



# The Wife of Bath's Sexual Poetics and Politics of Food and Drink

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## ABSTRACT

In contrast to the predominant misogynistic discourse of medieval English society, Chaucer's Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales* is renowned for her arguments in favor of sexuality and female authority, which depicts her as a woman who was years ahead of her time. Chaucer uses food and drink imagery to have the Wife of Bath contest the patriarchal impositions on sexuality in the prologue to "The Wife of Bath's Tale". Accordingly, this article aims to analyze how the Wife of Bath makes use of this imagery, which forms her sexual poetics and politics, in order to subvert the Nurturing Mother image. Therefore, this article will, in the first part, analyze the Wife of Bath's use of food and drink imagery through a discussion of how Chaucer undermines the social and religious implications to encode the Wife of Bath's arguments for sexuality. In the second part, based on the Wife's use of such imagery, Chaucer's presentation of the Wife of Bath as a sexual nurturer will be analyzed as a reflection of her subversion of the Nurturing Mother image. Hence, the article aims to contribute to the discussions on the gendered conception of food, food production, and food consumption in the Middle Ages.

**Keywords:** Chaucer, The Wife of Bath, Sexuality, Food and Drink Imagery, Nurturing Mother

## Introduction

Apart from having been regarded as material and symbolic means to display people's socio-economic statuses and religious practices, food and drink have also been associated with female sexuality via the consumption metaphor.<sup>1</sup> In Chaucer's "Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale," this association is shaped and reflected by the food and drink references presented throughout the text. Through the consumption metaphor, Chaucer establishes the Wife of Bath's "feminine poetics" (Cox, 1997, p. 19) to contest the material

1 See, for instance, W. W. Allman and Dorrell Thomas Hanks's "Rough Love: Notes Toward an Erotics of the *Canterbury Tales*" (2003, pp. 55-56) for a study of the use of consumption as a metaphor for female sexuality in *The Reeve's Tale* and the "Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale".



and discursive limitations placed on the female body at the time, through “material-discursive” (Barad, 2007, p. 153) food and drink references. Following Karen Barad’s assertion of the “ontological inseparability” of the material and the discursive because of their “intra-action” and “entanglement,” the term “material-discursive” will be used rather than using “material” and “discursive” as distinctive terms throughout the article (2007, p. 128). The references to food and drink are material-discursive practices which contribute to the Wife of Bath’s arguments for female sexuality, not only materially, but also discursively. The arguments for female sexuality are conveyed through the use of food and drink references which manipulate the signification process of the Wife of Bath’s listeners in the fictional world of the Canterbury pilgrimage (the Canterbury pilgrims) and her medieval and modern readers.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Wife’s body, associated with food and drink, exemplifies the semantic power<sup>3</sup> of the female body. The female body represented as food and drink highlights “the *possibilities* provided by fleshliness” (Bynum, 1987, p. 6), which paves the way for Chaucer to mold the Wife’s poetics and politics to delineate a female sexuality which was subversive to the patriarchal discourse of gender at the time.

I claim that Chaucer’s food and drink references in the Wife’s “Prologue” are material-discursive practices which constitute the Wife’s poetics and politics of food and drink and unveil her view of female sexuality. Food and drink, thus, register as significant images for secular women in the Middle Ages, as exemplified by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and also within the writings of religious women, as argued by Caroline Walker Bynum in her *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987). Therefore, following Bynum’s arguments regarding how food mattered for medieval women, drawing upon the social and religious significance of food, an analysis of food and drink references in the “Prologue of the Wife of Bath’s Tale” will contribute to the discussions regarding the gendered poetics of Chaucer. This was also argued by Carolyn Dinshaw in her seminal work, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (1989), where she explicates how the Wife speaks for feminine desire and sexuality.

Accordingly, the sexual poetics and politics of food and drink in the “Prologue of the Wife of Bath’s Tale” will be analyzed across two sections within the present study. In the first part, I will explicate the use of food and drink references in the Wife’s “Prologue” to display how they evoke not only the materiality of food and drink, but also the

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2 Cox defines this as a reflection of “polysemy” and “figurative multiplicity” (1997, p. 30).

3 Gail Weiss defines this power as “semantic impertinence” (2003, p. 32).

discursive traditions about such materiality, to challenge these material-discursive traditions via the Wife's own ends. Based on the Wife's use of food and drink imagery, I will propound in the second part how Chaucer enables the Wife to contest the Nurturing Mother image by exposing her as the sexual nurturer of her husbands. These two parts will reveal the Wife's sexual poetics and politics regarding food and drink. I will discuss the significant space and place of food and drink references in the Wife of Bath's arguments for sexuality, as well as her subversion of the misogynist society in general and the exegetical/clerical authorities in particular. Then, I will elucidate how Chaucer utilizes food and drink to disseminate the Wife's arguments for sexuality by associating the female (and in one instance, the male) body with food and drink.

Chaucer introduces the Wife's use of food and drink for the development of her discourse about sexuality with a seed metaphor (III (D) 71-76).<sup>4</sup> Contending the necessity of marriage, the Wife says, "And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe, / Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?" (III (D) 71-72). Chaucer's handling of this metaphor of sowing seeds enhances the sexual overtones in the Wife's argument, as she compares the female body with land that is waiting for the male seed to grow. In other words, seeds are the first example of food metaphors the Wife uses to develop her understanding of sexuality. Through this metaphor, which was incorporated into the context of the Wife's emphasizing the necessity of marriage, Chaucer establishes the almost essential sacrificial sowing of some seeds (women to marry) to propagate some other seeds (women to remain virgin). The Wife alludes to how "unsown seed represents unused" and thus "wasted potential," in contrast to the multiplication commanded by God (Cox, 1997, p. 30).<sup>5</sup> Hence, the Wife does not care much about the wasted, that is, the seeds which are not sown: "The dart is set up for virginitee; / Cacche whoso may, who renneth best lat see" (III (D) 75-76). Rather, to flaunt how she has chosen to not waste her potential for procreation and sexuality, or metaphorically speaking, how she is ready to be sown, the Wife employs food and drink references<sup>6</sup> to reject the material-discursive limitations on the female body and sexuality.

4 All the references to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* will be taken from *The Riverside Chaucer* (2008), 3rd ed., Larry Benson (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press). The references will indicate the relative fragment and line numbers.

5 See also the Wife of Bath's arguments against virginity (III (D) 26-29).

6 It is interesting to note that the Wife does not refer to any children in her prologue, which might imply her being a childless wife. Still, she takes advantage of the argument for procreation to speak about sexuality.

## The Wife of Bath's Use of Sexualized Food Imagery

Food has long been a means to convey religious messages, as in the cases of feasting and fasting, as well as being a basic human need and of nutritional significance. Additionally, religion brings with it miscellaneous repercussions of food on human life as demonstrated, especially in the Fall and the Eucharist.<sup>7</sup> Eve is the cause of the fall of man for eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 1-3). Furthermore, God becomes food in the Eucharist. Similarly, Caroline Walker Bynum states that “[f]ood was a multifaceted symbol in medieval spirituality” (1987, p. 250). This multi-layered interpretation of food in medieval culture is similar to Roland Barthes’s consideration of food as “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” since “food serves as a sign not only for themes but also for situations,” as in the case of the Eucharist (2013, pp. 24, 28). Situated in this religious context, food imagery also helps construct binaries and thus “social groupings” (Anderson, 2005, p. 109), such as the moral, the reconstructive, the revitalizing (Jesus), the immoral, the destructive, and the deadly (Eve). Food is thus used as a means of material and discursive communication through the symbolic connotations the imagery evokes.

Accordingly, the Wife’s food imagery evokes not only the material significance of food, but also the discursive traditions regarding food. Actually, throughout her “Prologue,” the Wife of Bath has several food-related references, some of which do not have direct sexual connotations. For instance, she reveals her interest in feasts by going “[t]o vigilies and to processions” to look for her fortune (III (D) 556) and through her demand from her husband for “a feeste” (III (D) 297) on her birthday. In another case, while revealing her personal secrets which allowed her to manipulate her old husbands, she chooses the adjective “sweete spiced” to describe their “conscience” (III (D) 435). Likewise, while talking about how she arouses anger and jealousy in her fourth husband, she states that “in his owene grece I made hym frye / For angre, and for verray jalousie” (III (D) 487-488). Evidently, food-related adjectives (“sweet spiced”), idioms (“fry in his grace”), events (vigils and feasts), and significations (“fruits”) become means for the Wife’s display of her interest in food. It is for this reason that although it is not a direct food reference, the Wife’s reference to “flesh” also immediately evokes food. The Wife declares her husband as her “detour” and “thral” (III (D) 155) who shall “have his tribulacion withal / Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf” (III (D) 156-157). A similar connotation

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7 See Angel F. Méndez Montoya’s *Theology of Food* (2009, pp. 77-156).

is also implied by the Pardoner in his intervention into the Wife's argument: "I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas! / What sholde I bye it on my flesh so deere? / Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!" (III (D) 166-168). In both cases, the use of "flesh" refers to the male body. Yet, considering that flesh also evokes "meat," the uses of "flesh" by both the Wife and the Pardoner when referring to the male body do not seem coincidental, or at least innocent, drawing attention to its physicality and materiality. However, built upon the sowing of seeds metaphor, there are several food images, including bread, bacon, flour, and bran, used by Chaucer to enable the Wife to advocate for sexuality, which recalls the religious significance of food in medieval culture.

Beginning with the bread imagery, employed to present the material-discursive difference between married women and virgins, the Wife uses bread as "a sexual metaphor for the comparison" (Wilson & Makowski, 1990, p. 155). She depicts the female body as bread through her wheat and barley bread imagery: "Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed, / And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed" (III (D) 143-144). Through this imagery, Chaucer evokes and re-interprets Jerome's references to wheat bread (virginity), barley bread (marriage), and cow dung (fornication) in *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.7.<sup>8</sup> The wheat and barley bread imagery becomes functional for the Wife to materialize "the two sexual states" of the female (Hall, 2007, p. 60). She says that virgins might be white wheat bread while married women are brown barley bread. White wheat bread was considered the most nutritious and best type of bread, since it was better for humoral health compared to the darker and coarser barley or rye bread.<sup>9</sup> In addition to its nutritional value, wheat bread had a great religious significance as well because, according to manuals, wheat bread should be preferred during the Mass rather than

8 See Jill Mann's *Feminizing Chaucer* (2002, p. 59). For a discussion of Jerome's letter to Pammachius, not his *Adversus Jovinianum* (I, 7), as the source of wheat and barley bread imagery, see Katharina Wilson's "Chaucer and St. Jerome: The Use of 'Barley' in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*" (1985, pp. 245-251). Warren S. Smith (1997) also traces the origins of the Wife of Bath's barley bread imagery to Jerome's letters and his citing Ambrose's *De Viduis*. According to Jerome, Ambrose, and the Wife of Bath (Chaucer), barley bread was the metaphor for marriage, which was allowed by exegetical authorities for those who were not capable of staying virgin for the sake of preventing their perpetration of bigger sins, such as fornication. Thus, Christ's distributing barley bread to many a man (John 6:9) can be interpreted as a reflection of His permission for marriage. See Warren S. Smith's "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome" (1997, p. 140).

9 See Melitta Weiss Adamson's *Food in Medieval Times* (2004, pp. 1-14, 227); J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham's *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Food* (1991, p. 74); Kate Colquhoun's *Taste: The History of Britain through its Cooking* (2007, p. 49); Maggie Black's "Medieval Britain" (1993, p. 98).

darker and coarser barley bread.<sup>10</sup> However, wheat bread was expensive at the time and could only be consumed by those with the means to afford it (Adamson, 2004, p. 91). Accordingly, the economic, social, and religious differences between wheat and barley bread become the means for the Wife of Bath to subvert the dominant patriarchal discourse on female sexuality by undermining the difference in the social and religious significance attributed to virgins against married women. The Wife accepts, as a married woman, the superior position of the virgins in the binary opposition, exposing and utilizing the material-discursive discrepancy between wheat and barley bread.

Chaucer fuses the material distinction between the two types of bread (wheat and barley) with their discursive distinctness in religion and sex. Despite being a false reference to Mark (which should have been John 6:9), there are two remarkable aspects of this subversion. Firstly, the Wife subverts the Eucharistic ideals. Secondly, the Wife presents herself, a married woman, as the distributor of barley bread (her sexually experienced body) to many men (her husbands, with the emphasis on the *quantity* being crucial). The Wife claims the authority and expertise to convey the clerical discourse, which “underscore[s] the gender of official speaker” (Hansen, 1998, pp. 29-31). She offers herself as a refresher providing “both spiritual and bodily comfort,” which can also be defined as “transubstantiating women” (Allman and Hanks, 2003, p. 55). The Wife says that “[a]nd yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan, / Oure Lorde Jhesu refreshed many a man” (III (D) 145-146). Hence, apart from presenting the female body as food to be consumed by men, the Wife’s bread imagery also draws attention to her subversion of Eucharistic ideals and Transubstantiation.<sup>11</sup> Her consumption image reminds the reader of the Eucharist, which depicts the bread, the transformed body of Christ, as food which would feed the congregation, not only physically, but also spiritually. The bread, credited as Christ’s body, signifies an “edible and visible” Christ (Adamson, 2004, p. 184). This manifests the religious significance attributed to bread, in that, the “edible”

10 See Miri Rubin’s “Popular Attitudes to the Eucharist” (2012, p. 453). Peasants were able to afford cheaper, darker, and less nutritional barley or rye bread, see C. Anne Wilson’s *Food and Drink in Britain from the Stone Age to Recent Times* (1973, p. 215). Barley bread was used as a trencher, and in poor houses, it was also eaten after dinner (Adamson, 2004, p. 2; Wilson, 1973, 219; Black, 1993, p. 99). As David E. Sutton states, this is in accordance with the idea that the type of food one eats signifies “food as a source and marker of social distinction” (2010, p. 213).

11 For the “eucharistic overtones,” see Thomas A. Van’s “False Texts and Disappearing Women in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*” (1994, p. 181). The doctrine of Transubstantiation announced at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that the body of Christ turned into bread, and his blood into wine, and the true followers of Christ should participate in consecration annually by eating bread and drinking wine (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:25 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-29). Also see Adamson (2004, p. 184); Gary Macy’s “Theology of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages” (2012, pp. 365-398).

Christ is the embodiment of the “edible” God that is transformed into bread. Therefore, by sharing bread with his congregation, a priest endows the congregation with “the chance to eat God” (Rubin, 2012, p. 458). Hence, *eating* Christ/God in the Holy Communion suggests “[b]ecoming part of and entering into the body of Christ as world, being entered and incorporated by the unique and universal body that is given for all, is captured and accomplished in the act of eating and drinking the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ” (Davies, 2004, p. 161). The Wife transforms bread from representing the body of Christ into bread that represents the female body. Accordingly, the material-discursive barley bread in the Eucharist is transformed into the barley-bread body of married women and also requires the transformation of the associated religious connotations to sexual connotations.

Eliciting the material-discursive religious associations of barley bread, Chaucer also contests the authority of the priest in the Mass. He uses the Wife to target the subconscious of the male audience in the Canterbury pilgrimage group, and also of her husbands in particular and the male in general. She subverts the religious connotations of the bread as the body of Christ/God and offers the female body as bread. On the one hand, Chaucer thus fashions the female body as Eucharistic bread. The Wife of Bath imitates Transubstantiation and depicts the female body as food for her husbands as Christ offers His body as bread to the congregation. On the other hand, Chaucer fashions the Wife of Bath as a priest offering *her bread to her congregation*. In the unification with God through eating bread (and drinking wine), the priest was of great significance because only a properly ordained priest could perform this rite during Mass, which contributed to the power of priests in the Middle Ages (Macy, 2012, pp. 365-370; Rubin, 2012, p. 458; Counihan & Kaplan, 1998, p. 5). In her subversion, the Wife of Bath claims to be a proper expert and authority in sexual affairs, which she has attained through several marriages (III (D) 1). Through her expertise, she unveils “the feminized sexuality of food” or “feminized sexualization of food” (Henry, 1992, p. 257). The Wife of Bath distributes her body-food to her husband-congregation in the sexual communion and, hence, attributes a central position to the female body that is contrary to the misogynist tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the Wife of Bath takes the bread imagery of the Eucharist one step further and transforms the religious connotations into sexual connotations. As Caroline Walker Bynum indicates, “[c]ommunion was consuming, i.e., becoming a God who saves

12 Hence, Alastair Minnis refers to the Wife’s use of barley bread imagery as a reflection of her thinking “of the *auctoritee* out of context” (2008, p. 256).



through physical, human agony" and thus "to eat is to join with food – and God is food, which is flesh, which is suffering, which is salvation" (1987, p. 250). In the Eucharist, "[t]o eat was to consume, to take in, to become God" (Bynum, 1987, p. 250). The Wife of Bath adjusts this spiritual transformation to a sexual context through her bread imagery, and "the [E]ucharist as suffering and bleeding flesh" (Bynum, 1987, p. 252) is thus totally transformed into sensuality. Her husbands, who eat the Wife's body as food in their sexual communion, are *becoming* the Wife by taking in her body-food. She is almost penetrating them. According to the Wife, only married women can *achieve* this. In other words, only married women can be sexually transubstantiated as barley bread to be distributed to and eaten by men. She is there to sexually nourish her husbands; yet, she intends to provide more than refreshment. She states that her husbands will have "that" both in the morning and the evening, which turns out to be a "forced" reception for the husbands through "an erotization of the Pauline marriage debt that [...] imagines agency as a fearsome means of erotic control" (Allman and Hanks, 2003, p. 55). The Wife appears to be keen on transforming her husband-congregation and making them consume her bread-body in their sexual communion both day and night.

The multiplication process of the barley bread is also of great significance because the process found in the Bible is now proclaimed by the Wife to refer to the multiplication of sexual desire in (un)married life. At first, the assumption is that this might be associated with procreation in marriage, which has already been advocated by the Wife of Bath (III (D) 26-29). However, she does not refer to any children that she has *produced* in her marriages. The Wife says that she "wol bistowe the flour of al myn age / In the actes and in fruyt of marriage" (III (D) 113-114). The "fruits" of marriage refer, within the context of the Wife's arguments for married sexuality, not specifically to children but to sexuality. However, she cannot pick the desired fruits. She felt deep disappointment because she was married to three old men when she was young, and to young men when she was older. Still, it appears that instead of children, her marriages and desires multiply. As a woman who has married, or metaphorically speaking *eaten up*, five husbands and is now waiting for, or *hungry for*, the sixth one, the Wife of Bath refers not to the augmentation of spirituality, but to the boosting of female sexuality. Accordingly, her multiplying barley-bread-body can be regarded as the manifestation of the multiplication of her sexual desires and corporeal pleasures.

Hence, although the Wife of Bath likens both virgins and married women to bread, Chaucer encodes the message that wheat bread (virgins) could be eaten less despite



their superior economic, social, and religious status, as reflected in the wheat bread of the Mass, while barley bread (married women) could be eaten more owing to their *availability* to greater numbers of people as the cheaper type of bread. In this respect, wheat bread-virgins are not available for the *feeding of many* men. Additionally, even if wheat bread was preferred in the Mass, it was not with wheat bread, but with barley bread, that Christ fed thousands of men, which justifies, according to the Wife's perspective, the value of married women. Although she accepts the superiority of virgins, the Wife of Bath still emphasizes the utility of married women for more men (III (D) 146).

To depict the Wife's disregard for such superiority of the virgins, Chaucer also regulates the linguistic choice in the Wife's bread metaphor. The Wife notes "[l]at hem be" (III (D) 143) while referring to white wheat bread virgins, implying her disregard for and disinterest in them. Yet, she states "lat us wyves hoten" (III (D) 144) while referring to barley bread-married women through which she accents the external forces that put "a duff label" (Davis, 2012, p. 68)<sup>13</sup> on married women due to their sexual status. Virgins are regarded to *be* the superior seed, with married women being *called* inferior compared to them. Yet, in the Wife's argument, the seeds of virgins are in vain since they can neither refresh "many a man" nor procreate, as the seeds of married women can. This can also be regarded as the Wife's justification for why she has chosen St. Paul's advice that it is better to marry than to burn (III (D) 52; 1 Corinthians 7:20).

Through bacon imagery, Chaucer also allows the Wife to benefit from material-discursive food imagery in her sexual discourse. Unlike her other examples of food imagery, such as bread or flour, that only signify the female body, bacon is the symbol of both the male and the female body. In the first case, bacon is the metaphor for the old and aged female body. Since she married her three old husbands while her body was young, the Wife foregrounds that her husbands were not served bacon in the way other men were served in Essex:

I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,  
That many a nyght they songen 'Weilawaye!'  
The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe,  
That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe. (III (D) 215-218)

13 Beryl Rowland also argues that "hoten" might allude to "heat" as well, in which case, the Wife's argument becomes "let us wives heat [bake] barley bread," signaling a reference to "Priapic" barley bread as "a kind of erotic necromancy which, according to the Church, merited a two-year punishment 'per legito mas ferias' (1972, p. 202).

In the second case, bacon is the metaphor for “old meat, aged and dry” (Cox, 1997, p. 22), allowing her to represent the bodies of her three old husbands through her dislike of bacon: “For wynnynge wolde I al his lust endure, / And make me a feyned appetit; / And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit” (III (D) 416-418). Bacon, thus, stands for both the male and the female body. In the first case, bacon, representing the body of an old woman, becomes a counter-image of the Wife's young and fresh body. In the second case, bacon, representing the body of an old man, becomes the “food” served to the Wife by her husbands, which signals their failure in appeasing the Wife's sexual hunger. Her old husbands can hardly pay their marriage debt to her young and fresh body (III (D) 197-202). Because of the then tasteless condition of her husbands' bodies which contrasted her young body, the Wife had to perform “a feyned appetit” (III (D) 417), which refers to the agency of the Wife's body that is enhanced by her performance of feigning. The performance of a feigned appetite empowers the Wife against the discourse of the “phallic power” (Straus, 1988, p. 537). In this performance, the Wife undertakes the role of the active participant in sexual intercourse, although her husbands do not recognize this. She pretends that her husbands are potent, as imposed by the misogynist patriarchal tradition. Hence, the Wife unveils the potential failings of the phallic discourse, which is enhanced by the bacon imagery. She *appears* to be aroused by her old husbands' bodies, for which she has no interest or sexual appetite. As Cox states, “language is the medium of eros for her, and the excitement she does not find in active sexuality as she finds in language, its substitute. The Wife participates in an erotization of the letter, for the erotic sense of language holds for the Wife far greater appeal than does participation in the activities to which the language refers” (1997, p. 22). She satisfies herself linguistically since she does not have the means to satisfy herself sexually, not only because of the physical limitations of her husbands' bodies, but also because of the patriarchal and misogynist limitations on her body (Cox, 1997, p.22).<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, appetite here also refers to the sexual appetite that governs the Wife.<sup>15</sup> She follows her appetite with no discretion (Pugh, 2003, p. 127):

14 Hence, Cox associates the Wife's textual pleasure with *jouissance* and argues that “she imposes connotations not only according to her pleasure but *for* her pleasure as well.” Therefore, emphasizing the importance of her appetite, “the Wife calls attention to her desire as a desire to consume, be it sexually, textually, or otherwise. In effect, as she “glosses” she consumes both partners and texts, appropriating them for her own use and deriving from them whatever satisfaction she can find” (Cox, 1997, p. 23).

15 This is defined as a reflection of “her egalitarian nature in the pursuit of men” which “is specifically directed to white sexual agency” (Pugh, 2003, p. 127).

I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,  
 But evere folwede myn appetit,  
 Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;  
 I took no kep, so that he liked me,  
 How poore he was, ne eek of what degree. (III (D) 622-626)

Governed by her sexual appetite, which was not pleased with the “bacon” served, the Wife turns to mill and grinding imagery to emphasize her domestic authority: “Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt; / I pleyned first, so was oure werre ystynt” (III (D) 389-390). Although she first employs this imagery while referring to how she has manipulated her old husbands by beginning to complain, the mill is traditionally associated with woman, the miller with man, and grinding with sexual intercourse (Rowland, 1965, p. 21). This association can be related to the Wife’s declaration of “her acceptance of the promptest lover” (Rowland, 1965, p. 23) and her readiness for “grinding.” Hence, the mill and grinding imagery, used within the context of domestic authority, also adds to the Wife’s use of food imagery within the context of sexual authority.

Another food imagery discloses how the Wife misses this sexual authority when she gets older. She presents her old female body as bran: “The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle; / The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle; / But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde” (III (D) 477-479). The Wife argues that as she ages, the flour (youth, young body, beauty) is gone and she has only bran (old age, aged body, material gain). By “[m]erchandizing her sexual favors” (Oberembt, 1976, p. 292), the Wife presents herself selling her “*bele chose*” (III (D) 447, emphasis original). As well as reflecting the mercantile tone of selling her “*bele chose*,” which “depicts conjugal sexuality as part of the wider market economy” (Desmond, 2006, p. 128),<sup>16</sup> these lines also contribute to the Wife’s sexual poetics and politics of food imagery and her arguments for sexuality. While her mercantile attitude underlines the difference between flour and bran, the use of flour and bran imagery also helps the Wife to represent her body as food in both cases. Either as flour or as bran, her body is there to be consumed by men.

In this consumption process, confronting the groaning of her husbands which reflects their desire to have control over her body, the Wife’s reference to the role of the “tooth” is also remarkable:

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16 Dinshaw argues that declaring “al is for to selle” (III (D) 414), the Wife “assumes her position as a female in the marketplace” (1989, p. 118.) For widows in the medieval marriage market, see Barbara A. Hanawalt’s *The Wealth of Wives* (2007, pp. 104-111). For the Wife’s “sexual economy in marriage,” see Paul Strohm’s *Hochon’s Arrow* (1992, p. 141).

And sith a man is moore resonable  
 Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable.  
 What eyleth yow to grucche thus and grone?  
 Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?  
 Wy, taak it al! Lo, have it every deel!  
 Peter! I shrewe yow, but ye love it weel;  
 For if I wolde selle my *bele chose*,  
 I koude walke as fressh as is a rose;  
 But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth. (III (D) 441-449)

The “tooth” of her husbands, for which her “*bele chose*” is spared, signals the consumption process of the Wife’s body as food. Without explicitly referring to the mouth, the Wife implies the central position of her husbands’ mouths as the starting point through which she enters the body of her husbands. Transgressing the physical and sexual impositions of the misogynist society, food imagery, hence, provides the Wife with both the material and discursive means to undermine those impositions on the female body and sexuality. Thus, food imagery should not be regarded as a means to present the Wife of Bath as a product of misogynistic discourse through the depiction of how her body is consumed in the transactions of the market economy of marriage. It rather endows her with the means to speak against that misogynistic discourse by the use of its own means.

## The Wife of Bath’s Use of Sexualized Drink Imagery

The Wife also employs material-discursive drink imagery in her “Prologue.” As in the case of the asexual food references, there are some asexual drink-related references as well. For instance, the Wife says she will tell her tale and tell the truth as if she has drunk wine or ale (III (D) 193-195). While talking about her three old husbands and revealing her secrets of manipulating them, she accuses them of coming to the house “as dronken as a mous” (III (D) 246) and she reveals their accusations of her “in hir dronkenesse” (III (D) 381). As Theresa Tinkle states, “[t]he simile makes the men irrational rodents, subject to their own sensuality—as unruly as the wife they seek to control” (2010, p. 41). The reference to drunkenness, thus, helps the Wife draw a parallelism between men and women, directing men’s accusation of uncontrollability of women towards them. In short, as in the case of food-related references, drink references (wine and ale) and drink-related comparisons (“drunken as a mouse”) display the Wife’s interest in drink.

However, the Wife of Bath employs drink imagery to argue for sexuality as well. For instance, when she is interrupted by the Pardoner in her “Prologue,” she presents her body as “tonne” to drink from:

“Abyde!” quod she, “my tale is nat bigonne.  
 Nay, thou shalt drynken of another tonne,  
 Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.  
 And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale  
 Of tribulacion in mariage,  
 Of which I am expert in al myn age –  
 This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe –  
 Than maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe  
 Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche.  
 Be war of it, er thou to ny approche;  
 For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten. [...]” (III (D) 169-179)

The “tonne” suggests largess and excess. Her barrel (body) is full of ale (her tale of suffering in her marriages). She lets her audience choose whether they would like to “sippe” from the same “tonne” that she will “abroche.” Although she associates her sufferings with ale, which makes ale imagery asexual as it is used outside the context of sexuality, the ale is, metaphorically speaking, to be drunk from her body. Her body, hence, stands out like a fountain to refresh the thirsty. The verb “abroche,” thus, also bears sexual overtones, signaling the Wife’s agency in performing her desire and courage. Following the depiction of her large body in the “General Prologue,” “her large hips, bold face, and gap teeth [which] also recall the carnival body’s excess and openness” (Crane, 1994, p. 129), the Wife enhances the image of largess with her barrel imagery, underlining her corporeality. The ale imagery endows the Wife with the means to offer her body as drink, ready to be drunk by the Canterbury pilgrims and also by the medieval and modern readers who read her “Prologue.”

Wine is the next image used by the Wife to represent sexuality. While talking about her fourth husband, the Wife indicates that she can sing and dance when she drinks a draught of wine (III (D) 457-459). Referring to the Bible and Ovid regarding women who drink wine, she confronts her listeners, saying:

[a]nd after wyn on Venus moste I thynke,  
 For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl,

A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl.  
 In women vinolent is no defence –  
 This knowen lecchours by experience. (III (D) 464-468)

As Fleming puts it, she nearly unveils herself as a “thirst expert” (qtd in Blamires, 2006, p. 145). She knows how to appease both her own thirst and the thirst of her husbands. Since she associates drinking wine with ease, a “likerous” mouth, and “tayl,” the expertise she references can relate to her know-how of appeasing sexual thirst. Furthermore, as Cox notes, the fact that the Wife puts “likerous mouth” and “likerous tayl” in the same line can be regarded as a signal of the association between eating/drinking and “licking,” since “the mouth is the point of intake for excesses of food and drink, and it is a vehicle for her excess of words, most of which are associated with her ‘tayl’” (1997, p. 25). Accordingly, the mouth, together with the tongue, stands out as an instrument for not only the consumption of food and drink, but also sexual and textual consumption (Cox, 1997, p. 25). The drink imagery found in the “Prologue of the Wife of Bath’s Tale” adds to the food imagery the Wife employed, revealing that she contests the material-discursive food and drink imagery by representing herself as food and drink for men. In this way, Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath to transform the socio-economic and religious significance of food and drink into a sexual significance, by the Wife disclosing that she is a provider of food and drink and that her body is food and drink to be consumed by her husbands and other men.

Moreover, Chaucer allows the Wife to act as a provider of food and drink for the males in the tale, which stands out as a reflection of the gendered food practices in the Middle Ages. As Caroline Walker Bynum argues, throughout the Middle Ages, there was a prevalent gendered association of certain food practices with men/women during the period. In terms of men, the monastic tradition and satire associated gluttony with food as symbols of men. On the other hand, miracles related to food, food abstinence, food provision through religious motivation (such as the distribution of food to the poor), and the Eucharistic feeding were associated with women (Bynum, 1987, pp. 79-87). Accordingly, food provision and feeding became the means of establishing a space specific to women. Furthermore, Bynum notes that “[w]omen’s bodies, in the acts of lactation and of giving birth, were analogous both to ordinary food and to the body of Christ, as it died on the cross and gave birth to salvation” (1987, p. 30).<sup>17</sup> In sum,

17 Bynum also regards lactation as “a food practice” (1987, p.75). Additionally, the bodies of women are food also during pregnancy feeding the fetus.

as Bynum states, “food equals [female] body” (1987, 251).<sup>18</sup> Hence, food became a means for religious women to manipulate the gender dichotomy and become closer to God/Christ by presenting themselves as food providers in the Middle Ages (Bynum, 1987, p. 296). Yet, Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* reveals that food was also significant for secular women in speaking against the misogynistic discourse of the era.

Furthermore, as Counihan and Kaplan express, “the exchange of food is a most profound way of making social connection” (1998, p. 3), which conjures images of the charity of Christ as a nurturing figure as well. Medieval iconography represents Christ as a preparer, distributor, and server of food (Bynum, 1987, p. 285). In other words, he nurtured his followers, both physically and spiritually. Therefore, the religious significance of food that was customary in medieval culture, and was repeatedly illustrated in the writings of/on religious women, provided women of the time with the means to deconstruct the gender hierarchy and distinctions of social status. It is this religious significance of food and drink that is subverted by the *Wife* to speak against the misogynistic discourse and to present herself as an authority on the matters of sexuality.

## Evoking and Subverting the Nurturing Mother Image

The concept of nurturing in the image of God/Christ also evokes the image of the Nurturing Mother.<sup>19</sup> This image of the Nurturing Mother was dominant in medieval iconography, as exemplified by the lactating Virgin and the allegorical figures, Charity and Ecclesia, as “nursing mother[s]” (Bynum, 1987, p. 270). As Caroline Walker Bynum states, “[w]oman was food because breast milk was the human being’s first nourishment – the one food essential for survival” and this required “a new acceptance of [the female] body” as the source of life (1987, pp. 269-270, 254). Subverting the religious and domestic connotations of the Nurturing Mother image, the *Wife of Bath* stands out as a subverted nurturing figure exhibiting a very big difference: the religious context of the nursing Mary, or nursing Charity, and the domestic context of a nursing mother, are transformed by Chaucer’s sexual depiction of the *Wife*, who stands out as a *nursing wife*. The *Wife* subverts the images of the multiplying bread and God’s body as bread, which is not only “something familiar and simple” but also “domestic” (Rubin, 2012, p. 457). She takes the domestic imagery one step further and presents herself as *the* nurturer of her

18 Furthermore, “[i]t is a fact cross-culturally that food is particularly a woman-controlled resource. In the majority of cultures, food preparation is a woman’s role” (Bynum, 1987, pp. 189-190).

19 See Rubin (2012, pp. 465-467).



husbands. This nurturing can be defined as sexual nurturing and the Wife of Bath's challenge, "[i]n wyfhod I wol use myn instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent" (III (D) 149-150), can be seen as the manifestation of how she will nurture her husbands (and maybe other men), which is functional in disclosing her sexual charity.

Accordingly, based on the metaphor of consumption and its sexual overtones, imagery of food and drink enables Chaucer, through the Wife, to both evoke and contest the Nurturing Mother image. Her barley bread-body feeds "many a man" (III (D) 146), her mill-body is set for being ground by men, and her flour and bran-body is ready to serve men. Her ale-body is to be drunk by men. Although her appetite is not triggered by her husbands' old bodies, as revealed by her bacon imagery, she succeeds in triggering the appetite of both the husbands she married at the church and many other men. As a nurturing figure, she offers her body as food and drink to be consumed by her husbands. The Wife of Bath's subversion of the Nurturing Mother image might, at first, be regarded as the objectification of her body, since she compares her body with something to be eaten or drunk by men. However, if this objectification of her body is linked with her material-discursive food and drink imagery and associated with social and religious connotations (for instance, the influence of the bread of the Eucharist on society), the Wife's main concern appears to be to influence her husbands.

The Wife of Bath, as a subverted nurturing mother, who evokes the charity of Jesus, Mary, and other miraculous charitable saints, such as St. Elizabeth who was famous for distributing food to the poor, reveals, as McGowan asserts, that "food is always a matter of production, distribution, and exchange and hence of power" (1999, p. 1). Thus, even though she states that "I nam nat precius" (III (D) 148) like wheat bread, the Wife willingly distributes whatever *food* and *drink* she has. As a result, while Bourdieu argues that "the body is the most indisputable materialization of class tastes" (1984, p. 190), Chaucer displays through the Wife that the body is also the materialization of sexual tastes which are experienced by "her much-married" body (Weil, 1995, p. 31). Accordingly, remembering what Michel Foucault argues about the transformation of sex into discourse in the Middle Ages under asceticism and monasticism (1990, p. 20), it would not be wrong to claim that Chaucer establishes the Wife of Bath's discourse of sexuality by presenting "women as sexual 'food'" and drink (Henry, 1992, p. 257). Hence, what multiplies as a reflection of the Wife of Bath's charity in her marriages is not children, which would have been very decent according to the impositions of the patriarchal and misogynist society, but her sexuality, which gives her an authority on the matter.

Moreover, the Biblical passage John 6:9 evoked by her bread imagery does not refer to any female among the 5,000 people who were fed with barley bread, but as the Wife of Bath also notes, refers to “many a man” (III (D) 146). This sounds controversial because, as a woman speaking for female sexual liberation, the Wife appears to be incapable of avoiding the patriarchal notion of consumption by presenting her body as something to be eaten and drunk. However, this consumption provides the Wife of Bath with control over her husbands through sexual consumption experience, which signals the intrusion of sensuality into spirituality. As Mikhail Bakhtin indicates, in the process of eating

the body transgresses [...] its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. (1984, p. 281)

Similarly, the Wife of Bath draws attention to the encounter of men with women by presenting herself as a subverted version of the “Nurturing Mother” and by likening the female body to food and drink to be consumed by men. The consumption process is also noteworthy since it is supposed to refer to being eaten up or drunk, which means a sort of death for the thing being eaten or drunk. The eaten food or swallowed drink *dies* to refresh the stomachs of men. Therefore, the female body, metaphorically presented as food and drink to be consumed by men, can be analogized to “dead” food and drink, whose function is to satisfy the *hunger* and *thirst* of men.

Not disregarding that “[c]onsumption is a traditional figure for female sexuality” (Allman and Hanks, 2003, p. 55), Chaucer allows the Wife of Bath to sustain her “auctoritee” (III (D) 1) in not only the domestic sphere of marriage, but also in the public, sexual, and textual sphere by using the dominant social and religious discourse on food and drink. By *eating and drinking* the Wife of Bath in sexual intercourse, her husbands will appease their hunger and thirst and meet her as a *sexual* nurturer. Thus, her use of food and drink imagery evokes the idea that “food [and drink can] be thought of as a fuel of eros” (Méndez Montoya, 2009, p. 2). Rather than following the *eros* of religion, which could have been decent for a pilgrimage setting, Chaucer displays that the Wife of Bath is a follower of the *eros* of sexuality. Her body is ready to appease the sexual hunger and thirst of her husbands (and maybe other men). She is like an always-multiplying

barley-bread, ever ready to appease the hunger and thirst of the male. It is this readiness that gives her authority in her marriages as the whip over her husbands, evoking the mounted Aristotle image. Hence, Chaucer constructs a "bodily economy of piercing men and pierced women" in the Wife of Bath's "attempt to construct the erotic" (Allman and Hanks, 2003, p. 59) through the images of food and drink she employs. Just like the multiplying bread, the more she is pierced and swallowed to nurture her husbands, the more she (or her sexuality) multiplies. The Wife of Bath satisfies, justifies, and glorifies her sexual appetite while satisfying the sexual hunger of her husbands. Hence, the subverted Nurturing Mother image helps the Wife develop subversive female sexuality, operating against the patriarchal misogynist discourse.

## Conclusion

The Wife of Bath's sexual poetics and politics of food and drink in the imagery she employs consolidates female sexuality, which has been defined as a component of "peripheral sexualities" along with "the sexuality of children, mad men and [...] criminals" (Foucault, 1990, pp. 38-39). The food and drink imagery of the Wife of Bath reveals that "[t]he meaning of food [and drink] is [...] while contingent, not arbitrary but rather highly purposeful" (McGowan, 1999, p. 9), not only in the religious, but also in the secular contexts. Her images of bread, mill, flour, bran, barrel, and ale provide the Wife of Bath with the means to contest the Nurturing Mother image. These images become the reflection of how the Wife of Bath subverts the material-discursive food and drink culture to advocate her sexuality. Her imagery undermines the misogynist discourse on the female body and sexuality, challenging it through the dominant Nurturing Mother image of the time. Her use of food and drink imagery thus becomes not only the materialized reflections of the socio-economic values and religious doctrines revealed in the Biblical context, but also a discourse about the Nurturing Mother image, which discloses the material-discursive female body, and hence, an alternative perspective on the female body.

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