

FOOD, TASTE AND COOKING IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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Introduction

Evidence of Shakespeare's interest in food and keen discriminating palate is recurrent throughout his works; this theme has already been underlined by Spurgeon (1982) who provides a long list of Shakespearean imagery on food, taste and cooking. Closely related to these culinary images is Shakespeare's sense of touch and especially his responsiveness to the texture of substances, which he shares with most of the Elizabethan dramatists (Spurgeon 1982: 82-3). Special flavours and textures in food are in fact typical of the gastronomic culture of Shakespeare's time. People were used to having a much greater tactile relationship with food and flavours, probably as a result of their sporadic use of the fork. Special flavours were part of a general trend to "denature" food by changing its taste and transforming it (Montanari 1993: 56; 64).

The aim of this article is to put some of Shakespeare's references to food into the wider context of the culinary habits of his time so as to clarify the meaning of such noncasual language and, possibly, to add new meaning to the text. General references to appetite for food, taste and digestion, though also very common in Shakespeare's plays, will therefore not be considered here. Nor will any attention be devoted to the particularly numerous references to food in *Troilus and Cressida* that are tainted by a peculiar disgust for greasy ill-served dishes and food remnants - to such an extent that Spurgeon notes that this play was probably written "at a time when the author was suffering from a disillusionment, revulsion and perturbation of nature, such as we feel nowhere else with the same intensity" (Spurgeon 1982: 320). The imagery which will be the main focus of this paper deals with taste either as resulting from the liberal use of sauces, sugar and spices, or as the tendency to blur the distinction between sourness and sweetness. The article also deals with the preparation and cooking of foodstuffs, in particular with the baking of bread, cakes and pastry, and with the stuffing and roasting of meat.

Sauces, Sugar and Spices

Sixteenth-century cookery in England was almost identical to that of the preceding medieval period, whereas the political and social upheavals which took place in the seventeenth century had a considerable effect on domestic life (Brears 1985a: 6; 1985b: 5). According to Montanari, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the tendency was to unite and blend flavours and it was only in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that European cuisine, under the influence of French cookery, started to isolate individual flavours (Montanari 1993: 56). Accordingly, Spurgeon mentions Shakespeare's consciousness "of the softening, balancing and complementary effect of suitable sauces or condiments on food" and says elsewhere that "the idea of a sauce as a corrective, contrast, complement or digestive to food comes naturally to him" (Spurgeon 1982: 84, 123). In particular, a wide range of pungent sauces were served with roasted meats; only in the latter part of the seventeenth century, when the quality of meat improved, did sauces become simpler (Wilson 1973: 99). Hence,

(...) the *sauce to meat* is ceremony;
Meeting were bare without it
(*Macbeth* III, iv, 23),

says Lady Macbeth to her husband after he has just expressed the "saucy doubts and fears" he is a prisoner of. With these words she is exhorting him to give cheer to the banquet, and his reply,

Sweet remembrancer!
Now *good digestion* wait on appetite,
and health on both!,

is in line with the connection between sauces and good digestion suggested by Spurgeon.

Among the many instances of a figurative use of "sauce," "saucy" and "sauc'd"¹, a particularly interesting one is the following witty exchange between Mercutio and Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet* II, iv, 78-81). This example is instructive because it exemplifies the tendency of Elizabethan England to employ sweet-sour sauces, which are much less usual in contemporary English cuisine than in other modern European cuisines (cf. the German "sauerbraten" and "sauerkraut" or even the Italian "mostarda di Cremona" (Spurgeon 1982: 123; Montanari 1993: 56):

I will *bite* thee by the ear for that jest.
Nay, good *goose*, *bite* not.
Thy wit is a very *bitter sweetening*, it is a most *sharp sauce*.
And it is not, then, well served in to a *sweet goose*?

In the proverbial cry for mercy from an unimpressive opponent uttered by Romeo in line 79, "goose" and "bite" have of course the function of introducing respectively, "sweet goose" in line 81 and "sharp sauce" in line 80. Sharp fruits were used to season cooked meat in Elizabethan times and the particular type of "bitter sweetening" referred to here must be one of the "twenty

1 cf. *As You Like It* III, v, 67; *The Comedy of Errors* V, i, 73; *Coriolanus* I, iv, 52; *Troilus and Cressida* I, iii, 42.

sorts of sweetings and none good" that John Parkinson listed in 1629, besides the existing fifty-seven kinds of apple (Wilson 1973: 341). The common Elizabethan accompaniments to goose were sorrel sauce, mustard or vinegar; and also fresh or pickled gooseberries, grapes, red currants and barberries were very popular in bird pies (Wilson 1973: 132-5). Likewise, apple sauce is the favourite accompaniment for roast goose in a contemporary recipe (Dixon 1983: 184) and, in the same recipe book, there is "Roast Goose with Fruit Stuffing and Red Cabbage" where prunes, cooking apples, red currant jelly and Demerara sugar feature among the ingredients (Dixon 1983: 200).

Sweetened pies of meat and dried fruits remained in fashion until the Georgian period - and developed later into the "minced pies without meat" that today are part of traditional English Christmas fare (Wilson 1973: 273). Another instance in Shakespeare of a sweet-sour sauce accompanying meat is provided by the following term of endearment used by Henry Prince of Wales to address Falstaff: "O! my sweet beef!" (*Henry IV Part 1*, III, iii, 176). Indeed, in a recipe for "Beef pastry, baked like venison" from a cookery book printed in 1596, the gravy was provided by 1 tablespoon each of butter, rosewater and sugar (Brears 1985a: 34). A relic of this combination of beef with sugar can also be found in "Dripping Cake" in the recipe of which, besides the traditional ingredients of cakes (sugar, flour, milk, raisins and currants), are combined, somewhat unexpectedly, mixed spice and beef dripping (Dixon 1983: 407)!

The use of sugar in seasoning meat and fish dishes in the sixteenth century was especially popular in wealthy households. In Elizabeth's reign sugar rapidly replaced the much cheaper honey which remained the only sweetener for poorer people (Wilson 1973: 285, 291). Among the many references in Shakespeare to the great use of sugar, which often have a negative connotation concerning its excessiveness², the following comparison by Touchstone in *As You Like It* (III, iii, 32) has almost uniquely a more positive connotation: "for honesty coupled to beauty is to have *honey a sauce to sugar*". Interestingly, and maybe reflecting the contemporary changeover from honey to sugar as the standard sweetener, in this image Shakespeare makes honey only a complementary sauce poured occasionally on sugar, which instead features as the main sweetening agent. A reference to the widespread custom of candying whole fruits, certain roots (eg. eringo or sea-holly, which was famed as an aphrodisiac) and lettuce stalks (Wilson 1973: 353-4) is to be found in the "*candied tongue*" of the flatterer in *Hamlet* (III, ii, 60), who is portrayed as a dog licking "absurd pomp" whilst genuflecting and fawning. It is interesting to note that the "dog plus candy" is one of Shakespeare's "image clusters" listed by Spurgeon (Spurgeon 1982: 194-7).

Sugar was also used in salads, or "sallets", which became very frequent on the table in Elizabeth's reign, whereas in medieval times raw vegetables and especially raw fruit were looked at with suspicion (Brears 1985b: 9). During the sixteenth century the colourful medieval herb and flower salads were elaborated

2 cf. *Midsummer Night's Dream* II, ii, 137; *Troilus and Cressida* III, ii, 17.

by adding new fruits and vegetables: a compound salad recipe of 1596 contained herbs, cucumbers, lemons, sugar, vinegar, oil, flowers and hard-boiled eggs (Wilson 1973: 359-60). Sometimes sugar-candied flowers were added to winter salads to make them even sweeter, together with sliced cold roast capon and anchovies. Vinegar was a very popular condiment, so much so that an Italian who lived in England for some years during Elizabeth's reign complained that salads were served up swimming in vinegar (Wilson 1973: 363). Both Sir Andrew Aguecheek's remark to Fabian in *Twelfth Night* (III, iv, 159),

Here's the challenge; read it: I warrant there's *vinegar* and *pepper* in't,

and Fabian's reply, "Is't so *saucy*?", can therefore be taken as exemplifying the great popularity of pungent flavours in Shakespeare's time. In Hamlet's speech to the players (*Hamlet* II, ii, 427), he compares the play he has seen to a meal, where the courses are well-balanced, "*well digested* in the scenes", and, though "one said there were no *sallets* in the lines to make the matter *savoury*", still it was "an honest method, as *wholesome* as *sweet*": here "*sallets*" stand for "sharp flavours" hence "ribaldries", whilst "*sweet*" can be taken to refer to the widespread use of sugar in all types of dishes in a meal.

The Clown's monologue in *The Winter's Tale* (IV, iii, 36 ff.), a list of common cooking ingredients he has to buy, features not only the ever-present sugar (which by this time was evidently beginning to be enjoyed also by the poorer classes) but also the dried fruits and spices that were used for making all sorts of dishes:

What am I to buy for our sheep-shearing feast? Three pound of *sugar*,
five pound of *currants*, *rice* - what will this sister of mine do with *rice*?
(...)

I must have *saffron* to colour the *warden pies*; *mace*; *dates*, none -
that's out of my note; *nutmegs*, seven; a race or two of *ginger*, but that
I may beg;
four pound of *prunes*, and as many *raisins o'th'sun*.

Wardens and prunes were both used for making pies and tarts, put in syrup or made into jam. Warden pears were so much larger and harder than ordinary pears that they were nearly considered a different fruit (Wilson 1973: 330). In Tudor and Stuart pies wardens were often precooked in red wine and sugar to dye them red (Wilson 1973: 349), which would imply that the warden pies referred to by the Clown were both red and yellow, the latter colour being brought in by the saffron to colour the pastry of the pies. Prune tarts were also very popular; like warden pies, they had ginger as one of the seasonings (Brears 1985a: 38) but they required a much briefer sojourn in the oven because they were made of short pastry and the contents of the tart were previously puréed (Wilson 1973: 351). Ginger is still used in a traditional contemporary recipe of pear crumble (Dixon 1983: 338). Currants and raisins were both imported from Southern Europe along with dates, which accounts for "*o'th'sun*" used by the Clown to

where they came from. Montanari's explanation is probably correct, at least in part, and is supported by Wilson. According to the latter, the main function of spices and pungent sauces was to conceal the odours of tainting meat and give interest to the taste of salted flesh (Wilson 1973: 99, 285). However, she also remarks (1973: 286) that heavy spicing became a habit once palates became accustomed to strong and aromatic flavours; this is proven by the fact that, for the wealthy, fresh meat was in fact available through much of the year.

Whatever the reason behind the use of spice, the seasoning of tainted meat to obscure its taste is indirectly referred to by Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* (III, ii, 74):

The world is still deceiv'd with ornament.
In law, what plea so *tainted* and *corrupt*
But, being *season'd* with gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil?

It can however be argued that here Shakespeare probably had in mind the fact that some piemakers took advantage of the spicy recipes of the time to employ tainted meat in their pies (Wilson 1973: 253). This seems to confirm that the use of spices - which incidentally were used also with baked fruits, sweets and wine - came *before* the malpractice of using poor-quality meat.

Though not strictly a spice, the pungent aromatic caraway seed is also worth mentioning. In caraway comfits, or "caraways", very popular in Elizabethan times, the seeds were coated by several layers of sugar and eaten with pippins as digestants (Wilson 1973: 288, 302):

Nay, you shall see mine orchard, where, in an arbour,
we will eat a *last year's pippin* of my own grafting, *with*
a dish of caraways, and so forth,

says Shallow in *Henry IV Part 2* (V, iii, 1), referring to the custom of eating roasted dried apples and pears at the end of a meal in combination with caraway comfits "because of their ventosity" (Wilson 1973: 334). The "*pippin*" referred to here is "*last year's*" because apples were preferred when they had been kept a while and allowed to mellow - a reminder of the suspiciousness against raw fruit typical of the time (Wilson 1973: 331).

If Shakespeare was fond of dried apples, the same does not seem to hold for dried pears. In the following two instances, in fact, "*dried*"/"*withered pears*" have a negative connotation:

Your *date* is better in your *pie* and your *porridge* than in your cheek;
and your virginity, your old virginity, is like one of our *French*
withered pears;
it looks ill, it eats drily; marry, 'tis a *withered pear*; it was formerly
better;
marry, yet 'tis a *withered pear*"

(*All's Well That Ends Well* IV, i, 174).

postmodify the "raisins:" all three types of dried fruit featured together in a variety of pies, which could explain the Clown's surprise at not finding dates in his list. It is more difficult to give an explanation of his bewilderment concerning the possible use of rice ("what will this sister of mine do with rice?"), which in fact was used in a variety of ways ranging from rice flour, mixed with pounded boiled salmon, through rice as a replacement for breadcrumbs in meatless white puddings, to the rice puddings which still enjoy a great popularity today (Wilson 1973: 287, 315, 319-20; Brears 1985b: 11).

The spices on the Clown's list were also very common in sixteenth-century cookery and an Elizabethan recipe for white pudding of hog's liver contains many of the ingredients listed by the Clown (dates, mace, sugar and saffron) (Wilson 1973: 311). Maces and nutmegs were much the same kind of spice, the former being the inner coatings of the latter. Ginger was a common hot spice and, together with pepper and other hot spices, was contained in 'powder fort': it was certainly cheaper than saffron and the vast majority of other spices which in fact were carefully looked after in the homes of the gentry (Wilson 1973: 285), which explains why the Clown was hoping to get ginger for nothing. Saffron remained expensive even when it began to be cultivated in England during the fifteenth century because it required a lot of labour in gathering the useful parts of the flower from a very high number of blooms (Wilson 1973: 284). Saffron was added regularly to colour and season a great variety of dishes; in particular it was used to yellow chickens⁴, cheese, egg dishes and shortcakes (Wilson 1973: 124, 174, 268, 287).

Food colourings were very popular in Medieval and Elizabethan times for both aesthetic and symbolic reasons. There was a marked preference for yellow which, according to Montanari (1993: 64), is explained by its being the colour of gold and thence of eternity and incorruptibility, but other favourites were deep purple (from alkanet, turnsole and heliotrope), white (from ground almonds, rice, milk etc.), green (from parsley juice) and black (from cooked blood, which still remains in the "black pudding") (Wilson 1973: 287). Together with the predilection for mixing flavours, Montanari (1993: 56) sees the colouring of food as an expression of the desire of this time in Europe to denature food's original taste. This desire would also be at the root of the abundant use of spice. But there are many other reasons why spices were used (Montanari 1993: 58-60). Their use was in line with the medieval scientific notion according to which the heat of spices helped digestion in the stomach. There was also a class element, for spices became a status symbol of "wealthy" gastronomy owing to their very high price, which made them unattainable for the poor. Yet another reason behind the use of spices would be the magical charm of the exotic East

3 Among the many references to the heat of ginger, cf. *Henry V* III, vii, 20 and *Twelfth Night* II, iii, 124.

4 This survives in contemporary English cooking in the recipe of "Roast Chicken with Honey and Almonds" where, before cooking, the bird is rubbed all over with honey and sprinkled with almonds and saffron (Dixon 1983: 187).

Shakespeare's dislike of dried pears (which here are French probably because after the Norman Conquest new varieties of pears which had been developed in France were introduced to England) not only is spelt out ("it looks ill, it eats drily") but also becomes apparent in the comparison made by Parolles between a withered pear and the virginity that virtuous Helena does not want to lose; the pun *date*/"fruit" and *date*/"age" in line 174 incidentally also makes reference to dates being added to pies to give them more flavour (Wilson 1973: 330, 333, 349-50).

I warrant they would whip me with their fine wits till I were
as crest-fallen as a dried pear"

(*Merry Wives of Windsor* IV, v, 89);

In this second example, dried pears have not only once more a negative connotation ("*as crest-fallen as a dried pear*") but might also have the function of referring to Falstaff's mellowness through old age which, in *Henry IV Part 2* (II, ii, 112) is jocularly hinted at through another food image: "And how doth the *martlemas*, your master?", where "*martlemas*" (i.e. Falstaff) stands for "Martlemas beef" or "mart", which was the meat of an ox slaughtered and salted at Martinmas (11th November) to be preserved for the winter. Here, as A.R. Humphreys has suggested in his footnote, it could therefore have the function of referring both to Falstaff's size through the plentifulness of meat at Martinmas and to his autumnal mellowness through the mild weather normally associated with St. Martin's summer.

Preparation and Cooking

As Spurgeon (1982: 119-20) has observed, Shakespeare's "interest in and acute observation of cooking operations are very marked all through his work". He must often have watched with interest the preparation and cooking of food in his own kitchen at home. Among these operations, he must have been particularly intrigued by jelly-making, which in his time, and indeed today, requires a very elaborate procedure, as shown by the two following instances:

(...) Whilst they, *distill'd*
Almost to *jelly* with the act of fear,
Stand dumb and speak not to him";
(*Hamlet* I, ii, 204)

(...) It is suppos'd
He that meets Hector issues from our choice;
And choice, being mutual act of all our souls,
Makes merit her election, and doth *boil*,
As 'twere from forth us all, a man *distill'd*
Out of our virtues"
(*Troilus and Cressida* I, iii, 346).

Though in the first instance the reference to jelly-making is direct whilst in the second it is only indirect, both texts refer to the process of obtaining the essence or an extract of a substance by heating it (*distill'd*), as in the operation of jelly-making where, still today (Dixon 1983, 504), the fruit or the meat (in Shakespeare's time usually calves' feet and the feet, snouts and ears of swine) was boiled, the liquor was then strained through a linen cloth (or 'jelly bag') and the juice was boiled again until it would set with its own pectin (Wilson 1973: 91, 354).

Shakespeare was well acquainted with other cooking operations too. For example, from *As You Like It* (III, ii, 448) we know he knew about the thorough washing of a sheep's heart prior to cooking it. Sheeps' hearts formed part of the entrails used for pottages in Shakespeare's day (Wilson 1973: 86). The same thorough washing of heart has been found to apply today in a recipe for "Baked Stuffed Ox Heart" (Dixon 1983: 128). However, in modern Britain sheeps' hearts are no longer commonly eaten: the only umbles of sheep routinely consumed are brain (on toast), the head, the kidneys and the tongue (Dixon 1983: 122, 148-50). Another cooking operation well-known to Shakespeare was the partial chopping ("scotching") of the mutton fillets on both sides to tenderise them in the preparation of "carbonadoes", broiled or grilled steaks very popular during Elizabeth's reign (Wilson 1973: 100):

(...) before Corioli he *scotched* him and *notched* him like a *carbonado*
(*Coriolanus* IV, v, 198).

Interestingly, the term "*carbonado*" has survived in contemporary English cookery only as a near-synonym of "beef stew" in "Carbonnade of Beef" (Dixon 1983: 116).

The operation of "larding", i.e. preparing lean meat by inserting small strips of bacon or fat before cooking, is also mentioned frequently in Shakespeare's work⁵. The most explicit instance is, of course, fat Falstaff who

(...) sweats to death
And *lards* the *lean* earth as he walks along
(*Henry IV Part 1* II, ii, 103)⁶

5 cf. *Hamlet* IV, v, 38 and V, ii, 20; *Merry Wives of Windsor* IV, vi, 12.

6 Though the culinary verb "to lard" is not generally found in contemporary recipe books, where either the strips of bacon are laid over the fowl and/or the melted fat is brushed on it (Dixon 1983: 182, 199), this verb occurs in a late fourteenth-century recipe of neat's tongue that goes: "Take a broach [larding-pin] and lard it [the boiled tongue] with lardons and with cloves and gilliflower, and do it roasting, and drop it while it roasteth with yolks of eggs, and dress it forth" (Wilson 1973: 86).

Basting fatty meat with the drops of fat that fell from it while roasting is another operation well-known to Shakespeare. In *Troilus and Cressida* (II, iii, 196), Ulysses refers to Achilles as

(...) the proud lord
That *bastes* his arrogance with his own *seam*",
whilst Falstaff complains that
(...) they would *melt me out of my fat drop by drop*
(*Merry Wives of Windsor* IV, v, 89)

In the following exchange of witty remarks between Cymbeline and the First Gaoler (*Cymbeline* V, iv, 153), direct reference is made to the roasting of meat, which provides the culinary metaphors underlying the dialogue:

Come, sir, are you ready for death?
Over-roasted rather; ready long ago.
Hanging is the word, sir: if you be ready for that, you are *well cooked*.
So, if I prove a good *repast* to the spectators, the *dish* pays the shot.

Particularly interesting is the term "*hanging*" which here, besides the usual sense of "put to death by hanging" and perhaps the Shakespearean meaning of "gloomy" (Onions 1982: 101), could have the additional meanings of the hanging of meat to make it mature and even of "hanged beef", which was an alternative name for "Martinmas beef" as the salted meat was kept hanging up in a dry or smoky atmosphere, usually in the kitchen (Wilson 1973: 87).

A further reference to roasting occurs in the following simile (*Love's Labours Lost* III, i, 19):

(...) with your arms crossed on your thin belly-doublet
like a rabbit on a spit.

Here the comparison is drawn from the custom of rabbits (and hares, piglets and lambs) being spitted and roasted whole and not jointed as with larger animals (Wilson 1973: 84); moreover, the head of the rabbit was left on and its limbs were (and are today) tied on to its front.

An operation which Shakespeare mentions frequently in his work is the stuffing of meat before cooking it:

to what form but that he is should wit *larded* with malice
and malice *forced* with wit turn him to?,

says Thersites referring to Menelaus (*Troilus and Cressida* V, i, 63), where the culinary verb "*larded*" stands here for "embellished" and "*forced*" refers to the forcemeat made of meat, spices, blood, onions, fat and breadcrumbs that was stuffed into the intestine or into the animal itself. Many are the explicit

references to stuffing and guts. Most of them refer in a jocular way to Falstaff⁷, the most interesting perhaps being the following in *Henry IV Part 1* (II, iv, 442):

Why dost thou converse with (...) that *stuffed* cloak-bag of guts,
that *roasted* Manningtree ox with the *pudding* in his belly.

Here the word "*pudding*" stands for "stuffing". Interestingly, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century the sucking pig with a "pudding in his belly" was a commonplace of cookery books (Wilson 1973: 310-1), which seems to indicate that Shakespeare was acquainted not only with the preparation of food, but also with the recipe books of his time. The invention of the pudding-cloth or bag, which is first attested in a recipe of 1617, finally severed the link between puddings and animal guts and made it possible for puddings to become a regular part of the daily fare of almost all classes (Wilson 1973: 316). A synonym used by Shakespeare for the culinary verb "*stuff*" is sometimes "*cram*"⁸, which in Hermione's plea to Leontes (*Winter's Tale* I, ii, 91)

I prithee tell me: *cram's* with praise, and make's
As *fat* as tame things,

has a sexual sense and therefore stands for "make me pregnant".

Even such a brief review as this on Shakespeare's imagery of food cannot ignore his interest and expertise in the preparation and baking of bread, cakes and pastry. The most exhaustive account of the operations needed to prepare a cake - from the grinding of the wheat to make the dough, to the cooling of the cake once it has been cooked - can be found in the very first lines of *Troilus and Cressida* (I, i, 15 ff.), where Pandarus compares the long and detailed sequence of the baking operations to the patience needed by Troilus to conquer the heart of Cressida:

He that will have a *cake* out of the *wheat* must tarry the *grinding*.
Have I not tarried?
Ay, the grinding; but you must tarry the *bolting*.
Have I not tarried?
Ay, the bolting; but you must tarry the *leavening*.
Still have I tarried.
Ay, the leavening; but here's yet in the word 'hereafter' the *kneading*,
the *making of the cake*, the *heating of the oven*, and the *baking*; nay,
you must stay the *cooling* too, or you may chance to burn your lips.

The sieving of the flour in the preparation of bread is the image used by Menenius in *Coriolanus* (III, i, 319) to make a comparison with Coriolanus' lack of sophistication in language:

7 cf. *Henry IV Part 1* III, iii, 151; *Merry Wives of Windsor* II, i, 27.

8 cf. *Twelfth Night* II, iii, 165; *Troilus and Cressida* II, ii, 46.

(...) and is ill school'd
 In *bolted* language; *meal and bran* together
 He throws without distinction.

This unsieved flour simile refers to one of the operations done in the bakehouses of Shakespeare's period: after measuring and milling the grain, the flour was bolted or sieved to remove the bran by shaking a quantity of flour through a piece of coarse linen⁹ (Brears 1985a: 12-3). In Shakespeare's time branny wheat bread was being gradually supplanted by white bread although the former was still eaten by many country people in Britain until late in the eighteenth century. The movement towards whiter bread for all started from London and the large towns so that by 1574 there were 62 white bakers in London and 36 brown bakers. White wheaten bread appealed more than brown bread not only for its paler colour (colour being an important feature of food in general, as mentioned earlier), but also because it was more agreeable in taste and more digestible than brown bread.

In Shakespeare's time brown bread made from bran or other poor-quality grains was associated with lower quality and manual labourers (Wilson 1973: 245-6, 260-1). The link between brown bread and poverty is made explicit in *Measure for Measure* (III, ii, 195) in the description of the lusty nature of the Duke Vincentio who, in Lucio's words,

would mouth with a beggar, though she smelt *brown bread and garlic*.

Garlic, much appreciated in medieval times by wealthy and poor alike, began to go out of favour in the sixteenth century and became associated with the poor classes, so much so that the Elizabethans called it "the poor man's physic" (Wilson 1973: 361).

Other operations in the baking procedure which Shakespeare employs in his imagery - thus showing a very good knowledge not only of the practical operation itself but also of the terminology used to describe it - include dough-kneading in bread-making and dough-pinching in pastry-making:

I will *knead* him; I will make him *supple*
 (*Troilus and Cressida* II, iii, 235);

I will confess what I know without constraint; if ye *pinch* me like a
pasty, I can say no more
 (*All's Well That Ends Well* IV, iii, 141).

In today's recipe books "*pinch*" is the verb still used to define the finishing touches to crimp the edges of pastry or to make decorative leaves out of it (Dixon 1983: 451), and "*knead*" is the verb still used to thoroughly work the

9 The linen or canvas came probably from Doulas in Brittany, hence the dowlas Falstaff gave away to bakers' wives to make boulders of in *Henry IV* Part I III, III, 79 (Brears 1985a: 12).

bread dough (pastry dough should in fact be handled as little and as lightly as possible) in order for the dough to become "firm and elastic" (Dixon 1983: 382), i.e. "*supple*", and therefore rise well in the oven. In *Titus Andronicus* (V, ii, 186) the whole procedure of pie-making is described in a very detailed and, in this particular instance, extremely gruesome way:

Hark, villains, I will *grind your bones to dust*
 And with your blood and it I'll make a *paste*,
 And of the paste a *coffin* I will rear,
 And make two *pasties* of your shameful heads.

(...)

This is the *feast* that I have bid her to,
 And this the *banquet* she shall *surfeit* on;

(...)

Let me go *grind their bones to powder small*,
 And with this hateful *liquor temper* it,
 And in that *paste* let their vile heads be *bak'd*.

(...)

So, now bring them in, for I'll *play the cook*,
 and *see them ready*, against their mother comes.

Though the particular ingredients employed here - human bones, blood and heads - are rather unconventional ones, still Titus' madness rests on a sound and realistic knowledge of how to make a pie. For a start, incredible as it may sound, ground bones from the charnel-house instead of wheat were used as adulterants of bread as late as the 1750s (Wilson 1973: 262) and this might well have also been the case with Elizabethan bakers. Likewise, though blood was obviously not used to moisten the flour and make a paste, animal blood was nevertheless employed to colour black puddings and darken pottages and sauces (Wilson 1973: 90). The "*coffin*" Shakespeare mentions here was the normal way to call the pie-crust which, most appropriately in this particular instance, maintains its main funereal meaning, much as in the implied quibble on "*coffin*" (*model, paste, cover*) in *Richard II* (III, ii, 152):

And nothing can we call our own but death,
 And that small *model* of the barren earth
 Which serves as *paste* and *cover* to our bones.

The reason behind the culinary sense of this rather gloomy item might be provided by the fact that in medieval fish pies the pastry "*coffin*" or shell was regarded merely as a free-standing container and was not always eaten. As evidence of the popularity of meat pies in medieval Britain, in 1378 a special ordinance of Richard II (which, given the previous Shakespearean instance, is a remarkable coincidence!) controlled the prices charged by cooks and pie bakers in London for their roasted and baked meats. For open pies or tarts the pastry coffin was baked blind and then filled (Wilson 1973: 42, 124, 253-4), as exemplified in a 1597 recipe of "Spinach Flan": "Take three handfull of Spinnage (...) and

lay it in your Coffin, when it is hardened in the oven, then bake it" (Brears 1985a: 28). In the particular instance of Titus Andronicus' "*playing the cook*", the two pies he makes of the heads of Demetrius and Chiron have the additional gloomy appeal of concealing the real contents of the pastry until the victims' mother, Queen Tamora, would start helping herself to the unsavoury dish.

To end this short article on a rather more cheerful note, small cakes and biscuits also feature prominently in Shakespeare's work. The cakes referred to by Sir Toby and the Clown in *Twelfth Night* (II, iii, 124),

Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be
no more *cakes and ale*?

Yes, by saint Anne, and *ginger* shall be *hot* i'th'mouth too,

are probably "Shrewsbury cakes", rounds of shortcake spiced with ginger according to a 1655 recipe (Wilson 1973: 268; Brears 1985b: 10). As the Elizabethan small, sweet, flattish shortcakes were eaten at banquets, the "*cakes and ale*" mentioned by anti-Puritan Sir Toby could therefore be taken to mean "celebrating festivities with banquets", which was opposed by the Puritans.

A final curiosity in the field of bakery which can be found in Shakespeare is his conservative use of the term *biscuit* which he employs exclusively in its medieval meaning:

Cobloaf!

He would pun thee into shivers with his fist, as a sailor breaks a
biscuit

(*Troilus and Cressida* II, i, 41).

Firstly, the term "*cobloaf*", employed here by Ajax as a term of abuse against Thersites, meant literally a small loaf shaped with a round head. As for "*biscuit*", here and elsewhere¹⁰, it is used by Shakespeare in its medieval meaning of "ship's biscuits", namely rusks of twice-cooked bread that in Italy were produced on a commercial scale to provision whole fleets and armies. By Tudor and Stuart times, however, biscuits were of finer quality and were served as a sweetmeat for banquets, though the medieval sailor's biscuits were still made in the form of rusks which would keep through long voyages (Wilson 1973: 251, 267).

Conclusion

This brief review of Shakespeare's imagery of food within the wider context of the gastronomic habits of his time has underlined the extent to which Shakespeare knew by first-hand experience the operations that went on in the kitchen, his at least cursory knowledge of the cookery books of his time and,

10 *As You Like It* (II, vii, 38): "(...) as dry as the remainder biscuit/After a voyage."

more generally, his keen interest in food. Such interest was probably shared by his audience, who could therefore appreciate his multi-level language to an extent which remains partially unknown to us. The aim of this article has been that of supplying at least part of this missing information, thus making Shakespeare's lines somewhat "tastier" by adding, as it were, a further dimension to his imagery on food. However, "taste" is not intended here as the individual sensation on the tongue and palate which is subjective by definition and therefore irretrievably lost from the historical point of view, but as the sensory valuation that comes from the mind of what is good and what is bad, namely the collective and communicable experience of a culture that is transmitted to the individual from birth (Montanari 1993: 55). In this latter sense, taste can be transmitted by written material not only through documentary texts such as recipe and etiquette books, health and diet manuals etc., but also through literature. Shakespeare's work thus enables us to look historically, but at the same time in a creative way, at the art of eating in Elizabethan times.

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