In Caroline Walker Bynum’s article, “Feast, Fast and Flesh”, she discusses the behaviors of pious women in medieval Europe, and the religious implications of fasting. There is a noticeable pattern in the sanctifying deeds of female saints versus those of their male counterparts, specifically the prevalence of food-related penitence. There are a number of ways in which food played a role in women’s piety. Fasting to absolve the sins of others and feeding the poor were both common acts of saintliness, as was the choice to subsist solely on the Eucharist.

Bynum focuses in particular on a woman named Lidwiga of Scheidam, who drew considerable public attention for her fasting and supposed healing abilities. By the end of her life she subsisted solely on the communion she took. Her fasting led to large pieces of her body falling off (pieces of skin, intestine and bone), and these were said to emit a sweet odor. The detritus of her deteriorating body was kept by her parents in a vase for some time. There are also numerous accounts of Lidwiga producing breast milk to feed others, as well as great generosity in feeding the poor.

Lidwiga’s asceticism is not an isolated case. There are many other cases in which the piety of young women manifests in their relationship with food. The phenomenon has been explained by some as a version of the eating disorders that many young women struggle with today. There are flaws, however, in this understanding. Not all cases of women refusing food were considered religious, and often they were understood to be the result of demonic influence instead.

Bynum argues that the correlation of gender and these religious experiences with food was a means of control for women in otherwise very restricted lives, through the one realm over which women could reside in medieval Europe: that of the kitchen. Within Christian ideology, women are often equated with the physical side of Christ, and thus their bodies are utilized as sources of “holy fluid”.

As far as control, women could manipulate their parents, husbands, or the church authorities through their relationships with food. In a society that left little room for empowerment of young women, control over something as integral to everything as food gave some semblance of power over things like marriages and chores.

I found this article to be an interesting and insightful one, and thought that it did a good job of covering a multifaceted issue in a not oversimplified way that was still accessible and engaging.

This is a good summary of a fascinating chapter but there is not much evidence of critical thought.