
The Culinary Shakespeare

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This paper is yet another attempt at situating William Shakespeare's art in the contemporary times, even after 400 years he and the efficacy of his thoughts are always felt in the mundane day to day living, as well as in the existential or deep philosophical moorings in different time and space. Its quite intriguing that inspite of thousands and thousands of scholarly pursuits he remains timeless and immemorial. Thereason is inevitable; his works offer a plethora of insights, fresh and animating as many times one reads his tragedies or comedies or sonnets.

One can get several shades of his genius; but what I have found worth exploring is 'Food and Eating', in Shakespeare's works, hence I wish to see an interesting facet of him as 'Culinary Shakespeare'. To analyse him, I have chosen just three of his texts, one Festive comedy, 'Twelfth Night', and two tragedies, 'Antony and Cleopatra' and 'Macbeth'.

This study becomes more invigorating as while it enables us to take a peep into Shakespeare's Festive World, it simultaneously introduces us to various vicissitudes of Food and eating as it enters different geographical stations, imaginary and real along with the corresponding sensibilities.

Franco is Laroque in his book Shakespeare's Festive World¹ tells us that

under the influence of Puritanism, gravity was beginning to be regarded as a virtue; hence those who were devotees of popular festivity were first and foremost fundamentally attached to laughter. Keith Thomas makes the point in a long article in *The Times Literary Supplement*:

The new cult of decorum thus meant that it was only the vulgar who could go on

laughing without restraint. In 1649 a contemporary observed that

Those most apt to laughter were children, women and the common people;²

In fact a succession of men of letters and writers of satire, from Philip Sidney to Joseph Hall³, expressed their distaste for scenes in which the clown was represented alongside personages of great dignity. While tragedy was beyond any doubt considered a noble and 'high' art, the rustic antics of the clown are out of place. Hence, festivals were essentially associated with popular culture seen in the forms of folktales, folksongs, decorated marriage chests, mystery plays and farces; and above all festivals, like the feasts of the saints and the great seasonal festivals such as Christmas, New Year, Carnival, May and Midsummer. It was in the masques, music, dancing and cuisine of the various festivals that this culture, which was so much apart of everyday behavior, was most fully expressed.

But the larger use of jigs and jokes among the countryside and villagers rendered the traditional songs and dances seem uncouth to the upwardly mobile social strata who in quest of refinement made popular festival synonymous with vulgarity. And one major criticism of popular festivity was that they fostered practices linked with paganism and distracted the faithful from the proper respect due to Sunday services and prayers and this encroachment of popular culture and festivity upon the strictly religious festivals was frequently deplored during this period. Preachers of Puritan persuasion went so far as to call upon the judicial and municipal authorities to ban all these practices, which they considered to be profane.

In Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night*, the festive mood is already going too long exemplifying lingering mood of festival till the twelfth day of Christmas. The experience of satiety is confirmed in Orsino's opening words which however is conditioned as he says,

'If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die....'⁴

The uncertainty about the festive mood is evident in the terms that follow,

Excess, surfeiting, appetite may sicken or die and so on and so forth.

This scene nevertheless evokes the spirit of festivity, a revelry that needs to go unabated. However, rather than the temporal flow of music, it's his own contemplations and comments that take precedence. The play does not open with music but with a precise, detailed analysis of Orsino's subjective reaction to music with the projection of his consciousness. The festivity therefore gets jarred and punctured at the very initial stage.

We then confront the actual scene of revelry in Act 2, scene 3 of the play where Sir Toby, Sir Andrew are shown along with Feste (the clown), Maria and Malvolio. Sir Andrew would clearly be happy to go to bed, but Sir Toby insists on keeping the party going. He is determined that by all means she has to indulge in the festivity in spite of any kind of resistance. Sir Toby is a knight with no substance, he drinks, plays practical jokes and evidently a parasite who lives on his niece and extracts money from Sir Andrew on the pretext of helping him win her hand. For an unemployed, good for nothing man like him a 'holiday' is a meaningless concept. His holiday depends on his permanent freedom from responsibility. He uses the mechanism of revelry and celebration so as to create a private and fundamentally selfish holiday world. Therefore, he appears very contemptuous in the gulling scene where he punishes Malvolio, the Puritan who wants to oppose their festivities.

Although few would argue that through Malvolio Shakespeare portrays a Puritan, most accept that Malvolio embodies the modern emphasis on economy, that as Oscar James Campbell has written, Malvolio is

"an enemy to the time-honoured English hospitality and liberality because of the strain it puts upon his lady's purse."⁵

To an extent, Malvolio seems a representative "modern", partially because he resists the traditional hospitality of the English great house that supports

such aristocratic ne'er-do-wells as Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, more so because, Malvolio finds his vocation to be a humiliation and, hence hopes for a temporary restriction.

Sir Toby taunts him,

"Art thou more than a steward" (Act ii, scene iii, 114)

His sense that he is not bound to his vocation or degree but autonomy that can be recognized and rewarded by society but as the one possessing personal autonomy. In fact, his intervention to put an end to the riotous drinking bout is an atrocious act as he blatantly accuses them of gobbling "liketinkers" and turning an aristocratic manor into "an alehouse" (Act ii, scene iii, 87-89).

Malvolio nevertheless intends to exercise his proper role but at the same time, being their subordinate, he transgresses it. His biggest error is he fantasizes reaching for upward social mobility as he dreams of becoming Count Malvolio, imagining Olivia to be in love with him and simultaneously imagining Sir Toby and Sir Andrew to be his subordinates. Hence, they decide that he rightfully deserves punishment for his outrageous act, for which the two along with Maria, hatch a plot to befool him by making him believe that Olivia has written him a love letter. Already living in his make believe world, he gets easily gulled as he stupidly ventures to reveal his love for Olivia who considering him mad sends him into a dungeon.

The letter he assumes to have come from Olivia is a precious marker; a license for an exclusively aristocratic privilege; to transform a private, narcissistic fantasy into public behavior.

Malvolio is labeled a Puritan not just because of his strictness and anti-theatricalism which in all likelihood would have hardly earned any sympathy among the Elizabethan audience. When Maria brands him "a kind of Puritan" she is not suggesting that he is a religious zealot intent on reforming the hierarchy of the Church of England, instead she

"identifies the Puritan in Malvolio as a matter of social ambition and exaggerated self-worth."⁶

Greenblatt even goes to suggest that Shakespeare might be sharing

Malvolio's desire for social mobility. No matter how unattractive Malvolio's ambition and self-love might appear, he avers, the steward may be "the shadow side of Shakespeare's own fascination with achieving the status of a gentleman".⁷

Malvolio's resolution to avenge on the whole pack of them definitely does not result in the comic happy ending as it does for other characters; it rather brings Shakespeare's in situation that the effort towards social mobility might be the beginning for those desirous of becoming gentlemen with the passage of time. It in fact ascertains the aspiration of several ambitious and adventurous commoners willing to make inroads into England's aristocratic ranks during Shakespeare's time.

The intense feelings and anger of Malvolio followed by desire for revenge may also signal Shakespeare's belief that the genre of romantic or festive comedy can no longer be both credible and serve the social status quo.

Ever since the publication of C.L. Barber's landmark study *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*⁸

a number of critics have understood the many manifestations of social and gender reversals in

Twelfth Night in the context of Saturnalian holiday festivals.

Barber argued that Shakespeare's Festive plays explored the

"social form of Elizabethan holidays," and that the basic "Saturnalian

Pattern appears in many variations, all of which involve inversion, statement and counter-

Statement and a basic movement which can be summarized in the formula, through release to Clarification."⁹

Thus we see Shakespeare's insinuation in *The Twelfth Night* pertaining to the contemporary times in the garb of Festive Comedy.

The next play that I have chosen is *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play that A.C. Bradley¹⁰ had excluded from his study of Shakespearean Tragedy. He could not see this play as a rival to the best four tragedies, viz; *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* on the ground that

'it is not painful', 'not as exciting dramatically'. Above all, it has 'no scenes of action or passion which agitate the audience with alarm horror, painful expectation, or absorbing sympathies and antipathies.'¹¹

Nevertheless, the play *Antony and Cleopatra* does lack the high seriousness of the tragedy which the other four possess. Moreover, Bradley valued Shakespeare's tragedies for their capacity to interpret the world and man's place in it without recourse to Christian theology.

Antony and Cleopatra is way far from any such generalization or perfection that a reader would expect from the main protagonists. As a matter of fact, both these characters are too human and imperfect, even too complex for any kind of idealization and yet, in some ways Antony does resemble Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, exceptional men in that their fate, as Bradley says,

'affect the welfare of a whole nation or empire,'¹²

Both he and Cleopatra are exceptional too in their capacity for extreme and spontaneous feeling which manifests itself most powerfully when they are responding, whether in fury or delight, to each other.

Unlike the other tragic heroes, Antony apparently undergoes no apparent struggle, never defines or articulates the nature of his choice or seems to foresee its consequences, nor does he intellectualize; he acts always on impulse. In fact, he is even inferior to Caesar; an ideal Roman soldier and also to Cleopatra as far as the sharpness of her mind is concerned.

Honingmann remarks on Antony's limitations in the early scenes,

"It is Cleopatra who rails and mocks, and Antony is always at the receiving end, and not amused. She laughs, he glooms..."¹³

Nevertheless, *Antony and Cleopatra*, from Bradley, an amoralist's point of view lacks the high seriousness and sublimity associated with a great tragedy. The question then arises, what exactly one finds in this play that it was accorded such recognition! The answer perhaps lies in this discussion by Rajiva Verma in his essay where he brings out the efficacy of the two plays, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth*; written in quick succession, yet being so different

in their aesthetic and psychological appeal. He avers that while Macbeth is full of violence not only in its action, but also in its imagery, "In contrast, Antony and Cleopatra is, among all the plays of Shakespeare, the richest in the language of erotic love. Whatever violence there is in the play's imagery is actually in the service of a voluptuous sensuality: instead of wounds made by keen knives we have here only lovers' pinches; there are no batteries to 'ram down' the defences of a country or a maiden, only 'fruitful tidings' which Cleopatra would have rammed down her ears. (ii.v.24)¹⁴

Indeed, the Egyptian imagery used in the language of Cleopatra and her court is suggestive of the voluptuous sensuality. While Egypt is associated with the Nile, the harbinger of fruitfulness and of carrion-eating insects, harvest and deadly serpents, and Cleopatra is termed as

'Serpentofold Nile', (1, 5, 26) where the river reflects the opposite characteristics; she is life enhancing as well as fatally poisonous, while Rome is associated with the Tiber.

Thus Antony's passion and desire for Cleopatra is expressed in these popular words,

'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space!' (1, I, 34-5)

He assumes his oneness with her in a figurative language, identifying his space like a common lover, unlike a triumvir of the Roman Empire.

Egypt is known for feeding and drinking to excess, where
eight wild boars are roasted for a breakfast for twelve people (2, 2, 189)

and Antony calls for wine both in defiance of his defeat as well as celebration.

In this play, Food becomes a major denominator of lust, fun, happiness, victory as well as defeat. Cleopatra too is repeatedly described in terms of food which, according to Enobarbus, is always enticing and never satisfying:

..... Other people cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry

Where most she satisfies
 (2,2.246-8)

On the other hand, not many images are associated with Romans for they are recognized for their moderation, their temperance and their ability to control their feelings. Temperance is a virtue Caesar admired in Antony before he met Cleopatra.

Antony may lack the heroic prowess of Caesar in the physical sense but ironically comes the realization,

“Tis paltry to be Caesar.”

At the end of the play it is Cleopatra who wins the cat-and-mouse game that Caesar plays with her, and the latter for all his ‘policy’, turns out at last to be merely vanquished when Cleopatra has already prepared herself to be one with Antony in the next life. Both the protagonists, Antony and Cleopatra seem content to live in the present which they would like to stretch into the eternity of pleasure.

Another facet of food, entirely different from the preceding ones is evinced in negative and violent connotation in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, generally categorized as a dark tragedy. To explain the chaos and tragedy Rajiva Verma suggests ‘ironic reversals’ pervading the play. Among them what concerns me in the present connotation are those occurring at the very outset, viz;

Where nothing is but what is not,

Where fair is foul and foul is fair;

Where the innocent flower hides the deadly serpent;

Where the castle in which heaven’s breath seemed to smell woefully
 turns out to be a hell on earth;

Where drink provokes desire but.....

Where all the sound and fury of our lives ultimately signifies nothing;

Where in short, milk turns into gall and victory into defeat.

The very edifice of *Macbeth* is breach of trust which unfolds in *Macbeth*

and his wife fulfilling their over vaulting ambition by killing King Duncan who comes as their venerable guest at Macbeth's castle for the night. After he has supper the couple carries on with their plan and successfully executes it.

The play opens with the three witches predicting Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, soon overtaking the kingship from the king Duncan suggested by their injunction,

Fair is Foul, Foul is Fair',

leading Macbeth on to first murder and further usurp Malcolm, the Prince of Cumberland's claim to the throne.

The 'serpent' is indicative of Macbeth who has the reputation of being king's great loyalist, a very brave soldier who earned victory for Scotland. Duncan, oblivious of the Macbeths' intention, addresses Lady Macbeth as

'fair and noble hostess' (1.6. 24)

Most suggestive and revolting images are those expressed by Lady Macbeth in her invocation to the dark forces to "unsex her" and fill her "

from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty"

She also invites "the murdering ministers" to come to her "woman's breasts" and

take her " milk for gall".(1.v.40-50)

Such determination and cruelty on her part further gives in to more heartless and violent images when she observes her husband's infirmity in carrying out the plan to kill Duncan;

*I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn....(1, vii, 54-59)*

Several kinds of interpretations have followed Lady Macbeth's merciless

and unwomanly nature, she is seen fiendish, yet she is neither the fourth witch in the play, nor as cruel as Euripides's Medea who kills her sons. Nevertheless, these expressions do point out to her resolve to tempt her husband to commit the act and she too is determined to strengthen herself against all odds, not to become weak, a frail woman; her basic instinct of motherhood should not become an impediment in her husband's ambition, hence there is reference to milk and the milking act.

Shakespeare has indeed supplied the metaphor of food, first through the image of the two protagonists held 'anoble host', but 'as a serpent', providing supper so as to murder and second through Lady Macbeth's invocation to exterminate her weak motherly feelings lest it mars her husband's desire. In rejecting her femininity, Lady Macbeth challenges her socially circumscribed position and enters the realm of paradox by being a woman and yet not being one. She is the decision maker and chooses the role of the perpetrator. Of course she falls short of committing the final crime as she says:

*"Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done't"*¹⁵

The continuous violence plays truant with her body and effects a psychic disintegration.

The development of the tragedy irrevocably points to the gradual destruction of both as it leads to more murders, more wrath, frustration, unhappiness coupled with guilt resulting into somnambulism and later her suicide culminating into Macbeth's utter desolation and degradation. Worst of all, her wish to unsex herself makes her barren as violence leaves no space for anything to germinate.

Thus we see how Shakespeare has effectively used different metaphors of food to bring out different themes in the texts cited leaving an impending effect on readers' mind, at the same time allowing many more reflections to appear on the mental horizon.

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