

**2018 SAA Seminar: Early Modern Cultures of Taste 1**  
**Matthew Hunter, Texas Tech University**  
**Samuel Fallon, Wesleyan University**

**Amy Cooper, Rutgers University**

**Taste in *1 Henry IV***

The aesthetic association of judgment with taste was already an established metaphor in the sixteenth century—notably, in Michel Montaigne’s *Essais* and Thomas Elyot’s *The Boke Named the Governour*. My paper brings this historical genealogy to bear on the relationship between literal and metaphorical uses of the word “taste” in Shakespeare’s *1 Henry IV*. In the comical tavern scenes of Act II, scene iv, Falstaff, an infamous lover of food, offers to advise Hal on his princely conduct toward his father. This scene, I argue, is a comical satire of humanists like Thomas Elyot, who had recast the feudal culture of taste as a metaphor for an emerging culture of literary taste: unlike Elyot, who advises “sobrietie in diete,” Falstaff, Hal’s mock-humanist advisor, exposes the gluttonous appetite of humanist-trained courtiers, whose advice to kings reflects their own ambition rather than the interests of state. Shakespeare’s satirical repurposing of taste represents a key moment in the history of literary-aesthetic criticism—a key “ingredient” in what would become the systematic philosophy of art and beauty.

**Liz Fox, University of Massachusetts, Amherst**

**Sex and the City Stage:**

**Fashionable Taste and the Foreign Whore in John Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan***

As London became a world capital of mercantilism in the early seventeenth century, the fashionable tastes of the English elite increasingly favored foreign commodities over domestic goods. As the appetite for foreign commodities intensified, the figure of the foreign prostitute became prominent in city comedies as a vehicle by which Jacobean playwrights invited their audiences to cast an ironic eye on the fetish for foreign goods. This essay conceptualizes Franceschina, the titular Dutch courtesan, as a foreign luxury commodity, arguing that the play warns English audiences of the danger of fetishizing foreign commodities while it simultaneously tempts them to do precisely that. As a result, this essay ultimately looks at how theatre elevates itself to the level of fashionable entertainment in an effort to find its place in a London that is ready to take its place among other global centers of mercantilism.

**Matthew Harrison, West Texas A&M University**

**Junk Food Poems**

Taste classifies, Bourdieu says, and it classifies the classifier, as aesthetic distinctions evince and enact the machinery of social distinction. In his wake, to understand 16<sup>th</sup>-century literary taste has become to draw increasingly finegrained social discriminations, to map out a field of class and institutions. Such is the logical consequence of an aesthetics of discernment, as articulated by seventeenth-century writers like Jonson, in which education, intelligence, or experience refine the palates of auditors and readers, equipping them to select the preferable, the appropriate, or the proper.

**2018 SAA Seminar: Early Modern Cultures of Taste 2**  
**Matthew Hunter, Texas Tech University**  
**Samuel Fallon, Wesleyan University**

But to taste isn't merely to prefer or judge. Rather, to taste is to subject yourself to sensation, a moment's consent to an experience of unpredictable quality, unpredictable intensity. Memories flood in alongside the bright prick of sweetness or unctuousness of fat. Or: the mind tracks the layering of flavors, as mechanical movements of teeth, tongue, and palate happen alongside the unfurling of chemical reactions. Or: the body may revolt, in a spasmodic urge to gag, spit, or swallow.

Following Bourdieu, we neglect other line of aesthetic thought offered up in the metaphor, ones that articulate not discernment but experience. John Harington and Nicholas Breton compare poetry to cheese; Harvey and Stanyhurst object to balductum ballads; many think about particular lyrics as "greasy" or "sweet." Tracking these particular taste metaphors through the sixteenth century, my paper proposes to explore taste as part of an early modern phenomenology of poetics rather than a replication of classed judgment.

**Colleen E. Kennedy, university of Iowa**

**Robert Herrick's "Spicy" Epigrams**

In a comical anxiety over the reception of his *Hesperides* (pub. 1648), Robert Herrick fears that his book will be recycled and reused, and his sweet garden of verse subjected to stench. He addresses several of his epigrams "To His Booke"; he blesses his book and tells it not to fear "spice, or fish, or fire, or close-stools" ("To his Booke" (H-405)). When Herrick vows to collect the dismembered leaves of his poem, he imbues his pages with life, embalms them with the very same spices for which the pages were originally shorn, and provides a perfumed burial. "Spice," in the early modern imagination, comes from places such as Arabia (the "Land of the Spices") the geographic Eden, home to Biblical exiles, and the luxurious Queen of Sheba, linking together the aromas of geographical and erotic paradise. Spice is foreign, piquant, luxurious, and dangerous.

But "spice" as Herrick asserts is also a domestic good—sold at the Grocers, bought by housewives, and used in everyday recipes. There is a wonderful circularity of literary and domestic economics in Herrick's anxious "spice" poems: Herrick writes poems about bridal-cakes and spices and publishes his *Hesperides*; those pages are then used to carry spices home from the market; those same spices are used in the baking of bridal-cakes; Herrick consumes and composes about spiced bridal-cakes; Herrick dies and is embalmed with spices, buried like his own sweet book or a young virgin. This cyclical nature of these "spice" poems underscores the larger circuitousness of his collection, concerned with the ephemeral moment or sensation that is captured in the immortality of the lyric, and always within the particular moment that looks simultaneously to the distant (pagan or early Judeo-Christian) past and the far future (the heavenly afterlife or some version of the Blessed Isles).

Following Ann Coiro's proposition that Herrick is "the poet of anxiety" (Coiro, "Edge" 1), this paper focuses on the "private domestic space" to investigate *Hesperides*. Expanding on the feminist cultural materialism of such scholars as Wendy Wall, Michelle Dowd, and Natasha Korda, I reclaim those piquant trifles and reinsert them into our larger readings of Herrick's

**2018 SAA Seminar: Early Modern Cultures of Taste 3**  
**Matthew Hunter, Texas Tech University**  
**Samuel Fallon, Wesleyan University**

work. By returning to some of the lighter fare in a reading that re-genders and queers *Hesperides*, we can focus on Herrick's personal fears and formal fixations: concerns over gendered labor and poetic output, apprehensions concerning the reception of his poems, and fears of growing old and dying, and how all of these uncertainties are connected to feminine and domestic gustative pleasures.

**Amanda Lehr, Vanderbilt University**

**“My Viscera Burdened”:  
Creative Autocannibalism and the Miltonic Imagination**

No sense is more crucial to the moral framework of John Milton's works than taste. In *Paradise Lost*, however, even before Eve's fatal taste of the apple, Milton's cosmos appears to already suffer from indigestion, from Sin's gnawed bowels to the “Intestine war” in Heaven.<sup>1</sup> My paper considers the *Paradise Lost*'s self-devouring universe as product of tension between Milton's epistemology of “taste” and the humanist idiom of consumption and assimilation for textual production. While a learned reference palette could be a sign of “good taste,” in a humanist framework, Milton's internalization and transformation of his far-ranging source material to create *Paradise Lost* constitutes a massive act of digestion. The pervasive turn toward autocannibalism in the epic's imagery, however, speaks to its struggle with ontology: the text may attempt to “digest” all of postlapsarian literature, yet accessing Eden remains as impossible as “un-eating” Eve's apple. Furthermore, *Paradise Lost*'s sheer ambition to consume all of literary history violates Raphael's doctrine of temperance to the point that the sphere of the text becomes dyspeptic. In addition to glossing the digestive motifs of *Paradise Lost*, my paper examines how conflict between the metaphoric imperatives of taste and digestion expresses an aesthetic crux distinct to the fallen world. [N.B. This is an excerpt from a chapter in progress.]

**Andrew Miller, Princeton University**

**Tasting Jonson**

Jonson's masque Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion floats the proposition that “a good poet differs nothing at all from a master cook.” It's a cook who says this, and we may be inclined to distrust his encroachment upon poetry's prized territory— Jonson, after all, typically seems to privilege “understanding” over the “vulgar palate” in describing and defending his works. But Jonson shows a fitful interest throughout his career in a sort of concocted taste that would conjoin the palates of the senses and the mind. This paper surveys Jonson's shifting attitudes, alternately accommodating and antagonistic, towards the notion that his works ought to be tastefully prepared for the palates his audiences. When Jonson figures his writing as food or drink, he faces a threatening multiplicity: this manner of tasting fragments his unified works into scraps and leftovers, to be consumed in parts. But when he appeals defensively to an abstracted

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, eds. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Random House, 2007), 6.259. For a colorful take on Milton's digestive metaphors, see Kent R. Lenhof's “‘Intestine War’ and ‘the Smell of Mortal Change’: Troping the Digestive Tract in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.”

**2018 SAA Seminar: Early Modern Cultures of Taste 4**  
**Matthew Hunter, Texas Tech University**  
**Samuel Fallon, Wesleyan University**

notion of taste that scorns the vulgar palate in favor of the understanding, Jonson creates the taste by which he is never to be enjoyed.

**Aaron Pratt, Harry Ransom Center—University of Texas**

**A Taste for Playbooks**

London's earliest public theaters may have had socioeconomically variegated audiences, but both the price-point of six pence (or more) and all the evidence we have about reception suggest that when plays found themselves in print, their audiences were primarily from among the relatively well-to-do, from the monied gallants at London's Inns of Court to women of the lower gentry in the provinces. In fact, when we can find English playbooks in the hands of early readers, we find evidence that they became something of a staple in the vernacular diet. But what are we to make of this? What does English readers' taste for printed playbooks tell us about the cultural status of drama in the period? What insight, if any, does the history of collecting and playbook survival give us into how English readers evaluated the plays they read?

**Anna-Claire Simpson, University of Massachusetts, Amherst**

**Disturbing Taste:  
The Baroque Framework of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle***

The allure of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* as a theatrical failure has generated significant criticism speculating on whether or not the play missed the mark in terms of the tastes of the Blackfriars audience. Its metatheatrical double framework upholds that theatre's standard fare of biting satire and city comedy, parodying popular tastes through the disruptive antics of the citizen-spectators, who "ruin" the city comedy they have come to see. Some critics propose the play bombed in the theater because of its satire (too sharp, too mild), while others cast doubt on the evidence of its failure altogether. Some reclaim the quality of the interior city comedy or the role of female spectatorship. While I don't take up the question of failure, the underlying assumption shared by most is that the play aims to appeal to taste at all.

My paper explores the frame of the double play in terms of baroque aesthetics and its implications for activating audiences and dislodging and disturbing them from their usual sense of cultural and social power. The play's overall ambivalence toward familiar theatrical tastes—both popular and elite—gestures toward the work, not of discernment *per se*, but of engagement itself. Or, to borrow Severo Sarduy's dictum, "the work is in the work." I see a kind of anti-taste (not bad, not good) or detachment from the creation of taste in the service of other kinds of distinctions, such as phenomenological and epistemological questions, and theater's unique ability to deal in the interplay between truth and illusion with living bodies. I consider this baroque disturbance in a context apart from topsy-turvy carnivalesque communal festivity and its return to the *status quo*, and instead as the facilitation of the experience of insignificance, which I see as a move, or a retreat from significance (as opposed to the absence of signification).

Andrew Sisson, University of Richmond

**Montaigne's Grotesque Friendship:  
Reading the Aesthetic in "De l'amitié"**

Montaigne's essay "Of Friendship" famously begins with a brief excursus in aesthetic theory. The essayist likens himself to a painter who fills the margins of his work with "crotesques," figures lacking classical proportion and achieving "grace" only through their very failure of decorous coherence. As frequently cited as this passage is in discussing the *Essays*' stylistic program, the fact of its appearance in an essay on the topic of friendship has tended to be taken more or less for granted. The usual way of reading the two subjects together is to see the contrast between classicist and Mannerist aesthetic principles as a figure for the dynamics of loss and mourning involved in Montaigne's relation to the deceased Etienne de La Boétie, whose Stoic personality becomes the absent center embroidered by the *Essays*' writerly project. In this paper I suggest that the logic of "Of Friendship" works equally strongly in the opposite direction. That is, Montaigne's description of his friendship with La Boétie is itself an attempt to work through the problems of aesthetic subjectivity highlighted by the stylistic opposition with which the essay begins.

I propose that the ancient discourse of friendship interests Montaigne—as it does Renaissance thinkers more generally—largely because it centers on a harmony of judgment, a *sensus communis*, that is systematically ambiguous between public and private. Friendship may thus be an ideal vehicle for discussing what it means when judgments of artistic value lose their grounding in objective proportion, floating uncertainly between personal idiosyncrasy and collective consensus. I argue that this is just what "Of Friendship" does. Montaigne responds to the emergence of "taste" and "style" as ambivalently subjectivist criteria of judgment by asking what sort of personality, and what sort of interpersonal relation, could be the ground of such concepts. Finding the answer in a metamorphosis of classical *amicitia*, he points the way toward the social logic that will accompany and support the rise of modern aesthetics.

Joel Elliot Slotkin, Towson University

**"Some women are odd feeders":  
Acquired Tastes and Fantasies of Perverse Female Desire in Early Modern Tragedy**

This paper will examine how early modern ideas about taste, particularly about what we now call acquired tastes, are used to frame and dramatize male anxieties about women desiring morally and/or aesthetically inappropriate objects in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy. In *Othello*, Iago offers racist explanations of Desdemona's desire for Othello as satisfying a perverted (and easily cloyed) taste for the exotic. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet attempts to understand Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius as an appetite for Claudius's supposed physical repulsiveness. And in *The Changeling*, De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna both offer theories about how her tastes might expand to tolerate or even love his unattractiveness. I am interested in accounts of how such tastes are developed, as well as in how the discourse of taste is applied to both moral and aesthetic domains. Finally, these examples also raise questions about the role of misogyny in

**2018 SAA Seminar: Early Modern Cultures of Taste 6**  
**Matthew Hunter, Texas Tech University**  
**Samuel Fallon, Wesleyan University**

explaining aesthetic perversity: how accounts of these perverse acquired tastes are affected by being ascribed to women, and what they say about early modern representations of femininity and masculinity.

**Simon Smith, Shakespeare Institute**

**Sweet Harmony?:  
The Taste and Smell of Early Modern Music**

My paper will build on recent work emphasising the multi-sensory nature of musical experience by considering the taste and smell of music in early modern England. This is not an investigation of neurological synaesthesia, nor indeed of the tastes and smells that according to early modern cultural convention were experienced alongside music (for instance those of food, wine, incense, or sexual activity). Rather, I will explore some of the ways in which the early modern language of musical affect depends centrally upon cultural synaesthesia, drawing on printed music book paratexts, commercial drama, and a range of other textual sources. Consumers were often asked to ‘taste’ musical fruits, banquets, sweetmeats, honey and conserves; less deliciously, music could also be (potentially smelly) breath, wind ‘in their breech’, or lettuce (itself archetypally wind-inducing). Above all, however, music was ubiquitously described as ‘sweet’, and at a crucial moment both in the etymology of the term and in its deployment as a metaphor of affect and judgement. ‘Sweet’ was undergoing a shift in meaning from ‘lickerous’ (i.e. delicious, but with no presumption of a particular flavour) to its modern, sugary sense, even as the arrival in London of movable type to set music facilitated an explosion of English music publishing in the late 1580s and 90s, generating countless paratextual references to musical ‘sweetness’. How far was early modern music considered sugar-sweet, rather than simply tasty? What might this suggest about the affective encounters that early modern subjects were seeking to describe? By tracing the prevalence and the precise forms of gustatory and olfactory metaphors for musical experience, this paper will raise suggestions about the broader interaction of sensory language and embodied sensation, and wonder whether music could, perhaps, have evoked gustatory sweetness in ways now lost after centuries of widespread metaphoric usage.

**Myra E. Wright, Bates College**

**“The Fancy of the Angler” in Thomas Barker’s System of Wild Taste**

Printed anonymously in 1651 as *The Art of Angling* and later known as *Barker’s Delight*, Thomas Barker’s fishing treatise introduces the hopeful angler to a world of taste. The text fulfils the requirements of its genre: it includes instructions on how to harvest and maintain live bait, make artificial flies, and catch freshwater fish with rod and line. Such details had been typical elements of angling manuals for at least two centuries. Barker is unusual, however, in delivering elaborate recipes for the preparation of particular species to be enjoyed at table. He describes how one should dress a pike or an eel, provides several different countries’ methods for stewing trout, and insists that “no better sauce can be made then the Antchovaes sauce.” These recipes are intermingled with the more conventional considerations of other creatures’ appetites. Barker moves fluidly from instruction on “calvoring a trout” to the promise that one can bring such trout

**2018 SAA Seminar: Early Modern Cultures of Taste 7**

**Matthew Hunter, Texas Tech University**

**Samuel Fallon, Wesleyan University**

to feed at a convenient spot on the river by chopping up a quantity of garden worms and “throw[ing] them in where you intend to have your pleasure.” And before either of these lessons comes advice on the treatment of bait: red knotted worms should be kept in a moss-covered pot and served a specially prepared posset so that they will grow “fat and lusty.” Taken as a late example of its genre (coming just before Izaak Walton’s massively successful *Compleat Angler* of 1653), Barker’s treatise shows that early modern people often conceived of their gustatory preferences as part of a system of wild taste, where their appetites were not isolated from the particular hungers of other creatures, but deeply influenced by the eating habits of nonhuman neighbours like bugs and fish.