

SBReview_11:

Robert Appelbaum. *Aguecheek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture, and Food Among the Early Moderns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxiv + 376 pp. \$32.50. ISBN: 0-226-02126-2.

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This review is an exercise in belatedness. Since Robert Appelbaum's *Aguecheek's Beef* . . . came out in 2006 it has become a much reviewed and much praised work. I am happy to concur with most of the praise. Appelbaum's scholarship is both broad and deep. He applies it skilfully to illuminate most of the texts he studies – notably *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet* – and provides a context that will illuminate many that he does not. Teachers of those two plays together, for example, should put the first chapter of this book on their recommended list immediately. Additionally, Appelbaum has an almost Greenblattian ability to turn up nuggets of information – about why early modern Italians didn't eat beef or about the origin of a word like “bully” (7) – and resonant anecdotes. He also has a commendable ability to accept and incorporate information that complicates and challenges his theses, and he has a topic that is almost as universal as he claims it is. This is, in short, an admirable book within its limitations, one from which almost any reader will learn a great deal. Belatedly, however, I want to suggest what I think those limitations are, since they may be more apparent to a sometime Medievalist like myself than to the Early Modern and Cultural Studies specialists who have written the reviews I have seen. Those limitations are important not only for this work but for Renaissance studies in general.

Appelbaum's subject is food in the early modern period as “not only . . . an economic reality answering to a biological function, but as . . . the object of a multitude of discourses: stage plays, religious polemics, mystical tracts, cookbooks, medical texts, herbals, travelogues, novels, to name a few” (p. xiii). This vast body of material is studied over a comparably large span, roughly 1450-1750. Appelbaum organizes his material by setting up a dynamic of change –

basically his adaptation of Norbert Elias's "civilizing process" in which European (food) culture evolves from a crude medieval base toward greater refinement, self-consciousness and literacy – against a principle of continuity. "Eating and drinking became more 'civilized' . . . to the extent that it [sic] came to approximate the laws of sociality of the emerging modern nation-state and its 'civil society'" (p. xvi). What remains stable is the (eternally?) recurrent opposition, brilliantly extrapolated from *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet* in Chapter One, between the "comic" view (p. xiv) of food and eating which sees the world as a life-sustaining and pleasure-providing field of nutrition – Belch and Aguecheek's life that "consists of eating and drinking" (2.3.10-11) – and *Hamlet's* "tragic" view which sees it as a system of predation in which humans ravenously consume in order to fatten themselves for worms. In an extraordinarily useful exercise in historicized close reading (pp. 15-27), Appelbaum first reminds us that Hamlet's "funeral baked meats" came in pastry shells known as "coffins," then links that to the Ghost's account of his body being literally cooked by the effects of the poison to reveal Gertrude and Claudius's funeral/wedding as an example of what Hamlet and the play come to see as "the universal cannibalism of nature" (30). The two versions of nature are, of course, inescapable complements; it is simply a question of whether you see your vial of blood as half-empty or half-full.

Chapter Two explores the Galenic theory behind the idea that life consists of eating and drinking in a way that greatly elaborates what most of us thought we knew about humoral theory. Galenic science viewed the body and its health as a function of digestion: "The body was a consuming organism" (49). Appelbaum stresses the way this "sensational science" was rooted in the physical experience of eating – in the taste of what is hot or cold, wet or dry – in contrast to the more abstract nutritional science that displaced it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Appelbaum further insists that the discourse that explained food also created "a regime of sensation that we no longer experience" (52). The past is another pantry; things taste differently there.

Chapter Three takes up the civilizing process through a history of the evolution of cookbooks and related textual authorities. The spread of such books, especially in the latter part of the period, imposed fixity and uniformity on previously heterogeneous experience: *this*, says the text, is how we cook our chicken cacciatore, and *that* is how we eat it. The same process codifies “taste” in the form of progressive refinement of manners and self-consciousness: the birth of *haute cuisine* as “the triumph of culture over nature” (80).

Chapters Four and Five return to the stable opposition set up in Chapter One: “food of wishes” vs. “food of regret.” The former chapter makes the rather obvious point that dreams of Cockaigne were rooted in the real experience of hunger and, less obviously, that these fantasies were translated in later utopian literature – More especially – into dreams of order, discipline and equal distribution. “Utopia is sober. But utopia is also a land without hunger and provides an answer to plebeian doubts and fears” (142). The latter chapter deals with the ascetic tradition and the guilt attached to eating in early modern Christian culture, whether in the form of religious self-denial as practiced by Teresa of Avila or the health-based dietary extremes of an authority like Luigi Cornaro. Inevitably perhaps, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*, though less inevitably that discussion focuses on a prolonged argument about what exactly Eve ate: a chaste apple, a sensuous peach, or some combination of the two. For reasons I will return to below, I found this discussion less than fruitful.

Chapter Six returns to Sir Toby Belch, his drinking and his pickled herring. Appelbaum treats Toby as a transitional figure in the civilizing process, whose aristocratic disregard of propriety and regularity looks to the feudal past but whose staple diet of imported wine and herring looks forward to a more cosmopolitan future. That evolution is linked to a process by which – in the Appelbaum version at least – “civility,” defined as an expression of bourgeois self-assertion, opposes and eventually displaces “courtesy,” defined primarily as the courtly assertion of rank and privilege. “Civility is *cosmopolitan . . . fastidious . . . elegant*” (210; his italics), and thus leaves little place for the likes of Belch. On the other hand, it becomes a justification

for colonizing those, such as the Amerindians, who can be defined as “uncivil.” Evolution toward gentility thus turns out to be evolution toward empire.

Chapter Seven takes up the consequences of that process in a discussion of Jean de Lery’s sixteenth-century narrative of cannibalism in Brazil and Richard Ligon’s seventeenth-century account of plantation life in Barbados. Empire, like many other things in this book, turns out to be centrally about food. In Brazil, fear of hunger and cannibalism displaces the fear of sin, especially gluttony. At the same time, however, “alimentary despair” (258), the colonial experience of being cut off from one’s sustaining food culture, produces a modulation of religious experience, “the material equivalent of spiritual alienation” required, for Calvinists, as the first step to salvation. The plenty of life in Barbados, on the other hand, distils a version of our modern relation to food:

the *commodification* of need and the goods required to satisfy it . . . the *alienation* of the individual from material and spiritual comfort . . . the *hybridization* (or *creolization*) of cultural style through the conjunction of strange and familiar foodways; the *assertion of wonder* at the new horizons of possibility opening up before the subject. (258)

The food of wishes again confronts the food of regret (not to mention, the food of cultural studies).

A conclusion – in which very little is concluded – returns us to the food of wishes in the form of Robinson Crusoe’s enactment of the fantasy of civilizing a cannibal by means of European food, and Rousseau’s attempt to make Emile “philosophical” about food; that is, aware of its nature, its sources – including murdered animals – and the labor that went into producing it – a reflection of Appelbaum’s stated intention for his own book (see p. xvii). Here and elsewhere, he is more inclined to set problems than to resolve them. We wish that our relation to nature or the other could be benign. We wish that food could be a civilizing force, but we know it is more complex, ambiguous, disappointing than that. At the end of all this

civilizing process, Crusoe and Friday devour a goat in the jungle, Rousseau and Emile wonder about whether the members of a salon are civilized.

Most of this is impressive, much of it is persuasive. Within its limits, as I said, it is commendable. Appelbaum has drawn a very large circle within which to work, but it *is* a circle and it excludes as well as encloses. The book is, for example, rigorously Eurocentric: the American colonies aside, no other part of the world gets even a passing mention. This is an unfair question perhaps, since it invites the author to write a different or an additional book, but it is hard to avoid asking: are we dealing with universals here or with the peculiarities of Judeo-Christian cultural history? China, India, Japan, the Muslim world have great and complex food cultures. Does Appelbaum think any of them have gone through a comparable evolutionary process? Is there a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Confucian equivalent to the food of regret?

A similarly unfair question: are we dealing with eternalists or with historical accidents? Is there any period in Western history – C.E. or B.C.E – that is not marked by the same ambivalences? The food of wishes, of course, survives and flourishes as foodie literature, in the form, say, of aspirational coffee-table cookbooks that would teach us to cook like Ferran Adria or Heston Blumenthal, if only we had chemistry labs attached to our kitchens. Our current equivalent of Cockaigne is El Bulli or Provence. The literature of regret and food guilt survives in vegan or environmental diatribes about the evils of meat-eating and in our pervasive worry about air miles and carbon footprints. Appelbaum has surprisingly little to say directly about recent history – or, for that matter, about the current equivalents of the dietaries and herbals, which fill so much space in our bookstores and cable-TV schedules. Out of curiosity, not criticism, I wish he had said more.

There are real problems within Appelbaum's circle of discourse, however, and those problems tend to be symptomatic of larger, lingering issues about the ways we do Renaissance studies. The scheme he has derived from Elias requires a pre-civilized period before the civilizing process starts, so he duly provides one. The othering of the Middle Ages begins, in a

small but significant way as early as p. xv with a caricature of medieval diners eating with their hands and licking gravy off their trenchers, an image that is repeated with elaboration at 207-08. I ask anyone who, unlike Appelbaum, remembers the theatrically delicate manners of Chaucer's Prioress (see General Prologue, ll. 127-31) to imagine her licking her trencher. Or using one, for that matter: ranking diners, like the head of a priory, ate off plates. They also used knives and spoons, not to mention finger bowls. Since Appelbaum (341 n11) admiringly cites Terence Scully's *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages*, he must know that Scully insists throughout on the sophistication of medieval cuisine and the elaborateness of medieval manners, the latter subjected to the kind of textualized authority Appelbaum associates only with the seventeenth century.¹ More importantly, the Prioress – “cosmopolitan, fastidious, elegant” – is displaying the marks of civility sometime in the 1390s. She thinks, of course, that she is practicing “courtesie” (l. 132), “countrefet[ing] cheere of court” (ll. 138-39) in the decidedly uncourtly surroundings of the Canterbury pilgrimage. Since she is almost certainly a social climber, she thus embodies the transition from medieval courtesy to bourgeois civility two hundred years before Appelbaum thinks it occurred. Moreover, she embodies the change not as opposition but as assimilation, a trickle-down process that is comically extended by the fawning show of delicacy Harry Bailly puts on when he addresses her. The manners of the Knight and his very courtly son also reflect a “civil” concern to set aside rather than to assert rank. The Knight does not slap down the Miller's attempt to “quit” him; he asserts his authority only when he needs to stop the quarrel between Harry and the Pardoner. The literature, in short, does not support the Appelbaum-Elias version, any more than history supports the idea that international trade and the commodification of food were Renaissance developments. Oil, wine, spices, and grain were all traded commodities throughout the Middle Ages. If there was a civilizing process, it started long before 1450.

If Appelbaum doesn't know enough about the Middle Ages, he doesn't say enough about the literature of his own period. I don't want to play the mug's game of asking why he didn't

choose the texts I would have chosen, but his principles of selection *are* sometimes baffling. No character in Shakespeare, not even Falstaff, is as elaborately identified with food as Cleopatra; she gets three sentences (234-35). They are perceptive sentences, of course, but they do cry out for more. For all the discussions of cannibalism, *Titus Andronicus* gets only two passing mentions. And how do you write a book on early modern food culture whose thematic and chronological center is 1600 and not mention Sir Epicure Mammon, Ursula the Pig Woman, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy's gluttony for pork, the figurative cannibalism rife in *Volpone*, or the model of civilized dining offered by Ben Jonson's "Inviting a Friend to Supper"?

If Jonson is Renaissance literature's poet laureate of eating, Marlowe – who rates a single mention – is its laureate of hunger. All his protagonists are driven by literal and/or figurative hunger: an insatiable inner emptiness that requires endless stuffing. "How am I glutted with conceit of this" (*Dr.F.*, A-text, 1.1.80) is Faustus's original and constant response to magic.ⁱⁱ King Edward differs only in preferring a more colloquial version of getting stuffed. Tamburlaine not only hungers for crowns, he arranges a course of pastry ones for his generals and himself to feast on. Appelbaum manages to (mis)quote Gluttony in *Faustus* (212) without mentioning the glutton s/he is addressing.

Of course, all these hungers are emblematic as well as physical. Specifically, they are theological, which may explain Appelbaum's neglect of them. In the Augustinian theological system that is marginalized throughout this book, evil *is* hunger, or rather, hunger is the first physical manifestation of a larger sin. Sin enters the (Miltonic) world when the serpent convinces Eve to feel empty in the midst of Edenic plenty. He teaches her to feel ignorant, deprived, denied; *then* she feels hungry (the relevant passage in *Paradise Lost* is 9.679-744). This is not simply the sin of gluttony, as Appelbaum thinks; gluttony is the metonymic substitute for the root of evil, cupidity – one of those theological words that never quite make it into this text.

Appetite is, as Appelbaum says, "a longing to possess" (225). As such it is a token of that larger, cupiditous love of the other (person or thing) for one's own pleasure: the desire to

use, consume, destroy. In the Augustinian doctrine that is the consistent orthodoxy of the early modern period, as it is today for both Catholics and Protestants, evil is privation, not a positive entity but the lack of something it is natural to have, as darkness is the absence of light. (The primary text is *City of God* XII-XIV.) Fallen man tries to fill that spiritual emptiness with material things, only starting with food. In the process of tempting Eve with the apple, the serpent sells her on discarding her mutual relationship with Adam in favour of the worship of non-existent admirers, a reorientation signified by her solitary, self-gratifying bingeing on the luscious fruit Appelbaum goes to great length to prove is now a peach. Actually, it is an emblem. The appetite for peaches is not, as he quotes Ulysses to show, “an universal wolf” (232); the appetite for power over others is. Having eaten that peach, she immediately decides she has to share it with Adam because of how dearly she loves him (see 9.830-33) – literally to death.

Though Appelbaum understands that the “forbidden fruit” is “a polysemous token” (192), he tends to get stuck at the literal level, worrying about the difference between higher and bestial appetites, when he should be distinguishing between *caritas* and *cupiditas*. The regret that attaches to the ‘food of regret’ is original sin, which is both murder and self-murder. Thus, eating is the term by which Marlowe describes Faustus’s relation to everything. That is what Epicure Mammon reduces all experience to. That is why all of Volpone’s schemes amount to growing “fat by eating, once a month, a man” (1.5.92).

The theological context of this book’s subject is always liable to go missing or go to the margins, not surprisingly given that Augustine gets exactly one mention and seems to mean nothing to Appelbaum except, vaguely, a source of *contemptus mundi*. He is also, however, the primary source of Milton’s interpretation of Genesis and the ultimate early modern authority on one of Appelbaum’s inescapable subjects: evil. Too often in Renaissance studies, we overvalue humanistic traditions and undervalue theological ones, getting rid of the latter by consigning them to a small body of specialists like Huston Diehl and Deborah Shuger. We do so at our peril, as we do when we define our period in opposition to a crude fiction of the Middle Ages

instead of the complex, nuanced, oddly familiar, real thing. If a scholar as subtle and learned as Robert Appelbaum can fall into such errors, God help the rest of us.

ⁱ (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995); see especially Chapter Seven, pp. 166-84.

ⁱⁱ Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus: A- and B-Texts*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1993), p. 115.