Fatal Indulgences: Gertrude and the Perils of Excess in Early Modern England

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Near the end of act 5, scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gertrude raises a toast to celebrate Hamlet's fortuitous hit against Laertes. Declaring, "The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" (5.2.232), Gertrude drinks from the fatal stoup intended for her son, falling victim to Claudius's murderous scheming.[1] Gertrude's fatal fall, however, proves as much about excessive consumption as it does about the toxic union Claudius slips into the cup. The poisoned wine Gertrude consumes comes, in fact, to represent a deleterious pattern of excess at the court of Elsinore that, from an early modern humoral perspective, results not only in the murder of a king, but in the all-consuming tragedy that invariably ensues. While, as Hamlet decries, overindulgence appears to be a condition of the Danish court as a whole, such excess proves especially intriguing in the case of Gertrude, whose linked dietary and sexual appetites torture her son's overwrought imagination. In the case of Elsinore's queen, the final drink she imbibes in celebratory abandonment ultimately proves one too many.

Important to an understanding of consumptive excess in early modern England is some knowledge of the role humors were believed to play in overall bodily health. According to the humoral model, first credited to Hippocrates and later advanced by Galen, the body was made up of blood, bile, black bile, and phlegm, which in combination defined an overall complexion or behavioral disposition: Each of the humors possessed two primary attributes—blood being hot and moist; bile, hot and dry; black bile, cold and dry, and phlegm, cold and moist. Humoral complexions were, moreover, believed to differ according to sex:

men, for the most part, considered hotter and drier; women, colder and moister—such complexional distinctions defining perceived sexual and behavioral differences. Moreover, as Gail Kern Paster notes, "the quantity of humors not only depended on such variables as age and gender, but also differed from day to day as the body took in food and air, processed them, and released them."[2] This link to dietary intake proves crucial to an understanding of associated behavioral attributes.

Because, as Paster further observes, "foods were thought of in thermal terms—variously promoting cooling and heating or aiding in the regulation of body temperature," early modern dietaries were concerned with the types as well as quantities of food and drink needed to maintain or achieve optimal balances to guard against disease or undesirable behaviors.[3] Thomas Elyot (1541) describes a process he calls "concoction . . . an alternation in the stomacke of meates and drynkes, accordyng to their qualities, whereby they are made lyke to the substance of the body."[4] Such an alteration could produce, from an early modern perspective, cholera, a hot and dry condition indicative of anger and, because of inherent humoral makeup, usually associated with men. Adding heat to the fire, or in other words, consuming food and drink containing or producing bile, could only exacerbate an already volatile bodily complexion. Thus, as Galen notes, "it is most essential for the physician to know in the first place, that the bile is contained in the food itself from outside, and secondly, that for example, beet contains a great deal of bile, and bread very little, while olive oil contains most, and wine least of all, and all the other articles of diet different quantities. Would it not be absurd for anyone to choose voluntarily those articles which contain more bile, rather than those containing less?"[5] This cautionary is echoed by Andrew Boorde, an early modern physician, who argues, for example, that because "color is hot and dry . . . colorycke men must abstayne from eating hote spyces, and to refrayne from drynkynge of wyne, and eatynge of colorycke meate."[6] From a Galenic perspective, one was, quite literally, what one ate.

Given the body's manufacture of humoral substances, dietary excess constituted an ever present threat to overall health and behavior. The Elizabethan *Homily Against Gluttonie and Dronkennes* (1563), which locates its authority in biblical admonitions against gluttony, advises, "He that eateth and drynketh vnmeasurablye, kyndleth oft tymes suche an vnnaturall heate in his body, that his appetite is preuoked thereby to desire more than it shoulde."[7] This desire, believed to impact the liver, site of the passions and

specifically sexual appetite, resulted from unhealthy imbalances in the overall humoral complexion. Key here is the word "vnmeasurablye," for while food and drink could well prove detrimental to bodily health and behavior, one could not simply stop eating or drinking. As Joan Fitzpatrick notes, it is "the immoderate consumption of food and drink [that] should be avoided, not consumption *per se*."[8]

The dangers of dietary overindulgence are especially evident in admonishments against excessive wine drinking. While alcohol consumption was considered a normal part of the early modern English diet, it nevertheless remained a concern, given the threat of drunkenness with its attendant problems. As the *Homyly Against Gluttonie and Dronkennes* declares, "Dronkennes bytes by the belly, and causeth continually gnawing in the stomacke, brynges men to whoredome and lewdenesse of harte, with daungers vnspeakable."[9] This sentiment is echoed by William Bullein (1595), who argues that although "almightie God did ordaine [wine-drinking] for the great comfort of mankind, to bee taken moderately. . . drunken with excesse, it is a poison most venomous, it relaxeth the sinews, bringeth palsey, falling sicknesse in cold persons, hote feuers, fransies, fighting, lecherie, and a consuming of the liuer, to chollerycke persons and generally there is no credence to be giuen to drunkards, although they be mightie men."[10] Clearly, wine consumption represented a much more imminent threat to the early modern social as well as bodily order than did food excess alone. While, as Boorde observes, "moderately drunken, [wine] doth acuate and doth quicken a mans wyttes, it doth comfort the hert, it doth scoure the lyuer,"[11] excess, which differed according to the individual, could result in sin and violence. Elyot goes as far as to warn that "yong men should drinke little wine, for it shall make them prone to furie, and lechery."[12]

It is perhaps no coincidence that the *Homyly* separates out gluttony and drunkenness, for despite the fact that the consumption of alcoholic beverages was part of the early modern diet, it nevertheless required special care. The early modern practice of watering down wine may be viewed as one means by which those who imbibed attempted to mitigate the potentially intoxicating effects of overindulgence. Shakespeare's Cassio, who, as he says, has "very poor and unhappy / brains for drinking," in fact, "craftily / qualifie[s]," i.e., waters down his first cup in an effort to avoid the cholera wine produces within him (2.3.29-30; 33-34). Such a practice was not, however, without dangers of its own, for as Boorde observes, "water is not holsome . . .

If any man do vse to drynke water with wyne, let it be purely strayned; and then seth it, and after it be cold, let hym put it to his wyne."[13] Gervase Markham offers up his own rather unique recipe for staving off drunkenness. He notes that "if you would not be drunk, take the powder of betony and coleworts mixed together; and eat it every morning fasting, as much as will lie upon a sixpence, and it will preserve a man from drunkenness."[14] It is unclear how betony, a member of the mint family, and coleworts, any kind of cabbage, consumed in combination will prevent drunkenness. Nor is it clear whether Markham's recipe constitutes an attempt to avoid the moral sin of drunkenness or whether it arises from a purely dietary concern. Such a seemingly odd recipe does, however, indicate an attempt to offset negative humors produced by excessive alcohol consumption. What is clear from the examples listed above are often extraordinary measures taken in early modern English society to avoid drunkenness. For while early modern moralists derided the sin of drunkenness, as A. Lynn Martin concludes, "alcohol [continued to form] a fundamental part of most people's diet."[15]

Yet the marked humoral differences between men and women arguably necessitated gender specific solutions to the problem. Given their unique humoral makeup, alcohol consumption was believed to impact women differently than it did men. Excessive wine consumption, as Ken Albala notes, was believed to add "too greatly to the internal vital heat of digestion, totally subverting it, much as throwing too much wood on a fire suffocates it."[16] This increase in bodily heat could introduce a whole host of negative consequences. In terms of the male humoral makeup, excessive heat could lead to an undesirable choleric state, replete with anger and increased sexual appetite. Boorde advises the melancholic man, one who possesses a cold and dry humoral complexion, to avoid "drinking of hote wynes, and grose wyne, as red wyne," presumably because such consumption would lead to even greater dryness.[17] For women, who were believed generally colder and moister, excessive wine consumption could very well lend undesirable male attributes to an already volatile female humoral complexion. Moreover, as Anthony Fletcher notes, "with the precise boundary between the heat which made man a man and the cold which predominated to make woman a woman difficult to draw, gender, in fact, seemed dangerously fluid and indeterminate."[18] The Dutch physician Levinus Lemnius (1658) observes that "women are subject to all passions and perturbations . . . when she chanceth to be angry, as she will presently be, all that sink of humours being stirred

fumeth, and runs through the body, so that the Heart and Brain are affected with the smoky vapours of it, and the Spirits both vitall and animal, that serve those parts are inflamed."[19] One would certainly not want to stir that toxic pot! Unfortunately, excessive wine consumption by women could reportedly do just that. As Boorde observes, "Wyne is full of fumosyte," which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, indicated a condition full of fumes and vapours.[20] Fumosity, which gives certain foods their flatulent quality, was also believed to create the intoxicating effects of wine, resulting in the undesirable behavior Lemnius describes. Rather, as Markham advises, "Let [the early modern woman's] diet be wholesome and cleanly prepared at due hours, and cooked with care and diligence; let it be rather to satisfy nature than our affections, and apter to kill hunger than revive new appetites."[21]

One of the appetites that excessive wine consumption was believed to revive was sexual desire. While the Porter from Shakespeare's Macbeth argues that drink "provokes the desire but / . . . takes away the performance" (2.3.27-28), excessive alcohol consumption by women was believed to result in lechery. If drunkenness rendered men incapable of performance, it turned women into sexually voracious creatures. As Robert de Blois's thirteenth century diatribe against women, *Le Chastoiment des Dames* declares,

> She who gluts more than her fill
> Of food and wine soon finds a taste
> For bold excess below the waist!
> No worthy men will pay his court
> To lady of such lowly sort.[22]

The belief that excessive consumption resulted in uncontrollable female lechery goes back to ancient Rome. Valerius Maximus argued that there was a "connection between intemperance in wine and lechery in body; drinking wives were adulterous wives."[23] Perhaps this was one reason why Boorde advises that "there is no wyne good for children & maydens."[24] It is understandable why children should not drink wine, although it has been well established that they drank watered down ale in the early modern period. Boorde's admonition seems to function in a different capacity in regard to young, unmarried women. If one factors in the early modern maiden's disease, greensickness, which was purportedly cured through marital sex, it is understandable why Boorde advises against wine consumption by maidens. Moderation in both food and drink proved crucial not only to bodily health,

but to female behavioral control as well. Dietary immoderation in women could well produce disastrous consequences, as evidenced in Shakespeare's Danish play.

The overindulgence that troubles *Hamlet* arguably comes to mirror that of the playwright's own early modern world. Hamlet's observation that the Danes' drinking customs are "more honoured in the breach than the observance" (1.4.18) refers to the dietary excesses against which both early modern physicians and moralists had warned. That "other nations" (1.4.20) label the Danes "drunkards" (1.4.21) speaks less of momentary lapses on the occasion of a royal wedding, but rather of a generalized propensity for overindulgence. The Rhenish draughts that Claudius drains to the beat of "the swagg'ring upspring reels" (1.4.10) presents a powerful image of such excess, which, as Hamlet's disparaging observations conclude, condemn Elsinore as an overindulgent court.

How does Gertrude fit within this overindulgent court? Is she, like Hamlet, an unwilling or perhaps unwitting participant in the male ritual of drunken revelry? Or is the queen, in fact, a regular imbiber herself, one who embraces the same pattern of excess that earns Claudius such scorn from the cold sober Hamlet? At the very least it seems clear that she is an integral part of the festivities that surround her sudden marriage to Claudius. After dismissing the concerns of the yet grieving Hamlet, Claudius declares,

> . . . Madam, come.
> This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet
> Sits smiling to my heart; in grace whereof,
> No jocund health that Denmark drinks today
> But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
> And the King's rouse the heavens shall bruit again,
> Re-speaking earthly thunder. Come away. (1.2.122-28)

The bacchanalian revelry that the King proposes here is to be shared with Gertrude. Unlike the festivities that the absent Othello organizes in honor of his marriage, Elsinore's royal couple directly indulges in the drunken celebration that earns such scorn from Hamlet and ostensibly the world at large. Certainly, as Martin has observed, "Weddings [in early modern England] were . . . occasions for often copious consumption."[25] Admittedly, though early modern physicians had warned against the practice, we must to some extent attribute the indulgence in which both Claudius and Gertrude engage to the celebratory fervor that accompanies their recent nuptials. But when such consumption is

coupled with Gertrude's "most wicked speed . . . / to incestuous sheets!" (1.2.156-57), we tap into an understanding of the humoral consequences of women and wine. Indeed, the critique in this play about excess is not limited to celebratory drunkenness; it is likewise about the perceived outpouring of female lechery that results from the consumption of too much wine.

Gertrude's sexuality is, of course, a major source of contention within the play. From an early modern humoral perspective, moreover, it proves crucial that we link Gertrude's dietary excess to her sexuality. Hamlet represents his mother as a sexually voracious widow when she prematurely sets aside her grief to enter into a lustful union with her murderous brother-in-law. As Hamlet charges, she lives "in the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty—" (3.4.82-84). Robert Burton's suggestion that "foolish, drunken, or hair-brained women most often bring forth children like unto themselves, morose and languid"[26] could, to some degree, describe the melancholic Hamlet. Richard Levin, however, argues that "Gertrude is the victim of a bad press . . . since she and her libido are constructed for us by the two men who have grievances against her and so must be considered hostile and therefore unreliable witnesses, while she herself is given no opportunity to testify on her own behalf."[27] Yet if Gertrude is not quite the lascivious creature Hamlet envisions, she is likewise not Markham's ideal English housewife, one who is "of great modesty and temperance as well inwardly as outwardly."[28] Rather, Gertrude becomes a caricature of the grotesquely painted creature Hamlet invokes to punish Ophelia: "You jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance" (3.1.143-45). Gertrude is, in other words, a creature of great appetite, whose consumptive excess plays handily into Claudius's power scheme.

Yet in some respects, it is an early modern cultural text that best explains Gertrude's fatal appetite, one declaring that female wine consumption results in an overly-sexualized humoral disposition. As the playwright and wit Robert Greene observes, "Drunkenness desires lust."[29] Hamlet and the ghost merely give voice to what an early modern audience would have already believed regarding women and dietary overindulgence. When Hamlet charges Gertrude with gross crimes against his father, he in fact couches his accusation in the language of consumption and excess. Forcing her to confront the counterfeits of his father and Claudius, Hamlet demands, "Have you eyes? / Could you on this fair mountain leave

to feed, / And batten on this moor?" (3.4.64-66). The lust and gluttony that Hamlet attributes to his mother ultimately constitute a metaphor for the drunkenness that characterizes the Danish court as a whole. When he advises Gertrude not to "let the bloat King tempt [her] again to bed" (3.4.165-66), Hamlet functions as a sage early modern physician, warning his patient to practice abstinence. In a sense, Gertrude has both gorged with and on Claudius, whose own greed renders him the very image of gluttony. Avoiding the "bloat king" becomes the only remedy against the dangers such excess yet represents to the queen.

Perhaps nowhere is the danger of overindulgence more apparent than in the final act of *Hamlet*. The excess which structures the play comes full circle as Gertrude drinks from the poisonous stoup to celebrate Hamlet's unexpected victory against Laertes. Raising the cup, Gertrude announces, "The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" (5.2.232). Claudius's belated directive—"Gertrude, do not drink" (5.2.233)—ironically becomes that of an early modern dietary warning against excessive consumption, for this final sip, however seemingly miniscule, ultimately proves too much. Gertrude is rendered a mirror image of the morally bankrupt Claudius: an overindulgent imbiber who wreaks havoc on the humoral body.

In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1632), Robert Burton advises that "our own experience is the best Physitian; that diet which is most propitious to one is often pernitious to another; such is the variety of palats, humors, and temperatures, let every man observe and be a law unto himself."[30] Burton's caveat proves instructive to a reading of *Hamlet*. If Claudius falls due to his greed and lust for power, Gertrude succumbs to an appetite that she fails to hold in check. If Claudius's consumptive excess manifests itself as murderous greed against a brother, his throne, and his queen, Gertrude's results in an insatiable sexuality, one which, from Hamlet's tortured perspective, metaphorically allows her to gorge on garbage. The toxic wine Gertrude defiantly consumes at play's end becomes representative of the poisonous excess that plagues the Danish court as a whole, setting in motion the tragic chain of events that, in the end, leaves the stage littered with corpses.

Notes

1. All Shakespeare citations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997).

2. Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 9.

3. Ibid., 10.

4. Thomas Elyot, *Castel of Helthe* (1541), quoted in Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 26.

5. Galen, *On the Natural Faculties*, trans. Arthur John Brock, M.D. (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, [n.d.]), 49.

6. Andrew Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment; or, A Dyetary of Helth* (1547; New York: De Capo Press, 1971), 289.

7. *Homily Against Gluttonie and Dronkennes* (1563), quoted in Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2007), 16.

8. Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare*, 15.

9. *Homyly Against Gluttonie and Dronkennes*, 16-17.

10. William Bullein, *The Gouernment of Health* (1595), quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2007), 17.

11. Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment*, 254.

12. Elyot, *Castel of Helthe*, 27.

13. Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment*, 253.

14. Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife* (1615), ed. Michael R. Best (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 18.

15. A. Lynn Martin, "Drinking and Alehouses in the Diary of an English Mercer's Apprentice, 1663-1674," in Mack P. Holt, ed., *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 99.

16. Ken Albala, *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 106.

17. Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment*, 289.

18. Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 11.

19. Levinus Lemnius, *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (1658), quoted in Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, 36.

20. Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment*, 254.

21. Markham, *English Housewife*, 8.

22. Robert de Blois, *Le Chastoiement des Dames*, quoted in Martin, "Drinking in Alehouses," 48.

23. Martin, "Drinking in Alehouses," 9.

24. Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment*, 254.

25. Martin, "Drinking and Alehouses," 98.

26. Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), quoted in Martin, "Drinking and Alehouses," 45.

27. Richard Levin, "Gertrude's Elusive Libido and Shakespeare's Unreliable Narrators," *SEL* 48, no. 2 (2008): 305-26, 323.

28. Markham, *English Housewife*, 7.

29. Robert Greene, quoted in Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 1. An interesting anecdotal account of Greene's death proves rather interesting in terms of excessive alcohol consumption. According to Thomas Nashe, Greene died in after consuming large quantities of pickled herring and Rhenish wine. See Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 210.

30. Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1632), quoted in Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, 21.