religious communities. Given the importance of this environment to Audrey's sanctity, it is particularly significant that the poet associates the island with its abundance of eels. Brithmar is presented as a man brought low from material illness and poverty; in this state of humiliation, eels serve as the only food source he can afford. The eel thereby becomes a source of life-giving survival that aligns with Audrey's act of healing Brithmar from his illness. But when Brithmar overeats this staple food to the point of inducing more illness, this allows Audrey to dispense a second act of healing. Eels thereby become the catalyst for the saint to inspire moderation in others. And as a staple food of the poor, eels also express the atmosphere of monastic poverty associated with Audrey and her island's communities of religious observance.

The eels' cultural resonances may also redirect developments within the Celtic literary worlds that demonstrably informed Marie's literary imagination (Waters, 2018, p. 15). Falaky reports certain highland narratives in which those who consume eels are driven to insanity. In other Celtic tales, the eel is associated with a malevolent goddess of war, serving as an obstacle to righteous protagonists like Cú Chulain (Falaky, 1985, p. 130). In this literary tradition, the eel is often a weapon or a source of poison (1985, p. 130-134). In most cases, the eel more specifically "contains and constricts human victims in the water." (1985, p. 137) Beyond the Celtic tradition, however, Falaky

8 The catadromous eel *(Anguilla anguilla)* was a common source of food in medieval cultures (Hoffman, 2005, p. 22). According to Hoffman, the year 1100 marked a major increase in the consumption of aquatic proteins within medieval European diets (2005, p. 23). Marie de France's literary career would have developed in the wake of this major development in medieval eating practices. For a discussion of fish and other aquatic food sources in medieval literatures, see Hostetter (2020, p, 21).

9 Hostetter, p. 15.

identifies a single Latin hagiography—a *vita* of St. Samantha—in which an eel (*anguilla*) drowns a cleric. This Christian textual image of the eel contrasts with the Celtic sources substantially (though Falaky does not elaborate on this difference): whereas the Irish sources dominantly feature eels as antagonistic obstacles to their texts' heroes, the eel in the Latin hagiography acts as a source of help to St. Samantha by ensnaring a "corrupt cleric" (1985, p. 134). In this Latin example, the literary function of the eel as an aquatic menace seems to have shifted from an accomplice of antagonists to a source of aid to holy protagonists.

The *anguillies* of *La vie seinte Audree* seem to mirror this emergent vision of the benevolent eel who aids a woman saint. For Marie de France, these creatures may not drown victims or impede evildoers, but eels do offer their flesh to alleviate the suffering of the poor *and* to occasion a holy pedagogy of moderation. Marie de France's eels, then, serve the designs of the hagiographic protagonist. Even when eels become the object of human overconsumption, the ingestion of their meat satisfies extreme hunger and allows St. Audrey to demonstrate her sanctity through miraculous healing.

Brithmar's act of eating to excess critically contrasts with a band of drunken monks who also overconsume food. In the final section of the poem, the narrative shifts from tales of healing to tales of vengeance. As with accounts of Audrey's miracles, these stories in which the saint strikes down the wicked also confirm her sanctity from beyond the grave. In this concluding portion of the poem, a virtuous abbot named Simeon dies at a monastery associated with St. Audrey on the Isle of Ely. Following the abbot's death, his monks abscond with the various riches of the monastery including gold, saintly relics, and fine tapestries. The band of monks take to the road but pause for the night at an inn where they drink to excess and "trop mangerent" (ate too much, v. 3460). Later that night, the monks' stolen goods burn down in a fire; the next day, the remorseful brothers direct their repentance to the soul of St. Audrey. The episode ends with the coda of a cautionary tale: thanks to Audrey's intercessory activity, no further thievery took place at that monastery.

In this story, the excessive ingestion of food is inseparable from the immoderate consumption of alcohol. Both forms of excess—drunkenness and gluttony—obviously contrast with the tropes of control and abstinence that characterize virtuous habits of eating both in Audrey's life and her pious foils (such as Eucalist). The thieving

monks' immoderate eating also forms a counterpoint to Brithmar's excessive ingestion of eels. In Brithmar's case, the overconsumption of food is a corrective response to starvation rather than a vicious indulgence. The contrast between these two stories begins to reveal the interconnectedness of hospitality and consumption in the poem. As with monastic prohibitions against indulgent eating in the twelfth-century *Voyage of St. Brendan the Abbot*, the ascetical charge to chasten food consumption reveals an underlying sense that indulgent eating is made possible by the same vices that animate thievery (Abell, 2023, p. 11-42). In both cases, a lack of moderation yields self-centered behavior that fails to prioritize the community over the individual.

That said, the poet does not univocally construe eating as a gateway to immoderation. As we find in another miracle account in *La vie seinte Audree*, the withholding of food from others constitutes a grievous sin. Described as cruel and deceptive, Ranulf is a sort of Iago figure who seems well loved by the powerful whom he manipulates with perfidious intentions. When Ranulf receives a monastery as a gift from a local bishop, Ranulf treats the inhabitants with cruelty. Among the indices of his malicious behavior, "Les moines destreut et leidi / Et lur viande lu" (He tormented and mistreated the monks / and even deprived them of food, vv. 3695-3696). Ranulf installs himself as a despotic ruler over his terrified hostages who are deprived of food and contact with the outside world.

As the Ranulf episode makes clear, to deprive food from others—rather than from the self—is tantamount to a grievous moral failure within the poem's ethical frame. In my view, the poem's denunciation of failing "to feed" others contributes to a reappraisal of Audrey's nuanced eating habits. In her field-defining study on food and fasting in medieval cultures, Caroline Walker Bynum warned against the overapplication of "modern concepts of anorexia nervosa and hysteria" (Bynum, 1987, p. 5) when analyzing medieval textual depictions of female eating. Indeed, Bynum's project amounted to a "complex refutation of the standard interpretation of asceticism as world-rejection or as practical dualism and of the standard picture of medieval women as constrained on every side by a misogyny they internalized as self-hatred or masochism" (1987, p. 6). My analysis works within the possibilities revealed by Bynum's thesis, acknowledging the troubling forms of body denial that partly connect to depictions of Audrey's asceticism while gesturing toward more nuanced interpretations

that are not exhausted by a diagnosis of body hatred[10]. It is not merely that Audrey's own eating habits admit of moderation, a fact of the text that already troubles any effort to ground the saint's practices of eating in self-loathing; rather, when we consider Ranulf's villainy alongside Brithmar's starvation, we find that Marie's text condemns involuntary hunger as a phenomenon to be avenged or healed. Espi Forcen and Espi Forcen's efforts to diagnose female saints with anorexia may generate some salience in our reading of medieval women, but Audrey's practices of eating cannot be separated from the wider constellation of food practices that the poem aggregates.

Food as Medium: Summoning the Dead, Digestion, and Indigestion

Audrey's story also positions food as a medium of spiritual forces, both holy and hellish. This is apparent in the story of a wealthy man named Bruston who seeks to become a monk out of fear that he is dying (and presumably in danger of damnation). Before Bruston can act on this intention, he is imprisoned out of suspicion that he has habitually stolen funds from the royal treasury (vv. 3169-3177). In the subsequent five months of his imprisonment, Bruston fasts without drink or food (the past participle *jeüna* (fasted) critically rhyming with *ne manga* (did not eat), vv. 3185-3186). In answer to his prayers, St. Audrey and St. Benedict appear to miraculously remove Bruston's chains. In Bruston's act of fasting, the willed absence of food summons the dead as a source of aid to the living. The voluntary absence of food here provides a precondition by which the concerns of the living can be effectively conveyed to the dead.

Other episodes construe human digestion (and indigestion) as dynamic components of sanctification. In the first instance, the poet recalls a man named Wigur who dies after selling tracts of land to a bishop. After his death, a certain Ingulf took these lands in an act of dubious morality; because of his actions, Ingulf and his family perished "[p]ur la vengance seinte Audree" (because of the vengeance of Saint Audrey, v. 2952). Before his death, Ingulf is said to be unable to eat or drink (v. 2943) because "le quer li creva" (because his heart gave out, v. 2944). The poet describes Ingulf's inability to eat as a symptom of sin, a visible expression of invisible guilt that provokes the just wrath of the dead saint. The absence

10 I note that *La vie seinte Audree* does not appear in Bynum's study of food and women saints.

of food in this episode illustrates vice. The sinful Ingulf's inability to consume food also suggests an implicitly positive evaluation of food. Since the inability to eat manifests a lack of contrition, the implied *ability* to eat would, in this case, signify both a fully functioning body and a reconciled soul. However, these normative processes of ingestion and digestion have been interrupted. Sin, in other words, has corroded the body's typical relationship to food. Ingulf's guilty conscience displays itself as the disruption of the body's rightly ordered metabolism. Whereas Audrey and Bruston voluntarily fast, Ingulf desires to ingest (absent) food that he cannot eat because of his wrongdoing.

Metabolic disruption recurs at other key junctures in the poem. In an episode blending humor and holiness, the poet presents human digestion as the medium of exorcism. The poet describes a monk who succumbs to the temptations of the devil, though what exactly this implies is unclear; a compassionate brother appeals to St. Audrey to deliver this fellow monk from his state of spiritual captivity. Owing to St. Audrey's intercessions, the possessed monk visits the latrines where he quite literally cleanses Satan from his bowels. It is highly significant that the poet describes the monk's defecation as an act of *purging* (espurger, v. 2975); McCash and Barban translate *espurger* as "to empty," but the term is also striking as an adjectival form of the noun *espurgatoire* which forms the title of Marie de France's *L'Espurgatoire seint Patriz (The Purgatory of St. Patrick*). In that poem, which recounts Owein the knight's act of extreme penance, the verb *espurger* directly conveys notions of religious purgation associated with the most intense forms of spiritual trials[11]. In *La vie seinte Audree*, the monk held captive by Satan is similarly purged, relieved of diabolical presence by the mundane procedures of digestion rather than the activity of a spiritual quest. The bodily intestines and their natural metabolic function become the site of holy intercession[12]. As such, the verb *espurger* is at once scatological and eschatological, referring to the monk's digestion as well as his eternal fate. The coarse poetics of the passage ennoble the intestines and their capacity for processing food (and as a

11 See also McCash's comparison of purgative suffering in the stories of Audrey and Owein (Mccash, 2011, p. 242).

12 This religious use of excrement imagery may distantly recall the homilies of the fourth-century Church Father John Chrysostom, who employed scatological images to decry vices such as excessive wealth (Leyerle, 2009, p. 338).

mechanism for exorcising evil). In Marie's poem, these biological processes are not merely metaphorical; instead, the bowels directly play host to a spiritual process of becoming holy. As such, intestines—and the implied cycle of eating, digestion, and excretion—become cooperative processes in human sanctification.

Conclusion

Medieval Christian attitudes toward food were always more complex than modern scholars might be given to believe. Bynum summed up this complexity when she wrote, "Medieval people often saw gluttony as the major form of lust, fasting as the most painful renunciation, and eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God." (Bynum, 1987, p. 2). In short, food – as a presence and an absence – conveyed a wide range of cultural significance for medieval Christians, and it cannot be said that the saintly praise of renouncing food implied a universal rejection of eating as a constitutive component of Christian life.

Marie de France's poem illustrates the complexity that Bynum identifies with the Middle Ages writ large. When we consider the collective representation of food in *La vie seinte Audree*, what emerges is a focus on eating ordered by a principle of what might be (somewhat hazardously) termed moderate moderation. By introducing this term, I do not mean to generate needlessly obtuse jargon; rather, this locution is meant to describe the poem's focus on moderation as a virtue in medieval Christian habits of eating, both lay and monastic, while allowing for a concomitant emphasis on extreme asceticism as a permissible component of sanctification. Marie de France fashions Audrey and her foils as exemplars of nuanced eating. Audrey the saint – utterly committed to her monastic vocation – neither wholly despises her own body nor delights in feasting. Her habits of eating emphasize the banality of food as a substance that must be consumed with regularity and with occasional abundance in accordance with religious observance. Woolgar's study of ascetical diets in medieval England observes a trend of moderation among key historical figures like St. Hugh of Lincoln, who reportedly practiced moderate eating and drinking "as an example to others" (Woolgar, 2006, p. 193). Marie's poetic representation of St. Audrey reflects this broader English tradition: moderated, regular, and intermittently festive practices of eating contribute to the saint's growth in holiness (and to those who imitate her).

Eating, however, is no less likely to form an obstacle to Audrey's ascetical path. This is illustrated not only in Audrey's moderated practices of eating and fasting but also in the stories of her postmortem miracles in which the saint's gestures of salvific healing involve mitigating the overconsumption of food. Nevertheless, the same Audrey who avenges drunken monks who eat to excess is the same saint who saves a sick man from overeating as an antidote to starvation. Both cases present figures who consume excessive food, but the ends and aims of overeating are opposed. Marie's subtle pairing of both episodes calls attention to their defining difference: the thieving monks eat too much as an expression of gluttony; the sick man eats to alleviate the pains of the starvation to which he is pathetically and unjustly subjected.

The poem's approbation of moderated moderation coincides with the text's exposition of the digestive process as a locus of sanctification. Consumption and excretion—whether of eels or evil spirits—are taken up into the poem's holistic vision of human holiness, evident both in Audrey's life story and in her postmortem acts of healing and chastisement. Eels and bowels can serve as the media through which the Christian saint works her miracles; since the saint is dead at these key points in the poem, the living flesh of aquatic beasts and human stomachs stand in for Audrey's absent body as the tools through which she realizes her miraculous intentions. In sum, Marie de France's poem may not sing the praises of eating in the most unrestrained register, but the text's presentation of moderated consumption positions the eating body as an always potential subject of saintliness.

Written by one of the Middle Ages' best remembered women poets, *La vie seinte Audree* may yet transmit a vision of hospitality, consumption, and moderation that can enrich broader efforts within contemporary food studies to articulate nuanced habits of eating across historical periods. Bowler's recent study of feasting and fasting in modernist literature suggests the enduring literary occupation with festive and restrictive diets (Bowler, 2020). She writes, "Who gets to eat what, where, when, and how are fraught questions." (2020, p. 405). To the extent that such fraught questions continue to occupy critical food studies, the field's inquiry into cultural eating practices may be enhanced through new explorations of medieval holy eating such as we find in Marie de France's *La vie seinte Audree*.

La nourriture, la consommation alimentaire, and la digestion dans La vie seinte Audree de Marie de France

Résumé: Cette étude propose une analyse du festin, du jeûne et de la digestion dans *La vie seinte Audree*, un poème français médiéval attribué à Marie de France. Les rares allusions du texte à la nourriture recommandent une pratique de "modération modérée", qui combine la consommation quotidienne, le festin et le jeûne en tant que composantes intégrales d'une alimentation sacrée. En mettant l'accent sur les tropes de l'hospitalité, des anguilles et de l'excrétion, le poème positionne le système digestif humain comme un site de sanctification spirituelle.

Mots clés: Marie de France; Hagiographie; Anguille; Festin et jeûne; Poésie française médiévale.

Comida, consumo alimentar e digestão em La vie seinte Audree de Marie de France

Resumo: Este estudo oferece uma análise de banquetes, jejuns e digestão em *La vie seinte Audree*, um poema medieval francês atribuído a Marie de France. As escassas alusões ao alimento no texto recomendam uma prática de "moderação moderada" que combina consumo diário, banquetes e jejuns como componentes essenciais da alimentação sagrada. Através de um foco particular nos tropos de hospitalidade, enguias e excreção, o poema também posiciona o sistema digestivo humano como um local de santificação espiritual.

Palavras-chave: Marie de France; Hagiografia medieval; Enguias; Banquetes e jejuns; Poesia francesa medieval.

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