‘Some Straunger Lombard Now Will Take the Vittailes’: continental appetites in early modern London

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Citation: FITZPATRICK, J., 2004. ‘Some Straunger Lombard Now Will Take the Vittailes’: continental appetites in early modern London. Paper delivered at the conference The Mistress-Court of Mighty Europe: Configuring Europe and European Identities in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period, University of Wales, Bangor, 11-13 September.

Additional Information:

- This article was presented at the conference The Mistress-Court of Mighty Europe: Configuring Europe and European Identities in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period: http://www.bangor.ac.uk/english/mightyeurope.htm

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/6249

Version: Not specified

Publisher: © Joan Fitzpatrick

Please cite the published version.
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My paper focuses on consumption considered to be physically or morally reprehensible or strange as a distinct indication of alterity in the play *Sir Thomas More*. This is an inherently interesting text since part of it probably represents the only piece of creative writing by Shakespeare that has survived in his own handwriting. The play exists solely as British Library manuscript Harley 7368, in several hands, and comprising 22 sheets. Most of the writing is in the hand of Anthony Munday, although additional sheets in different hands have been inserted. The front of the first sheet contains a provisional licence from Edmund Tilney, the state censor, requiring alterations before public performance. The additions might represent changes to the play made after Tilney's objections were known but this explanation is difficult to sustain because in some ways the changes (such as the re-writing of the scene in which More quells the rioters) make matters worse. This problem is treated in the Revels edition of the play by its editors Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori (Munday 1990) and more fully in Scott McMillin's book *The Elizabethan theatre and 'The Book of Sir Thomas More'* (McMillin 1987).

In the play, foreign culinary appetites are invariably associated with physical and sexual degeneracy and there is a perception that foreign consumption is harmful to English natives. The play's interrelation of food and civil disorder can be contextualized in the light of the food shortages in the 1590s and early 1600s which gave rise to real riots. The process of enclosure, together with harvest failures, had provoked unemployment and led to a sharp rise in the price of food. Moreover, the Londoners' concern about the influx of foreigners in *Sir Thomas More* reflects the reality of demographic change in England and the specific effect of such change upon London which witnessed a rapidly expanding population. As we shall see the basic need for food is related to the basic desire for sex, and accusations of foreign gluttony are accompanied by accusations of their voracious sexual appetite suggesting that all kinds of foreign appetites demand control in order that English national security be maintained.

McMillin and the Revels editors concur, as do most scholars, that Shakespeare is probably the composer of Hand D and hence of the scene which depicts events leading up to the riots of Londoners against resident foreigners on May Day 1517. The riot's leaders--John Lincoln, Williamson and his wife Doll, George and Ralph Betts, and Sherwin--are angry at the behaviour of foreigners in London and have planned a violent uprising against them. Shakespeare's contribution comes before the entry of Sheriff More of London who has been sent by the authorities to calm the situation: [no. 1 on handout]

*Enter [at one end] LINCOLN, DOLL, CLOWN, GEORGE BETTS, [SHERWIN.]*

*WILLIAMSON [and] others; and [at the other end] a Sergeant-at-arms [followed by MORE, the other Sheriff, PALMER and CHOLMLEY].*

*Lincoln.* Peace, hear me: he that will not see a red herring at a Harry groat, butter at elevenpence a pound, meal at nine shillings a bushel, and beef at four nobles a stone, list to me.
Another citizen. It will come to that pass, if strangers be suffered: mark him.

Lincoln. Our country is a great eating country, argo they eat more in our country than they do in their own.

Clown. By a halfpenny loaf a day troy weight.

Lincoln. They bring in strange roots, which is merely to the undoing of poor prentices, for what's a sorry parsnip to a good heart?

Another. Trash, trash! They breed sore eyes, and 'tis enough to infect the city with the palsy.

Lincoln. Nay, it has infected it with the palsy, for these bastards of dung--as you know, they grow in dung--have infected us, and it is our infection will make the city shake, which partly comes through the eating of parsnips.

Clown. True, and pumpions together.

Sergeant. What say you to the mercy of the King? Do you refuse it?

Lincoln. You would have us upon th' hip, would you? No, marry, do we not; We accept of the king's mercy; but we will show no mercy upon the strangers.¹

The accusations rehearsed against the foreigners are that they have a detrimental effect upon the economy, specifically inflation, they have strange culinary practices, and they bring disease. Moreover, there is an underlying fear of hunger, that foreigners will eat more than their fair share of English food and English people will suffer malnutrition as a result. Also apparent is the belief that vegetables grown by the foreigners infect Londoners and undermine the security of the city: "for these bastards of dung--as you know they grow in dung--have infected us, and it is our infection will make the city shake". As the Revels editors pointed out, Lincoln confuses parsnips with potatoes, first mentioned in print by Sir John Hawkins in his Second Voyage to Guinea, c. 1565 (Munday 1990, 95n10). Hawkins appears to be referring to the sweet potato (Ipomea batata), or yam, first introduced into England in the 1580s, the common potato (Solanum tuberosum) following sometime after. The potato, generally regarded with suspicion, was considered an exotic and unusual delicacy, not becoming a field crop in England until the late eighteenth century (Drummond & Wilbraham 1939, 28-29; Brears et al. 1993, 142, 185).

Whether or not the 'bastards of dung' are the 'parsnips' or the foreigners is unclear, and perhaps there is a deliberate conflation of both but certainly the term 'bastard' refers to plants artificially cultivated by humans, here by the addition of manure. In Sir Thomas More the body's consumption of infected vegetables, propagated by manure, becomes a powerful symbol for what the rioters believe to be the detrimental effect of London's absorption of aliens. Just as the body consumes that which will infect it so London incorporates the means of its own destruction by allowing the aliens to remain. As a body that has been poisoned should purge itself of the poisonous matter to ensure its well-being so violent efforts to purge London of...
foreigners are considered necessary by the rioters to ensure the safety of the city. The city will 'shake', become weak and feverish, if its people are made sick but the city will also 'shake' at the hands of the rioters if things are allowed to continue as before.

Pernicious consumption is a powerful symbol of foreign influence in Sir Thomas More and it is not surprising that eating, an essential human behaviour, should be made to seem unnatural in the case of foreigners: even their food is harmful. Certain vegetables appear to have acquired their negative reputation from a general association with the place from which they came and the nationality of those responsible for their importation to England. Vegetables appear to have been regarded with some suspicion in the early modern period. Hostility toward the potato was arguably made worse by its association with the Spanish but its West Indian origin presumably added to the suspicion with which it was regarded. Notably the parsnip, with which Lincoln confuses the potato, was imported to England from France which was, like Spain, a traditional enemy (Munday 1990, 84n1).

Although the complaints levelled against foreigners in 2.3 centre on food they have previously irritated Londoners with their sexual impropriety: in the opening scene of the play De Barde accosts Doll, Williamson's wife, and boasts about his previous sexual exploits with Sherwin's wife. De Barde aggravates the offence when he boasts to Betts "I tell thee fellow, and she were the mayor of London's wife, had I her once in my possession I would keep her, in spite of him that durst say nay" (1.1.46-49). The notion of sex with the wife of an English official is here meant to constitute a general insult to the English nation. Notably, in the same scene Caveler enters with a pair of Doves which he has apparently stolen from Williamson. Doll's admonishment--"How now, husband? What, one stranger take thy food from thee, and another thy wife?" (1.1.31-32)--alerts us to an oft-repeated association in the play between the behaviour of the foreigners and food. Caveler's sneer "Beef and brewis may serve such hinds. Are pigeons meat for a coarse carpenter?" (1.1.23-24) demonstrates that food is socially encoded in the play and just as the penetration of English women by foreigners emasculates English men, so too does their dictation of what English men should eat: Williams is forced to settle for modest fare and denounced as a "hind", a female deer.

Sexual insults from foreigners undermine English pride and in a period when food supplies were under threat and food was becoming increasingly expensive the depiction of foreigners taking food from English men would have caused considerable unease. Lincoln arranges for the Londoners' complaints against the strangers to be read from the pulpit during the following week's sermons, and the specific complaints that foreigners steal English jobs and thus reduce English men to poverty are initially couched in terms of food: [no 2 on handout. won't read all. just bold]

Lincoln (reads). To you all the worshipful lords and masters of this city, that will take compassion over the poor people your neighbours, and also of the great importable hurts, losses and hindrances whereof proceedeth extreme poverty to all the king's subjects that inhabit within this city and suburbs of the same. For so it is that aliens and strangers eat the bread from the fatherless children, and take the living from all the artificers, and the intercourse from all merchants, whereby poverty
is so much increased, that every man bewaileth the misery of other, for craftsmen be brought to beggary, and merchants to neediness. [my emphasis] (1.1.106-116)

The complaint that foreigners take bread from the mouths of fatherless English children illustrates how ineffectual English men have become in the face of hostile foreigners, something previously noted by Doll who threatens the strangers with violence from English women since English men do not take effective action: "I am ashamed that freeborn Englishmen, having beaten strangers within their own bounds, should thus be braved and abused by them at home" (1.1.77-80). The civil unrest provoked by the behaviour of some of the foreigners must be considered in the light of genuine contemporary fears about hunger. That the foreigners consume more than their fair share of English food and English wealth is apparent even to the nobility; Shrewsbury expresses concern that the aliens responded to the King's grace with insolence and "fattened with the traffic of our country / Already leap into his subjects face." (1.3.14-15).

John Jowett has claimed, based on stylistic analysis (Jowett 1989, 147), that Henry Chettle (not Munday as is usually claimed) wrote the first scene of the play and that several others wrote: "over one-third of the original text" (Jowett 1989, 148). For my purpose however, the question of the authorship of particular scenes is less important than the parallels that can be traced between them and like Jeffrey Masten I find that a number of thematic concerns run across the traditional editorial divisions of the work into hands (Masten 2001). The authors of the first scene and Hand D focus on food and foreignness in a like manner, and since the 'additions' appear to be rewritings of some kind, rather than sources for the main text, Hand D was presumably influenced by his knowledge of the existing first scene. But Hand D might also have been influenced by the section of Holinshed's Chronicles upon which the first scene is closely based. The Chronicles themselves link food and foreignness: [3 on handout. just read first sentence. draw attention to bold]

About this season there grew a great hartburning and malicious grudge amongst the Englishmen of the citie of London against strangers; and namelie the artificers found themselues sore grieued, for that such numbers of strangers were permitted to resort hither with their wares and to exercise handie crafts to the great hinderance and impouerishing of the kings liege people. Besides that, they set nought by the rulers of the citie, & bare themselues too too bold of the kings fauor, wherof they would insolentlie boast; vpon presumption therof, & they offred manie an injurious abuse to to [sic] his liege people, insomuch that among other accidents which were manifest, it fortuned that as a carpenter in London called Williamson had bought two stockdooues in Cheape, and was about to pay for them, a Frenchman tooke them out of his hand, and said they were not meate for a carpenter. (Holinshed 1808, 617-18).

Although Holinshed is an importance source for the first scene, the play contains material not present in the prose source, including a greater focus on foreign food. It is likely that the pun on 'hartburning' in the extract above (in bold) triggered for the composer of the first scene a connection between the Londoners’ grievances, foreigners, and food and he decided to elaborate upon the references to food in the Chronicles. The OED records that the word 'heartburning' in the sense of grudge and
in the sense of a stomach ailment was current in the period (OED heart-burning n.). Most notably, the first scene of the play saw the invention of Doll which allows for an emphasis on the sexual misbehaviour of the foreigners in the context of anxieties about foreign influence on English food. In the Chronicles Lincoln is recorded as saying that foreign trade makes "Englishmen want and starue" whilst the foreigners "liue aboundantle in great pleasure", a hint at the sexual abandonment which is made more explicit with reference to the foreigners as "rauener" (Holinshed 1808, 619), a word which implies sexual force as well as robbery (OED ravener s.1 and 2). It seems that hints of sexual impropriety in the Chronicles were noted by the composer of the first scene of the play and expanded upon in his creation of Doll so that sexual misbehaviour is considered in the context of goods, wives, and food in order to suggest that the foreigners are responsible for several kinds of pernicious consumption.

In 2.1, revised by Hand B, who was probably Thomas Heywood, the Clown urges action against the foreigners: [no. 4 on handout. short but worth reproducing]
"Come, come, we'll tickle their turn-ups, we'll butter their boxes. Shall strangers rule the roast? Yes, but we'll baste the roast" (2.1.1-3). This may be nonsense with 'turnips', a pun on 'turn-ups', simply referring to the turned-up part of a garment (OED turn-up a.2) or it may carry an altogether different meaning. The Revels editors gloss "we'll tickle their turnups" to mean 'kick their bottoms' since a sense of 'tickle' recorded in the OED is 'chastise', and 'turnups' indicate 'the backside of breeches' as well as carrying an association with French parsnips (Munday 1990, 84n1). Yet it seems more likely that the clown is using 'tickle' in a lewd sense especially given that 'turn-up' meant prostitute (OED turn up s.1) and foreign men have behaved with sexual impropriety toward English women earlier in the play; thus 'tickling the turn-ups' of foreigners would mean fornicating with foreign women, here denounced as whores. An intimation of sexual violence would problematize the claim by the Revels editors that the introduction of the new role of the Clown by Hand B was meant to lighten the riot scenes (Munday 1990, 24). Punning on food and violence, specifically sexual violence, continues with the notion that the foreigners will have their boxes buttered. The Revels editors suggest that as well as carrying the violent sense of beating heads the phrase is "based on 'butterbox', the current nickname for a Dutchman" (Munday 1990, 84n1-2). It is also likely that 'buttering boxes' refers to sexual intercourse; Gordon Williams provides examples of 'box' meaning 'vagina' and 'butter' meaning 'semen' in early modern usage (Williams 1994, 141-142; 181).

That the Revels editors should omit any reference to the sexual implications of the Clown's revenge fantasy is puzzling especially since further evidence that the Clown, more than any other rioter, intends specifically sexual violence toward foreign women is evident in his announcement: "Now Mars for thy honour, / Dutch or French, / So it be a wench, / I'll upon her" (2.1.50-53). The Clown is clearly (and typically for this stock character) preoccupied with foreign women as whores, as suggested by his estimation of Doll as their opposite: "Ay, Lincoln my leader / And Doll my true breeder" (2.1.5-6). Doll stands for chaste English women everywhere who will not allow their 'boxes buttered' by foreign bullies, as made clear in the opening scene of the play. The Clown's reference to foreigners' ruling and basting "the roast" (2.1.2-3) continues the punning on food and implies violence, as suggested by the Revels editors, and perhaps more specifically burning, since the rioters discuss setting fire to houses belonging to foreigners. The extended
association in the early part of the play between the foreigners and food continues in More's appeasement of the rioters when he argues that if violence were to rid them of foreigners then some day violence might be used by others to get rid of them:

"other ruffians . . . Would shark on you and men like ravenous fishes / Would feed on one another" (2.3.90-93). If, as seems likely, Hand D is a subsequent addition, its writer picked up on and repeated associations drawn between foreigners and food in the earlier part of the play in an effort to fully realize the extent of their pernicious consumption; they not only devour the wives of London's citizens but their food, their profits, their culinary culture, and their general well-being.

Sheriff More quells civil disorder by recourse to rhetoric when he argues that London's citizens should not rebel against the king and, moreover, should afford others the understanding they themselves would welcome. Ultimately, and ironically, however, he finds that he cannot apply this rhetoric to himself and, when faced with a point of principle, proves a rebel. Having framed his argument about rebellion and pity in geographical terms, asking London's citizens to picture foreigners as outcasts, "Plodding to th'ports and coasts for transportation" (2.3.82), he condemns himself to a kind of exile, not from England's shores but from the centre of its power and influence, the court. The play explores the familiar and the exotic in terms of national boundaries and in terms of culinary and sexual appetites but Shakespeare is also alert to what we might term intellectual exoticness, the kind of thinking which questions, indeed rebels against, the dominant ideology.

Notes

¹All quotations of the play will be from Munday 1990.

Works Cited


