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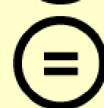

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Fitzpatrick, Joan. 2008a. "Early Modern Dietaries and the Jews: The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta." Shakespeare's World/World Shakespeares: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Brisbane, 2006. Edited by R. S. White, Christa Jansohn and Richard Fotheringham. Newark. University of Delaware Press. pp. 98-107.

Early Modern Dietaries and the Jews: The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta by Joan Fitzpatrick (The University of Northampton, UK)

Early modern dietaries make clear the view that food and drink are not mere necessities but also indices of one's position in relation to complex ideas about rank, nationality, and spiritual well-being; careful consumption might correct moral as well as physical shortcomings. Anxiety surrounding consumption was reinforced by tirades against excess in dietary literature, a phenomenon that undoubtedly reflected the stance taken by religious texts such as the Homily Against Gluttony and Drunkenness. Yet asceticism was also denounced since excessive fasting was associated with the monastic life and was by some considered as indulgent as gluttony. The dietaries are an eclectic genre: some contain recipes for the reader to try[1], others give tips on more general lifestyle choices, such as which is the best location to build a house[2] or focus on a particular body part or dietary failing[3] but all offer advice on how to maintain good health via diet. Although some are more stern and humourless than others, the overwhelming impression is that of food as an ally in the battle against disease and ill-health as well as a potential enemy.

Many dietaries were revised and reprinted in the period (indicating their popularity) and typify the genre's condemnation of excess and the tendency to blame human disease on feeding practices. Most of the dietaries were written in English but some were translated out of European languages and so made available to an English audience[4]. Although distinct in many ways there is some tendency toward repetition in later dietaries of earlier advice; what we might term plagiarism they appear to have regarded as building upon earlier authorities. The dietaries provide clear evidence of the increasing availability of imported, exotic foods, such as rice, as well as the continued importance of staple foods, such as bread, and although there is often consensus they differ at times on whether a particular food is harmful to human health. Some odd beliefs emerge, in particular that vegetables and especially fruit should be treated with caution (regarded as an indulgence, as it were) and that animal flesh (they tend to use the term 'meat' to signify food in general) was especially good for the body. [5]

The Jewish Diet

The Pentateuch or five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) dictate what Jews may eat. Of the "beasts of the earth" Jews may eat any animal that has cloven hooves and chews its cud (Leviticus 11:3; Deuteronomy 14:6) but any land mammal that does not have both of these qualities is forbidden. The Pentateuch specifies that the camel, the rock badger, the hare and the pig may not be eaten because each lacks one of these two qualifications. Sheep, cattle, goats and deer may be eaten. From the water anything that has fins and scales may be consumed (Leviticus 11:9; Deuteronomy 14:9) so fish like tuna, carp, salmon and herring are permitted but shellfish such as lobsters, oysters, shrimp, clams and crabs are forbidden. Although birds of prey or scavengers are not allowed (Leviticus 11:13-19; Deuteronomy 14:11-18) other birds, including chicken, geese, ducks and turkeys are permitted. Rodents, reptiles, amphibians, and most insects are forbidden (Leviticus 11:29-30, 42-43) and Jews may not eat animals that have died from natural causes (Deuteronomy 14:21). The Pentateuch also prohibits the consumption of blood, because it is believed to contain the spirit of the animal

(Leviticus 7:26-27; 17:10-14); moreover, mammals and birds that may be eaten must be slaughtered in accordance with Jewish law (Deuteronomy 12:21).[6]

Of course the most widely-known Jewish dietary law, and one specifically referred to in The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta is the prohibition against pork [7], a food Galen praises:

Of all foods . . . pork is the most nutritious. Athletes display the most striking proof of this fact, for if one day they eat an equal weight of some other food when training for their exercises, on the next day they grow weaker, but also clearly show signs of malnutrition. Similar proof of this theory is given when boys are working out in the gym and when others undertake some tough and strenuous activity, such as digging for example. (Grant 2000, 154)

Although the dietaries generally bowed to the wisdom of Galen, many had reservations about his favourite meat: Andrew Boorde refers to Galen who "with other auncient & approbat doctours doth prayse porke" but announces "thys I am sure of, I dyd neuer loue it". Boorde cites the bible, which identifies the pig as an unclean beast, but notes that this was only true of certain countries. He refers to the Jews, Saracens and Turks who have "as much wyt, wysdom, reason, & knowlege for the sauyte [safety] of theyr body, as any chrysten man hathe" but warns that "they al lacked grace, for as moche as they do nat know or knowledge jesu chryst", thus suggesting that a lack of faith undermines otherwise solid views on diet (Boorde 1547, f2v). Still, Boorde agrees with Galen that pork is good for those involved in physical activity, noting that bacon is "good for carters and plowmen, the whiche be ever labouringe in the earth or dung" (Boorde 1547, f3r). Thomas Twyne claims swine's flesh is beneficial to health (Twyne 1576, C1r) but Thomas Moffett is of the opinion not only that it lacks nourishment but that it causes sickness and appeals most to wantons (Moffett 1655, K1r-K1v) and William Bullein warns that pork is "not good to euerie complexion, nor euerie age" (Bullein 1595, J2r). Crucially, quite a few authorities draw connections between the eating of pork and cannibalism. John Partridge warns against eating pigs because they "will eate their owne Pigges and feede upon vile Carrion which causeth them many diseases" (Partridge 1588, G6r).William Bullein also mentions "Their foule feeding of most stinking filth and carion. . . . the eating of their owne pigges, and oftentimes pulling children out of the cradle for their dinners" (Bullein 1595, J1v). Thomas Cogan claims that "the flesh of a swine hath such likenesse to mans flesh, both in savor and taste, that some have eaten man's flesh instead of porke" (Cogan 1636, R2v) and Moffett suggests that the Romans liked the "dainty meat being taken blood and all out of the Sowes belly ere she was ready to farrow, eating them after a little bruising in the blood, no less greedily then some do the pudding of a bruised Deer" (Moffett 1655, K1r). Notably, the Jewish prohibition against pork and blood products makes the charge that Jews cannibalized their victims and consumed their blood in rituals, a charged rehearsed throughout history, especially perverse and indicates the contradictory nature of much of the debate surrounding them. As we shall see, The Merchant of Venice engages with the tradition of alleged Jewish cannibalistic savagery but is alert to the contradictions thrown-up by the stereotype and the general view expressed about pork in the dietaries is especially relevant to the characterization of Shylock.

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As James Shapiro pointed out, there was a widespread belief that Jews carried with them a distinctive smell, the foetor judaicus (Shapiro 1996, 36-37). As A. Cohen noted, the smell was thought to emanate from their black and putrid bood, which was considered the result of a divine curse inflicted on them for their part in the death of Christ and which thus made them constitutionally distinct from Christians (Cohen 1943, 322). In Dyets Dry Dinner Henry Butts claims "The Jewes are great Goose-eaters: therefore their complexion is passing melancholious, their colour swort, and their diseases very perillous" (Butts 1599, K8r). Eating goose has apparently made them melancholy: Butts' focus is on their diet and it is this, rather than any curse, that is responsible for what were considered traditional Jewish attributes. In 1609 Vicente Furtado, a Spaniard, told the Inquisition that when visiting two Jewish brothers living in London four years earlier, he was urged "not [to] eat pork or rabbit, nor believe in Christ" (Shapiro 1996, 72). Butts does not mention rabbit, but he does praise hare, a food also forbidden to Jews, as "good for those that would be leane & faire" and refers to the "receiued opinion, that vse of Hares fleshe procureth beautie, fresh colour, and cheerfull countenance . . . in so much as the Italians haue a by-word, which speaketh thus of a faire man, He hath eaten an Hare" (Butts 1599, K2r). Although 'fair' might mean handsome it also suggests pallour and that the Jews were forbidden hare would help explain their traditional swarthiness. Galen also recommends hare which he claims is more wholesome than beef or lamb but, like Butts, disapproves of goose and also ostrich which he considers "much more difficult to digest" than the meat of other birds (Grant 2000, 171).

Butts' reference to Jews as melancholy, a common notion in the period, has implications for the representation of the Jew in The Merchant of Venice and The Jew of Malta. The dietaries repeatedly invoke food as one of the main causes of melancholy: Timothie Bright's A Treatise of Melancholy and Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, both cited by David Houston Wood for their discussions of the physical and mental consequences of melancholy (Wood 2002, 188-189, 196), also focus on the role of diet in provoking and curing the condition. Bright notes "The causes of excess of this humour are diuerse, and all (except it be receaued from the parent) spring from fault of diet . . . " and proceeds to "declare vnto you, such nourishments as are apt to engender those humours, that in this present state you nowe stand in, oppressed therewith, knowing which they are that minister matter to this grosse iuyce, you for your speedie recouerie auoide them, and with choice of better, alter that which is amisse into a more cheerfull qualitie" (Bright 1586, B5r-B5v). So too Burton asserts that "Diet, which consists in meate and drinke . . . causeth Melancholy, as it offends in Substance or Accidents, that is, quantity, quality, or the like" (Burton 1621, F3v), listing the offending foods and why too much or too little food can also cause the condition. Since melancholy had the characteristics of coldness and dryness, foods also classified as such should be avoided by the melancholic. In order to avoid "dolour or heuynesse [heaviness] of mynd" Thomas Elyot advises against the daily consumption of a range of foods, amongst them hare, beef, mutton, and hard cheese. Like Galen, he warns that the melancholic should not consume boar, thick red wine and coleworts ('Colewort' was "originally, a general name for any plant of the cabbage kind, genus Brassica, of which varieties were formerly less distinct than now", OED colewort 1.) (Elyot 1595, O4r). William Bullein notes that although "cholericke men may as lightly digest béefe, bacon, veneson, &c. With as much spéede and litle hurt as the fleugmatike man may eate, rabit chicken, and partridge, &c.", the melancholie man "through the coldnesse

of the stomacke hath not that strength in the stomacke as hee hath promtpnes in wil: to eat things warm and moyst be good for him" (Bullein 1595, E3r). So too Timothie Bright advises against "porke, except it be yong, and a litle corned with salt, beefe, ramme mutton, goate, bores flesh, & veneson" (Bright 1586, B6v).

The Dietaries and the Plays

In The Merchant of Venice, Shylock responds to Bassanio's invitation to dinner by using Christian doctrine to reinforce Jewish dietary law: "Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into! I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (1.3.31-35).[8] Although Shylock goes to the dinner provided by the Christians it is by no means clear that he eats their food. Indeed, throughout the play there are clues that Shylock conforms to the melancholic type in his aversion to feeding in general. It seems that any desire to feed has been diverted into the metaphorical and he is consumed by his desire "to feed upon / The prodigal Christian (2.5.14-15), the first of many allusions to cannibalism, a practice with which Shylock is increasingly associated as the play progresses. Crucially though, and as we saw above, Shylock's aversion to pork would have been recognized as right and proper by many of the dietary authors. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to assume that they, as authorities insisting upon rules governing the proper consumption of foods in order to protect the body against disease, would have admired the Jewish focus upon dietary rules even if, it seems, Shylock has violated one of those rules by not properly feeding himself.

Shylock is apparently resistant to feeding himself but so too, it seems, he prevents others from feeding: Lancelot tells his father, Gobbo, "I am famished in his service; you may tell every finger I have with my ribs" (2.2.100-102). Shylock several times refers to Lancelot's excessive feeding and warns that, in Bassanio's service, Lancelot "shalt not gormandize / As thou has done with me" (2.5.3-4), describing him as "a huge feeder. / Snail-slow in profit" (2.5.45-46). Of course the choice of actor for the part of Lancelot determines whether or not the audience might be expected to believe that Shylock keeps him hungry. In a recent film version directed by Michael Radford, Lancelot is played by the exceptionally thin Mackenzie Crooke, which suggests he is telling the truth about Shylock's meanness, but a director might wish to suggest that Launcelot is lying by casting an obviously well-fed actor in the role (Radford 2005). In The Jew of Malta Barabas similarly seeks out a slave who will not eat much: "I must have one that's sickly, an't be but for sparing victuals" (2.3.125-126) and Itamore accuses Barabas of feeding only upon grasshoppers and mushrooms (4.4.66-67), the first a foodstuff which, according to the bible, Jews were permitted to eat (Leviticus 11:22) and the latter specifically denounced by Thomas Elyot in his dietary as dangerous: "Beware of Mushromes . . . and all other thinges, whiche will sone putrifie (Elyot 1595, T1v). Although it is not clear whether Itamore is lying (Barabas claims he is, and that "The governor feeds not as I do", 4.4.68-69), Barabas, unlike Shylock, is keen to feed others, but specifically poisoned foodstuffs: the porridge that he serves to the nuns and his own daughter, and the feast he prepares as a prelude to the mass slaughter of his enemies.

It should perhaps come as no great surprise that Shylock does not enjoy feeding in the literal sense since, throughout The Merchant of Venice, feeding is entwined

with treachery: it is when Shylock has gone to dinner with the Christians that his daughter and his wealth are taken from him and food facilitates Launcelot's departure from his master when, in order to persuade Bassanio to accept Lancelot into his service, Gobbo presents him with the present originally intended for Shylock: "a dish of doves" (2.2.129).[9] Food, it seems, is the means by which the favour of servants and masters may be gained and, indeed, withdrawn at short notice, but the dietaries and Shylock's apparent melancholy are perhaps also specifically invoked. In the dietaries dove, which is a term used interchangeably with 'pigeon', is generally acknowledged as easily digestible and considered especially wholesome for melancholics by Thomas Cogan (Cogan 1636, V1r), Thomas Vaughan (Vaughan 1612, D2r) and Oswald Gabelkover (Gabelkover 1599, C6r). That Shylock is prevented from feeding upon the very foodstuff that might alleviate his condition makes him less responsible for it than if he had himself rejected the means of a cure. In Marlowe's play the Jew is the traditional villain who poisons the food others rely on for nutrition but Shylock is a more complex figure who, although apparently responsible for his melancholy by refusing to feed, is also prevented by the disloyalty of those closest to him from consuming the very food that might alleviate his condition.

In his deal with Antonio, Shylock specifically asks for a pound of his "fair flesh" (1.3.147). As Horace Howard Furness pointed out, the reference to fair flesh "suggests Shylock's darker, Oriental hue" (Shakespeare 1888, 52n155), which contrasts with the pallour of Portia, the golden fleece (3.2.239), and Shylock's daughter, described by Lorenzo as having a "fair hand, / . . . whiter than the paper it writ on" (2.4.11-12). The distinction between Shylock, who conforms to specific Jewish stereotypes, and his daughter, who converts to Christianity, is reinforced in dietary terms when Salarino tells Shylock "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish" (3.1.36-38). As we saw above, red wine was one of the foodstuffs thought to promote melancholy and it is notable that, via this four-term homology, Shylock is specifically compared to a foodstuff that would harm him. Although Jessica is still ethnically a Jew, her conversion to Christianity has led to the belief that her skin is less swarthy and her blood somehow of a higher quality than that of her Jewish father or, conversely, that she was apt to convert because she was less physically Jewish than her father. The notion that the hereditary Jewish smell, the foetor judaicus, disappeared with conversion to Christianity (Shapiro 1996, 37) suggests that for many anti-Semites ethnicity was less an issue than adherence to Jewish religious doctrine. But perhaps ethnicity is not all Shakespeare is getting at here. Shakespeare might well be making a point about Christian hypocrisy and using early modern views about food and humoral theory to do so. The dietaries focus not so much on Jewishness per se as the Jewish tendency to melancholy and so it might be that Shakespeare too was alert to the power of diet, rather than religious conversion, to effect physical change. This would make Shylock less alien that he at first appears: his identity is not so much bound up in his ethnicity but rather with the choices he makes about food. The dietaries, and indeed Shakespeare, are alert to the Jew's humanity: he is more like his fellow men than distinct from them precisely because he is prone to the same physical ailments they suffer from as a result of humoral imbalance. Shylock's behaviour, it seems, is less a consequence of his racial and/or religious difference than his diet and although he correctly avoids pork he incorrectly avoids moderate consumption.

In the court scene The Merchant of Venice demonstrates a shift from the Jew as cannibalistic savage toward Jewish dietary laws, in particular the instruction that mammals and birds authorized for consumption be slaughtered in accordance with those laws. Portia's statement that Shylock "Tarry a little . . . / This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood" (4.1.302-303), denies Shylock the role which fulfils the Jewish blood-libel. But just as Shylock ironically used Christian doctrine to reinforce Jewish dietary law that prohibits the consumption of pork (1.3.31-35), so too Portia's pronouncement ironically reinforces that law: the sacrifice of Antonio must eschew the spilling of blood, an echo of the Jewish dietary laws which also forbade the consumption of blood. Ultimately Antonio is not a victim of Jewish savagery but a symbol of Jewish sacrifice although, as a 'tainted' wether his flesh cannot be consumed. It is a Jewish dietary principle that saves Antonio, not a Christian one (and certainly not a mercantile law). Although Shylock does not wish literally to consume Antonio's flesh he is prevented from getting his revenge, from 'feeding' upon him metaphorically. Instead, sustenance is provided elsewhere. In response to the news from Portia and Nerissa that they will get half of Shylock's wealth after his death Lorenzo announces: "Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way of starved people" (5.1.294-5). Just as The Jew of Malta ends with Barabas falling into his own cooking pot, so too The Merchant of Venice ends ironically: the food from heaven which sustained the Israelites in the desert" (Exodus. 16.15) here feeds the Christians, but Shylock remains hungry.

Notes

[1]For example Partridge 1573.

[2]For example Boorde 1547.

[3]For example Baley 1602 and Gascoigne 1576.

[4]For example Gabelkover 1599.

[5]My research on the dietaries is indebted to the Text Creation Partnership (TCP) at the University of Michigan. Work on these texts has hitherto been hindered by their frequent use of black-letter typefaces that are hard to read, especially on over-inked leaves with show-through from the previous page, and I was fortunate to able to use accurately keyed electronic texts of more than a dozen such books from TCP. Not only were these texts easier to read, but being electronic it was possible to rapidly search across them to see how a particular food (say, mint) was represented in each. Some dietaries have indices, but these searches revealed detail easily missed even by the most careful reader, and the Text Creation Partnership is to be applauded for providing scholars with new ways to work on these old books.

[6]See also Josephus 1930, 3.259-260.

[7]In The Merchant of Venice reference is made to the foodstuff, 'pork', and the Jewish prohibition against consuming it, three times (1.3.31-35; 3.5.21-24; 3.5.32-34) whereas in The Jew of Malta the animal itself, 'swine', is mentioned only once and is synonymous with the food it will become: "these swine-eating Christians" (2.3.7).

[8]The allusion is to the exorcism performed by Christ in the New Testament, which saw demons cast into swine (Matthew 8: 28-34).

[9]Doves are also diverted from one man to another in Sir Thomas More (Munday 1990), another play concerned with alterity, when the foreigner Caveler steals a pair of Doves from the Londoner Williamson. Caveler's sneer "Beef and brewis may serve such hinds. Are pigeons meat for a coarse carpenter?" (1.1.23-24) demonstrates that food is socially encoded in the play and this episode constitutes part of the play's oft-repeated association between foreigners and food. For a more detailed discussion of this see Fitzpatrick 2004.

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