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‘DO NOT SWEAR AND EAT IT’: THE FOOD OF HOSPITALITY IN SHAKESPEARE’S *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

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Abstract

The framework of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* relies on hospitality, a contradictory concept that, as Jacques Derrida recognises, incorporates both hospitality and hostility. Words uttered in hospitality can potentially create tension, as words of welcome or expressions of gratitude may hold concealed animosity. Likewise, the food offered in hospitality may also fluctuate among multiple meanings: it could be gratefully eaten, rejected, or even poisoned. My argument is based on all of these inherent contradictions. I propose that the words and food of hospitality act as emblems of mutability for the protagonists as each character begins the play in a liminal state, leaving their position in Messinian society vulnerable to the artifice of others. The status of each character therefore rises and falls as each resists the bonds of community. Only when those bonds are recognised, and acknowledged, does each find a permanent social position so that commensality, not competition, prevails in Messina.

Key Words: textual criticism, interpretation, agency, transformation, metaphor, cannibalism, slander

Words and Food in Hospitality

William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* is a love-comedy, implying fun, foolery, and frolic. The script delivers these expectations, particularly in performance, for which theatre reviewers apply descriptions of the ‘sparkle’ and ‘warm glow’ the actors radiate.¹ Yet criticism also yields what Barbara Everett refers to as ‘startling judgements’ on a play that is perhaps ‘not so simple after all.’² Because of its similarity in plot to Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* and *Othello*, in which innocent women are accused of infidelity, resulting in disastrous consequences, *Much Ado about Nothing* inspires readings that emphasize ‘pervasive anxieties,’ deception that ‘breeds conflict and distrust,’ and a ‘sombre parallel between warfare and romance,’ conveyed primarily through dialogue.³ Characters engage continually in a war of witty words in an attempt to win victories over each other. Words cause anger, physical confrontation, and even apparent death, such as when Claudio’s accusations result in Hero’s deathlike swoon, while other words inspire love and faith, like when Benedick accepts Beatrice’s belief in Hero’s innocence without question. All of those words, regardless of intent or effect on listeners, witty or not, are formed by the mouth and tongue, the same mouth and tongue that chew and swallow food. Food ‘is arguably by definition liminal. It is always on the way to being transformed into ‘something else’ through digestion, metaphor, or other biological and cultural mechanisms.’⁴ Spoken words, too, are liminal and temporary as they are uttered, heard, and disappear; they may cause great harm or simply be forgotten. The mouth is a borderland, the site of ingress and egress for both words and food as they simultaneously leave and enter bodies. Both are emblems of mutability as words and food reflect and shape the continually fluctuating status of characters. The inherent instability of food and words acts as an agent of change influencing the oscillating relationships between protagonists as they negotiate their sense of marginalisation and eventually mature into bonds of proven trust and assurance.

Words and food also form the centrepiece of hospitality as guests are welcomed, hosts are thanked, and refreshments are consumed. Hospitality, despite its positive connotations, is a socially constructed concept fraught with contradictions and dangers. The word 'host' derives from the Latin *hospes* and *hospitis*, translated as 'guest,' 'host,' 'stranger,' or 'enemy.' The contradictory meanings of 'host,' added to the Latin *pasco*, 'to feed,' extend the definition to 'feed the stranger.' 'Hostis' also relates to the Sanskrit *ghas*, which means 'to eat, consume, or destroy.'⁵ In its etymological origins, hospitality is an agglomeration of paradoxical concepts in which the guest is a host and the host is a guest, terms that are not only interchangeable but that also simultaneously convey both positive and negative connotations. Shakespeare himself uses the term 'host' with multiple, nuanced meanings as both the offering and the receiving of hospitality in *The Comedy of Errors* (1.2.9) and *All's Well That Ends Well* (3.5.94), in accordance with standard Renaissance usage.⁶ In his plays, the host is sometimes hostage to the guest, as Regan and Goneril claim about their father King Lear, and the guest is often hostage to the host, as the trusting Duncan is to Macbeth. Jacques Derrida found the concept so troubling that he coined the term 'hostipitality' to convey the contradictory concepts of hospitality and hostility.⁷ Like food, which can appear appetizing but also contain poison, and words, which can simultaneously hold multiple meanings, hospitality can pose as a contradiction, which is reflected in *Much Ado about Nothing*. The first line announces guests who are welcomed unconditionally. The last lines announce the inhospitable return of Don John. Hospitality is not always repaid with gratitude but sometimes with betrayal, cruelty, and confrontation. My argument bases its premise on all of these inherent contradictions, which can be found in *Much Ado about Nothing*: words of welcome and gratitude disguise treachery; hospitality welcomes guests but risks betrayal; the mouth expels speech but receives food; food destroys one life form but sustains another life form. Every discursive exchange and every reference to food within the context of Messina's hospitality act as indicators of the fluctuating influence and power of each character. With every word, each character is always becoming something else, altering identity, and moving closer to or further from positions of power and vulnerable positions of marginality. Amidst the fluctuations, however, the words also hint at concealed bonds between the characters. When those bonds are recognised, the Messinians learn that faith and trust in others offer rewards through the attachments of stable friendship and marriage.

Food Metaphors within Hospitality in *Much Ado about Nothing*

As governor and host of Messina, Leonato appears secure in his status, his sense of self bound up with the honour of his name and house. His hospitality begins with a feast, intended to celebrate the victory of the soldiers. Leonato's authority, however, dissolves for two reasons. First, the meal, like Hero's bedroom window scene, is not actually staged, muting the audience's sense of its hospitality, lessening the impact of the breaking of bread and sharing of food, and presaging the divisions and outright subversion of his guests. Secondly, Felicity Heal explains that early modern hospitality recognised that higher ranking guests retain their rank, despite the presumed authority of the householder over his own home.⁸ Leonato must defer to the prince, Don Pedro, who announces the invitation to the soldiers himself and sets the limits on their stay (1.1.143-44). He directs the entertainment of guests and sanctions Claudio's aspersions on Leonato's character at his daughter's wedding (4.1.87-94). Leonato loses authority, reputation, and credibility, yet still must act as nominal host to Claudio and Don Pedro, despite his hostility. His guests subvert the feast, its accompanying revels, and his daughter's wedding, marginalising Leonato and slicing away at his honourable reputation. Even his challenge to Claudio on Hero's behalf is mocked when Leonato's now unwelcome guests marginalise him further as an old man with no teeth. Claudio protests that

We had lik'd to have had our two noses
 Snapp'd off with two old men without teeth. (5.1.116-17)

Without teeth to snap, or eat, Claudio refuses to regard Leonato as dangerous, relegating him to the role of hostage, the victim of his guests. Like the food he serves in hospitality, Leonato is continually in the process of becoming something else as the power of his position ebbs and flows. By the end of the play, the power he held before Don Pedro's arrival is restored, and it is Leonato's eventual test of Claudio, in which he requires Claudio to marry a woman based only on Leonato's standards, neither Claudio's nor Don Pedro's that leads to the permanent reunion of Hero and Claudio in marriage.

As prince and commander of the soldiers, Don Pedro is the most powerful person in the play but is also marginalised. He retains his rank in Leonato's house and assumes host's roles, but he also remains a guest, pressured to 'not fail him at supper, for indeed he hath made great preparation' (1.1.265-66). More significantly, he continues in his bachelor state even though Messina's culture insists on marriage as an emblem of stability.⁹ Beatrice refuses his marriage proposal, shredding his dignity and lowering his self-esteem, and thus limiting his sense of power. At the conclusion he remains unmarried. Even Benedick urges him to rectify that state: 'Prince, thou art sad, get thee a wife, get thee a wife' (5.4.121). The prince has many friends, but persists as an isolated figure, dwelling on the borders of Messina's newly paired couples and without the authority to provide a wedding feast, necessarily deferring to the father of the bride. Don Pedro's position of authority alters throughout the play, beginning as prince, triumphant in battle, welcomed warmly to Leonato's hospitality, but ending in marked solitude.

Don Pedro brings his half-brother, Don John, who benefits from the royal blood that runs in his veins. Yet despite his reconciliation with his brother, which earns Don John a welcome to Messina's hospitality, he is also marginalised simply by birth. His bastard status permanently places him outside the social traditions of marriage and the children born into legal marriage. To borrow Alison Findlay's description of the bastard Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*, Don John is:

without a name or a place in the social structure, outside its values and norms, deviant. Illicit conception leads to illegitimate education, consciousness, actions, to an alternative life 'in everything illegitimate.' Bastardy makes [Don John] a personification of a distinct 'other,' an existence which is governed by other values, codes of behaviour, activities.¹⁰

His recent rebellion against his brother Don Pedro and his current position as conquered prisoner, even within Messina's hospitality, marginalise him yet again. His hostile sense of marginality inspires Beatrice to create a food metaphor, imagining a cannibalistic ingestion:

How tartly that gentleman looks! I never
 Can see him but I am heart-burn'd an hour after. (2.1.3-4).

Don John authors Messina's subversion but disregards the physical food of the feast, preferring treachery, which 'may prove food to my displeasure' (1.3.62). Don John begins his subversion of Leonato's hospitality through his unwillingness to attend the 'great supper' (1.3.67).¹¹ He does not go until Borachio determines a method for thwarting Claudio's courtship of Hero. Once Don John gains a sense of power, he outwardly fulfils his obligations as guest, but wishes 'the cook were o' [his] mind' (1.3.68-69). Breaking hospitality's assumptions by desiring to poison the food renders Leonato's sustenance into the marginal

and destructive realm of treachery, illness, and death. Don John does not stubbornly proclaim, 'I will not eat with you,' as Shylock does in *The Merchant of Venice* (1.3.34), but acts instead by stealth. Despite his insistent manifesto that 'I cannot hide what I am,' he does indeed compromise his villainous identity by concealing the truth of it and by expressing concern for Don Pedro and Claudio's honour:

You may think I love you not; let that
appear hereafter, and aim better at me by that I
now will manifest. (3.2.89-91)

Hero's defamation, Claudio's bitter sense of betrayal, and the termination of the wedding are the crops reaped from Don John's 'harvest' as he wields his power to manipulate the lives of others (1.3.24). Although Don John himself changes less than the other prominent characters, his position in Messina alters from hesitant acceptance to justifiable anger. The play ends with Benedick promising to devise brave and inhospitable punishments for the captured Don John, who replaces all the temporarily marginalised Messinians to remain the only permanent socially deviant, at least within the space of this play (5.4.126-27).

Unlike Don John, Claudio appears secure in his position. A valiant young soldier, eager to marry, he enjoys the favour of powerful men above him, including Don Pedro, Leonato, and Benedick, and is therefore welcomed to Messina's hospitality. His sense of marginalisation, ironically, is based on that favour. Although Beatrice's references to Benedick's latest companion, Claudio, in the first scene are generally interpreted as bitterness regarding her history with Benedick, an alternate reading could construe the statements as true, that Benedick really does 'hath every month a new sworn brother,' that he does wear 'his faith but as the fashion of his hat: it ever changes with the next block' (1.1.67-68 and 70-72). Beatrice's accusations, if accurate, would make Benedick's friendship with Claudio ephemeral, establishing Claudio's status as ephemeral as well. Claudio could return to his marginalised status as another nameless soldier if Benedick tires of him, explaining his insecurity doubting his choice of a bride, dependence on the assurance of his new friends, and rapid belief in Don Pedro's treachery and Hero's infidelity. Furthermore, he could be plausibly marginalised by family as well. The messenger in scene one reports that he delivered letters to Claudio's uncle in Messina announcing the army's return and extolling Claudio's military feats, yet we are not told that Claudio sought his uncle's advice on his marriage or on Don John's allegations against Hero. Because family plays a large role in marriage negotiations, it is conceivable that Claudio feels peripheral to his family, relying more heavily on his friends, particularly Don Pedro. Claudio's sense of fluctuating power is highlighted through metaphors of food. When he believes Don Pedro deceived him, consequently feeling utterly isolated, betrayed by a trusted friend, and eternally separated from Hero, Beatrice compares his jealousy to an orange, a sickly colour: 'civil as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion' (2.1.280-81). Stephanie Chamberlain points out that fruit was sexualized in early modern England, bringing forth 'ill humours within the body or from spoiled flesh that hid beneath an undamaged exterior, raw fruit, untempered through the stabilizing process of heat or preservation, proved an uncertain, however enticing, commodity.'¹² Chamberlain correctly applies this description to Hero, referring to Claudio's later insult of her as a 'rotten orange,' but Claudio, too, is displaying untempered or uncontrolled ill humours as he suspects both Don Pedro and Hero of betraying his own hopes for sexuality within an impending marriage (4.1.31). Claudio already regards Hero's reputation and economic assets as a threat to his own sexual honour.

Hero's perceived betrayal is proven false, but Claudio's betrayal of his host Leonato, based on Don John's lies, plunges Leonato's status in Messina. Claudio's slander attacks Leonato's

hospitality, destroying his honour and reputation, nearly killing Hero, and inducing Leonato to desire both his own death and that of his only child. When most mistakes have been rectified and Claudio returns to the church for a second marriage ceremony, Benedick makes the play's only reference to a cow, surprising since beef is more closely associated with the English than any other meat, especially in a framework of hospitality. As one householder in early modern England writes, 'no man of honour, or worship, can be said to have good provision for hospitality, unless there be good store of beef in readiness.'¹³ Benedick jests to Claudio that;

Some such strange bull leapt your father's cow,
And got a calf in that same noble feat
Much like to you, for you have just his bleat. (5.4.49-51)

The jest mirrors the slander levelled at Hero, in which a strange guest leaps on Hero potentially producing a bastard. Benedick's humour strengthens masculine sexual power with the verb 'leapt,' giving all choice and power to the bull and relegating the cow to sexual victim of the bull's 'noble feat.' But since Benedick equates Claudio with the calf, not the bull, Claudio's masculine power is deflated, not enhanced.

The conclusion of the joke likens Claudio to a calf, milk-fed veal in culinary terms, a term in use in England since at least 1386, found in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and in Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* (*OED*, 5.2.248). The reference serves three potentially contradictory functions. The first evokes images of near-infant calves, still feeding on mother's milk, resulting in meat more tender and mild than beef. Benedick's joke lends a faint representation of the cruelty in slaughtering a baby cow for man's culinary pleasure and appropriate for Claudio's figurative slaughter of Hero, whom he leaves for dead, for the pleasure of feeding his pride and revenge. Secondly, equating Claudio with a calf grants Claudio babyish qualities that support Beatrice's nickname for him, Count Comfekt, a child's sugar-plum, a sweet Beatrice wishes could be fed to her guests to exact revenge (4.1.315). Although in his denunciation of Hero he imagines himself 'the figure of a lamb' (1.1.14-15), and victim of a vicious plot by his host to foist a rotten orange upon him, the image of a milk-fed calf emphasizes instead Claudio's immaturity. He childishly refuses to accept responsibility, regarding Hero's death as mere collateral damage and responding to Leonato afterwards as if he were guilty only of social awkwardness that makes his relationship to his host simply inconvenient. The image also stresses his emasculating position in marrying Leonato's niece, sight unseen, denying him the patriarchal privilege of choosing his own wife. Images of Claudio as simultaneously Hero's butcher, crime victim, and betrayed lover reflect his shifting desires and also mirror the contradictory sense of hospitality in Messina. His sense of self fluctuates erratically as he feels power over Hero and Leonato, shame in his bride choice, anger at the magnitude of the crime, and pride in discovering it in time. He feels defiantly justified in remaining in Messina, yet remains hesitant when his initial impression of marginalisation recurs when meeting his host Leonato.

Finally, the image of a calf, still breastfeeding, arouses the perception of non-destructive feeding, 'that which feeds only on what causes replenishment: that which does not kill the giver.'¹⁴ Although still bound with the fatal interpretations emphasizing calves slain for consumption, this is the only non-destructive metaphor of eating in the play, applicable, perhaps, to the ultimate union of Claudio and Hero in marriage, for Claudio finally learns to feed on Hero's love in a non-destructive form and becomes a full member of Messina. Perhaps an appropriate food image to summarize Claudio is Benedick's description of him as 'a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes' as Claudio's position of power rises and falls (2.3.20-21). Established first as honoured soldier, he transforms to shy and jealous

lover, accusatory tyrant, near combatant in a duel, penitent mourner, and finally joyful bridegroom. Only at the resumption of his wedding does he stop existing on the margins of Messina. Now secure and matured by his experiences, he recognizes his bonds to others and stands firmly within Messina's conventional society by joining his host's family.

Hero, powerfully positioned as hostess and heiress, is also marginalised by passivity and silence, the essence of an obedient, submissive woman in Messina's patriarchal world. Her acceptance of Claudio as betrothed is ordered beforehand by her father and she accepts her engagement in silence. She is often hidden from sight at the behest of men: masked, buried, and veiled, unsurprisingly objectified through food epithets, including 'meat' believed to have been stolen by Don Pedro (2.1.192). The reference foreshadows the threat of violence later in the play when Don Pedro refers to Benedick's challenge to Claudio as a 'feast' in which Claudio must carve different meats, 'a calve's-head and a capon' perhaps even a woodcock (5.1.153-54, 56). The violent image of carving a calf's head after Claudio himself has been referred to as a calf imparts a sense of self-mutilation and a disturbing hint of brutality to Don Pedro's metaphor, troubling when considering that meat has functioned as a slang term for women since at least the fifteenth century that literalizes the cycle of objectification and consumption of women, directly acknowledged when Benedick asks if Claudio wants to buy Hero.¹⁵ For Claudio, Hero exists only through what she represents as his host's heir. In the accusatory church scene, he calls her a 'rotten orange,' referring to an often sexualised food item prized by early moderns for its expense and rarity (4.1.31).¹⁶ At the same time, however, oranges and other fruit were viewed with suspicion because many physicians warned that they were not good for the health.¹⁷ Claudio's epithet links prized yet suspect oranges with the formerly prized woman who he thinks has justified his suspicions. Hero's worth, linked to her chastity, has been devalued; therefore, Claudio makes much ado about what is now worth nothing. Claudio's choice of analogy recalls Beatrice's description of him as an orange, endowing the word with multiple identifications, first with Claudio, then Hero. The term demonstrates an underlying bond between them that Claudio resists with accusations against Hero that sever the bond so completely, she faints as if dead. Messina holds many such hidden bonds that, if recognised, hold a key to Messina's stability.

Don Pedro applies another food term to Hero when he defines her as 'a common stale,' referring to a prostitute, but also to food allowed to grow sour, rancid, or decomposed (4.1.64). Blended with a rotten orange, Claudio and Don Pedro's representation of her is a pungent mass of putrid refuse, degrading Leonato's hospitable gift of food and reducing her to a food source whose edibility is more than questionable. Claudio characterises her simultaneously as 'most foul, most fair,' slandering her honour and that of his host and once again highlighting the contradictions that lie behind so much of Messina's discourse (4.1.103). He satisfies himself that Hero subsists beneath his pure morality, reducing her 'much' into nothing. Hero, already marginalised by her gender within a patriarchal society, is pushed so far to the societal edge that she lies believably dead, apparently crossing the border between life and death. Her essential character does not change, but her position in Messina continually transforms from Leonato's only daughter and heir to fiancée to harlot to corpse and finally to bride, always defined in relation to a man, existing on the periphery of a man's life, and finally reduced to something so easy to discard, like rotten food. Like the food undoubtedly prepared for the wedding feast in the household she has been hosting, she is always in the process of becoming something else.

Benedick, like Hero, is also perpetually in the process of becoming something else. He opens the play physically outside the perimeters of Messina, then enters as a guest, yet outside Beatrice's favour and outside the social norms of marriage, indeed, without even the desire to marry. But in Messina, marriage is a necessary social institution, a 'domestic bulwark in the fight against evil.'¹⁸ His hostility to marriage and his relative isolation sets him just outside

full acceptance. He uses wordplay to cultivate his reputation as a tyrant to women to enhance his stature.¹⁹ Benedick's request for a book to read in act 2 further marks his solitude, as for Elizabethans, a book in the hand is a symbol of the solitary.²⁰ Also like Hero, Benedick earns food monikers. Beatrice describes him as 'musty victual,' mouldy food in the process of spoiling, and as such, he makes fit fare for 'Lady Disdain' (1.1.47 and 1.1.114).

His relationship to food changes in the gulling scene, when Claudio refers to him as fish to bait (2.3.112). The phrase disconcertingly recalls Shylock's promise to use Antonio's flesh 'to bait fish withal,' a disturbing image of slicing up human flesh for consumption (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.50). Claudio's meaning is more light-hearted, but the violence of his depiction remains, however faint. In the gulling scene, his friends exaggerate Benedick's marginalisation, positioning him outside the polite world of civility by enumerating his deficiencies. Their criticism propels him to self-evaluation and he soon asks, 'doth not the appetite alter,' precipitating his border crossing to conventional society (2.3.233-34). Just as an appetite for food alters as one eats, is sated, and grows hungry again, Benedick now 'eats his meat without grudging' and alters from professed misogynist to chivalrous lover by writing a sonnet and accepting Beatrice's command to challenge the villain on behalf of a damsel in distress (3.4.83-84). His challenge propels him outside of the male brotherhood of soldiers, but he simultaneously moves into his host's family circle, the permanent residents of Messina, aligning with its perennial stability. Like the ever liminal food he eats, Benedick continually transforms from misogynistic singleness to knightly champion to lover and husband. His urging of a dance including all of Messina signals his full integration. He marries and concludes on good terms with all, ensuring Messina's future stability.

Like Benedick, Beatrice's verbal aggression positions her as powerful, even formidable. Part of Leonato's household, she shares in hosting duties, but does not welcome Benedick, throwing instead the opening salvo in the principle of offense, not defence, immediately beginning a cannibalistic suggestion that he is food feeding her disdain. However, her adamant protestations against marriage also place her outside Messina's societal norms and earn censure from her uncle. Although her repartee garners laughter, her family and friends also display uneasiness, making them anxious to get her married. Under their influence, Beatrice, too, is continually changing, ending the play with at least the semblance of a compliant wife.

Beatrice, too, sustains food metaphors, some that continue to reveal a hidden network of links among the contending social circles in Messina. Like Benedick, she is fish to trap, signalling a connexion to him (3.1.106). The same food identifies both even though neither would ever admit to that suggestion before the gulling scenes. Despite the similarity, the alteration from Benedick's fish bait to Beatrice's fish trap also lends far different connotations. The faint memory of Shylock is gone along with the violence of a fish hook piercing through flesh. Certainly, trapping may also end in death so the fish can be eaten, but the initial image seems less violent, restricting the fish's movement, but not physically harming it. The more subdued food image contrasts with Benedick's antagonistic metaphors. For Benedick, Beatrice is a 'dish' he 'love[s] not,' a cannibalistic suggestion that connects her with the tart, heartburn-causing villain, Don John (2.1.261). The suggestion is unsettling, yet provides evidence for concealed relationships that hold hope for the future. If Benedick and Beatrice finally acknowledge their love, and Claudio and Hero cross their seemingly unsurmountable hurdle, perhaps unacknowledged connexions with Don John will unite him permanently with his brother Don Pedro and the others as well.

Benedick also presents Beatrice as a dominatrix who would humble the mighty Hercules into a kitchen slave forced to turn the roasting spit over a fire fuelled by his war club, an appropriate allusion for her misandrous persona (2.1.241-43). Benedick's allegory not only negates Beatrice's fulfilment of the cultural expectation to cook, but also rhetorically

emasculates a god repurposed to aid women's work. Eliminating traditional feminine conventions removes her from feminine boundaries. She also knows, however, that she does not belong within masculine boundaries either, as evidenced by her thrice repeated 'O that I were a man!' (4.1.302, 304-5, 316). Benedick's analogy, then, ostracises her in an ungendered wilderness, boundaries that place her further away from her friends and family. Replicating Benedick's experience in the gulling scene, whose similar experiences provide another suggested bond between them, Beatrice recognises her marginalisation after listening to her friends: 'Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much?' (3.1.108). Her self-reproach not only validates her peripheral position but also motivates her to join other women in a more traditional wifely role as she vows to tame her wild heart to Benedick's loving hand (3.1.112). She keeps her promise, as Margaret attests when Beatrice asks her how long she has taken up wittiness as her profession: 'Even since you left it,' she replies (3.4.64).

Cannibalism in *Much Ado about Nothing*

Beatrice's more disquieting border crossing takes the form of metaphorical cannibalism, a suggestion hinted at in earlier edacious metaphors. Cannibalism represents an uncrossable border in most societies, certainly in England. Yet the threat of cannibalism occurs in *Much Ado about Nothing* in the first scene and recurs in a markedly more shocking manner later in the play. When Beatrice hears that the soldiers are returning, she does not welcome Benedick to Messina's hospitality. She asks instead about Benedick's feats in battle:

how many hath he kill'd and eaten in these wars?
But how many hath he kill'd? for indeed I promis'd
to eat all of his killing. (1.1.40-42)

She claims for herself the right to consume the enemy dead, a statement that humanises her in one sense because she can only be defined as a cannibal if she is a human being. Symbolically eating enemy soldiers can also be justified somewhat as merely another war atrocity, like the reports that Welshmen mutilated the slain British soldiers after their defeat at the beginning of *I Henry IV*. Enemy soldiers, after all, are not normally welcomed to one's hospitality after battle, so her symbolic consumption of enemies would be expected in some cultures in which a warrior drinks the blood of his first kill in battle.²¹ Her statement betrays a willingness to traverse any line she can, inviting transgression as if the very existence of a border between civilisation and savagery generates the impulse in her to cross it.²²

Beatrice's most blatant cannibalistic utterance occurs when Benedick asks her if she believes Claudio is truly her enemy. She angrily declares that she 'would eat his heart in the marketplace' (4.1.305-06). Defining her as a cannibal partly humanises her because it demonstrates the fierce love she holds for her cousin, although it also identifies her as rather like a mother bear protecting her cubs from predators. Her cannibalistic desire signals not only a descent within a continuum of humanity but also a descent from humanity into bestiality because carnivorous animals sometimes include human beings in their diet. Cannibalism represents the ultimate act of othering, defining cannibals as impassive beasts, outside the boundary of humanity itself.²³ Beatrice's utterance, then, places her in a category very different from other marginalised characters in this play, different from characters referred to as food, as illegitimate, even as 'nothing' as Claudio dismisses Hero. She joins Titus Andronicus, who deviously serves Tamora a pasty filled with the flesh, bones, and blood of her sons or perhaps, more aptly, the bear referred to in the infamous stage directions of *A Winter's Tale*: 'Exit pursued by a bear,' when the pursued Antigonus provides the bear's dinner. As unsettling as this violent death is, at least bears are potentially man-eating creatures. Just as a bear attacking a man embodies a reversal of the power on display at the

popular bear-baiting pits, a woman eating the heart of a man contradicts perceived laws of nature. Beatrice claims for herself the aggression that western culture generally assigns to so-called savages or animals, effectively crossing out of her assigned boundaries, perhaps even expressing concern about perceived cannibalistic inhabitants of the new world that Shakespeare explores more fully in *The Tempest*. Beatrice's wishful consumption multiplies her cannibalistic danger, each interpretation elevating the enormity of her threat. First, her statement defines Claudio's heart as interchangeable with that of a cow or sheep waiting to be butchered, betraying her own inhumanity as she removes Claudio from the status of a human being and marginalises him as an animal. Secondly, because Beatrice forms part of Leonato's household, she breaks the unstated rule of hospitality: do not eat your guest.

Indeed, the heart has long held an important allegorical significance beyond its biological function. The heart was understood in the early modern era as the origin of psychological truths otherwise obscured by one's physical appearance.²³ Jean Starobinski explains that for early moderns, 'what goes unsaid is actively hidden in the heart, the space of the inside—the interior of the body is that place in which the cunning man dissimulates what he doesn't say.'²⁴ Hamlet, for example, believes his mother's heart holds her secrets and rants against her 'brazen' heart, threatening to disclose 'all within' (3.4.38, 155). Iago similarly asserts that Othello cannot know what he is thinking, assuring Othello, 'Thou canst not, if my heart were in your hand' (3.3.162-3). Believing that the heart holds psychological truths could be one reason Claudio places so much faith in the blush suffusing Hero's face when he accuses her in the church. Flowing directly from the heart which pumps it upward, the blood must be telling the truth. For Beatrice, Claudio's heart represents his very essence, ripped from his fragmented body for her own vengeful satisfaction and for therapeutic consumption since the heart was also believed to have extraordinary healing functions.²⁵ Beatrice's desire for revenge once again recalls the image of Shylock, placing her in a position similar to his when he reveals his deadly motivation for demanding his pound of flesh: 'If it would feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.48-49). It also strengthens her similarities to Shylock as

A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy. (4.1.4-6)

At least rhetorically, Beatrice resembles Shylock. She renders herself a carnivorous subhuman, a predator of fellow human beings, and an absolute rejecter of all laws of hospitality, evoking images of the sacrifice of Tamora's son at the beginning of *Titus Andronicus* and the cycle of revenge it initiated, adding Claudio's heart to the pile of truncated limbs, tongue, and heads in that play.

The threat of cannibalism, however, ironically calls forth other unexpected hidden connexions among characters. Beatrice's desire to eat Claudio's heart defines her as a cannibal, a primitive barbarian, or a savage. When Shakespeare was writing, the word 'savage' meant much the same as it does today. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records two principal usages: 'living in a wild state; belonging to a people regarded as primitive and uncivilized' and 'a wild or untamed animal.' The term applied to a human being designates a clear boundary between humanity and so-called lesser life forms, implying that man or woman has wilfully lowered status. Beatrice clearly sees Claudio as an animal or inhuman savage who deserves public execution in the most violent and undignified manner she can imagine. Claudio, in his rejection of Hero for alleged promiscuity, also draws a line that divides her supposed savageness from his own noble existence when he claims that her sexual appetite is deeper than that of 'animals / That rage in savage sensuality' (4.1.59-60).

Rhetorically, Claudio's use of 'savage' binds them together rather than dividing them as he is attempting to do. Further, Benedick is referred to as a 'savage bull' four times, opening up yet another link between already marginalised characters (1.1.250, 251, 5.1.178, 5.4.43). The word pulls the four main protagonists of the play together, even though most are resisting or even actively pushing each other away. They are denying everything they have in common, looking instead for reasons to isolate themselves. If they were to follow the example of revenge exemplified by Titus Andronicus, they would further the sequence of retaliation in Messina inaugurated when Don John exacted revenge on Claudio. In return, Claudio exacts revenge on Hero and Beatrice on Claudio (through Benedick's challenge), undermining the system of hospitality upon which Messina operates. Beatrice's revenge would negate the fragile underlying threads of connexion between characters, hinted at through unifying food metaphors, threatening the collapse of the unity expressed in the final dance.

Finally, and most seriously, because the heart, comprising both flesh and blood, 'becomes a synecdoche for the edible human, the ultimate proof of a communion of body and blood,' Beatrice's statement threatens hospitality in a spiritual context.²⁶ Just as the word 'host' holds contradictory meanings—host, guest, stranger—the Host in church communion represents contradictory meanings. Communion consumed in Mass represents Jesus' salvific body and blood. Augustine, whom Shakespeare must have been familiar with, taught what he believed to be God's perspective: 'You shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your body. Instead you shall be changed into me.'²⁷ The ritual was understood to represent not only man incorporating God in the form of bread and wine into himself but also God incorporating man into Himself, symbolising a relationship of love for the benefit of both parties.²⁸ Shakespeare, however, introduces a profound difference to the decidedly Catholic description of communion, a choice consistent with Claudio's pattern of repentance, which follows the Anglican communion service prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer.²⁹ As R. Chris Hassel argues, the characters in this play enact 'established Protestant understandings of sacrament in the late sixteenth century.'³⁰ In contrast to Augustine's doctrine of reciprocal benefit in consuming the body and blood of Christ, eating another human being's body and blood, as Beatrice threatens, incorporates the eaten into the body of the eater but with no corresponding benefit to the eaten, identifying Beatrice with Shylock, who desires a pound of Antonio's flesh nearest the heart with no pragmatic benefit. Beatrice, the cannibal, would incorporate the essence of Claudio, including his insecurity, pride, and cruelty, into herself while harvesting only retaliatory gratification, destroying relationships and strengthening boundary walls rather than breaking them down. The host and the Host become confounded and corrupted. Hospitality becomes indistinguishable from hostility. Sacrifice becomes reinscribed as revenge.

Commensality, Not Cannibalism

Arguably, based on the uses to which food is put in this play, something really is rotten in the state of Messina. Hospitality becomes only a thin veneer as virtually every character is potentially consumable, transforming human flesh into musty, stale, or rotten food. Ghosts of dead animals and humans, the result of rhetorical violence, fill the stage. Characters manoeuvre for positions of power by figuratively feeding on others, only to be chewed up and spat out themselves, as hosts become guests and guests become hosts. In any act of eating, living organisms are destroyed, but with the compensation of sustenance for the consumer. However, none of the exchanges in this play nourish, either physically or socially. Even for the audience, the commensality of Leonato's hospitable feast occurs offstage, leaving only the satisfaction achieved through winning oratorical culinary competitions. Each character functions simultaneously as both predator and prey as each rhetorically snares others in traps and is baited in return, each sensing social power ever rising and falling.

Although it is true, as R. Chris Hassel contends, that 'beneath a delightfully secular and romantic surface' lie 'insistent' error and sin, the play also concludes with 'profound festivity'.³¹ When the social violence reaches a boiling point in Claudio's abuse at the church, leading to Beatrice's command to 'Kill Claudio' so that she can eat his heart in the marketplace, her cannibalistic desire results in Benedick's decision to fight for her, to fight *for* someone else, not merely *against* someone else as most of the metaphors have implied (4.1.288). As even hunter-gatherers of food would have learned, survival in a social group depends on cooperation. Competition destroys. Benedick's decision to alter his appetite and fight for Beatrice results in Margaret's observation that 'now is he become a man' (3.4.81-82). Every person in Messina has been subject to the alimentary attacks of others, suffers metaphorical reduction to foodstuffs, and changes for better and worse in the process. All except Don John, the scapegoat cast out but not eaten, end intact, threatened but safely within the now harmonious, non-threatening Messina. Even he is being brought back into Messina's fold, not abandoned in a non-Messinian wilderness, a world elsewhere. Perhaps, we hope, today's celebratory dancers will not become tomorrow's rhetorical cannibals of Don John's returned flesh, but merciful culinary artists so that Don John is not served for dinner. The comic closure of the play, accompanied by a dance, after all, implies mercy, festivity, and feasting, not slaughter – minimising the inherent contradictions in the food and words of hospitality, affirming instead the blending that the underlying bonds in Messina reveal.

Notes

¹ Penny Gay, 'Much Ado about Nothing: A Kind of Merry War' in *Much Ado about Nothing and The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by Marion Wynne-Davies, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 69-102, (p. 72).

² Barbara Everett, 'Much Ado about Nothing: The Unsociable Comedy' in *Much Ado about Nothing and The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by Marion Wynne-Davies, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 51-68, (p. 52).

³ Carol Cook, "'The Sign and Semblance of Her Honor': Reading Gender Difference in *Much Ado about Nothing*,' *PMLA*, 101 (1986), 186-202, (p. 189); Richard Henze, 'Deception in *Much Ado about Nothing*,' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 11 (1971), 187-201, (p. 188); Elisabeth Bronfen, 'The Day after Battle: *Much Ado about Nothing* and the Continuation of War with Other Means,' *Poetica*, 43 (2011), 63-80, (p. 64).

⁴ David B. Goldstein, 'Shakespeare and Food: A Review Essay', *Literature Compass*, 6, (2009), 153-74, (p. 158).

⁵ Daryl W. Palmer, *Hospitable Performances: Dramatic Genre and Cultural Practices in Early Modern England* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press: 1992), p. 3.

⁶ Palmer, p. 3.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Hostipitality', *Angelaki*, 5, 3 (2000), 3-18, p. 2.

⁸ Felicity Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 32.

⁹ Elliot Krieger, 'Social Relations and the Social Order in *Much Ado about Nothing*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 32, (1979), 49-61, (p. 54).

¹⁰ Alison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 1.

¹¹ Shakespeare raises the question of Don John's presence at the feast. In the subsequent scene Leonato asks if Don John was at the supper and Antonio answers, 'I saw him not' (2.1.2.)

¹² Stephanie Chamberlain. 'Rotten Oranges and Other Spoiled Commodities: The Economics of Shame in *Much Ado about Nothing*,' *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium* 9 (2009), 1-10, p. 3.

¹³ Robert Appelbaum, *Aguecheek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture, and Food among the Early Moderns*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 4.

¹⁴ David B. Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare's England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 189.

¹⁵ Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 149.

¹⁶ Chamberlain, p. 2.

¹⁷ Chamberlain, p. 3.

¹⁸ Bronfen, p. 64

¹⁹ Maurice Hunt, 'The Reclamation of Language in *Much Ado about Nothing*', *Studies in Philology* 97, (2000), 165-191, (p. 168).

- ²⁰ Barbara Everett, 'Much Ado about Nothing: The Unsociable Comedy' in *Much Ado about Nothing and The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by Marion Wynne-Davies, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 51-68, (p. 52).
- ²¹ Robert Viking O'Brien, 'Cannibalism in Edmund Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, Ireland, and the Americas' in *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Kristen Guest, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 35-56, (p. 38).
- ²² Louise Noble, *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 35.
- ²³ Fiddes, p. 123.
- ²⁴ Jean Starobinski, 'The Inside and the Outside', *The Hudson Review* 28 (1975), 333-51, p. 336.
- ²⁵ Noble, p. 48.
- ²⁶ Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics*, p. 44.
- ²⁷ Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 15.
- ²⁸ Kilgour, p. 15.
- ²⁹ R. Chris Hassel, 'Sacraments and the Intentional Ambiguity of *Much Ado about Nothing*', *Anglican Theological Review* 58, (1976): 330-345, p. 333.
- ³⁰ Hassel, p. 332.
- ³¹ Hassel, p. 332.

Thumbnail: Illustration from *The Little Lame Prince and His Travelling Cloak* by Dinah Maria Mulock "Medieval Food" illustrated by Hope Dunlap (1909) Source <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45975/45975-h/45975-h.htm>

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