"Feasts are too Proud / Better to Starve": Shakespearean Culinary Divides

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Food plays an unexpectedly key role in the Shakespearean canon, regularly signaling social, political, economic, and religious cruxes. While frequently overlooked, the preparation, availability and scarcity of food highlights significant informational nodes in the plays. Disputes involving food, for instance, often reveal close convergences between dietary options and challenging loci of interpersonal conflict, frequently connected with competing hierarchies associated with status as well as domestic, political, financial, or social power. Access to expensive items, on the other hand, typically indicates privilege when it is available and social or financial precarity when it is absent, restricted, threatened, or taken away. While food is not the only marker of status or authority appearing in the dramas, it draws attention to close ties between diet and social or political standing. As the title of this essay suggests, both feast and famine regularly signal complex moral and ethical issues. Many of Shakespeare's plays use food to communicate matters of social importance and distinction. These markers are not always evident to conventional modern audiences, but they help make visible how comestible privilege and deprivation illuminates critical social divides in the societies on display.

Germane references appear across Shakespeare's plays. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, variations in status

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between the three central groupings in the narrative fuel numerous plot lines and interpretive directions. Some of these remain difficult to conceptualize. How, for example, should differences between the categories of "fairies" and "rude mechanicals" be articulated? This conundrum becomes even more challenging once Bottom is magically "translated" (3.1.113)[1] into an entity physically joining a human and an ass. Within the play, Bottom's friends are horrified by his alteration, but the drugged Fairy Queen has no qualms about the social position or unconventional physicality of her love interest. Titania highlights Bottom's newly heightened status after she becomes enamored with him through the food she instructs the faeries to feed him, namely, "apricocks and dewberries, purple grapes, green figs, mulberries, and honey bags" stolen from the bees (3.1.163). As Joan Thirsk indicates, apricots were the "fruit with the most intriguing history at this time" that was "often used at banquets."[2] Joan Fitzpatrick similarly notes that "although grown in England, apricots were available only in limited numbers since their season was short and they were therefore expensive."[3] Figs moreover were seen as a "Mediterranean luxury"; both figs and grapes were classed as "exotics of warmer climes" and "the royal garden at Richmond" boasted grapes as one of their crops.[4] Bottom's diet, therefore, corresponds with his new position in society as the romantic interest of a queen. In a play where social rankings matter greatly, demanding luxury goods for a "rude mechanical" emphasizes the striking change in Bottom's status, at least temporarily.

At the same time, however, Bottom's inclination toward animal feed makes it clear that his new classification as a human/ass hybrid looms as prominently for him as the status conferred by his unexpected liaison with Titania. Thus, when he becomes hungry, he does not desire apricots or other such niceties. Instead, he yearns for

> *Bottom:* Truly, a peck of provender; I could munch your
> good dry oats. Methinks I have a great desire to a
> bottle of hay. Good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow.
> *Titania:* I have a venturous fairy that shall seek
> The squirrel's hoard, and fetch thee off new nuts.
> *Bottom:* I had rather have a handful or two of dried peas.
> (4.1.31-36)

Since this is a comedy, albeit a complicated one, Bottom's preference for the foods likely craved by the non-human parts of his body rather than the rare and expensive treats offered by Titania heightens the humor of the scene. It also indicates that Bottom is less attracted to the luxuries available to royals than might be expected. An enhancement of his social position is clearly not his highest priority. While Bottom and his thespian comrades are frequently mocked in the play, the fact that he has diverse culinary choices underscores his exalted status while he is with Titania. His predilection for hay and oats, however, suggests that he has little interest in the delectable benefits on offer to those with status. The opportunity for sex with a queen does not automatically correspond with his desires or his other appetites.

Bottom's short-lived transformation, including its access to culinary delicacies, is unusual, however. Clear distinctions between working people and those of higher status are more commonly highlighted in the plays when food is mentioned. The preparations for the Capulets' feast in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, emphasize the undervalued positions held by those working to provide a magnificent display for the forthcoming guests:

> A hall in Capulet's house.
> *First Servant:* Where's Potpan, that he helps not to take away? He
> Shift a trencher? He scrape a trencher!
> *Second Servant:* When good manners shall lie all in one or two men's
> Hands and they unwashed too, 'tis a foul thing.
> *First Servant:* Away with the joint-stools, remove the
> Court-cupboard, look to the plate. Good thou, save
> Me a piece of marchpane; and, as thou lovest me, let
> The porter let in Susan Grindstone and Nell Antony and Potpan!
> (1.5.1-11)

This scene, which focuses on preparing for the Capulets' ball, provides insight into the organization of this affluent family's household. While a piece of expensive, sugar-filled marchpane appears to be available for the first servant to enjoy, the staff is

mostly noteworthy for the way some of their names—if, indeed, they have names—reflect their roles in the household, and for a striking fear of dirty hands contaminating the food. Shakespeare's plays predictably reflect the wide variations between foods available to people of differing socioeconomic states, although the sugar contained in marchpane suggests that the Capulet's household staff had access to some luxury items those of their position would generally lack. *Romeo and Juliet* focuses most of its attention upon Verona's wealthier inhabitants, but this household scene reveals the comparative anonymity and invisibility of servants, even as they organize everything for one of the most prominent events in the drama. Preparation of the food associated with this gala highlights the inevitable economic and social disparities within this community. The promise of marchpane offers the only suggestion that these workers ever share in the bounty of the Capulet enclave.

In another play, luxury items provide one means for the powerful to demote the status of another. In *Richard III*, Gloucester requests homegrown strawberries from the Bishop of Ely in order to demonstrate his authority: "When I was last in Holborn, / I saw good strawberries in your garden there. / I do beseech you send for some of them" (3.3.31-33). Here, the conniving upstart not only alerts the Bishop that his house is under surveillance, he also reminds him that his personal property, including the bounty from his garden, ultimately belongs to his social and political superiors. Commandeering the fruits from the Bishop's own garden sends a message that Richard is exerting potentially perilous control. The choice of strawberries in this circumstance would be resonant for contemporary audiences. Strawberries were popular during this period, with Paul S. Lloyd, for example, referring to them as "fashion fruits."[5] The manner of their serving varied, however, in accordance with the comparative status of different consumers. Lloyd notes, for instance, that Robert Dudley, then future Earl of Leicester, "purchased strawberries and cream together, signifying an association between these two types of luxurious food."[6] Thirsk, moreover, remarks that strawberries were thought to gain succulence and flavor when they were domestically cultivated, as in the Bishop of Ely's plot at Holborn: "Wild strawberries were plentiful in the woods, but it was readily admitted that they improved when brought into gardens."[7] In addition, Susanne Groome mentions

that Elizabeth Tudor's mother was particularly fond of strawberries and that Anne Boleyn seems to have bequeathed her sweet tooth to her daughter.[8] In 1599, Henry Buttes also comments on the medical efficacy of strawberries, noting that they "Asswage the boiling heate and acrimony of blood and choller. coole the liuer: quench thirst: pro|uoke vrine and appetite: [and] are passing gratefull to the palate."[9] Strawberries clearly attracted considerable attention in this era. Despite the widespread popularity of these treats, however, Richard's mood sours soon after he receives the berries he requested. The Bishop of Ely, accordingly, swiftly transfers his allegiance to Richmond (the future Henry VII), presumably to protect his life and position. This exchange is short, but pithy, and the play quickly turns to other events.

This brief interlude, however, represents the ways that food both reflects and instigates social and political maneuvers in these dramas. As Brears states, "the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw enormous changes in the recipes we use to cook our food [and] another change was just as important, that of newly available foodstuffs."[10] Increased military and exploratory travel, combined with evolving domestic cultivation practices, prompted significant shifts in English culinary experiences such as those Shakespeare references. Given the widespread societal alterations encompassing food availability and preparations, therefore, it makes sense that foodstuffs, like strawberries, can signal important power differentiations, even through a passing reference.

Foods associated predominantly with the affluent are not the only edible focus in this timeframe or in these plays, however. While expensive cuisine was popular with those who could afford it, times when food was hard to come by for many people in England recurred throughout Shakespeare's lifetime, as John Bohstedt details:

> For centuries in times of dearth—scarcity and high prices—driven by gut-feelings of hunger and justice, and steered by memory and calculation,English communities sought forcible remedy, declaring their right to survive, and demanding action from the wealthy and powerful.[11]

The food-related upheavals occurring in *Coriolanus*, therefore, would strike home for many audience members. In the play,

starving citizens blame the corn shortages on governmental policies rather than crop failures:

> *First Citizen:* Care for us? True, indeed! They [the Roman state]
> ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their storehouses
> crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal
> daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more
> piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars
> eat us not up, they will.
> (1.1.77-83)

Since the discontent fueling discord throughout this play had many early modern English parallels, the play reflects Shakespeare's home country as much as it does ancient Rome.

Given England's many periods of food scarcity, it is not surprising that the problems associated with such upheavals appear in some of Shakespeare's comedies, as well as in his more somber dramas. In 1603's *As You Like It*, for example, Orlando threatens violence to Duke Senior and his companions when he is seeking food for himself and the elderly, ailing Adam: "He dies that touches any of this fruit, / Till I and my affairs are answered" (2.7.98-99). He is then surprised when Duke Senior freely offers the food that provokes this disturbance: "Sit down and feed, and welcome to our table" (2.7.104). Orlando's challenging circumstances have kept him largely separate from the social environment enjoyed by others in his family, but his aggressive response may also reflect some awareness of the many contemporary forces restricting charity, such as those presented by Evan Gurney, who describes the conflicted status of charity during the early modern period: "many Jacobean dramatists were likewise skeptical of claims made by supporters of commercial enterprise who often used charity to justify the acquisition of wealth."[12] From this perspective, Orlando is understandably unprepared for the largesse offered at the "court" created by Duke Senior during his exile in the forest. Having fled the cruelty dispensed by his brother and by Duke Frederick, Orlando has little experience with generosity

such as that provided by Duke Senior. Escaping into the forest was unlikely to prove welcoming for typical people during this period, however. While Adam's subsequent disappearance from the text remains unexplained, his urgent need for food and Orlando's lack of confidence in his own ability to procure it reflects the high risk of mortality likely to accompany anyone venturing into such realms in real life. Of course, remaining in the city also carried significant risks. As Bohstedt comments, there had been serious food-related disruptions in the decade before this play appeared on stage: "In the mid-1590s, a series of four bad harvests produced widespread rioting."[13] Audiences viewing Orlando's pugnacious demands for some of Duke Senior's bounty, therefore, would have recognized the complicated conditions leading to this kind of behavior, particularly since his actions correlate with the rationale Bohstedt offers for related early modern outbursts: "food rioters seemed to believe their warrants for action were self-evident: hunger, exports, 'corn being dear,' and hoarding by rich men."[14] Orlando, accordingly, was adopting familiar strategies used during times of need, particularly since Shakespeare's era saw massive disparities between access to food for the rich and the poor, as Steve Rappaport discusses:

> If rising prices and populations threatened to undermine the stability of London and other English cities during the sixteenth century, it is often argued that they did so because the ensuing decline in real income and growth in unemployment drove the majority of townspeople below the poverty line, hastening the polarization of urban society in general and the growth of oligarchy in particular.[15]

The people of London may not have fled to the forest in emulation of Orlando, but they certainly were cognizant of the food inequalities such as those related by Rappaport:

> For a precious few who lived in England's cities the Tudor period offered opportunities for amassing fortunes which rivaled and occasionally surpassed those possessed by peers of the realm. Living in spacious mansions, sealed off from the wretched poverty around them, the rise in prices was little more than a thorn in the side of their opulent lifestyle. But for most townspeople, we are told, a single meal was a fortune, subsisting an accomplishment.[16]

From this perspective, Orlando's and Adam's desperate efforts to obtain sustenance do not speak only to those in the forest, just as *Coriolanus* is not simply depicting deprivation in Rome; the townspeople watching Shakespeare's plays would have either experienced or been told of similar crises in the lives of their extended families and neighbors. As Ian Archer indicates, there was "alarm" at the rising levels of poverty demonstrated during the Tudor period that led to a number of efforts to meet the needs of impoverished London families:

> Central to relief in the capital were the hospitals founded in the mid-Tudor period on a wave of godly enthusiasm and alarm about the growing dimensions of London's poverty. They represented a comprehensive approach to the problem, categorising the poor in terms of the sick and impotent who were to be cared for in St. Thomas' and St Bartholomew's, orphaned children who became the responsibility of Christ's, the unemployed and work-shy who were to be set to work or disciplined at Bridewell, and decayed householders relieved by pensions raised through the poor rate.[17]

London audiences, therefore, would probably nod in recognition at the hunger experienced by many of Shakespeare's characters and the desperate acts they sometimes chose to commit in order to survive.

Such widely varying social conditions and their concomitant influence upon access to food also contributes to the many references to food, particularly to feasting, presented in *Timon of Athens*. As the quote in the title of this essay suggests, close associations between consumables and morality permeate this play, with food marking many of the evaluative disparities between people appearing throughout the drama. Early in the text, for instance, when Timon provides lavish meals to all comers, Apemantus questions the character of the guests. Asked if he is going to Timon's feast: "Ay," responds Apemantus, "to see meat fill knaves and wine heat fools" (1.1.263). The skeptical Apemantus later warns Timon against too close association with those he feeds, telling him:

> *Timon:* I scorn thy meat; 'twould choke me, for I should ne'er
> flatter thee. O
> you gods, what a number of men eats Timon, and he
> sees 'em not! It

> grieves me to see so many dip their meat in one man's
> blood...
> methinks they should invite them without knives:
> good for their meat and
> safer for their lives.
> (1.2.37-41)

He further announces that the company at such meals were likely to be murderers:

> *Timon:* The fellow that sits next to him now, parts bread with
> him, pledges
> the breath of him in a divided draught, is the readiest
> man to kill him.
> 't has been proved. If I were a huge man I should fear
> to drink at meals,
> Lest they should spy my windpipe's dangerous notes.
> Great men should
> drink with harness on their throats.
> (1.2.47-52)

By the end of the play, Timon clearly holds a similarly disdainful view about his greedy guests, as he offers them bowls of water to eat, urging them: "uncover, dogs, and lap" (4.1.85). He then expands upon his derision, "May you a better feast never behold, you knot of mouth-friends! Smoke and lukewarm water is your perfection" (4.1.87-90).

Timon's transformation from generous to misanthropic host emphasizes some of the common ways that Shakespeare signals important contemporary social and economic issues through his drama. Culinary allusions in Shakespeare's plays often employ such strategies to reflect the rapid changes characterizing Elizabethan and Jacobean life. When Sir Toby Belch lauds the ongoing importance of "cakes and ale" in *Twelfth Night* (2.3.115), he counters Malvolio's dismissive perspectives on sociability:

> *Malvolio:* Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty but to
> gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do you
> make an ale-house of my lady's house?
> (2.3.88-90)

These views may well mirror those of the Steward's fellow Puritan Dr. James Hart, who criticized the growing taste for sugar near the time of Shakespeare. As Thirsk indicates, "[Hart] suspected that the high death rate in London, as shown in the Bills of Mortality, was

due to merchants whitening sugar with lees of lime."[18] Introducing people at the other end of the social scale, Katharine's thwarted attempts to gain food from Gremio in *Taming of the Shrew*, contain allusions to common expectations of charity for those in need, as Katharine notes:

> *Katharine:* What, did he marry me to famish me?
> Beggars that come to my father's door
> Upon entreaty have a present alms;
> If not, elsewhere they meet with charity.
> (4.3.306)

Dietary issues in these plays thus continually provide valuable information about social status and economic changes during this period, with food structures and access reflecting key aspects of these societies.

Just as food emphasized the societal connotations associated with cultivated strawberries, the critical importance of grain or other sustenance for a hungry and impoverished populace presents close correlations between social and political hierarchies. Whether deemed exotic or commonplace, consumable products regularly signal significant information about those who prepare, serve, provide, or eat these items. The importance of similar distinctions in early modern society appears frequently in historic accounts of the period. The diffuse layers of meaning associated with food and status provides the structure of Lloyd's monograph, which offers chapters entitled "The 'Meaner Sort' and Their Diets," "The Middling Sort and Their Diets" and "The Diet of the Gentry," and which further differentiates between those people, designating them more specifically as "labourers and the poor," "household servants," "wealthy yeomen," or "urban 'professionals' and artisans." Drawing from Keith Wrightson,[19] Lloyd further observes that during this period "Hierarchical structure was thought to promote and stabilize a society in which divisions in wealth, patterns of interaction including duties and obligations, and relative levels of honour and integrity, were essential characteristics of order."[20] Thus, culinary allusions in Shakespeare's plays often reflect the perceived need to establish clear distinctions between people in the upheavals of the rapid changes characterizing Elizabethan and Jacobean life. Feast and famine were equally prominent in early modern England, though affecting different populations,

and Shakespeare's plays keep these issues clearly in view through pointed allusions to significant societal disruptions.

Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's plays in this paper are taken from William Shakespeare, *The Norton Complete Works*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, Gordon McMullan, and Suzanne Gossett, 3rd edition (New York: Norton, 2015).

2. Joan Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England: Phases, Fads, Fashions 1500-1760* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 75.

3. Joan Fitzpatrick, *Shakespeare and the Language of Food: A Dictionary* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Company, 2011), 17.

4. Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England*, 10, 17, 22.

5. Paul S. Lloyd, *Food and Identity in England*, 1540-1640 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 65.

6. Lloyd, *Food and Identity*, 84.

7. Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England*, 73.

8. Susanne Groome, *At the King's Table: Royal Dining Through the Ages* (London: Merrill, 2013), 48.

9. Henry Buttes, *Dyets Dry Dinner* (London, 1599), sig. B4v.

10. Peter Brears, *Cooking & Dining in Tudor and Early Stuart England* (London: Prospect Books, 2015), 20.

11. John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550–1850 (History of Retailing and Consumption)* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

12. Evan A. Gurney, *Love's Quarrels: Reading Charity in Early Modern England*, (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 155.

13. Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions*, 32.

14. Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions*, 50-51.

15. Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 162.

16. Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds*, 162.

17. Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1991), 154.

18. Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England*, 80.

19. Wrightson discusses related issues in a number of venues, including *English Society 1580-1680* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982) and *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

20. Lloyd, *Food and Identity*, 10.