

SAA 2015 Seminar: Early Modern Food Systems
Convener: Hillary Eklund

Abstracts

Stephanie Chamberlain, “A Tale of the Body Politic: Economic Famine and Trade through the Lens of *Coriolanus*”

My paper takes as its starting point the grain shortage that incites famine-stricken citizens to riot in the opening scene of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. Rebelling against what they see as unfair cost and distribution practices of scarce corn commodities, the play’s working class challenge policy which reserves grain for the use of the state to the detriment of the starving poor. Arguing a kind of “trickle-down” theory, Menenius attempts to appease the rabble by relating a version of Aesop’s tale of the belly, whereby the nutrients received by those at the top of the food chain trickle down to the masses, ultimately benefitting all. As he notes, “touching the weal o’th’ common, you shall find / No public benefit which you receive / But it proceeds or comes from them to you” (1.1.140-142).¹

The tense opening scene depicted in *Coriolanus* gestures to shortages induced in early modern England as a result of the country’s participation in global trade. While merchants were forbidden by statute to export grain from the country, numerous famines resulting from crop failure in the latter part of the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, coupled with the loss of England’s other “bread,” i.e., silver bullion, exported to underwrite the country’s participation in trade, led to widespread shortages impacting all. Ensuing early modern debates mirror, I will argue, the tense confrontation opening Shakespeare’s late Roman tragedy with Menenius’s tale of the belly, reflecting public debates, some of which argued that the investments of scarce English resources would ultimately benefit all.

Michelle Dowd, “Chestnuts and Labor in *Macbeth*”

My paper for the seminar will examine a brief moment in *Macbeth* that opens up possibilities for reading forms of labor—such as women’s agricultural work—that the drama rarely represents directly onstage. The three witches’ brief discussion of the sailor’s wife in Act 1 of *Macbeth* (“A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap, / And munched, and munched, and munched” [1.3.3-4]) is typically read (when it has been discussed at all) in terms of what it can tell us about the witches’ neglected position within a culture of charity. But I suggest that this brief exchange can also tell us more about the network of labor in which the witches and the sailor’s wife might have been engaged. In particular, the reference to the chestnuts, an imported food product at the time, locates the witches and their supernatural language within a broader narrative of labor, trade, and horticulture that has gone unremarked, yet which opens up new insights into the witches’ role within the tragedy by suggesting the global rather than purely domestic implications of their prognostic vision and, in turn, of Macbeth’s fate. Using this brief dramatic moment as a miniature case study, I hope to model some of the ways in which attending to the (often elusive) language of work in the drama can help elucidate the theater reflected and shaped emerging capitalist modes of production during this crucial period in England’s social and economic history.

¹ All Shakespeare citations come from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2nd ed. (New York and London: Norton, 2008).

Ernst Gerhardt, “Dearth Manuals and the Politics of Commensality”

Early printed dietaries such as the *Governayle of helthe*, Thomas Elyot’s *The Castel of Helth* and Andrew Boorde’s *Regyment or a Dyetary of Helth* describe food in terms of humoral effect on individual bodies. While these dietaries foreground food’s role in the regulation of individuals’ humors, several alimentary texts printed in the late-sixteenth and early seventeenth-centuries specifically address the problem of dearth and how to feed oneself and one’s neighbors during periods of food scarcity. In this essay, I explore the ways in which these later texts—Richard Gardiner’s *Profitable instructions for the manuring, sowing, and planting of kitchin gardens*, Hugh Plat’s *Sundrie new and artificiall remedies against famine*, and Gervase Markham’s *Hunger’s Prevention*—address hunger as a feature of collective rather than of individual experience. In doing so, these texts configure hunger as a collective affect which compels social action. By foregrounding the transformation between two collectivities—one configured by a collective experience of hunger and one configured by hunger’s alleviation—these texts make food labor and production central to commensal politics.

Victoria Jackson, “Food as Performance Media in Middleton’s *No Wit Like A Woman’s*”

This paper uses two banquet scenes in Thomas Middleton’s city comedy *No Wit Like A Woman’s* (first performed 1611) as a case study to explore the performative elements of banquet delicacies such as sweetmeats and sugar confectionary. This little studied play is of interest because both banquet scenes highlight the theatrical potential of confectionary: it is here a prop that generates debate, vulgarity and humour on-stage. The banquet in scene 4, for example, is furnished with twelve individual sugar sculptures each elaborately molded into one of the astrological signs. In their complex methods of table service and consumption, I argue that the edible sculptures prompted complicated oral, gestural and corporeal performances from the banquet’s host, guests and servants. Banquet guests begin to adopt and perform the characteristics of the individual sculpture placed in front of them, so Sir Gilbert Lambstone – a suitor to a wealthy widow also present at the banquet – seated at the sign for Taurus, assumes both the ‘heels and horns’ of a bull. By applying theorized concepts of performativity to the material culture of banquet confectionary, I argue that Middleton dramatizes the theatricality and agency of sugar confectionary within the grander theatre of real life: it conveyed meaning not simply through its ownership or display, but through its usage.

David Morrow, “Local food for thought: Shakespeare’s natural philosophers and the agrarian crisis”

Literary critics most commonly explore the upheaval in the early modern English countryside through the issue of enclosure and the figure of the vagrant. Such work is often delimited by the elite cast Shakespeare puts on representations of vagrancy—through the individual hardship experienced by characters such as Orlando, Edgar, and King Lear, for example. This paper explores, by contrast, exchanges involving “natural philosopher” Clowns—including Corin, Old Shepherd, and the fishermen in *Pericles*—who offer alternative responses to the era’s pervasive expropriations, food shortages, and hunger. When these characters produce political and philosophical wisdom from the material stuff of their agricultural labor Shakespeare gestures to the value of situated, local knowledge of the land—so much of which fled with primary producers during England’s agricultural revolution. I aim to show that these moments in the drama share ideological space with aims of authors of agricultural manuals, including Arthur Standish and Gervase Markham, who sought to alleviate food shortages by fostering more educated, sustainable relationships between farmers and the land. Looking at these positive responses to the restructuring of English food production provides a sense of what was being lost in Shakespeare’s day, while offering us models for new forms of relationships with our food and farmland in this present moment of crisis.

David Ruiter, “Shakespeare’s Table”

In terms of hospitality, tables are pretty important historically, and they function importantly in Shakespeare’s plays. With some of Shakespeare’s most remembered table settings—Macbeth’s, Titus’, Prospero’s—we find both the hospitable and the inhospitable at play in a rather vicious, even deadly, transactional gathering. In these moments and places, the table appears to become a location of “pretend” hospitality, a staged event that does not do what it purports to do. There is displacement, disappearance, and indigestion, but little that can be considered healthful or community-inspiring breaking of bread.

Why does Shakespeare, in effect, turn these tables so precipitously? And what does this mean to those gathered for the events?

And how might that relate to those of us who wish to feast on Shakespeare now? Who has a seat, and who does not? Who feeds well, and who leaves famished?

All in all it seems a much more monstrous matter than I might have guessed, and one I will be glad to discuss with you in Vancouver.

Rob Wakeman, “Follow the Scent: Ben Jonson’s Fast Food Economies”

The market calendar creates communities of eaters bound together by common diets. Whether it is the feast day of *Bartholomew Fair* or the fast day of *Every Man in His Humour*, Jonson’s city comedies uses the bodily, sensory experiences of a live audience to convey the material qualities of food and their ability to hook the nose of the city’s consumers. On fish days the stench of herring hangs in the air; in a diatribe against fasting, Oliver Cob says of a herring that he “smell[s] his ghost, ever and anone” (*EMIHH* 1.3.20). For Rabbi Busy on St. Bartholomew’s Day, it is nigh impossible “to decline or resist the good titillation of the famelic sense, which is the smell” of Ursula’s roast pork. “Huh, huh, huh,” snorts Busy. “Follow the scent. Enter the tents of the unclean” (*BF* 3.2.82-85). This paper considers the affective powers of market aromas in Ben Jonson’s London and the use of smell in theater to conjure the specter of food animals kept out of view. Especially in urban environments where consumers are sequestered from sites of production, economic, political, religious, and other cultural forces, transform meat animals into abstractions along the path from farm to fork. The lingering smell of animals’ “ghosts,” however, reminds the audience of the animals’ continued agency even into death.