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DANGEROUS FEASTS AND THE SOCIAL APPETITE IN *MACBETH* AND *TITUS ANDRONICUS*

Natalia BRZOZOWSKA

Feasting has forever been known as the time of merrymaking, yet certain well-known banquets of Shakespeare's plays consciously break the stereotype. Sociology often terms feasts as time and place for the consolidation of personal ties, cementing social order and the generous displaying of status. However, in Macbeth, two feasts build up to an inevitable doom. In the first, Duncan's freely chosen role of "the guest", in accordance to socio-anthropological hospitality rules, and his murder are linked in a similar manner to horrify the audience. In the second, there is a breakdown in the maintenance of expressive control which underlines Macbeth's inability to cope with his new role as a monarch. Titus Andronicus, while serving the hearts of Tamora's sons, plays out a shocking parody of the traditional family feast. The final banquet is bound to end in carnage. All three examples are analyzed through the scope of sociology, using role theory (from Linton through Goffman to the most recent takes on role-taking), selected modern theories of food and nutrition, as well as the older theories of deviance (Becker, Sutherland, Znaniecki).

Les banquets ont toujours été perçus comme une occasion festive. Cependant, quelques scènes de banquets célèbres dans les pièces de Shakespeare vont sciemment à l'encontre de ce stéréotype. La sociologie envisage les repas festifs comme le lieu de la consolidation des liens personnels, assurant l'ordre social et permettant à chacun d'afficher légitimement son statut. Néanmoins, dans *Macbeth*, deux banquets conduisent les personnages à leur perte. Au cours du premier, le choix de Duncan de se conformer à son rôle d'hôte, suivant les règles socio-anthropologiques de l'hospitalité, ainsi que son meurtre sont présentés de manière similaire afin de terrifier les spectateurs. Au cours du second, la dramaturgie est rompue, ce qui souligne l'incapacité de Macbeth de faire face à son nouveau rôle de monarque. En offrant à Tamora le cœur de ses enfants, Titus Andronicus accomplit un acte scandaleux parodiant les repas familiaux. Le banquet final ne peut que finir en carnage. Ces trois exemples seront analysés à travers le prisme de la sociologie, à l'aide de la théorie des rôles (de Linton à Goffman, en prenant en compte les dernières études sur le rôle social), de certaines théories récentes sur la nourriture et la nutrition, ainsi que des théories plus anciennes sur la déviance (Becker, Sutherland, Znaniecki).

The Polish theatre critic Jan Kott stated that *Macbeth* is in its core a play about murder and blood. Another literary scholar dubbed *Titus Andronicus* a "catalog of abominations" (interestingly enough, suggesting the quality of the play an abomination in itself). The scholarly focus on the concept of "deviance" in the two plays is not a new phenomenon. A sociological standpoint, however, could still be considered underrepresented in literary studies. Modern sociology of literature has been evolving since the 1920s, from the Frankfurt school and the Neomarxist perspective. The trend of analysing literary works of art, the literary market and reception of books through particular sociological theories was further developed in the 1950s, when the choice genre to be studied was the novel (which, according to sociologists such as Georg Lukacs, best portrayed the

social background of a given period and was therefore an important asset for a sociological examination of particular times). It is worth mentioning that sociology of literature is no longer limited to the Neomarxist outlook. Contemporary studies of literature seem to slightly undervalue the contribution of sociology. Especially neglected are the most recent theories which may, if used with caution, be successfully employed to obtain a better understanding of the literary work of art. However, every theory's methodology must be carefully assessed. Certain theories may not be universal enough to apply them to every play or book. New Historicism, which draws strongly from, if not the sociological, then the social perspective, has also received its share of criticism. Sociological assessment of Shakespeare's plays does not purport to convey the only truth about works of art, but merely a new perspective to certain concepts. Modern sociological (or socio-criminological) theories of deviance, as well as new approaches to food and nutrition (including interdisciplinary socio-anthropological viewpoints) and the 1960s concept of role theory may serve to explain the intricacies of the dark aspect of Shakespearean feasts.

The term deviance must be defined thoroughly as the sociological concept varies somewhat from the non-academic usage of the term. Scholars differ in its characterization, for instance, Becker states that "the deviant is one to whom the label has been successfully applied",¹ while Akers draws on "behaviour which deviates in a disapproved direction".² The sociological definition of deviance is based on three dimensions³ – expectation (linked to the norms which regulate behaviour and state what is acceptable and what is not), the act of violation and reaction (a social response to the deviation). "Deviance cannot exist if people don't have some idea of what is appropriate, if someone hasn't been perceived as or accused of violating some social norm, and if others haven't reacted to the alleged transgression".⁴ The reaction to deviance is also part of the definition, and will be vital in Becker's model. The concept of deviance has been

¹ Howard Becker, *The Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, New York, Free Press, 1963, p. 9.

² Ronald L. Akers, *Deviant Behaviour: A Social Learning Approach*, Belmont, Wadsworth, 1977, p. 11.

³ David P. Aday, *Social Control at the Margins*, Belmont, Wadsworth, 1990.

⁴ David M. Newman, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, Thousand Oaks, Pine Forge Press, 2008, p. 225.

especially used in criminological theories that attempt to explain why and on what grounds crime is committed. The concepts of Edwin Sutherland, Howard S. Becker and Florian Znaniecki, who all contributed to the understanding of the term, shall be returned to.

The sociology of food is an emergent sub-discipline which still waits for the concretization of its theories. Analyses of feasting are still scarce (sociologists tend to focus more on, for instance, the role of the family in dietary matters or the social impact of the distribution of foods), however, other social disciplines seem to have borrowed from sociology in their own studies of the feast.⁵ Consequently, one could make a connection between various aspects of the sociology of food and nutrition and, for example, cultural anthropology or archaeology, as even archaeologists note that “there is now a growing awareness of the value of studying the social context of food”.⁶ Feasts are an interesting topic for the sociologist for various reasons, mostly because they are “communal food consumption events that differ in some way from everyday practice”.⁷ What usually distinguishes the feast from other meals are the quality and quantity of the served food, the size of the party and, most importantly, the social purposes of the occasion (overt or covert). The banquet’s nature is generally celebratory; it is most often associated with merry-making but it may also commemorate a solemn event. Banqueting and feasting are recognized as activities which consolidate social ties and bring a certain community together. The elaborate feast may also be a symbol of wealth or status (two factors denoting social goods). “Food and feasting are increasingly recognized as having played a prominent role in the emergence of social hierarchies and the negotiation of power and identity”.⁸ The host usually holds the power position, but also the burden of responsibility for the guests’ well-being. Meals in general function as a form of ritual,⁹ feasting at banquets, however, is ritualized even more as it

⁵ Michael Dietler, “Feast and Commensal Politics in Political Economy: Food, Power and Status in Prehistoric Europe”, in *Food and the Status Quest: an Interdisciplinary Perspective*, eds. P. Wiessner and W. Schiefenovel, Providence and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 1996.

⁶ Marijke van der Veen, “When is Food a Luxury?”, *World Archaeology* 34, 2003, p. 405.

⁷ Michael Dietler, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁸ Tamara L. Bray, ed., *The Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting in Early States and Empires*, New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003, p. 1.

⁹ William Alex McIntosh, *Sociologies of Food and Nutrition*, New York, Plenum Press, 1996, p. 64.

serves specific social functions and follows set rules. Certain behaviours are expected from both the hosts and the guests of the feast. Following the terminology used by Erving Goffman in his dramaturgical metaphor, the feasting party takes certain roles. The roles become stiffer if the banqueting party is a large group, and the occasion is official: the members are not necessarily linked by family ties or informal relations.

Though basic social elements of the feast are retained to this day, the Elizabethan feast was an even more ritualistic spectacle than the modern banquet. It is likely that feast occasions were more strictly determined. "So important were these meals that they were recorded for posterity in cookbooks, menus, and as rules for kitchen organization and table manners".¹⁰ Those publications became bestsellers in the Renaissance world, as the anonymous *A Proper New Booke of Cookery* (1575) or Thomas Dawson's *The Good Huswifes Jewell* (1585). Shakespeare's plays, though they often portrayed events from a distant historical past, are firmly rooted in the Elizabethan mentality. Most often the old customs presented in the plays were just a Renaissance re-imagining of, in this case, medieval Scotland (as in *Macbeth*) or Ancient Rome (in *Titus Andronicus*). The characteristics of an Elizabethan banquet are closer to the stage world of the tragedies than the factual modes of the medieval or Ancient feast. Renaissance banquets were "explicitly political in nature, and include[d] both overt messages honouring guests and more subtle interchanges of meaning".¹¹ The symbolic interactionist perspective of social roles focuses on such communications of meaning and symbols. Symbolic interactionism underlined the flexibility of role-taking and role-making. One of the first role theoreticians, Ralph Linton, proposed to associate roles with status, naming the former the dynamic aspect of the latter. Naturally, status markers are vital in the analysis of roles, yet they are not the only element roles may be judged by. Sociologists often refer to the dichotomy between ascribed and achieved status (which in turn becomes also the ascribed role and achieved role dichotomy). Achieving a role means realizing it through individual accomplishments. This method requires more effort and may be

¹⁰ Ken Albala, *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2007, p. vii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

associated with competition,¹² yet the transition is smoother and easier if one has been sufficiently socialized – i.e. prepared – to act out the achieved role. Ascribed roles are “bestowed upon” a person through the acts of others or through specific circumstances. An example of such “others” and such “circumstances” is Macbeth’s encounter with the Weird Sisters, where they literally shower on him a dangerous mixture of ascribed and achieved roles. The role of “Thane of Glamis” and “Thane of Cawdor” are achieved roles Macbeth attained through his victories. The last role of King is ascribed before it can be achieved. From now on, Macbeth struggles to win and perform a role he has not been adequately prepared for.

Analyses of the motives and choices of certain Shakespearean characters are only possible because of their psychological depth, which makes them appear three-dimensional and believable. They seem to follow paths defined by certain social theories. Macbeth’s story may be compared to Becker’s so-called “deviational career”. He comes upon certain “career contingencies” which determine his next steps forward in the “deviational career”. The first step is committing an act (the murder of Duncan) which breaks a given set of rules. The question posed is why this first step is undertaken – where the source of the character’s unrest lies. In sociological terms, the first step is often associated with clashing or difficult expectations – such as the ambitions of Lady Macbeth and her desires to cast her husband into the roles she deems more suitable and attractive. The first banquet is planned to be a celebration of victories and of Macbeth’s honour and bravery, yet turns out to be an appalling example of deviance from hospitality rules. Duncan has a right to believe in the safety of the occasion, and enters the passive role of the guest – he expects (judging from general cultural feasting rules) that he will be treated honourably, therefore, he submits himself to the care of his hosts, who are in turn expected to protect the King and make him comfortable. Macbeth comments on these well-known rules himself:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,

¹² Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man*, New York, Appleton, 1936, p. 115.

Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. (I.vii.13-16)¹³

Shakespeare doubles the horror: the deviant act of killing the King is now not only a political murder, but a preposterous crime of slaying a trusting and innocent guest. Macbeth now begins to enter the desired, ascribed role of King. The next factors that influence Macbeth's deviational career are based on motivation, desires and ambitions,¹⁴ which must be fulfilled if the individual wishes to retain a sense of balance. The fear of losing what he attained by the murder of Duncan drives Macbeth to other crimes. Because of his specific new social position (or social role), he must engage in certain activities and give a good role performance. The link between these ideas and Erving Goffman's analyses becomes clear when one considers notions such as role strain, role ambiguity or breakdowns in the maintenance of expressive control. Yet, Lady Macbeth attempts to save the second feast and urges Macbeth to do his duty. However, in the end, she will also lose face. The concept of "face" and the idea of the maintenance of expressive control may be closely related. "Face" may stand for the "front", which is "that part of the individual performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance (...) the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance".¹⁵ It is the second banquet that is the turning point in both Macbeth's performance and – probably – the societal reaction to his deviational career. Macbeth's visions break the social norms of feasting, and his reactions become unsuitable for the role of king which the Witches ascribed to him – "a performer may accidentally convey incapacity, impropriety or disrespect by momentarily losing muscular control of himself".¹⁶ With Banquo's ghost tormenting him, Macbeth cannot play the host successfully, which is commented upon by his wife.

¹³ All the quotations from Shakespeare's plays refer to *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, second edition, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁴ Howard Becker, chapter 2: "Kinds of Deviance: A Sequential Model", *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 22.

¹⁶ Goffman, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

My royal lord,
 You do not give the cheer. The feast is sold
 That is not often vouched, while 'tis a-making,
 'Tis given with welcome. To feed were best at home;
 From thence, the sauce to meat is ceremony;
 Meeting were bare without it. (III.iv.31-36)

Lady Macbeth underlines the fact that there is far more to the banquet than just food – without the ritual, there is no feast. Macbeth tries to compose himself and maintain the performance, but he does not succeed.

You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting,
 With most admired disorder. (III.iv.107-108)

Following Becker's model, until the feast, Macbeth was still safe as the "hidden deviant". During the feast, as his front starts to disintegrate, and he loses control of himself, he is slowly beginning to enter the image of the "pure deviant" which will characterize him until his death.¹⁷ The party must have noted the changes within the hero.

I pray you, speak not. He grows worse and worse.
 Question enrages him. At once, good night.
 Stand not upon the order of your going,
 But go at once. (III.iv.117-120)

As Lady Macbeth sees that her husband is incapable of playing the role well, all she can do is simply order the guests out. The banquet is a failure in terms of proper feasting. It is worth mentioning the guests do not leave in their order of precedence. As remarked, banquets were ritualized performances, therefore the notion of hierarchy – who sat where, who spoke or ate first etc. – was of prime importance. In Macbeth's court, status markers prevail, therefore hierarchy is highly valued. This reversal of order reveals Macbeth's failure in his performance as the host.

The concept of performing roles seems not to be alien to Titus Andronicus, as he directly states that he will "play the cook" during the last, gruesome banquet. The feast in *Titus Andronicus* is officially prepared for a legitimate – that is, a culturally recognized – occasion.

¹⁷ Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 596-608.

Publicly, the party states the final banquet is thrown to bring around reconciliation and peace:

Rome's emperor, and nephew, break the parle;
 These quarrels must be quietly debated.
 The feast is ready which the careful Titus
 Hath ordain'd to an honourable end,
 For peace, for love, for league, and good to Rome:
 Please you, therefore, draw nigh, and take your places.

(v.iii.19-24)

By the time of the last feast Titus realizes that he is surrounded by enemies, who conspire to bring him down. Tamora and her sons, with the help of the Moor Aaron, have committed every atrocity that could be imagined by an Elizabethan audience. Their last actions are designed to disturb the mind of Titus and lead him into insanity. Though somewhat passive and dejected before the last act, Titus now gains strength and only feigns madness to achieve his own goal – the ultimate revenge, for which the banquet will be the perfect occasion. This shift may be explained by Titus' reanalysis of the occurrences of deviant acts that took place up to this point. Tamora, Aaron, Chiron and Demetrius are all deviants who, according to Becker's model, would be labelled "pure deviants", as their attempts to conceal crimes are not very convincing. The four have no regard when it comes to social rules, though it is worth mentioning that they do have knowledge of them and fully understand them – the antisocial character drawing of typical Elizabethan villains. Yet, deviant acts do not always equal villainy. The Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki, who recognizes several types of human profiles, also mentions the deviants among them.¹⁸ The last group consists of those who are *over* or *under* the rank of "normal". Deviants disregard social norms, but they also may become innovators, who redefine norms and who are the avant-garde of society. Sociologists try to avoid the labels of "good" and "evil". Titus submits to deviance himself, by going against accepted behaviours: he pays Tamora back for every crime with double the intensity. Once he realizes that he has to fight an enemy who does not care about norms or authority, he begins to use the same weapon. Edwin Sutherland's

¹⁸ Florian Znaniecki, *Ludzie Teraźniejsi a Cywilizacja Przyszłości*. [*The People of Today and the Civilization of Tomorrow*], Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2001, p. 124-297.

differential association theory, used both in sociology of deviance and criminology, states that “a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of law”.¹⁹ Titus knows that to achieve any goal he must play the same game. He uses the grotesque to underline the menace of his last actions. He dresses in a cook’s garb, symbolically taking the role of both cook and host of the banquet.

Come, come, be every one officious
 To make this banquet, which I wish may prove
 More stern and bloody than the Centaurs’ feast.
 So, now bring them in, for I will play the cook,
 And see them ready ’gainst their mother comes. (v.ii.200-204)

By dressing up as the cook, he demeans himself. He contrasts this humble role with that of a host and a ruler, creating confusion within the social group of the invited guests. This initial shock is his first step in the gruesome spectacle that will follow.

TITUS. Welcome, my gracious lord; welcome, dread queen;
 Welcome, ye war-like Goths; welcome, Lucius;
 And welcome, all. Although the cheer be poor,
 ’Twill fill your stomachs; please you eat of it.
 SATURNINUS. Why art thou thus attir’d, Andronicus?
 TITUS. Because I would be sure to have all well
 To entertain your highness, and your empress.
 TAMORA. We are beholding to you, good Andronicus. (v.iii.26-29)

By serving Tamora the pastry which contained the remains of her sons, he finally revenges the deeds done to his family. There seems to be an inversion of the theme of the mother pelican who sacrifices her own flesh to feed her offspring. In this scene, the young are the ones who are sacrificed, but no one’s life is saved. The problem of cannibalism as defined by sociology (on the one hand, it is a taboo in Western culture, and on the other – a highly ritualized phenomenon in the symbolic dimension) opens many interpretative possibilities, especially when one considers the symbolic nature of the last banquet. Another deviant act is based on the idea of the banquet as a delicious treat, a form of gift from the host – as the guest eats what belongs to her, it isn’t a proper feast at all, rather a gruesome ritualized ‘mass’.

¹⁹ Robert J. Franzese, *The Sociology of Deviance: Differences, Tradition, and Stigma*, Springfield, Charles C.Thomas, 2009, p. 79.

where the bodies of Tamora's sons serve as the Eucharist. Everything is reversed. However, there is more to be done. Titus realizes that the world he has been living in has become, as he states, "a wilderness of tigers". This anomic (using Durkheim's term of normlessness) reality needs to be redefined. Deviations from norms reached a critical point, to draw from Sutherland's theory – violating norms seems to make more sense than following them. Nothing but a drastic purification of the Roman reality will work. The feast turns into a cathartic mass murder scene as it is anticipated that nothing more can be done for Rome – this society must start anew.

It has been mentioned that *Titus Andronicus* seems to follow the rules of a revenge tragedy, but then the play simply goes too far in its interpretation of the genre. Some critics state that this may have been caused by Shakespeare's inexperience, or his misuse of the Senecan model, and label the play as one of his worst creations. However, this critical trends seems now slightly outdated. One could attempt to see the tragedy in a more holistic light (many literary scholars, notably Ann Christensen,²⁰ and film directors – from Peter Brook to Deborah Warner or Julie Taymor – underlined its topicality). Many events portrayed in the play are just apparently justifiable and happen according to certain set customs – under the veneer of many socially acceptable labels: ritual sacrifice, honourable revenge, loyalty to the tough but traditional rules – many deviant acts have been committed. It is possible the play is so drastic because it was Shakespeare's idea to present the decaying picture of ancient Rome, where deviance and bloody revenge rule, and which must be purged and reformed by the *overnormal* deviant Titus (the label "overnormal" is an indirect translation of Znaniecki's idea regarding the forward-thinking deviants, who redefine a 'defective' reality by their disregard of conventions, as contrasted with those pathological minds who simply do not understand social rules). *Macbeth*, however, seems to play on the juxtaposition of safe order and danger. The feasts' official social function is a celebratory occasion for the people to reaffirm their ties, to display their status, yet they both end in disaster – a gross deviation of social norms by Macbeth and his wife. The killing of

²⁰ Ann Christensen, "Playing the Cook: Nurturing Men in *Titus Andronicus*", in eds. Holger Klein and Rowland Wymer, *Shakespeare and History (Shakespeare Yearbook)*, Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

Duncan is the first step in Macbeth's deviational career, and the second banquet offers the Scottish lords a glimpse of a deteriorating mind.

The use of sociological theories to analyze these events was initially influenced by the fact that feasts are not only social in nature, they are ritualized, semi-political spectacles and interesting instances of interactive processes. Symbolic interactionism with its own variety of role theory may serve to understand the performative aspect that should not be neglected. Socio-criminology successfully explores the danger in darker Shakespearean feasts. However, there are almost no works linking the newest developments in the sociology of food and nutrition to meals and cooking in Shakespeare's plays. This field of research remains an uncharted territory in literary studies.

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