



A Felony To Drink Small Beer~ Reflections on Food and Drug Metaphors in Shakespeare

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A Felony To Drink Small Beer~ Reflections on Food and Drug Metaphors
in Shakespeare

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INTRODUCTION

Cade.

I will make it felony to drink small beer....

All.

God save your Majesty!

Dick

The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.

Cade.

Nay, that I mean to do.

-2 *Henry VI* IV. ii William Shakespeare

Strong beer and dead lawyers—this is the vision of rebellion painted with a not so fine brush by the anarchic rabble-rousers in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part H*. Though many would agree that in an ideal world the term at bar would connote images of a stouter ale instead of stout lawyers, the above quoted passage is a perfect puzzle. And thus, vintage Shakespeare. This particular puzzle is only illustrative of a larger Shakespearean enigma—one which mixes chaos and order, rule-breaking and rule-making, the impolitic and the political, all into a combustible brew. This brew, like the bubbling cauldron of Macbeth's

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witches, is a combination of some toil—and plenty trouble. The enigma here is one which traverses the whole canon of the Great Bard's plays and infects the comedies as well as the tragedies. It is embodied in a conflict well-known to literary theorists, political scientists, and most of all, to food and drug lawyers: the conflict between state power and individual choice.

The irony of this conflict is paramount in the above passage. The boisterous rebel Cade, in what is certainly a winning political ploy, promises the masses that, under his rule, beer will be regulated for strength.¹ But not only will it be regulated—it will be strictly regulated—so strictly, in fact, that it will be a felony to drink the weak variety. This, of course, is a reverse form of regulation in that it regulates the consumption, not the production. Yet, it still hovers on the page as a form of regulation, as a restriction on a type of product, as the word of law. Upon the heels of the resultant jubilatory cry of the crowd: God save your Majesty!, Dick, a less than respectable character with a talent for the pithy sound bite, follows with his famous line—oft quoted but less oft credited—advocating the death of advocates.² Extraordinarily and delightfully, Shakespeare highlights one of the fundamental flaws of any anarchy: the abolition of all rules is just another rule. Cade promises to dethrone the king, yet make himself king; to overthrow the government, yet erect his own; to rid the world of rules, yet regulate beer. Dick joins with the ultimate ironic addition: let's pass new laws, yet kill all the lawyers.³

1 Small beer in Shakespearean lingo refers to weak beer.

2 For a superb analysis of this particular line in Shakespeare and in cultural history, see Daniel J. Kornstein, *Kill all the Lawyers* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

3 See also *The Tempest*, II.i.154, where Gonzalo, the old councillor, offers the utopian vision of a place where there will be no magistratates, contracts—or any other vestige of the legal system. At the same time, there will be No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil. Again, a proxn.ise of regulatory bliss is hitched to a vision of a lawless—or lawyerless—society.

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In this interchange about food regulation, Shakespeare captures the very nature and spirit, replete with the less than subtle shades of hypocrisy that still color the regulatory debate today. People would *still* like to have *good* beer while having *iv* law. Yet, the question is posed by the very answer: You can't have one without the other. What Shakespeare knew implicitly, we know explicitly—that the tension between regulatory schemes and individual desires is a constant. This tension, a staple of Shakespeare plays, is evoked through strings of metaphor and bursts of witty dialogue. Images of food and drug consumption, use, abuse, disuse, and regulation are abundant in Shakespearean drama as they are in contemporary society. The way we talk about food—regulate it, apportion it, consume it—is a reflection of greater sociological and legal frameworks. The contents of a nutritional label can give as much insight to political priorities as they do to the fat content of a soft drink. The preapproval process of drugs can tell us as much about what society values (or is confused or fearful about) as it can about where the cures of tomorrow will come from. Shakespeare, as perhaps history's keenest observer, was no stranger to this relationship. He would've loved the line 'You are what you eat, though it is one of the few resounding bon mots he can't claim as his own.⁴ Indeed, society *is* what it eats—in more ways than one. Strong beer and weak lawyers is one societal vision. Some might say America is a land of the mirror opposite—weak beer and strong lawyers, that is. Regardless, it is often literature, and in this case Shakespeare, that highlights these appositions.

~ Though Shakespeare coined not the actual phrase, he was undoubtedly aware of its import. Indeed, he evinces the same thesis in *Henry V*, III.vii.166: Give them great meals of beef and iron and steel, they will eat like wolves and fight like devils.

DISCUSSION

Lean and Hungry

Interestingly, Shakespeare and his society were as obsessed with fat and fat content as we are today. Though, not in the same way. When Julius Caesar, in his eponymous play, warns that Cassius has a lean and hungry look, He thinks too much; such men are dangerous,⁵ he is talking about his future assassin and, thus, the irony and prescience of that statement looms heavily at the end of the final act. Caesar states in lines just prior. Let me have men about me that are fat, sleek-headed men and such as sleep a-nights— instead of lean and hungry types like Cassius. This notion of fat men as self-indulgent, lazy, unplotting, hedonistic and politically benign thus conflates the metaphorical and the literal in the ways for which Shakespeare is famous. For Caesar it was an extraordinary statement of political genius to peg Cassius as the plotting terrorist he was, and all through his physique. Yet, we too make intuitive decisions, and some of our worst ones, based on body type. From ancient writings to twentieth century pseudo-science,⁶ academicians and laymen have been equally obsessed with trying to find a clear correlation between various modes of behavior and body types (and thus, by extrapolation, habits of food consumption). Shakespearean allusions to the lean and hungry visage of villainy are ubiquitous.⁷

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Julius Caesar, I.ii.194.

⁶ See the criminology studies of Cesare Lombroso et al. Lombroso tried to prove correspondences between criminal inclinations and physique.

~ See, e.g., *The Comedy of Errors* V.i.238, They brought one Pinch, a hungry lean-f ac'd villain.

8 ~ *Henry IV*, II.ii.119.

~ 1 *Henry IV*, II.iv.470. 10 ~ *Henry IV*, II.iv.534.

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Yet, the images are complicated by plays like *Henry IV Part I* where the comic and massive character Falstaff is politically potent and effectual despite his hugeness and grandiosity. Falstaff is so gargantuan that he lards the lean earth as he walks along.⁸ He is a character who is seen as part farce, part fighter; part cowardly, part fearless. Called fat paunch and worse throughout the play, Falstaff is characteristically unruffled and merry in his self-defense:

If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked!

If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damn'd. If to be fat be to be hated, then Pharoah's lean kine are to be lov'd.⁹

This cloaking of terms of physique and consumption in the rhetoric of sin and morality is something still common in contemporary society. The relationship between the eating of sugar and sin is still tenuous at best, but modern nutritional schools of thought have often been as vehement in their excoriations of sugar's properties. Of course, when one turns away from moral fervor and towards the biological, the relationship becomes more wholesome. Sugar content is a mainstay of nutritional information and many current health concerns are quite well-founded and certainly transcend the issue of obesity Falstaff-style.

Ingrained somewhere in this admixture of gossip and truth, health and the lack thereof, lies the importance of Shakespeare's chronic fiddling with messages of obesity and leanness. For Shakespeare, the message is often political:

Falstaff, whose first name is Jack, expresses this quandary with concomitant grandiosity when he announces, Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.¹⁰

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With this staged threat, Falstaff challenges Caesar's assumption that power is wholly contained in lean, ambitious types. Rather, a wide torso contains the world—indeed the political world. Seen in the context of a play that revolves around the ways in which power is had, this is the crystal-clear message. And seen as a companion piece with Caesar's analysis, Shakespeare's thesis becomes one of dichotomy and contrast. It's as though the Bard admonishes us to put little stock in physique as an insight to the heart—and to put even less in the notion that morality may be measured on the same scale as heft.

But the real beneficiary of this juxtaposition is the warning that Shakespeare offers in admitting the reality that looks *do matter*. Aside from health, we must all worry about our corpulence because, at least for Shakespeare, this is the true stuff of tragedy. If Caesar had put more faith in his pseudoscientific intuition, he might have survived to launch an irrepressible dictatorship. One which might have regulated all lean men to the extent of putting them in prison camps.

Yet, Shakespeare's ultimate message is gentler and, similarly, more incisive: The way in which people relate to food can say something—often fallible and fictitious—about their personalities and thus about their political predispositions. Thus regulation and laws that define food can mirror these predilections.

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Med'cinable Griefs

There was a fine line between potions and poisons in Shakespeare's day—just as there is in our own. Sometimes the difference was a matter of degree, sometimes a mere matter of labeling, or naming. Shakespeare was obsessed with the issue of labels and accurate descriptions—by both the need for some and the seeming hypocrisy of others. After all, it was he who lamentably queried through the words of Romeo: What's in a name? That which we call a rose! By any other word would smell as sweet. ¹¹ Indeed, there are in his plays, constant references to potions and poisons and the varying daims that can be made for each.

Fittingly, the play in which Shakespeare explores most of all the boundary between potions and poisons and the metaphors of labeling is his great play of identity, *Hamlet*. In this tragedy, where Hamlet questions his own existence with the famous words 'To be or not to be?', ¹² the line between life and death is never very well-marked. In *Hamlet*, the overwhelming issue is again contradictory illusions. Hamlet's stepfather king has murdered his real father and usurped the throne. Thus, power has shifted. In order to flesh out this homicidal deceit, Hamlet stages his play within a play by which he will catch the conscience of the King.¹³ The trickery here is that the play comes within a play but is not really a play at all, in that it is not fiction but rather, the truth. Thus, Shakespeare puns on the illusions that occur when something is labeled that which it isn't. To call something a play will not make it *fiction* if indeed it is

~ Romeo and Juliet, II.ii.43.

¹² Hamlet, III.i.55.

¹³ Hamlet, III.i.605.

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flict, just as a rose by any other name is still a rose. Yet, the magical link between this trickery and the theme of potions! poisons is borne by the contents of the play itself. In it, Hamlet directs the actors to reenact the murder scene of his father as follows:

[The King] lies down upon a bank of flowers. [The Queen], seeing him asleep, leaves him. Anon come in another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper's ears, and leaves him. The Queen returns, finds the King dead...The pois'ner woos the Queen with gifts...¹⁴

Here, poison is the means of murder. Interestingly, the type of poison is never specified;¹⁵ whereas, Shakespeare is usually quite meticulous about naming and labeling the curative potions that are used in his plays, as when Ophelia later tells Laertes: 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance...there is pansies, that's for thoughts.'¹⁶ As when in *Othello*, the Moor talks of the Arabian trees and their medicinale gum,¹⁷ or when Cleopatra calls for the soporific: Give me mandragora, That I may sleep out this great gap of time my Antony is away.¹⁸ These remedies read like the labels on some modern vitamin supplements and yet Shakespeare was quite specific, in a way that is currently prohibited by the FDCA, in making claims for these substances. Rosemary is for remembrance, pansies are for thoughts and mandragora is for sleep. This is the type of claim that would land the executives of General Nutrition Company in jail, yet passed for astute medicine at the time of Shakespeare. In *Cymbeline*, the Bard even

¹⁴ *Hamlet*, III.ii.135.

¹⁵ See also *Macbeth*, III.ii.22, where poison is referred to generically but never specified.

¹⁶ *Hamlet*, IV.v.175.

¹⁷ *Othello*, V.ii.351.

~ *Antony and Cleopatra*, I.v.4. See also *Othello*, III.iii.331.

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asserts that some griefs are med'cinable,¹⁹ thus presaging the modern field of psychopharmacology and the advent of Prozac. But in classic Shakespearean contradiction, this hypothesis is coldly refuted by Claudio in *Measure for Measure*: 'The miserable have no other medicine, but only hope.'²⁰

But the question remains: if potions are labeled as the herbs they are, then why not poisons? Is it that Shakespeare did not know the names of the herbs and compounds that could constitute poisons? Not likely. It may, instead, be explained metaphorically. To Shakespeare, perhaps, what distinguished between a potion and a poison was only a matter of naming—of labeling. Potentially, the same substance could be both a poison and a potion, the distinction posed only by the differing use, dose and description. Shakespeare was cognizant of a truism that we know today after years of research: that the same element can at the same time be both a cure and a nail in the coffin. As we know today, cyanide is a common ingredient in the food we eat—indeed, some of our healthiest foods—ones which are hailed as panaceas of health. Yet, cyanide in the requisite, larger and fatal dose is a deadly poison.²¹

Thus, for Shakespeare, all natural elements could be both potions and poisons, depending on the dose and the label. The same mandragora that could herald sleep could potentially summon a deeper sleep if concentrated enough. The same pansies that bolstered the brain could harm it if given the chance. For the Bard, this was more than a scientific observation—it was a bit of moral instruction: he was calling people's attention to the abuses that can arise if *people* are not monitored, regulated and labeled properly. In a play where power is usurped and a murder executed by poison in the ear, Shakespeare was warning

19 *Cymbeline*, III.ii.33. See also, Macbeth's famous line beseeching the doctor for a cure for psychological turmoil: Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased? *Macbeth*, V.iii.40.

20 *Measure for Measure*, III.i.2.

21 Lecture, Professor Peter Barton Butt, January, 1995, Harvard Law School.

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us to be wary of labels: What's appears a play may in fact be real. What's
a
curative herb may in fact be a poison. What seems a reason to be may be a
reason not to be. What's called a rose may not be one.
On the other hand, a rose is always a rose. Even if labeled a daisy.

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Rotten Apples

'There's small choice in rotten apples,'²² proclaims the suitor Hortensio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in a simple truism that calls to mind any food law discussion of tainted fruit supplies. Shakespeare often used images of tainting and adulteration in the food supply to signify metaphorically the terrain of political issues. In fact the word rotten is much more famously used in the notorious line 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'²³ to describe the evil usurpation of political power that has occurred there. Political issues are often described by means of metaphors of food purity and impurity—as they are today when we speak of tampering with the election results or a politician's being ripe for reelection. Adulteration was a big concern of Shakespeare's, both in the food supply and in the political regime. His plays are ever mindful of the metaphorical correlations.

Shakespeare refers directly to adulteration in the highly political play *Coriolanus* when he calls upon Menenius to state that he loves a cup of hot wine with not a drop of allaying Tiber in't.²⁴ Thus, Menenius loves a cup of wine undiluted by any adulterating water. Adulteration in the form of dilution is a modern concern of the FDA just as it was a concern of the people in

²² *The Taming of the Shrew*, I.i.137.

²³ *Hamlet*, I.iv.89.

²⁴ *Coriolanus*, II.i.48.

25 *Macbeth*, II.iii.91.

26 *Macbeth*, IV.i.12.

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Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare often looked to descriptions of wine and its purity and impurity for symbolic references as when Macbeth declares:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys: renown and grace is dead,
The wine of life is drawn, and them mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.²⁵

Here, Macbeth has just murdered the King to gain power and his speech is pure hoax, designed to throw others off his trail. Yet, his comments are astute and his depiction of life as a wine that once drawn, leaves only the lees (the sedimentation of liquor during aging), here indicated to mean the only thing left for those who must live without their beloved King. Macbeth uses a metaphor of impurity, a wine drained to its mere lees, to describe a political condition, namely the discord that follows upon the removal of a monarch.

Perhaps the most famous recipe in all literature is the brew that is mixed in *Macbeth* by the triumvirate of witches:

Fillet of a fanny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of pow'ful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble. ²⁶

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The ingredient list goes on for at least another ten lines, but the point is quite clear after the first eight. It's safe to say that no one in our time, or in Shakespeare's, would have wanted this special stew. Lizard's leg and howlet's wing are not even on the menu at the Hark Box. Thus, the cauldron is an evil mixture: the ultimate adulteration—the ultimate constituents of filth. Here the witches are plotting the malicious machinations that will persuade Macbeth to commit his murders in the name of ambition. So, symbolically, the overthrow of the state is being churned in the cauldron along with the eye of newt and toe of frog. These bizarre ingredients—these strange items of filth—are the harbingers of political death and destruction. In his most famous food image, Shakespeare unleashes a pow'rful trouble in the form of a bubbling bowl of soup.

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CONCLUSION

Eat no onions or garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath.

-*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.42 William Shakespeare

Some things don't change. Garlic and onions have always smelled less than perfumy on the breath—in Shakespeare's day and now. The images of food and drugs in Shakespeare are ubiquitous and reflect some of the same societal quirks and constructs that are firmly entrenched today. After reading his plays, you could say that Shakespeare didn't like lawyers, liked beer and avoided onions and garlic before a social engagement. That all may be true. Yet, what these predilections and aversions, in the form of food imagery, can tell us about larger issues of the day can be far more interesting. As is true today, little was more important then than what you took into your body. Food, as the staff of life, was bound to be talked about, regulated, symbolized and consumed.