**Chaucer, women and food  ‘pured whete seed’ and ‘hoten barly-breed’**

**While the Miller and Merchant see their young wives simply as tender morsels, Katy Lee discovers that in The Canterbury Tales Chaucer uses the imagery of food to far more subversive ends.**

From the moment we are told ‘strong was the wyn’ and the ‘vitaille at the beste’ in Harry Bailey’s inn, food and drink are central to The Canterbury Tales. Indeed, the very prize the pilgrims are vying for is ‘a soper at alle cost’ back at this same hostelry and many of the proverbial sayings in prologues and tales allude to food. Many of these, such as ‘nat worth a bene’, ‘worth a leek’ and ‘I counte nat a panyer ful of herbes’ in ’The Merchant’s Tale’ refer to insubstantial things, comparing something deemed worthless by the speaker to a bean or leek. However, the role of food needs considering within its historical context if we are fully to understand the meaning of the gastronomic images in the Tales, particularly with reference to women.

**Tasty women**

Women are repeatedly compared to food and drink in the Tales, particularly by the unhappily married Merchant and the lascivious Miller, but also (perhaps initially more surprisingly) by the Wife of Bath, the strident, wealthy woman who has already been through five husbands. The imagery seems degrading at first sight; most modern women would not be flattered to be compared to meat or bread. At times, it certainly is unflattering, which is no surprise, considering the misogynist feelings that both the Miller and Merchant reveal in their respective ‘Prologues’. However, when we look at these ‘Tales’ in their historical context and consider Alison and May, the two young wives at their centre, the imagery takes on a more ambiguous meaning.

**A healthy appetite?**

When January, the old Lombardy knight at the centre of ‘The Merchant’s Tale’, is introduced, one of the first things we are told about is his ‘appetit’ for women. Chaucer uses the obvious link between appetite for food and for sex throughout the ‘Tale’ (with increasing irony as it is January’s wife’s appetite which causes the protagonist to be cuckolded). On initially considering marriage, largely to save his soul and ensure an heir to his fortune, January speaks in terms of food; he imagines a ‘hony-swete’ life and later describes his wife’s breasts as ‘fairer [...] than is wyn’. He also conveys his desire for a youthful wife (despite being ‘sixty yeer’ himself) in food-related terms, confidently stating:

‘I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere. She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certain; Oold fish and yong flesh wolde I have ful fain. Bet is’, quod he, ‘a pyk than a pikerel, And bet than old boef is the tendre veel.’

The comparison of women to meat is one that remains relevant throughout the poem. The adjectives ‘fresshe’ and ‘tendre’ almost always precede a mention of his wife, May. Clearly these epithets do have physical, sexual connotations but they also link her to food – meat which is fresh and tender is far more appetizing than old, tough meat. Ironically, January fails to apply the same standards to himself. Indeed, he is convinced of the opposite, claiming that:

To take a wif it is a glorious thing, And namely whan a man is oold and hoor

In January’s eyes, women exist purely for men’s satisfaction. Unfortunately for him, however, May also finds ‘tendre veel’ tastier and sees his young squire, Damian, as a more tempting prospect than her ageing husband.

In ‘The Miller’s Tale’ we meet another young wife who marries an old, wealthy man. As well as being compared to a number of young, wild animals, she too is described in edible terms; her apron is ‘whit as moorne milk’; her eyebrows are ‘blake as any sloo [sloe-berries]’; her mouth is like ‘bragot [a honey and ale drink] or the meeth [a fermented honey drink],/Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth’. Most significantly, she is more beautiful than the ‘pere-jonette tree’, which bore particularly sweet, early-ripening fruit. Some of these allusions are heavily contextual – a medieval audience would have been more familiar with the specifics and it is appropriate that the Miller’s frame of reference includes rural, agricultural details such as these. Nevertheless, that Chaucer goes to the trouble of describing a specific variety of pear tree and describes Alison’s mouth in terms of taste is unmistakably sexual and implies she is almost edible.

**Not just a pretty plate?**

Like May, Alison cheats on her husband with a much younger man and escapes unpunished. She too turns her tempting appearance to her own advantage. Despite the imagery associated with her, she is far from being just a delicious item of foodstuff, merely to be admired and consumed. In May’s case, the turnaround is made even more obvious by the scene of her infidelity; she tricks January by claiming to have an insatiable craving for what is in the pear tree. Chaucer again uses the word ‘appetit’ here, with all the sexual connotations established at the start of the ‘Tale’, yet this time it is May, not January, whose appetite needs satisfying since not just the fruit but also her lover is hidden in the pear tree, in the culmination of this typical Medieval fabliau plot.

**Daily bread**

It is easy to make sweeping statements abut the status of women in the Middle Ages and to assume all women were subordinate, needy creatures in a male-centred world. While independent women who did not rely on a husband or father for financial security were certainly rare, Chaucer nevertheless forces us to rethink ideas about women at the time, not just the female characters within the Tales, but also some of the pilgrims themselves. The most famous woman on the pilgrimage is another Alison (a common Medieval name), the Wife of Bath, who is often dubbed a feminist. While there is a danger in applying a modern label to a fourteenth-century text, the point remains that her ‘Tale’ takes an unmistakably pro-women stance, concluding with the plea that Jesus:

sende Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresh abedde, And t’overbyde hem that we wedde.

Perhaps we would therefore expect the link between women and food to be absent from her ‘Prologue and Tale’; on the contrary, she too sees women as food, albeit in a different sense.

In her ‘Prologue’, the Wife praises women by comparing them to bread. A modern woman may not be particularly excited by the prospect of being a loaf of bread – after all, it’s hardly the most glamorous image – but in order to comprehend the reference, we need to consider the historical context. In the fourteenth century, the kind of bread you ate depended on your status. But this was no matter of choosing between a sesame-rye bagel, rustic granary loaf or sliced white, as it might be today. Those who could afford it ate refined, white bread made from fine-milled flour. The commoners, however, ate coarser loaves, often made from barley, which was a hardy crop. Knowing this, the Wife of Bath’s extended metaphor of women and bread makes more sense. In her discussion of the merits of virginity and marriage, she says:

I nyl envye no virginitee. Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed, And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;

In this image she suggests that wives, like barley bread, are rougher, cheaper and more readily available than virgins, who are like refined, white bread. Not a particularly positive view of wives, we may assume. However, she continues by alluding to Mark’s Gospel, pointing out that:

with barly-breed, Mark telle kan, Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man.

Having had five husbands already, she knows a great deal about being a wife and turns the barley bread idea to her advantage. In admitting that marriage is not as pure a state as virginity, she puts herself and all other wives in a virtuous light, since Jesus gave not white, but humble barley bread, to his followers. The obvious sexual innuendo of ‘refreshment’ ties in exactly with January’s ideas about honey-sweet marriage and satiating his appetite for women, so could again be viewed as degrading to women. Yet because Chaucer has given the image to a female speaker, in effect he has reclaimed it, ridding it of the misogynist implications it could have had. Depending on our personal interpretation of the Wife of Bath, Chaucer’s image can be viewed in different ways. Unlike the Merchant’s pathetically short two months of married life, she boasts five previous husbands and speaks from genuine experience, encouraging us to trust and value her views. Through such characterisation, Chaucer inclines us to sympathise with her and not to see women as edible tit-bits existing only to satisfy the appetites of unpleasant men.

So, the idea of women being compared to food is much more ambiguous than January thinks. In his foolish mind, he is the only one with an appetite to satisfy and his failure to see that in fact he is the ‘old boef’ is his downfall.

Chaucer’s food imagery, which at first seems pretty simple, becomes more satisfyingly complex when evaluated carefully and in context. In the Miller’s and Merchant’s ‘Tales’ Chaucer presents us with young women who trick men by turning their tastiness to their own advantage. Through the Wife of Bath he goes even further, subverting the conventional link between women and food, thus challenging attitudes towards women which arguably still remain in our lexis in the form of names like ‘sweetie’, ‘honey’, ‘sugar’ and so on, which are still used to address women.