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“The Taste of Shakespeare”

It’s a great honour and thrill to speak to you also a bit intimidating.

I have given many public talks about my work on Shakespeare, including, very memorably for me, a talk about Shylock and dogs to a Montréal audience of more than 200 Jewish men, all of them senior citizens, some of them friends of my late father. It was worrisome because I wanted to acknowledge the play’s anti-Semitism, which is of a piece with its building up of Shylock’s character in terms of caninity, and I also wanted to advocate for the ethical and social value of the play. In the event, they were an extraordinary audience—tough and savvy and willing to work through what looked at first like a contradictory argument. It was particularly gratifying when someone told me afterwards how impressed he was by the fact that no one left to go to the bathroom during my talk or during the Q+A. “With this bunch of pishers,” he said, “that is really saying something!”

But I have not yet spoken to a large audience of people eating pastry . . . except very rarely in the classroom. There the pastry usually stands for the divide that can sometimes appear between the students and their teachers—the teachers bent on serving up knowledge and interpretative know-how and the students devoted to activities closer to their hearts and stomachs. Here the pastry is not the sign of a division but rather a synecdoche of a communal feast. Although I am going also to take this opportunity to get some long-standing gripes about Shakespeare off my chest.

Since after all we are Shakespeareans and must temper our festivity with critical analysis and since I want my remarks to chime with this partaking in a meal, I have decided to talk about Shakespeare and eating, more exactly about the taste of Shakespeare. Basically I want to say that Shakespeare tastes good—indeed that he tastes sweet—and that he’s good for you. Akin to my argument about the taste of Shakespeare is a defense of shallow reading that I will at least initiate.

However, I want to start with an amuse-bouche of some of his words, which seem to me to epitomize what I want to call Shakespeare’s sweetness effect. These words also capture my feelings about the SAA or the particular dynamic of relationship that obtains among the members of an association that studies a great dead writer. The words, which are from the first meeting between Viola and Olivia, seem to say to Olivia “I could love you” or “do I love you? Perhaps I do”; while at another level, which is one we grasp but Olivia and even Viola do not apprehend, they mean: “I love a great lord with such unending and unrequited desire that everyone I meet is at risk of becoming my beloved and of loving me”:

VIOLA

If I did love you in my master’s flame,
With such a suffering, such a deadly life,
In your denial I would find no sense;
I would not understand it.

OLIVIA

Why, what would you?

VIOLA

Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house;

Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
Halloo your name to the reverberate hills
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out 'Olivia!' O, You should not rest
Between the elements of air and earth,
But you should pity me!

Viola's extraordinary poetry of longing which, as we know, gives expression to her love for Orsino, catches with its sweetness the unsuspecting Olivia and, by dint of a long and complicated struggle, issues at the end of the play in a newly formed community of husbands and wives and brothers and sisters, a community founded by the errant, indirect movements of desire and sweet words. And while the flows of desire are channeled and regularized in the new community, they are not and they cannot be completely normalized. Luke Wilson this morning . . . [this was adlibbed at the time, but now I can't remember what Luke was talking about.]

Now this understanding and enactment of how affective language constitutes community by indirection is wonderful and it is part of why I love Shakespeare.

I do love him but it is time to come clean about some problems I have been having with him.

Sorry to have to stand before you on this day of all days, which should be a great high point of my unfolding relationship with this splendid and various community, and make the confession that I don't like Shakespeare

I mean "Shakespeare" the name.

It's a name that seems invented to be mildly ridiculous and an occasion for bad puns. Shakespeare's contemporaries saw this: Robert Greene said that Shakespeare was "in his own conceit the only shake-scene in a country." I guess he intended to suggest that Shakespeare was proud of the fact that he ate the scenery or gave others the means to eat it. Is there a bit of a ribbing in Jonson's ginger avoidance of what we could call the pun direct in his praise of Shakespeare's well-turned and true-filed lines, in each of which, Jonson says, "He seems to shake a lance, / As brandished at the eyes of ignorance"? It would be better for my talk on eating and taste if the anti-Stratfordians were right and Sir Francis Bacon was the author of the plays.

And I never thought there was anything in the case for the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere until I realized that the "vergaloo" is the name of the white doynné or Warwickshire bergamot, which is a juicy variety of winter pear imported to America from Limousin. These two eminent men have a far greater claim on tasting good than has Shakespeare, whose name if anything has a faintly metallic tang. Clearly Bacon (who caught his death, we remember, because of his keen interest in the storage and preparation of poultry) and the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vergaloo have more food-friendly and appetizing names than Shakespeare.

It's not just his name; I also have to say that there are far better looking men than Shakespeare. In fact it is time to say that I don't like Shakespeare's face. All of these recent controversies about Shakespeare's face seem indeed to be connected to the so-called authorship question and reflect a deep dissatisfaction with the name and the look of the man.

How can I love a man who looks like Paul Giamatti in a ridiculous period costume and who, even at a mature age, is unable to give up wearing an earring?

Jonson seems to have confirmed that the engraving on the Folio title-page was a likeness.

This figure that thou here seest
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut,
Wherein the graver had a strife
With nature to outdo the life

I am not showing it to you, but you surely remember it. Sam Schoenbaum described that “a huge head, placed against a starched ruff, surmounts an absurdly small tunic with oversized shoulder-wings. . . . Light comes from several directions simultaneously: it falls on the bulbous protuberance of forehead . . . that ‘horrible hydrocephalous development.’”

The Cobb portrait a strikingly handsome and well turned-out man, a model in a Ralph Lauren ad. The image won a prize on Wikipedia, but it’s nothing like the Folio engraving

My favourite is the Canadian Sanders portrait; it’s not Shakespeare (who was on the evidence a mildly risible looking and quite hairy man), but the likeness of strapping, red-headed, Ontario farm boy in his Sunday go-to-meeting clothes, a kind of Bartholomew Cokes-on-the-morning-of-his-twenty-first-birthday look.

I am very happy that I have come out about these two matters. They’ve been a burden over the years, and I hope that if some of you share with me your discomfort about the name and face of the writer we admire, revere, and even love, you’ll feel more empowered to imagine Shakespeare as a more handsome figure or called by some other, more pleasing name. I’ve been giving these questions a good deal of thought lately, and am thinking of calling him Will de Vergaloo or Francis Canadian Bacon. And I am holding in my mind an image of Joseph Fiennes from *Shakespeare in Love* in one of those scenes where he is in a warm pouting state of desire and creativity.

But let us put aside these external matters and consider what is truly flavourful about the figure that we study. It’s what he wrote, of course. In that poem where Jonson says the Droeshout engraving is a likeness, he also mercifully directs the reader away from the picture:

O could he but have drawn his wit
As well in brass as he hath hit
His face, the print would then surpass
All that was ever writ in brass
But since he cannot, Reader, look
Not on his picture but his book.

As Adam Hooks has recently shown, Shakespeare’s contemporaries thought of him as something like a confectioner of sweet verses and spoke of him as mellifluous and sweet. Francis Meres, just one of many early modern witnesses to Shakespeare’s sweetness that Hooks adduces, wrote that “the sweet wittie soule of Ovid liues in mellifluous & hony-tongued *Shakespeare*, witness his *Venus*, and *Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his private friends.”

Shakespeare is not only called sweet, he devotes much of his writing to sweet descriptions of people and things; “sweet” and its cognates are among his favourite words. The word appears 24 times in *Richard II*—sweet infant breath of sleep, sweet love, sweet Richard, sweet York, sweet music, sweet May, sweet soil; even the roads of England are said to be sweet. O sweet M4 motorway!

We think that sweet foods are not good for us. We think that the energy they bring us is ephemeral, leaving, after a flurry of hyperactivity, only fatigue and a faint residue of ennui, that if they add anything to the substance of our persons, it is fatness and cavities, and that the sheer pleasurable mouth-feel of sweets are suspect in itself and potentially infantilizing and/or aging.

Shakespeare loves the sweetness of language but he, like us, is distrustful of sweetness. He knows that the sweetest things can turn sourest. In *Richard II*, the plain-spoken Northumberland pours out a cloyingly sweet shower of words before the returning Bolingbroke. Along with other bon mots, he says that Bolingbroke's fair discourse hath been as "sugar, / Making the hard way sweet and delectable." Bolingbroke, who is himself capable of high-flown conceitful verse, sees this for just what it is: "words." Elsewhere Shakespeare characterizes false followers as soft, malleable, dog-like candy. Antony says,

The hearts
That spaniel'd me at heels, to whom I gave
Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets
On blossoming Caesar; and this pine is bark'd,
That overtopp'd them all.

Shakespeare's distrust of the shallowness and malleability of sweet words is a problem for me, since, on this account, he seems to be warning us away from him—as if he were saying "the better I taste, the worse I am for you." His distrust of sweet words issues in the vigorous attack on saccharine flattering speech that he mounts in a play like *Lear*, where Cordelia and Kent become radical plain-speakers against Goneril and Regan's professions of love. Kent says

What wilt thou do, old man?
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak,
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound,
When majesty stoops to folly.

And the play ends with the doubled plainness of Lear's discovery that a dog, a horse, a rat can have life when his daughter has no breath at all and Edgar's or Albany's closing:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

This, the play seems to say, does not taste sweet, but it is good for you to take it in and make it part of your understanding of the world and part of how you conduct yourself in the world.

Throughout his career, Shakespeare continues to distrust the sweetness of words. Remember how Miranda's brilliant "O brave new world, that hath such creatures in it!" is answered by Prospero's acerbic, "'Tis new to thee."

Shakespeare, like us, seems to think that real food, which includes any number of comestibles so long as they are not sweet, occasions a less immediate frisson of pleasure, but goes deeper, knits with our corporeal substance, makes us stronger and straighter. Of course, and thank goodness, he goes on writing sweetly, but he is always ready to put the beauty of his own language in question, and always ready to put something closer to plain speech in at critical moments as if he wanted us not to relish the sound but swallow the sense.

Good readers are supposed to take in what they read, digest it, make it part of themselves, and not just savour its flavour in their mouths or merely hold it on their lips. Michel de Montaigne, one of Shakespeare's most favorite conversation partners, says:

Even as birds flutter and skip from field to field to pick up corn, or any grain, and without tasting the same, carry in their bills, therewith to feed their little ones; so do our pedants glean and pick learning from books, and never lodge it further than their lips, only to disgorge it and cast it to the wind.

Elsewhere Montaigne tells us in more positive terms how we are supposed to digest and incorporate the writing of others: "What avails it us to have our bellies full of meat if it be not digested? If it be not transchanged in us, except it nourish, augment, and strengthen us?" ("Pedantism," 57).

Shakespeare shares with Montaigne some part of this ideal of incorporative reading along with the suspicion about sweet words. By the way, Shakespeare's contemporaries' view of him as honey-tongued is of a piece with their selective reproduction of him in commonplace books, as readers pick out and copy particularly memorable and appetizing bits of him, for pleasure and for use, which is just the kind of shallow reading that Montaigne decries.

Now, since I want to argue that Shakespeare tastes good and is good for us, I want to come to the defense of shallow reading. The kind of deep, incorporative reading recommended by Montaigne, where words are substantial food that is transchanged by a process of deep and active engagement, addresses itself to the cultivation of the individual person. Commonplacing and theatrical performance, practices where the very sweetness of the language is key to its rapid movement from text to text or from person to person, bend themselves toward a more communitarian project.

This must be Shakespeare's view too, since the alienation of the avid reader Prospero from the human community must be healed by the drowning of his book and because Shakespeare elsewhere makes splendid fun of the idea of incorporative reading. In *Love Labour's Lost* Sir Nathaniel says of Dull

Sir, he hath never fed of the dainties that are bred
in a book; he hath not eat paper, as it were; he
hath not drunk ink: his intellect is not
replenished; he is only an animal, only sensible in
the duller parts:

And Shakespeare certainly knows how the sweetness of words serves a communitarian project, since his practice as an actor helped to train him up as one of best dramatists for performance. His words feel good in the mouth; and since they are words and not foodstuffs, and since to mouth them is to speak them, they are had and shared at the time and by the same action.

The sweet cornucopia of Shakespeare's language is also and as much for scholars as it is for actors. We create new words to be sure and endlessly, and we have also quite palpably made a durable community here by virtue of our boundless tasting, cooking, and serving of Shakespearean meaning. If I might change one word of John Heminge and Henry Condell's encouragement of the reader: Eat him therefore, and again, and again.