

Foods and Class in Shakespeare's Plays*

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As the Elizabethans believed in hierarchy in all areas of life and thought, the majority believed in an hierarchy based on blood quality. Certain writers of this period reflected such belief through their interest in and a certain knowledge of blood and medicine. This knowledge, which should be held suspect since it was certainly less sophisticated than our own modern scientific world would approve, was prompted by the influence of Hippocratic and Galenic teaching. The Elizabethan medical consciousness accepted this teaching partly because certain theories were promoted which were compatible to some degree with the Chain of Being, although these theories were constantly being scrutinized for harmony with Biblical teachings.¹ Thomas Walkington, a medical or quasi-medical period authority, expresses the usual Elizabethan reverential attitude toward

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¹ Job complains in his degradation that he is scorned by those "who cut up mallows by the bushes, and juniper roots for their meat" (Job 32:4, KJV), and Daniel was ordered to consume "a daily provision of the king's meat, and the wine which he drank: so nourishing them [Daniel and other 'children of Judah'] three years that at the end thereof they might stand before the king" (Daniel 1:5).

blood: "In the elements consists the body, in the body the blood, in the blood the spirits, in the spirits soule . . . It [blood] is a nutriment of all and singular parts of what qualities soever" (58). Walkington further states that in Hebrew blood is referred to as "the dam or nurse from whose teats the whole body doth suck out and draw life" (59).

It seems logical, then, since food is vital to blood and since blood is important to our understanding of the Elizabethan Renaissance and the Shakespearean canon, to examine foods and the importance it held during the sixteenth-century. Since the basis for this study is to investigate both the interpretation of foods mentioned in the Shakespeare's plays and the meaning of what these foods intimate concerning characterization, I shall examine certain foods as categorized primarily by Elizabethan writers after which I will separate the list into two classes of foods, those eaten by the aristocratic class ("gentle") and the plebeian class ("base") and apply these foods to several Shakespeare's plays.

The following classification of Elizabethan food, dietary habits and the qualities of food are mostly based upon Jane O'Hara-May's book, *Elizabethan Dyetary of Health*, and few other period writers. Stephen Halliday's *Our Troubles with Food* also provides some interesting early histories of foods, such as white and brown bread, and milk. Food in the sixteenth-century was divided into hierarchical degrees. Each quality had potentially four elemental qualities: hot, cold, moist, and dry.² Smells were generally divided into pleasant or fragrant (gentle) and unpleasant or rotten (base), and gross substance is generalized as "base" and fine substance as "gentle."

The six characteristics to be considered when estimating the value of any foodstuffs according to sixteenth-century writers are: quality, substance,³

² Hot and moist are usually connected with the gentle class while cold and dry are connected with the base.

³ Gross and thick substances are usually regarded as base, and fine and thin as

quantity, custom or habits, time,⁴ and order.⁵ In connection with characteristics the value of food had always to be estimated in relation to the circumstances of the individual who would take the food. Since the gentle class lived in more fortunate circumstances, the gentles could benefit from this scheme much more easily than the base. Foods were also given some generalized characteristics which included digestibility, being costive or laxative, being nourishing, causing sweating or containing putrefying effects and superfluities. The Elizabethan order of foods with respect to nutrient qualities was disputed among the sixteenth century medical writers, but William Langham, a practician in physics in the sixteenth-century, set out the following order in *The Garden of Health*:

The first order: includes bread corn which "is of greate power and strengthe"; all domesticated four-footed beasts; "great" birds, such as goose, swan, peacock and crane; honey and cheese.

The middle order: giving a "lower degree of nourishmentes," includes roots, all wild fowl, and fish, especially those which cannot be salted and dried.

The lowest order: includes all sorts of salads and "whatsoever groweth in a little stauke," such as cucumbers and gourds, also fruit. (1)

There were deviants to this order, examples of which are furnished by Henry Buttes and Thomas Cogan.⁶

gentle.

⁴ Time of year, time in the life of a person (age), and times in the day of meals.

⁵ The sequence in which foods should be taken.

⁶ O'Hara-May extracts material from Buttes' *Dyets Dry Dinner* where he presents foods in the following sequence: fruits, herbs, flesh, fish, white meats (dairy produce), spices, sauces, tobacco. Buttes mentioned that fruits were first because Adam and Eve first fed on them; however, after the exile from the Garden of Eden, they "fell to herbs and roots" and man lived for a long time like hogs on beechnuts and acorns. Because man would not, or could not, be a husbandman, he turned to eating flesh and, after flesh, fish was the next easiest thing to get. White meats werre more difficult, and required the "help or art of man's

Moreover, there had been discussions of the foods belonging to the two classes of the Elizabethan society, the gentles and the plebeians. Wines were classified in Elizabethan times as a gentle food. On the whole beneficial, they were considered best in a clear white or yellow color, neither too old nor too young. Thick red wines were thought to build blood, but sweet and gross wines were avoided, for they could make men fat. Wines were known to quicken man's wits and heart,⁷ and every gentle family had an adequate supply from which to select for banquets and to offer their guests.

Ales and beer were considered base drinks. These beverages⁸ were thought to engender gross humors although they augmented the strength. They were also thought to increase the flesh, breed blood, provoke urine, cause looseness of the bowels, and inflate the belly. In sixteenth-century England, ale was made with malt and water; barley was thought to produce a colder ale; barley and oats were thought to produce an ale that was less nourishing; wheat produced an ale that was hotter and more nourishing. The grosser the ale, the worse it was considered to be; the subtler, the better. The grossness depended on the substance of the materials from which the ale was made. Gross ale, such as was made from darnel, caused headaches and hurt the sinews. Cider was thought not to be

invention," so they came later. Gradually man's appetite wanted more than "necessary" food, so he added spices for his "voluptuous delight." Finally, tobacco was valuable for "airying" the body to counteract any putrefaction which would come from excess (Buttes 2-3). O'Hara-May points out that this sequence is not as fanciful as it might seem for sixteenth-century writers had constantly to try to reconcile Galen's advice on food with teachings from the Bible. The sequence used by Cogan, which in O'Hara-May's estimation is more practical and more usual, is cereals (including beans and peas), herbs and vegetables, fruits (including nuts), spices, meats (including birds), fish, dairy, produce, salt, vinegar and mustard, i.e., sauces and drink.

⁷ Quality and substance are discussed in detail in O'Hara-May's book, chapter 8, section 5, chapter 9.

⁸ They, of course, were not so expensive as wine, and therefore, were accessible to the populace.

very wholesome, for it was made from apple, and fruits in general were thought to engender ill humors. Those who regularly took cider were said to have pale wrinkled skin when they were young. The few benefits from cider were for those with hot stomachs and hot livers, but only under certain circumstances. If moderately used by those who had the red cholera as their predominant humor, cider could mitigate excess heat.

Beef was in the anomalous position of being rejected as flesh of choice by conservative medical theory, while at the same time being eaten by many of all classes. The word "beef" had acquired class-associations before Shakespeare's time, as attested by the term "beefeater," colloquially applied to the yeoman of the Royal Guard instituted in 1485. During the first part of the sixteenth century it was easily accessible to the base. In fact, servants of the wealthy class would be likely to have eaten beef regularly. Although beef was thought to give a stronger nourishment than other meats, Galen, Isaac Judaeus and the School of Salerno believed beef bred melancholy. Because of this assumption, beef was not one of the gentles' favorite foods. Some Elizabethan writers believe that beef was better for hot stomachs, supposedly common in England, than finer meats; other Elizabethan medical writers divide beef into age, saying young beef promoted strength whereas old beef promoted melancholy. Bull-beef was considered the grossest of gross meat. When the gentle class partook of beef, they preferred the young beef to the old; the base, however, usually ate any part of beef flesh they could get.

It was thought during this period that mutton should not be eaten in "moyst countrey, and in moyst bodies" (Buttes 8). Since England was, and still is, a moist country, mutton was excluded as possible food by the gentle class. It was eaten by the base who for the most part fared better on the meat, for they were thought to have "dry" bodies. Pork, another base food, was considered to be good meat for wrestlers but poor for students or those who had weak stomachs. Timothy Bright, Doctor of Physick,

trivialized pork “except it be young” (30).

Goat’s flesh was another base food; it was tart and believed to produce bad blood. Kid was believed to be good for those with a weak stomach or for those who took little exercise, but not for labourers (and thus not for the base), “because great labors woulde soone resolve the juice engendred thereof” (O’Hara-May 226). Kid, partridges and white bread made of the finest meal and seasoned with salt were foods mentioned by John Huarte that intended gentle parents who “shall breed children of great understanding” should eat (Berkeley 63). Hare was said to be good for conditions of the liver, kidneys and bladder whereas rabbit’s flesh was considered to be “of verie good nourishment . . . [and] consumes all corrupt humours” (O’Hara-May 227). Venison was deprecated by doctors of the period, for it was said to engender melancholy, a predominant humour in the base.

The horns, however, once burnt and powdered were given with much success in the treatment of all kinds of lasks (fluxes) and the spitting of blood and jauntiness. Strange beasts, which were known to be eaten by the base, were avoided by the gentles. They preferred instead the flesh of birds which was thought to be much lighter than the flesh of beasts. These birds which were preferred by the gentles included “Wylde foule [which were] moste wholesome to eat, namely; Hen, Capon, Turtle, Stare [starling], Dove, Quail, Osell [blackbird], Pheasant, Woodcock, Partridge, Raddocke [robin redbreast], Oser, Tremulus [wagtail] and Amarellus [perhaps moorhen]” (O’Hara-May 227). Unwholesome birds which were consumed, for the most part, by the base were all long-necked or long-billed fowl or those that lived upon the water. Sparrows were avoided because they were thought to cause lust. Chickens were thought to be best in the flesh of a young capon, for they could be easily digested, made little odor, and had much good nourishment. In summer, chicken was eaten by the weak; the healthy to digest, made a good broth and was often prescribed for the sick.

Pheasant was a food considered superior enough for princes. Partridge flesh was considered to be very precious and every morsel worth gold. The flesh of woodcocks was believed to be wholesome and was taken on occasion by the gentles. Pigeon was considered not so good except for those who were "flewmatick and pure melancholic"; however, "they were very wholesome, and could be easily digested" (O'Hara-May 229). Blackbirds were greatly commended for lightness of digestion and were classed with starlings, robins, moorhens, and wagtails.

Fish (a base food) was considered less nourishing than flesh because it was "full of flewmatike superfluities, cold and moist" (O'Hara-May 231). Eels (a base food) were pleasant to taste, but they were not considered wholesome; they were considered especially bad for the voice and were said to have a congealing effect. Some people thought lampreys were venomous. In fact, the Elizabethans strongly advised their friends to drink wine after this meal, for they believed "Poisson sans vin est poison" (O'Hara-May 228).

Sixteenth-century writers accepted the traditional view that "milk is made of blood twice concocted . . . until it come to the paps, or udder, it is plain blood; but afterward by the proper nature of the paps it is turned into milk" (Cogan 12). Women's milk was classified as the outstandingly nutritious milk;⁹ then, in descending order, cows', sheeps', and goats' milk. According to some sixteenth-century writers, the good or ill conditioning in children was due to their nursing, inasmuch as human milk was regarded as blood in another form. Jacques Guillemeau, in this treatise *The Nursing of Children*, had the following to report: "Though it were fit that every mother should nurse her owne child: because her milke which is nothing

⁹ Rachel Trubowitz, in *Nation and Nurture in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), focusing on seventeenth-century English views of maternal nurture, insists that maternal nurture gains new prominence in the early modern cultural imagination. She provides few good examples from the work of Shakespeare.

else but the bloud whitened (of which he was made, and wherewith hee had been nourished the time hee staide in his Mothers wombe) will be alwaies more naturall and familiar unto him, that that of a stranger" (47). For this reason great care was taken to secure proper nurses. Guillemeau suggested that the proper nurse should have good health, possess youth and a pleasant appearance, display discreet behavior, and avoid such other things that "infect and overheat the spirits and blood, whereof the milke is made" (48); otherwise, degeneracy in the child could easily set in.

Jonas Hanway, in his *A Journal of Eight Days*, also insists that vicious habits could be imparted to innocent babies by wet nurses of bad character and, despairing of the prospects of improving the behaviour of the wet nurses,¹⁰ he writes that "this author expects no speedy reformation and therefore recommends the feeding of infants with milk of animals" (111). For the more mature Elizabethans, several writers of the period issued their opinion that "All milke is of good juice, it nourisheth the bodie, it looseth the bellie, yet it filleth the stomach and belly with winde" (Cogan 158). Cheese was avoided by the gentles, for it was thought to be "grosse, clammy, flegmaticks and difficult to digest" (Cogan 156). Milk, however, was advocated for all melancholy. Boiled milk with sugar was thought to be good for children and old men. Cream, it was believed, "rejecteth the nourishment and maketh grosse bloud" (Cogan 156).

Whey, a base food and the by-product of cheese, was used to feed hogs and dogs. It was also used in England as a mild laxative. In the spring, whey was used with herbs for skin troubles and as a purge of choler and melancholy. It is also included in many cook books of the sixteenth-century, according to W. M.'s *The Compleat Cook and A Queens Delight*.

¹⁰ To research more about the social recognition of the wet nurses in the sixteenth-century, see page 12 of Linda Gregerson's *The Reformation of the Subject: Spenser, Milton, and the English Protestant Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) and Page 146 of Kim Hall's *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995).

There was some disagreement among the Elizabethan writers as to the value of herbs. A few believed that sage was the outstanding herb and that fruits were not as valuable as herbs. Apples, as mentioned above, were generally thought to be "unwholesome in the regiment of health" (O'Hara-May 249). They were thought to hurt the sinews, to cause wind and, in the "second digesting," to make ill and corrupt blood (O'Hara-May 249). Yet, judging from recipes found in the sixteenth-century cookery books, the attraction of fruit overcame these dietary considerations.

It is interesting to apply this division of foods to the Shakespeare's plays, for they are rich with examples of how foods were regarded in the attitudes and beliefs of the Elizabethans. An interesting reference which illustrates the great difference between the gentle and base classes regarding food is given in *The Taming of the Shrew*. In the Induction, the Lord finds Sly in a drunken stupor and depicts Sly's baseness as he exclaims in disgust, "O monstrous beast, how like a swine he lies!" (1.1.34).¹¹ Then, with a change of heart, the Lord decides to make merriment for his guests and himself at Sly's expense. "Sirs," the Lord says to his friends, "I will practice on this drunken man. / What think you, if he were convey'd to bed, / Wrapp'd in sweet clothes" (1.1.36-38). The Lord, in his instructions to the servants, describes how a gentleman in the Elizabethan Renaissance was perfumed and made to smell sweet: "Balm his [Sly's] his foul head in warm distilled waters, / And burn sweet wood to make the lodging sweet. . . . Let one attend him with a silver basin / Full of rose-water and bestrew'd with flowers" (1.1.48-56). But Sly, a base person, abhors the gentle food. He begs the First Servant, "For God's sake, a pot small ale" (1.2.1). The servant, attempting to obey his master's orders, offers Sly "a cup of sack¹²" while the Second Servant offers Sly a taste of conserves and

¹¹ Quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Ed. G. Blackmore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

¹² Spanish white wine.

Sly answers them both: "I ne'er drank sack in my life; and if you give me any conserves, give me conserves of beef" (1.2.6-8). Sly's answer to the servants suggests that he is of a low plebeian class, for he prefers a pot of ale and conserves of beef to the more gentle of foods such as sack.

A commoner who knew the value of wine, however, is Jack Cade.¹³ In *2 Henry VI*, Cade, who has taken London Bridge by storm, shouts that when he is king of England, "I will make it felony to drink small beer" (4.2.67-68) and "of the city's cost, the pissing conduit [shall] run nothing but claret wine this first year of our reign" (4.6.3-4). As a base person, he realizes the extent to which a constant diet of ales and small beers affects the base person's blood. In making this vow, he is vowing to improve the health of his base followers as well as contributing to their advancement in enjoying the higher range of gustatory sensations, advancing them socially.

In the gentle class, wine was used to toast the health of another. We see this ceremony in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* when King Simonides, Thaisa's father, becomes quite concerned over the prince's apparent melancholy and says to Thaisa, "Here, say we drink this standing-bowl of wine to him [Pericles]" (2.3.65), and when Thaisa tells Pericles that her father has drunk a toast to him, she says "Wishing it so much blood unto your life" (2.3.77). This quotation appears straightforward: the wine was drunk and toasted with the wish that, through the toast, Pericles' blood would be improved. In *Timon of Athens*, Timon refers to wine and the importance it has with regard to the blood when he gives the First Bandit a coin and says, "Rascal thieves, / Here's gold. Go, suck the subtle blood o' th' grape, / Till the high fever seethe your blood to froth, / And so scape hanging" (4.3.428-431). Here, we see a hyperbolic statement. Timon advises the thieves, who are base, to buy wine with the gold he gives them, for by

¹³ For more about the Jack Cade case, refer to Byung-Eun Lee's "Shakespeare's Villeinizing of Jack Cade" (in *Shakespeare's Theories of Blood, Character, and Class*, New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

drinking the wine, a gentle beverage, their blood quality would improve. This appears to be an ironical remark from the pen of Shakespeare. It is most doubtful that the dramatist meant his readers to believe that food, or beverage in this case, could improve base blood to such a degree that a base person could be raised in blood degree to a gentle.

An interesting contrast is drawn between English climate and English food with French wine in *Henry V*, as the Constable wonders how the English forces have developed such a strong combative sense on their weak ale. In the following passage, he is attempting to understand why his own forces who apparently drink nothing but wine have not performed better in battle. The Constable asks,

Dieu de batailles! where have they this mettle?
Is not their climate foggy, raw and dull,
On whom, as in despite, the sun looks pale,
Killing their fruit with frowns? Can sodden water,
A drench for sur-rein'd jades, their barley-broth,
Decoct their cold blood to such valiant heat?
And shall our quick blood, spirited with wine,
Seem frosty? (3.5.15-22).

He clearly wonders how the English soldiers can fare so well in battle, for they are, for the most part, base. They have eaten base food and base beverages while the French have "quick blood, spirited with wine." Since there appears to be no clear answer to his question, perhaps Shakespeare is indicating here that Englishmen are of a higher quality in general than Frenchmen.

Falstaff sets out the doctrine on sack in 2 *Henry IV*, Act 4, Scene 3. Here, he clearly prefers sack over the more base beverages. He tells Prince John that when the lower class drink small beers and ales the thin drink "doth so over-cool their blood" (4.3.91-92). They are generally fools and

cowards which, he adds, “some of us should be too, but for inflammation” (4.3.95-96). Falstaff clearly prefers,

A good sherris-sack hath a twofold operation in it. It ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish and dull and curdy vapors which environ it, makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble fiery and delectable shapes; which, deliver'd o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit. . . . It illumineth the face, which as a beacon gives warning to all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm, and then the vital commoners and inland petty spirits muster me all to their captain, the heart, who, great and puffed up with this retinue, doth any deed of courage; and this valor comes of sherris. So that skill in the weapon is nothing without sack (for that sets it a-work). (4.3.96-114)

At this point in his speech, Falstaff remembers Prince Henry and attributes the prince's good qualities to the drinking of sack:

Hereof comes it that Prince Harry is valiant, for the cold blood he did naturally inherit of his father, he hath, like lean, sterile, and bare land, manur'd, husbanded, and till'd with excellent endeavor of drinking good and good store of fertile sherris, that he is become very hot and valiant. If I had a thousand sons, the first human principle I would teach them should be to forswear thin potations and to addict themselves to sack. (4.3.117-125).

In this monologue, Falstaff presents his view of the importance that sack has with regard to diet. Falstaff truly believes sack builds his blood because like Shakespeare's other old men, he conventionally possesses little blood and resorts to sack as a substitute for bodily heat. Unfortunately for Falstaff even sack, the winiest of wines and recommended for the old, was an evanescent surrogate for blood because it required continual infusions and imparted only temporary relief from impotence and cowardice.

Another passage in the Shakespearean plays where sack is drunk for courage occurs in *The Tempest* when Caliban tells Trinculo that he is not valiant. Trinculo retaliates by calling him a liar, asking, "was there ever man a coward that hath drunk so much sack as I to-day?" (3.2.27-28). Caliban, drunk on sack, plots with Stephano and Trinculo to overthrow Prospero. Thinking of the worse crime he could commit against Prospero, Caliban says, "I do beseech thy greatness, give him blows / And take his bottle from him. When that's gone, / He shall drink nought but brine" (3.2.64-66). This was indeed a base ordeal, for brine was regarded as the most abhorrent beverage of all base drinks. Ariel overhears their plotting and reports this rebellion to Prospero saying "I told you, sir, they were red-hot with drinking" (4.1.171). Ariel's remark implies that the sack has worked at great strength on their blood.

Broken meats are also connected with the base. In *King Lear*, we see what could possibly be one of the most sustained and intense cursing scenes in the Shakespearean plays when Kent abuses Oswald by calling him, among other things, an "eater of broken meats" (2.2.15). Here, he is implying that Oswald eats food which has been worked over by the gentles. Instead of gentle meats being given to garbage in the sixteenth-century, they were often given to the lower orders for food. This accusation by Kent implies that Oswald has base tendencies. In *Cymbeline*, Act 2, Scene 3, we also see the mention of broken meats as Cloten speaks to Imogen of the man she wishes to marry. Cloten says, "For / The contract you pretend with that base wretch, / One bred of alms and foster'd with cold dishes, / With scraps o' th' court, it is no contract, none" (2.3.112-115). Cloten believes, and wishes Imogen to believe, that her fiance is base and therefore beneath her station, for any man who eats such base food as "scraps" would never be worthy of a gentle wife such as Imogen. It seems ironic that Cloten, who has perhaps the grossest attributions in the Shakespeare's plays should point his finger at anyone.

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Pandarus points Troilus out from a group of soldiers who pass before Cressida's window. Then he casts his eyes on the base forces who follow and says to Cressida, they are "Asses, fools, dolts! chaff and bran, chaff and bran! porridge after meat!" (1.2.241). Here, Pandarus is noting the great difference between Troilus, who is gentle, and the members of the forces who are base and, in so doing, calls the base by the names of their base food. Later in the play, Ajax attempts to gain Thersites' attention by beating him, and Thersites cries out in response, "The plague of Greece upon thee, thou mongrel beef-witted lord!" (2.1.12-13). This statement indicates that eating beef adversely affects the class, even lords, for mongrel beef is notoriously base. It is perhaps bull-beef which is salted and aged, the worst kind of beef to consume. Beef was noted by Andrew Aguecheek to dull the intelligence in *Twelfth Night*. Sir Toby speaks to Fabian of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who eats beef, then acts a coward. Toby says, "if he [Andrew] were open'd, and you find so much blood in his liver as will clog the foot of a flea" (3.2.60-62). This statement supports the Elizabethan belief that beef was a clogging agent. With such a statement about Sir Andrew's lack of blood, Sir Toby is labeling Sir Andrew to a position close to base. Sir Andrew himself admits, "I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit" (1.3.85-86).

Another mention of beef is found in *Measure for Measure*, when Lucio asks Pompey, a base person, "How doth my dear morsel, thy mistress?" (3.2.54). Pompey answers, "Troth, sir, she hath eaten up all her beef, and she is herself in the tub" (3.2.56-57). Lucio answers, "Why, 'tis good; it is the right of it; it must be so. Ever your fresh whore and your powder'd bawd, an unshunn'd consequence; it must be so" (3.2.58-60). Pompey's mistress is metaphorically the beef in this instance, for she has sold herself as beef, and she is now "powder'd" as beef is powdered in the process of preparation for consumption. Aged beef in the form of a whore is

compared here to aged beef in the form of flesh to be eaten. As for the mistress, the brine treatment for venereal disease has come too late.

Orlando in *As You Like It* is a gentle who must eat base food and does not appreciate his position at all. Orlando complains to Adam that his brother, Oliver, who has inherited their father's estate has neglected his brotherly duty. This neglect has forced Orlando to "feed with his [Oliver's] hinds" while Oliver "bars me [Orlando] the place of a brother, and . . . mines my gentility" (1.1.19-21). Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* suffers a worse diet than Orlando, however. In the play we learn of this as Caesar speaks aloud to the absent Antony reminding him of his youthful days when he once

Was beaten from Modena, . . .
 . . . at thy heel
 Did famine follow, whom thou fought'st against

 . . . Thou didst drink
 The stale of horses and the gilded puddle
 Which beasts would cough at, thy palate then did deign
 The roughest berry on the rudest hedge;

 . . . On the Alps
 It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,
 Which some did die to look on; and all this

 Was borne so like a soldier, that thy cheek
 So much as lanked not. (1.4.57-71)

Through this testimony, Caesar recognizes Antony's gentle blood, for only a gentle could endure such food unfit for human consumption, and still maintain a gentle quality. Gentle classes were expected to go through a bad diet and come through it better than the base, and this is clearly what

Antony does.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron carries his infant son to live with the Goths and pledges to make a fine soldier of him:

I'll make you feed on berries and on roots,
 And feed on curds and whey, and suck the goat,
 And cabin in a cave, and bring you up
 To be a warrior, and command a camp. (4.2.177-180)

By suggesting such a diet of the poor eugenic quality, it appears at first that Aaron is deluded into thinking he can bring his son up to become a great warrior. But after consideration, Aaron believes his son's genetic quality, "First know thou [Lucius], I begot him on the Empress" (5.1.87), can transcend such a base diet. This second consideration seems particularly valid inasmuch as the great warriors in Shakespeare's works usually become great warriors because of the blood that they have inherited. Granted, their blood is usually enriched by "gentle" foods, not through the eating of such a rough diet as mentioned here. But if inherited blood is more important than gentle foods in certain circumstances, Aaron might believe his son could become a great warrior in spite of his diet.

In *1 Henry VI*, Alanson speaks contemptuously of the English soldiers who want "their porridge and their fat bullbeeves" (1.2.9). Here again we find the suggestions that the blood of the English soldiers is of such quality that it is impoverished neither by the grossest of diets nor the lack of it. In *2 Henry VI*, the gentleman Iden contrasts his well-thewed figure with the poorly composed body of Cade, his base-born antagonist. David Berkeley says that from the close connections between beef-eating and the peasantry, especially peasant soldiers, "one gathers that Shakespeare visualizes these persons as being large and solid of figure but without good lines" (53).

In *Tempest*, base foods of the sea are mentioned as a method of

punishment by Prospero who says to Ferdinand, "Seawater shalt thou drink; thy food shall be / The fresh-brook mussels, withered roots, and husks / Wherein the acorn cradled" (1.2.463-465). Since Ferdinand is clearly a gentleman, the eating of these base foods is an insult to him, yet he goes through this trial to prove his gentility and to win his love. Later in the same play, Trinculo says Caliban smells like a fish: "What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of not-of-the-newest poor-John. A strange fish!" (2.2.24-27). This smell of a fish classifies Caliban not only as a base, but as a gross base. This description suggests a distinction between his gross baseness and that of other Shakespearean degenerate characters such as Falstaff's.

The best milk was thought to be from the mother and great caution was urged by physicians such as Jacques Guillemeau. Queen Margaret, in 3 *Henry VI*, apparently nursed her son for in a moment of grief; she cries out to King Henry, "Hadst thou but lov'd him half so well as I, / Or felt that pain which I did for him once, / Or nourish'd him as I did with my blood" (1.1.220-222). Here, the word "blood" signifies milk, for milk was thought to be a whitish blood in the Elizabethan period. In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes demands that Mamillius be removed from the powerful shaping influence of what he perceives as Hermione's treacherous, unlawful body (55-56). He laments that "[though] he does bear some signs of me." his son has too much of her adulterous, female, and so unstable and illegitimate "blood in him." His only solace is: "I am glad that you did not nurse him" (2.1.56). This utter shows the Elizabethan's belief¹⁴ which, as Rachel Trubowitz points out, wet-nursing or breast-feeding by unfit mothers, unlike normal maternal breast-feeding, creates "milk-lines that threatened

¹⁴ On the association of nursing with witchcraft in the play, see Kirstie Gulick Rosenfeld, "Nursing Nothing: Witchcraft and Female Sexuality in *The Winter's Tale*," *Mosaic* 35 (2002): 95-112.

to mix families and blur or subvert the borders separating the upper-class infant from the lower-class nurse" (56). Gail Kern Paster also describes the later events of *The Winter's Tale* as "the masterplotted representation of the generic desires and intrapsychic traumas of wet-nursed children" (274).

Another play which mentions the nursing of an infant is *Romeo and Juliet*. This passage includes Juliet's nurse reminiscing the weening of Juliet. She says her husband picked Juliet up when she fell and asked the child, who was about three years of age: "'Yea,' quoth he [her husband], 'dost thou [Juliet] fall upon thy face? / Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit, / Wilt thou not, Jule?'" (1.3.41-43). Here, he suggests that because of Juliet's milk coming from her base nurse, Juliet possibly possesses some of the nurse's base qualities including low morals.

Berries, roots, curds and whey are also notorious as base foods. When Timon of Athens lost his wealth through generosity, he was reduced to digging for roots yet we assume that both he, a gentle like Antony and Ferdinand, can eat these base foods without suffering any debasement: Timon, digging, cries out, "Earth, yield me roots! / Who seeks for better of thee, sauce his palate / With thy most operant poison! What is here? / Gold? yellow, glittering, precious gold? / No, gods, I am no idle votarist; / Roots, you clear heavens! Thus much of this will make / Black white, foul fair, wrong right, / Base noble, old young, coward valiant" (4.3.23-30). Here, the desperate Timon ironically praises the base food. Perdita of *The Winter's Tale* seems to escape the bad odor of the Shepherd's hut and diet of berries, roots, curries, whey, brown bread, beers and waters of the puddles, for she must have eaten these foods and they have not affected her. These foods aged the commoners prematurely and caused cowardice in her foster-brother, the Clown, as well as conducing to the lack of honor, stupidity, and inability on the part of her foster-father to beget better children. Indeed, she shows many gentle qualities: she falls in love at first sight, and her love is immediately reciprocated, for example.

Wheat is mentioned in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* and, according to Berkeley, it is responsible for the lack of talent and gentleness of Cleon's daughter, Philoten, who, although she has been given all the advantages of Marina, has not reached Marina's heights in her training in either education or the arts. The difference of gentle quality between the two girls can be attributed to the poor quality of food which was consumed by Philoten's mother during the famine. Berkeley mentions that "food thin in nourishing quality made for the gross blood of the non-gentles and the consequent low to mediocre quality of their offspring" (53). He refers to C. S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy* who tells us that at least until the early twentieth-century a genetically rich diet might be given to the upper classes and poor fare to other ranks (53). Therefore, it seems reasonable to believe that Philoten's relative inability to learn may be owing to her conception by Cleon and Dionyza in famine-ridden Tharsus when the blood of her parents, albeit noble, had been depleted by bad diet. Or it may be owing to the impoverishment of her own blood by the lack, when she was small, of any food except wheat, a food which is unpraised by Elizabethans for eugenic qualities.

It is apparent that food was thought to have a great deal to do with blood in the sixteenth-century, and that blood regulates, to a certain extent, characterization, plotting and, in some cases, theme in the Shakespearean plays just as blood inherited from ancestors, the stars, births, ages, thoughts, actions, customs and influences of climate and of season also contributes to characterization. If a character such as Marina has a good nurse, eats gentle foods and is well nourished, she can rise above her unfortunate fate and become the master of her own destiny. Foods thin in nourishing quality made for the gross blood of the non-gentles and the consequent low to mediocre quality of their offspring. By reason of ignorance, lack of money, and perhaps indifference, plebeians were unable to benefit from the substance of Andrew Boorde's remark 'a good cook is

half a physician.' Other characters like Philoten, her childhood playmate, may be of royal parents, but if they are subjected to base foods such as wheat in order to survive a famine, they will lack attributes and may even be dull witted. Foods in Shakespeare's plays are clues to characterization. They help us understand what the people who eat them may be expected to utter or how they will act. If we know what foods they eat, we know what type of character they are.

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K C I

ABSTRACT**Foods and Class in Shakespeare's Plays****Byung-Eun Lee**

Due to Elizabethans believing in hierarchy in all areas of life and thought, the majority envisioned an hierarchy based on blood quality. Certain writers of this period reflected such beliefs through their interests in and demonstrated a certain knowledge of blood and medicine. This knowledge was prompted by the influence of Hippocratic and Galenic teaching, and was constantly being scrutinized for harmony with Biblical teachings. This paper insists that food was classified on the basis of eugenic capability, inasmuch as diet in some measure determined the quality of one's blood, and blood regulates, to a certain extent, characterization, plotting, and, in some cases, theme in Shakespeare's plays. Certain foods are categorized primarily by Elizabethan doctors and writers, and separated into two classes, "gentle" and "base": wine, ale and beer, beef, mutton, pork, goat, birds, chicken, fish, milk, white and brown bread, herbs, fruits, and others. Beef, for example, was in the anomalous position of being rejected as flesh of gentle by conservative medical theory, while at the same time being eaten by all classes. Interestingly, human milk was regarded as blood in another form.

This paper, then, applies this division of foods to Shakespeare's plays, for they are rich with examples of how foods were regarded by the attitudes and beliefs of the Elizabethans: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, and about 12 other plays. Jack Cade, in *2 Henry VI*, for example, shouts that when he is King of England, "I will make it felony to drink small beer" and "of the city's cost, the pissing conduit [shall] run nothing but claret wine this first year of our reign." He is vowing to improve the health of his base followers as well as contributing to their advancement in enjoying the higher range of gustatory sensations, advancing them socially.

Key Words | Shakespeare, foods, class, gentle, base, blood, hierarchy

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