Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare

29 | 2012

Shakespeare et les arts de la table

“Shakespeare’s Culinary Aesthetic”

Ken Albala

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1687>

DOI: 10.4000/shakespeare.1687

ISSN: 2271-6424

Publisher

Société Française Shakespeare

Printed version

Date of publication: 3 March 2012

Number of pages: 1-11

ISBN: 2-9521475-8-2

Electronic reference

Ken Albala, « “Shakespeare’s Culinary Aesthetic” », *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* [Online], 29 | 2012, Online since 03 March 2012, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1687> ; DOI : 10.4000/shakespeare.1687

Shakespeare et les arts de la table

actes du Congrès

organisé par la

SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE SHAKESPEARE

les 17, 18 et 19 mars 2011

textes réunis par

Christophe HAUSERMANN

et

Pierre KAPITANIAK

sous la direction de

Dominique GOY-BLANQUET

COUVERTURE :
Botticelli, *Banquet dans la forêt de pins*,
Troisième tableau de la série
« L'histoire de Nastagio degli Onesti »
inspiré d'une nouvelle du *Décaméron* de Boccace
Musée du Prado, Madrid

conception graphique et logo
Pierre Kapitaniak

mise en page et corrections
Christophe Hausermann
Pierre Kapitaniak

© 2011 Société Française Shakespeare
Institut du Monde Anglophone
Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle
5 rue de l'École de Médecine
75006 Paris
www.societefrancaiseshakespeare.org

Tous droits de traduction, de reproduction et d'adaptation
réservés pour tous les pays

“SHAKESPEARE’S CULINARY AESTHETIC”

Ken ALBALA

While much attention has been paid to the culinary and dietary metaphors in Shakespeare’s works, the culinary aesthetic with which he would have been familiar is less well known. In other words, what types of foods would a man of Shakespeare’s social standing and profession have eaten in the late 16th and early 17th century? How did the flavor profiles, ingredients and cooking techniques influence his frame of mind and what repertoire of dishes would he have been able to draw from when thinking about food? This paper will examine Tudor and Stuart cuisine. I will argue that the same aesthetic preoccupation with variety, polyphony, surprises and ingenious conceits dominate in drama and cuisine, without however abandoning a certain fundamental straightforwardness in regard to materials or ingredients. That is, when conjuring metaphors that directly relate to food or not, it was a distinctly Tudor and Stuart approach to art in general, largely influenced by the arts of the table, that steered Shakespeare toward the aesthetic choices he ultimately made.

Beaucoup de critiques se sont penchés sur les nombreuses métaphores alimentaires que l’on trouve dans l’œuvre de Shakespeare. Cependant, l’esthétique alimentaire qui lui était familière est moins connue. En d’autres termes, quels types de plats un homme du statut social de Shakespeare pouvait-il manger à la fin du XVI^e et au début du XVII^e siècle ? Comment le spectre des saveurs, les ingrédients et les techniques culinaires pouvaient-ils influencer son état d’esprit ? Quels plats avait-il à l’esprit lorsqu’il pensait à la nourriture ? Cette étude présente la cuisine des Tudors et des Stuarts et vise à montrer que celle-ci avait des préoccupations communes avec celles de l’art dramatique en termes de variété, de polyphonie, de surprises et de traits d’esprit, sans toutefois renoncer à une certaine simplicité quant au choix des matériaux et des ingrédients utilisés. Ainsi, dans son recours aux métaphores se référant ou non à la nourriture, Shakespeare était fortement influencé par les arts de la table dans ses choix esthétiques.

Shakespeare’s plays and poems are riddled with metaphors drawn directly from his knowledge of the kitchen and cooking techniques. While the longer gastronomic and dietary references have been studied at length, for example Aguecheek’s beef in Robert Appelbaum’s book¹ or the dietary references in Joan Fitzpatrick’s *Food in Shakespeare*,² the more casual and incidental culinary metaphors have not been gathered or examined systematically. Moreover, they have never to my knowledge been compared to culinary techniques as described in contemporary cookbooks nor tested before the glowing hearth embers to get a sense of what Shakespeare himself might have actually tasted, the product of bygone techniques which inspired these metaphors in the first place. In other words, I intend in this paper to describe what Shakespeare understood about basic cooking procedures as mentioned in his works

¹ Robert Appelbaum, *Aguecheek’s Beef, Belch’s Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture, and Food Among the Early Moderns*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

² Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007.

as a means not only to clarify and enrich our understanding of his metaphors, but also to gain further insight into those techniques which may not be fully understood through the culinary literature alone.

The best known example of what I propose here is the passage in *Hamlet* where he mentions that “The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (i.ii.179)³ which refers partly to the fact that the food used for his father’s funeral has been served again as cold leftovers for his mother’s new wedding, one following so quickly after the other. Under normal circumstances this would be an act of “thrift”, exactly as Hamlet says. But it also refers obliquely, albeit gruesomely, to the pastry shells of “baked meats” which here relates to pies, which were often served cold. The pastry was primarily a vehicle for storage of the contents and usually wasn’t eaten, being made of coarse but sturdy free-standing rye flour.⁴ The contents would be sealed from the air with gelatinous broth, as well. Most importantly, such crusts were referred to as “coffins”, which merely means cases, whether for jewels, dead bodies or baked meats. And in each example, the coffin is meant to protect and preserve the contents from corruption, theft, rapid decay which would inevitably occur if exposed to the elements.

Titus Andronicus uses the word “coffin” in exactly the same double sense when he describes his plan to put children’s heads into a pie to feed to their mother. “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.” (v.ii.188). It is the same double metaphor of coffin as pie casing and a vessel bearing the dead.

Both of these references to coffins are further clarified with an actual recipe. The 15th-century Harleian mss. 279 has a section on baked meats (meaning pies):

A bake Mete Ryalle.

Take and make litel cofyns, and take Chykonys y-soþe; o þer Porke y-soþe, and smale y-hackyd; oþer of hem boþe: take Clowys, Maces, Quybibes, and hakke wiþ-alles, and melle yt wiþ cromyd Marow, and lay

³ *Hamlet*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, second edition, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. All the quotations from Shakespeare’s plays refer to this edition.

⁴ See Barbara Santich, “The Evolution of Culinary Techniques in the Medieval Era”, in *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Melitta Weiss Adamson, New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1995, p. 69.

on Sugre y-now; þan ley it on þe cofynne, and in þe myddel lay a gobet of marow, and Sugre round a-bowte y-now, and lat bake; and þis is for soperys.⁵

This recipe does not include a gelatinous broth which would solidify and keep the contents fresh, although the marrow fat probably served the same purpose. Mentioning that this is for suppers, being the smaller evening meal, implies that this is a cold dish meant to be kept in the larder and brought out as needed, much like the leftover pies for Gertrude's wedding. Without fully understanding the cooking procedure, the full meaning of the metaphor is lost. Equally Shakespeare's use of the term "coffin" sheds light on contemporary attitudes to cold pies: they are often leftovers, but ones that can be kept for emergent occasions.

Shakespeare's other references to pie reveal that he is not always thinking of meat, or at least not meat alone. Commonly he mentions dates in pies. In *Troilus and Cressida*, we are given a seasoning metaphor to describe Troilus' attributes.

PANDARUS. Do you know what a man is? Is not
birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood,
learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality,
and such like, the spice and salt that season a man?
CRESSIDA. Ay, a minced man: and then to be baked with no date
in the pie, for then the man's date's out. (I.ii.258)

Cressida's quip refers to a variety of finely chopped mincemeat pie made up of many jumbled ingredients. Each individual item, just as each personal attribute of a person, is lost in the mix. She also implies that without dates in the pie, it would be out of date, or out of fashion, or without substance.

The Good Huswife's Handmaide for the Kitchen,⁶ first published in 1588, offers a good idea of the type of pie Shakespeare is referring to here. First it is a pie with an edible crust. The author warns explicitly in a recipe to make Paste to raise Coffins, not to put too many eggs in the pastry or "it will make it drie and not pleasant in eating." On the next page he offers exactly the sort of recipe Cressida has in mind:

⁵ Harleian mss. 279, p. 55.

⁶ *The good huswives handmaide for the kitchin*, ed. Stuart Peachey, Bristol, Stuart Press, 1992, p. 22-23.

To make sweete pies of Veale

Take Veale and perboyle it verie tender, then chop it small, then take twice as much beef suet, and chop it small, then minse both them together, then put Corrans and minced Dates to them, then season your flesh after this manner. Take Pepper, salt, and Saffron, Cloves, Mace, Synamon, Ginger, and Sugar, and season your flesh with each of these a quantitie, and mingle them altogether.

This filling is then put in a pie garnished with more dates and currants, the lid is placed on and it is baked. Presumably without the dates it is not only paltry, but not something likely to please – a comparison directly to Troilus.

A similar pun about date and fashion is given by Parolles in the opening scene of *All's Well that Ends Well*. He is describing how virginity is of no use if kept too long:

Virginity, like an old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion: richly suited, but unsuitable: just like the brooch and the tooth-pick, which wear not now. Your date is better in your pie and your porridge than in your cheek;
(I.i.157)

The pun is that dates, the fruit, belong in pies, but date meaning age, does not wear well on a woman's face. The lines only make sense knowing that dates in pies are indeed still fashionable and that without them pies are not considered very interesting.

Shakespeare also makes further reference to the word "season" in the culinary sense. His use of the term is not merely to flavor with spices, but implies preservation through the seasons and most often specifically refers to meat being pickled in a brine. In *Twelfth Night*, the salty brine is equated with tears, which have a similar preservative effect.

And water once a day her chamber round
With eye-offending brine: all this to season
A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh
And lasting in her sad remembrance.
(I.i.28)

Likewise in *All's Well*, the tears of Helena who weeps whenever she thinks of her dead father are compared to a salty preservative brine: "Tis the best brine a maiden can season her praise in." (I.i.48) The countess who speaks these lines is suggesting that she's gone on

mourning too long, hence the ability to produce fresh tears much later in a new season.

Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* uses the same reference to tears as brine which will preserve food which one will eventually taste, or in this case not,

Jesu Maria, what a deal of brine
Hath wash'd thy sallow cheeks for Rosaline!
How much salt water thrown away in waste,
To season love, that of it doth not taste! (II.i.65-68)

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Leonato, speaking of his daughter that he believes to be corrupted, says:

Valuing of her,—why, she, O, she is fallen
Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea
Hath drops too few to wash her clean again
And salt too little which may season give
To her foul-tainted flesh! (IV.i.139-143)

Once again, Shakespeare is thinking of a pickling brine, like tears or sea water, which has the power to preserve flesh. In other words he is talking about what we now call salt or corned beef, and what in his day was called powdered beef, which was not merely salted but first soaked in brine as a preservative.

The Good Huswife's Handmaide once again gives us explicit and fairly complicated directions:

A good way to powder or barrell beef

Take the beefe and lay it in mere sawce a day & a night. Then take out the beef and lay it upon a hirdle, and cover it close with a sheete, and let the hurdle be laid upon a peverell or cover to save the mere sauce that commeth from it: then seeth the brine, and lay in your Beefe again, see the brine be colde so let it lye two days and one night: then take it out, & lay it againe on a hurdle two or three days. Then wype it everie peece with linned cloth, dry them and couch it with salt, a laying of beefe and another of salt: and ye must lay a stick crosse each way, so the brine may run from the salt.⁷

The procedure is intended first to get the salt to penetrate the meat via the mere sawce – i.e. salt water. Then the brine is boiled because germs and mold likely to spoil the meat will have grown, the

⁷ *The good huswife's handmaide*, op. cit., p. 16.

brine also draws further moisture from the meat. Only at the end is it merely salted and left to drain. If it were salted alone to start, the salt would never reach the interior and it would spoil from the inside out.

As Shakespeare uses the word “season” in a very specific preservative sense, so too the word “sauce” has a meaning that is now obsolete. Today we think of “sauce” merely as flavoring, something to complement or accentuate the main flavor of a dish, often made from a reduced broth based on the same ingredient. This is a culinary aesthetic post-dating Shakespeare. For him “to sauce” meant something added to a food with opposite flavors. Hence when Touchstone says “honey a sauce to sugar” it is not merely redundancy, but a logical impossibility. Moreover the sauce is intended to correct or temper the main ingredient, making it more digestible, which is why in *Julius Caesar* (I.ii.299) we are told of rudeness as a sauce to good wit, which gives men stomach to digest his words. Shakespeare’s metaphors are all about seasoning with opposites. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio says “Thy wit is a very bitter sweeting; it is a most sharp sauce.” (II.iv.80). Malcolm in *Macbeth* says “my more-having would be as a sauce / To make me hunger more” (IV.iii.81-82) referring to the ability of sharp sauces to pique the appetite. Again, the sauce is designed to contrast with the main ingredient serving a digestive function. Any look at contemporary cookbooks reveals this.

For example, the *Good Housewife’s Treasure* of 1588 offers two sauces for pork, which involve vinegar, mustard, sugar and pepper – which are hot condiments intended to humorally counteract the moist flegmatic flesh of the pig, or in the case of vinegar to cut through the viscous substance of the meat – making it more digestible.

Shakespeare also makes reference to procedures used in baking bread. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Ajax speaks of kneading someone to make him supple (II.iii.218). In *All’s Well*, Lafeu refers to one person’s ability to corrupt youths in these terms: “No, no, no, your son was misled with a snipt-taffeta fellow there, whose villanous saffron would have / made all the unbaked and doughy youth of a nation in his colour.” (IV.v.1). The idea is that a little saffron put into a batch of dough before baking will turn everything yellow, in the same way that young people will easily be led astray, before maturity, when exposed to a little corruption.

More interesting yet are his references to leavening. Hamlet speaks of people's manners and how one particular fault by force of habit which "o'erleavens" (1.iv.29) spoils everything else, which is exactly what happens in bread baking if the dough rises too long. In *Troilus and Cressida*, there are even fairly explicit bread baking instructions, used as a metaphor for patience and the need to go through every necessary step carefully without haste:

PANDARUS. He that will have a cake out of the wheat must tarry the grinding.
 TROILUS. Have I not tarried?
 PANDARUS. Ay, the grinding; but you must tarry the bolting.
 TROILUS. Have I not tarried?
 PANDARUS. Ay, the bolting, but you must tarry the leavening.
 TROILUS. Still have I tarried.
 PANDARUS. Ay, to 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. (1.i.14-26)

We might not think of baking per se as an apt metaphor for extraordinary patience, but in the days before preground flour, super-active instant yeast and electric ovens, making bread through its various steps was extremely time-consuming. Gervase Markham in *The English Housewife* makes this explicit:

To bake the best cheat bread, which is also simply of wheat only, you shall, after your meal is dressed and bolted through a more coarse bolter than was used for your manchets, and put also into a clean tub, trough or kimmel, take a sour leaven, that is a piece of such like leaven saved from your former batch, and well filled with salt, and so laid up to sour, and this sour leaven you shall break in small pieces into warm water, and then strain it, which done make a deep hollow hole in the midst of your flour, and therein pour your strained liquor, then with your hand mix some part of the flour therewith, till all the liquor be as thick as pancake better, then cover it all over with meal, and so let it lie all that night, then next morning stir it, and all the rest of the meal well together, and with a little more warm water, barm, and salt to season it with, bring it to a perfect leaven, stiff and firm; then knead it, break it, and tread it... and so mould it up in reasonable big loaves, and then bake it with indifferent good heat [...].⁸

⁸ Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife*, 1615, ed. Michael R. Best, Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986, p. 210.

Directly related to these bread metaphors are Shakespeare's references to "trenchers", which are thin slices of bread placed directly on the table cloth to hold food. In Shakespeare's time these were often replaced by wooden trenchers, ceramic or metal plates. It seems that the use of trenchers is specifically intended to denote subservience and lower social status, which would make perfect sense if using trenchers were going out of fashion. Most references to trenchers involve eating as a servant in someone else's house. The Earl of Suffolk in *2 Henry VI* asks: "How often hast thou waited at my cup, / Fed from my trencher, kneel'd down at the board." (IV.i.57-58) In *Timon of Athens*, an old Athenian asks "And my estate deserves an heir more raised / Than one which holds a trencher." (I.121-122). And Timon mentions sycophants as "Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites, Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears, You fools of fortune, trencher-friends, time's flies, Cap-and-knee slaves..." (III.vi.93-95). In *The Tempest*, Caliban declaring his freedom says that he'll "Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish. / 'Ban, 'Ban, Cacaliban." (II.ii.182-183) Consistently a trencher implies subservience and eating at someone else's largess, and by implication leftovers which have already been picked at.

The most explicit of these references is in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in which a servant is compared to a dog, "I came no sooner into the dining-chamber but he steps me to her trencher, and steals her capon's leg: O, 'tis a foul thing when a cur cannot keep himself in all companies." (IV.iv.8-11) A proper servant would naturally wait to be offered from the superior's table, but not snatch food like a dog.

Late medieval carving manuals, such as *The Boke of Kervynge* printed by Wynkyn de Worde makes clear that the position of carver is not merely a lowly servant, but someone within the patronage network of a greater personage, serving in the household and presumably scraping from their trencher afterwards for sustenance. But first his duty is as follows: "ye muste have thre pantry knyves, one knyfe to square trenchoure loves, another to be chyppere, the thyrd shall be sharpe to make smothe trenchours. Then chyppe your soveraynes brede hote and all other brede let it be a daye olde, household brede thre dayes olde, trenchour brede foure dayes olde [...]"⁹ He continues with the elaborate service, who gets how many trencher slices, and so on. However, a century later the trencher had mostly given way to

⁹ *The Boke of Kervynge*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, London, J. Childs & Son, 1866, p. 26.

permanent dishware, but the association with subservience of an outdated kind remains embedded in Shakespeare's references.

I think among Shakespeare's favorite culinary references, and one with which few people today are directly acquainted but very well could have been in the past, is "distillation." The technique was connected to alchemy and magic of course, but more often was among those pastimes leisured gentlemen would take up to distill various medicinal potions, which might equally have been sipped for mere pleasure. These typically would use herbs or spices, but just as often flowers. As sonnet 5 remarks: "But flowers distilled though they with winter meet, Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet." or in sonnet 6: "Then let not winter's ragged hand deface, In thee thy summer, ere thou be distilled: Make sweet some vial; treasure thou some place, With beauty's treasure, ere it be self-kill'd."

Like the other metaphors, these refer to the power of preservation, but also of concentration into an essence to preserve particular qualities (youth, freshness, aroma) through the seasons. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus says "But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd; / Than that which withering on the virgin thorn, / Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness." (i.i.76-78). There are also other references to distilled Carduus Benedictus in *Much Ado*, the distilled liquor to feign death in *Romeo and Juliet*, distilled waters used to balm the head in *The Taming of the Shrew*. In any case, this is a procedure with which Shakespeare was certainly familiar.

To clarify all these references, Hugh Platt's little *Delights for Ladies* (1617) offers numerous typical recipes of the day, including several for rosewater. This was used partly as perfume and as a cooking ingredient. The process of distillation can take place either in a balneo or a Still or limbeck. The former are glass vessels with a crooked neck, while the alembic is a metal vessel with curled condensation tubing. Platt instructs:

Macerate the Rose in his own juice, adding thereto, being temperately warme, a convenient proportion either of yeast or ferment: leave them a few daies in fermentation, til they have gotten a strong and heady smell, beginning to incline toward vinegar then distill them in balneo in glass bodies luted to their helmes (happely a Limbeck will do better...) and drawe so long as you finde any sent of the Rose to come: then redistill or rectifie the same so often till you have purchased a perfect spirit of the

Rose. You may also ferment the juice of Roses only, and after distill the same.¹⁰

Figure 1 : Rose Distillation

Distillation naturally is also used to produce medicines as well as deadly concentrated poisons. The ghost in *Hamlet* describes the effect of the poison poured into his ear:

The leperous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood. (1.v.64-70)

Here Shakespeare reveals directly his familiarity with cheese making procedures. The eager he refers to is rennet, which posset milk – not exactly the curdling which we tend to imagine now that milk is always pasteurized and separates when bad into little flecks suspended in clear liquid, but rather first a thickening into a quailed mass. Blood, incidentally, thickens exactly the same way when cooked – which if in the body would clog the passages and kill instantly. “And a most instant tetter bark’d about” (1.v.70) – in other words it stopped flowing.

¹⁰ Hugh Platt, *Delights for Ladies*, London, H. L. [Humfrey Lownes], 1617, fol. E9.

Figure 2 : Posset

In conclusion, I think the perspective of historic cookery lends great insight into Shakespeare's metaphors, and in turn his dramatic works reveal details for the culinary historian that one might not understand from reading cookbooks alone, as I hope these few examples have shown.

Ken ALBALA
University of the Pacific, Stockton, California