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Reading Analysis # 1: *Men's Lives and Writings: A Comparison*

1) Selective Summary

In *Men's Lives and Writings: A Comparison*, Bynum compares the lives of male saints and their food asceticism to that of religious women in the middle ages. In the chapters we have read and will read from Bynum's "Holy Feast and Holy Fast" we have seen how food is central to the lives of religious women in the Middle Ages and the extremes in which they relate it their faith. Here Bynum shows that even though these male saints were very devout the focus of their devoutness was centered on food, "precisely that food is, at best, a theme, not the theme, in male lives and sensibilities" (pg. 95). These men took part in the religious feasts and some did choose to fast, some as extreme as women, although reasons for doing so are different from women, and others did not see why women chose to go to such extremities at all when it came to fasting.

To Francis of Assisi feasting and fasting was not his central goal in his devotion. Francis unlike religious women did not place much emphasis on food. He did however make sure that his followers did fast when it was necessary as during the season of lent. However, he did not encourage them to fast any more than the necessary religious expectations. His devoutness was more than abstaining from food is was about poverty,

The good friar must be truly poor, as the new urban poor are poor; he must have no security, no guarantee for the morrow. The pattern of his life must comfort rather than scandalize; it must display Christ's love in the midst of the needy. (Pg 96)

He detaches himself from the comforts of everyday life; this he thought would help purify his heart.

“First that we must never use our asceticism to censor others and, second, that we must always have faith that God will feed us in our need” (pg. 97). We must not judge those who decide not to fast in such ways and always believe that when truly needed God will provide for us. Although Francis denounced food in his devotion of poverty he ate what was given to him by others and when truly needed. Francis ate when God provided him with food but he ate for other reasons as well. Fasting should not be taken in such extremes where one is to make themselves become ill or not help others when needed. When one was in need to eat but not able to do so for themselves, Francis joined them and ate with them to show they can and were able to do so. Francis himself ate food when he became ill and needed to do so to make himself feel better.

Clare of Assisi was a woman who decided that she wanted to follow the life of poverty as Francis has done before her but was unsuccessful. Unlike Francis Clare’s central devotion was fasting from food entirely.

In times of manifest necessity sisters shall not be bound to corporal fasting. . . . At all times the sisters are to fast. . . . to take only one meal a day and we who are well and able should always eat Lenten food. (Pg. 100)

At first she tells others what Francis himself has said, that one should indeed fast when it has to do with one’s religious practices and it is not mandatory to fast completely all the time. She then goes on to say that women should always be fasting and only eat the food in which it is appropriate to be doing so.

The discussion of Francis and Clare show how women took food more centrally in their religious lives more than men in the middle ages. For Francis his devotion was for him shedding himself of his wealth and only taking what was provided for him. Clare on the other hand gave her devotion by giving up food and serving others.

Clare's emphasis on serving and feeding others while herself not eating, suggests that food was to Clare what clothing and money were to Francis: a basic symbol of both sacrifice and service. (Pg. 101)

They are both from the same time and place but they each show their devoutness through different means.

The male saint Henry Suso, like most religious women was very extreme when it came to his food ascetic, although I do believe he may have been more weak than women to remain so.

Yet throughout his intense fasts and thirsts, he never lost his taste for food and drink. Once, after having abstained from meat for many years, he gave in to a craving for it; as a result, he was attacked by demons. (Pg. 104)

After years of fasting it became an everyday part of one's life when fasting and women grew accustomed to it. Henry no matter how extreme his fasting was and no matter the years he continued to do so he always craved food and when he did so he ate. It seems to me he always found reasons that it was alright for him to enjoy food when he came upon it no matter the fasting. However, to Henry fasting was not the central devoutness as it was to the women of the middle ages.

Tauler and Rolle did not practice food asceticism in the extreme nor do they truly see the need for it and the suffering it causes those who practice it. Rolle like others do still go through religious practices they are accustomed to, he does not see the need for him not to eat.

In the *Fire of Love* he comments that it is better to eat a little too much by mistake if it is done "with good intent to sustain nature" than to fast until one becomes too feeble to sing with love of God. (Pg. 107)

Tauler, like Rolle, did not see the need for extreme fasting and could not himself understand it.

In one of his writings Tauler says,

Whether you deserve it or not, take your suffering as coming from God...[But some people] want to take still more [bitterness] upon themselves. They make themselves ill and queer in the head, and it is all of no avail. The reason why they derive no grace from their efforts and make no progress is that the whole

performance is self-determined, whether they are doing penance, fasting, praying or meditating. (Pg. 108)

Tauler does not see why people choose to bring upon themselves more suffering when there is already so much suffering going on. To him people should just accept what is happening around them and let it be, do not add to it in a way that is harmful to yourself.

2) Evaluation

Bynum is very good at drawing from the work of men in the middle ages to compare them to the women she writes more about in her chapters. As he have read in her other chapters that food is very central to the religious practice of women in the middle ages. Here we get to see how the men consider food as it pertains to them. Although this section was shorter than the others it is very easy to see the distinction between how the men and women of the middle ages dealt with food. Both sexes did fast when it was necessary such as before receiving communion and lent.

Men seemed more inclined to fast and feast when their religion mandates it to them. As we have read in this chapter, the men tend to be less extreme, if at all, with fasting. The other chapters we have read have shown women not only the actuality of extreme food asceticism but also in the writings of women. In the following chapter, *Food in the Lives of Women Saints*, Bynum writes:

In the high middle ages devout Christians fasted before communion and received their God as food. Because...food actually became God, food was a powerful symbol. Some holy women carried the religious significance of food much further...eating and not eating became more than metaphors for grace and desire. (Pgs. 113-114)

I am not sure why women of the Middle Ages tended to be more extreme with food asceticism it is apparent that they did.

3) Relevance

When it comes to sustainability, there is not much to be found in this chapter discussing it. The fasting of these men and women have to do with their religious practices and what they believe they need to do to win favor with God. Their thought when fasting, especially in the extreme, is not about preserving for the future. It is more of purifying one's mind and body to reach that closeness with God. But as it pertains to the subject of the Course "food, farming and faith" I believe it relates really well. Fasting from food or anything was their way of showing faith and finding a way to purify themselves, make themselves better.