

'The Chameleon's Dish': Shakespeare and the Omnivore's Dilemma

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Abstract: This essay situates Shakespeare's *Hamlet* within the emergent discourse of ethical vegetarianism in early modern England, challenging the prevailing assumption that the English were a nation of robust beef-eaters. Specifically, it argues that Hamlet has undertaken a commemorative fast for his father, which implies that he likely eschewed meat. It documents Hamlet's repulsion with butchery and his morbid fascination with the physiological decay of the flesh, culling further evidence in the Prince's denunciations of meat-eating in Shakespeare's source. It relates Hamlet's delay to his qualms about cold-blooded butchery, and deciphers the murder of Polonius as an ironic reenactment of the folk-play known as the Killing of the Calf. Finally, the essay unravels the metaphysical and ecocritical implications of Hamlet's fast. By blurring the animal/human boundary, the tragedy problematizes the unthinking acceptance of carnivorism as divinely ordained by the Judeo-Christian tradition.



In her classic study, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, Caroline Spurgeon detected a conspicuous spike in unsavory allusions to food, drink, and cooking in *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*. The protagonists in these two texts are not the only ones afflicted with some kind of metaphysical dyspepsia. Indeed, numerous characters in the plays written between roughly 1599-1605 (a period that coincides with Shakespeare's mature tragedies) express revulsion at the thought of greasy food and "morsels unctuous," prompting Spurgeon to conjecture that the thirty-five year old playwright had begun to suffer from heartburn, or, more broadly, from some profound psychological disturbance "which translated itself into

terms of physical appetite and its disgust."¹ While the word "meat" in early modern parlance can refer to food in general, Spurgeon fails to reflect on the fact that it is animal flesh in particular, usually greasy, rotten, or over-salted, that evokes the most potent feelings of nausea. This paper will not attempt to unmask Hamlet, Timon, or their creator as crypto-vegetarians (at least not in the modern sense of the word – which did not yet exist), or to diagnose them with any specific medical conditions. However, it will endeavor to illustrate that many of Shakespeare's plays written in the early seventeenth century de-familiarize the custom of meat-eating, and often cite it as evidence in their indictment of human depravity. In ways surprisingly reminiscent of recent environmental writing about dietary ethics, the odd preponderance of meat imagery in *Hamlet* and *Timon of Athens* raises moral qualms about mankind's right to slaughter animals, questioning or repudiating the ethos of dominion promulgated by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

After surveying attitudes towards meat consumption in the early modern period, Joan Fitzpatrick asserts that "a vegetarian diet was generally considered unhealthy, and against divine ordination."² However, as Fitzpatrick herself acknowledges, ample evidence also exists indicating that this doctrine was by no means unassailable. To undercut the supposition that early moderns considered meat essential to good health, one need only point to the celebrated case of Thomas Parr. In 1635, a man claiming to be 152 years old arrived in London in the company of the Earl of Arundel. Paraded around the city, Parr quickly became something of a national celebrity. He met with Charles I, sat for a portrait by Rubens, and was the subject of a verse encomium by the water poet John Taylor entitled (somewhat unimaginatively), *The Old, Old, Very Old Man*. When asked about the secret of his longevity, Parr credited his vegetarian diet and temperate living. Although he is largely forgotten by cultural historians today, who seem to consider his story apocryphal, Old Tom Parr was a household name for centuries – Thoreau even cites him as a byword for dietary temperance in *Walden*. Whether or not Parr may have been mistaken about his actual age (perhaps confusing his birth records with those of his grandfather as some suspect) his story debunks the notion that early moderns invariably thought of vegetarianism as unhealthy.³

Though his story is certainly unique, Parr was not alone in his opinion regarding the medical and spiritual benefits of abstaining from meat. In the sixteenth century, humanist scholars circulated texts by several classical authorities, such as Plutarch and Porphyry, advocating a vegetarian diet. An English translation of Plutarch's "Whether It Be Lawful to Eat Flesh or No" appeared in 1603, right around the time Shakespeare was presumably reading the historian's brief biography of Timon of

Athens in his *Life of Anthony*. Two key incentives Plutarch cites for renouncing meat include an abhorrence of unnecessary suffering and the belief that vegetarianism conforms to the Aristotelian virtue of *sophrosune*, or temperance. Abstaining from animal flesh is also championed in the *Asclepius*, a Hermetic text beloved by Renaissance humanists such as Ficino and Bruno. The dialogue concludes with the orators adjourning "to a pure meal that includes no living thing."⁴ Egyptian priests practiced vegetarianism for centuries, and a knowledge of this custom transmitted via Hermetic texts or by historians such as Plutarch likely inspired Spenser's portrait of the priests at the Temple of Isis who "mote not taste of fleshly food, / Ne feed on ought the which doth bloud containe."⁵

Perhaps the most notorious plea on behalf of vegetarianism, familiar to all educated Elizabethans, is Pythagoras' oration in Book 15 of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*:

And wee that of the world are part (considring how wee bee
 Not only flesh, but also sowles, which may with passage free
 Remove them into every kynd of beast both tame and wyld)
 Let live in saufty honestly with slaughter undefyld
 The bodyes which perchaunce may have the spirits of our brothers
 Our sisters, or our parents, or the spirits of sum others
 Alyed too us eyther by sum freendshippe or sum kin,
 Or at the least the soules of men abiding them within.
 And let us not, Thyesteslyke thus furnish up our boordes
 With bloodye bowells. Oh how leawd example he afoordes.
 How wickedly prepareth he himself to murther man
 That with a cruell knyfe dooth cut the throte of Calf, and can
 Unmovably give heering to the lowing of the dam
 Or sticke the kid that wayleth lyke the little babe, or eate
 The fowle that he himself before had often fed with meate.
 What wants of utter wickednesse in working such a feate?⁶

The speech concludes with an injunction to "Forbear the flesh, and feede your mouthes with fitter foode therefore" (15.532). While metempsychosis (the transmigration of the soul from human to animal) was condemned as heresy and scoffed at onstage, it should be noted that Pythagoras' argument rests only partially on a belief in reincarnation. The passage begins with a reminder that all living things spring from a common kind, which Ovid's book implicitly endorses with its tales of human transformation into various animals and plants. As Arthur Golding, the Elizabethan translator, commented in his introductory verse epistle: "the oration of Pithagoras implyes / A sum of all the former woorke"

(Epistle.288-9). Animals share a common flesh and susceptibility to pain, rendering them eligible for sympathy and moral concern. The radical implications of this doctrine for natural history can be seen in John Donne's *Progress of the Soul*, which toys with the idea of transmigration to question "the sovereignty God supposedly conferred on human beings" over other animals.⁷ Pythagoras' speech became a touchstone for early modern vegetarianism; several eighteenth century advocates, including Lord Chesterfield (who in turn persuaded James Boswell to join him) traced their "conversion" to an undergraduate encounter with Ovid.⁸ The influence of the passage can be gauged by the fact that, until the word vegetarian was coined in the 1840s, people who refrained from eating meat were known as Pythagoreans.

The Old Testament covenants with Adam and Noah appear to sanction meat eating, yet an important and oft-overlooked fact in early modern environmental history is that the Church periodically required all early modern Christians to practice de facto vegetarianism. Although fasting practices differed widely among various regions and religious communities, a conservative estimate would be that the majority of people in pre-modern England ate only fish, or abstained entirely from meat (and sometimes even dairy products), for nearly seventy days each year: the forty days of Lent, the twelve Ember days, and the eves of the feasts of the twelve Apostles, as well as Ash Wednesday and Whit Sunday. More fastidious observers (not to mention the legions of those too poor to afford it) may even have gone without red meat and poultry for nearly half the days of the year. Before 1550, Church policies enjoined the faithful to abstain from beef, chicken, or pork twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, in addition to the aforementioned holy days; the number of "fish days" increased to three per week after 1563 (perhaps in part to subsidize the fishing industry).⁹ Keeping this forgotten bit of culinary history in mind, the pastoral banquet scene in Milton's *Paradise Regained* takes on a new significance:

A Table richly spread, in regal mode,
With dishes pil'd, and meats of noblest sort
And savor, Beasts of chase, or Fowl of game,
In pastry built, or from the spit, or boil'd
Grisamber steam'd.¹⁰

In a conscious reprisal of Eve's temptation, Satan reminds Christ that "these are not Fruits forbidden; no interdict / Defends the touching of these viands pure" (2.369-70). Satan's logic here sounds strangely similar to that of Augustine, who defends meat-eating in the *Confessions* as

sanctioned by God. In a bid to disarm the Manichee sect who thought the Christians should adopt vegetarianism, Augustine refers to the Book of Matthew where "Our King was tempted to eat not meat but bread."¹¹ Milton departs from Augustine and scripture by introducing this new scenario. In the standard account of the poem, Barbara Lewalski identifies the pastoral banquet simply as heightening the appeal of gluttony in the initial temptation, while ignoring the obvious difference: the food in the second temptation consists of the flesh of slaughtered animals.¹²

Although many Puritans condemned the "superstitious and Pharsaical manner of fasting" prescribed by the Catholic church, even Cromwell's Parliaments continued to institute days of public fasting.¹³ It therefore seems a safe assumption that Milton's own personal experience of abstaining from meat in Lent likely informs this scene in *Paradise Regained*. The celebration of Lent dates back at least to the Nicene Council in the fourth century, when the Church mandated forty days of penance; the number forty was consciously chosen so that the experience would simulate the biblical story that is subject of Milton's brief epic: Christ's forty days in the wilderness. Today many Catholics still refrain from eating meat on Fridays during Lent. In the medieval and early modern eras however, Christians were expected to abstain from eating beef and poultry for the entire forty days. Elizabeth I and James I issued royal proclamations "For the Restraint of Killing and Eating of Flesh" on an almost annual basis, which regulated the meat industry in accordance with official Church policy. The Proclamation of 1589 restricts the number of butchers in the entire London metropolitan area to only four, who were "bound in the summe of one hundred pounds to her maiestie, to sell no flesh in the time of Lent" without a special dispensation.¹⁴ Even considering the city's population was only around 200,000, this is an astonishingly low number, indicative of just how many Londoners took part in this religious observance. No doubt there was some corruption and a flourishing black market trade in meat, as described in Thomas Middleton's comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (c.1613), but, rather than ridicule this religious custom, Middleton pokes fun at the corrupt "promoters" who confiscate the food only to sell and consume it themselves.

The Dietary Revolution

Medical and religious beliefs were not the only factors shaping people's attitudes toward their culinary habits. In the sixteenth century, England experienced what agricultural historian Joan Thirsk has termed a

"Dietary Revolution."¹⁵ During the Middle Ages, aristocrats and merchants gorged themselves on beef and venison, while turning up their noses at vegetables as peasant food. However, following the reign of Henry VIII greenstuffs and fruits gradually became more fashionable, and consumption rates for these foods rose sharply during Shakespeare's lifetime, while meat consumption witnessed a corresponding decline. Certainly, many early modern Englishmen took pride in their nation's reputation for hearty beef-eating, linking it with virility. Yet by the end of the sixteenth century, red meat was no longer considered quite so *à la mode*. Ever-vigilant for symptoms of cultural decline, the Puritan polemicist, Phillip Stubbes, noted that in his father's time "a good piece of beef was thought then good meat, and able for the best, but now it is thought too gross: for their tender stomachs are not able to digest such crude and harsh meats."¹⁶ Poultry, pork, and fish replaced beef on many tables, but there also seems to have been a noticeable turn toward a Mediterranean-style diet high in greenstuffs and complex carbohydrates. In other words, while a vegetarian diet was involuntary or economically compulsory for the majority of the poor, it was also becoming, thanks to the larger variety of crops being cultivated and the rising reputation of vegetables, increasingly appetizing.¹⁷

Contrary to widespread assumptions, then, vegetarianism is by no means an exclusively modern, post-industrial sentiment, and Pythagoreans do appear in several works of Elizabethan literature. In addition to the priest at the Temple of Isis in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the Wild Man who rescues Serena in Book 6 "Ne fed on flesh, ne euer of wyld beast/ Did taste the bloud, obeying natures first beheast" (6.6.14). Although the fact has not garnered much notice from critics, at least three of Shakespeare's plays depict vegetarians or vegetarian meals: *As You Like It*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Timon of Athens*. After vetting the first two texts, Fitzpatrick concludes that they undermine the orthodox views sanctioning the consumption of meat.¹⁸ Curiously, she fails to mention *Timon of Athens* in this context, although it is clear that the cynic Apemantus voluntarily subsists on a diet of root vegetables. The word "meat" is repeated eleven times in the play; sometimes it refers to any food in general, but often it specifically designates animal flesh. Registering his disgust with the conspicuous consumption occurring at Timon's feast, Apemantus tells his host "I scorn thy meat" and concludes his sardonic grace by announcing: "Rich men sin and I eat root" (1.2. 37, 70).¹⁹ As an outspoken critic of aristocratic decadence, Apemantus's fondness for roots recalls that of Elizabethan horticulturalist Richard Gardiner of Shrewsbury, whose 1599 book *Profitable Instructions for the Manuring, Sowing, and Planting of Kitchin Gardens* argues that wealthy landowners should grow more "garden

stuffe," such as carrots, since they use the land more efficiently and can feed the hungry during times of dearth.²⁰ After his numerous meat-laden banquets in the opening acts, Timon eventually apes Apemantus' vegetarian regimen during his self-imposed exile. During his exile in the forest, Timon urges a band of thieves to renounce their pilfering and convert to a vegetarian diet:

Why should you want? Behold, the earth hath roots.
 Within this mile break forth a hundred springs.
 The oaks bear mast, the briars scarlet hips.
 The bounteous housewife nature on each bush
 Lays her full mess before you. Want? Why want?

(4.3.410-14)

Unimpressed, the First Thief dismisses his rant: "We cannot live on grass, on berries, water, as beasts and birds and fishes" (4.3.415-6). Hinting at an affinity between meat-eating and cannibalism (one that also crops up in Spenser and may have been exacerbated by Protestant parodies of the Eucharist), Timon retorts, "Nor on the beasts themselves, the birds and fishes; / You must eat men" (4.3.417-8).

Rather than consider vegetarianism unhealthy, characters in Shakespeare often repeat the popular contemporary belief that a diet high in beef could dull the intellect (a vestige of which survives in the modern insult "meathead"). In *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites taunts the oafish Ajax by calling him "beef-witted" (2.1.12). In *Henry V*, the Duke of Orleans refers to the English soldiers as "fat-brained," presumably because they devour "great meals of beef" (3.7.121, 135). Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* offers a similar diagnosis for the cause of his idiocy: "Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or ordinary man has; but I am a great eater of beef and I believe that does harm to my wit" (1.3.71-3). When Toby seconds this opinion, Andrew replies: "An' I thought that, I'd forswear it" (1.3.75).²¹ Around the time he composed these three texts in which meat is associated with mental torpor, and shortly after he finished *As You Like It* (1599), Shakespeare wrote another play featuring a melancholy and undeniably cerebral character, Hamlet, who has a strange obsession with livestock, butchery, and the flesh of dead animals.

Hamlet's Fast

The very first line of Hamlet's first soliloquy contains a notorious textual crux: following the 1623 Folio, most editors print, "O that this too

too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129), in lieu of the reading found in both Q1 and Q2 (generally considered the most authoritative version), "too too *sallied* flesh." Some editions, such as the recent two-volume Arden text, retain "sallied" but gloss it as "assailed, or besieged." Regardless of what Shakespeare actually wrote (assuming he did not revise earlier drafts), the editorial preference for "solid" has tended to obscure the significance of "sallied," which by hinting that Hamlet's face has been wetted with salt tears, sets up a connection in the play between the human flesh and meat. The image of salted flesh also anticipates his reference a few lines later to the "funeral baked meats / [that] did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.179-80) at Gertrude's wedding. In an age before refrigeration, unconsumed meat left, like Hamlet, "too much i'the sun" would quickly spoil. Leftover meat was therefore smothered with salt as a preservative. Preservation was also aided by ensconcing the meat in piecrusts, or pasties, referred to as "coffins" (cf. *Titus Andronicus* 5.3.187). Since the meat inside was reconstituted (de-boned, mixed with seasonings, and placed back inside the skin), the bereaved Prince would have an even stronger motive for eschewing it. As Robert Appelbaum has brilliantly argued in his recent study of early modern gastronomy, to serve such a dish at a funeral would carry with it a disturbing "underimage of internment, disinternment, and embalmment."²² The tone of the Prince's remark conveys disgust with these baked meats, and it seems reasonable to assume that he did not partake of them at the royal reception.

So what, then, did Hamlet eat? At first glance this question may seem a rather absurd instance of the Bradleian fallacy of treating fictional characters as living human beings, long ago relegated to the dust-bin of criticism by L.C. Knights in his overview of the vain attempts to number Lady Macbeth's progeny.²³ While admitting there is no clear-cut answer to this query, posing it will nevertheless illuminate a dimension of *Hamlet* that has been overlooked in the groaning shelves of scholarship devoted to the tragedy. For many early moderns, as for the environmentally conscious today, food was very much a moral issue, and it should not be surprising that a play rife with uncertainty about humanity's niche in the cosmos would also subject human dominion over "brute creation" to intense scrutiny. Critics have long acknowledged the radical skepticism that pervades Shakespearean tragedy.²⁴ Hamlet in particular interrogates and rails against all engrained habits and "that monster custom, who all sense doth eat" (3.4.152). While Hamlet literally means that custom often overrules common sense, this strange personification of custom as ravenous monster that devours sense may also point to something monstrous about dietary habits, and the way that society can condition people to eat things they normally, as individuals, would not consider

edible. Was meat-eating another custom Hamlet felt to be more honored in the breach?

Belleforest's prose narrative appears to confirm the suspicion:

And as the messengers sate at the table with the King, subtile Hamlet was so far from being merry with them, that he would not taste one bit of meate, bread, nor cup of beare whatsoever... rejecting them as things filthy, evill of tast, and worse prepared.²⁵

In most cultures throughout the world, sharing a meal is a way of affirming familial and communal bonds. Refusing to sit at the table beside Claudius, then, may simply be a way of renouncing kinship – something Shakespeare conveys when Hamlet darkly quips, “a little more than kin and less than kind” (1.2.65). Nevertheless, Belleforest's Hamlet shows a particular abhorrence of meat. When the King and courtiers take umbrage at Hamlet's behavior, the text suddenly erupts into the first-person:

What, think you, that I wil eat bread dipt in humane blood, and defile my throat with the rust of yron, and use that meat that stinketh and savoureth of mans flesh, already putrified and corrupted, and that senteth like the savour of dead carryon, long since cast into a valt?”²⁶

In Belleforest's *Hystorie*, this remarkable outburst (one of the few moments in which we hear Hamlet's voice directly) possesses something of the rhetorical charge of Shakespeare's first soliloquy. Paid oblique homage in Hamlet's passing references to baked meats, sallied flesh, and carrion, the radical disgust with carnivorousness in Belleforest is an under-recognized force propelling the tragedy's metaphysical flights.

Apart from wishing to boycott the wedding feast, Hamlet, like Jaques, may have avoided the baked meat for health reasons since it was, according to Burton, deemed “unfit for such as lead a resty life, anyways inclined to melancholy.”²⁷ As a scholar who has “forgone all custom of exercise,” Hamlet would certainly fit this description. A vegetarian diet was also thought to reduce aggression, as evident in *Taming of the Shrew* when Petruccio avers that burned, dried meat “engenders choler, planteth anger” (4.1.152). Hamlet's accusation that his liver “lacks gall,” or the yellow bile, which a diet high in meat was thought to produce, may be another hint that a meatless diet has contributed to his failure to act.

Although in fierce fits of passion Hamlet contemplates drinking hot blood and dares Laertes to eat a crocodile, these lines are simply hyperbole. Perhaps a more reliable clue as to his diet might be inferred from his wry banter before the Mousetrap when Claudius asks him: “How fares our

cousin Hamlet?" Punning on the alternate sense of "fare" as in "to be entertained with food," Hamlet replies: "Excellent, i'faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so" (3.2.84-6). Hamlet's wisecrack hinges on the belief authorized by natural historians like Pliny that chameleons could draw nourishment from the air (while perhaps reminding Claudius that Hamlet is the promised "heir" to the throne). Reports of people who claimed to have survived for months, even years, without eating anything do appear in contemporary collections of natural marvels.²⁸ His claim to eat air, generally dismissed as a symptom of the Prince's madness, is very likely a reminder that Hamlet has been fasting. Fasting, which could mean simply abstaining from meat, was also considered a sign of grieving in the early modern era, thereby indicating that Hamlet remains in mourning for his father. Polonius in fact informs Claudius and Gertrude that Hamlet "fell into a sadness, then into a fast" (2.2.147). Obscured by Polonius's buffoonish pedantry, this vital bit of biographical information about Hamlet has largely gone unnoticed by critics. In the "Murder of Gonzago," the Player Queen announces she intends to fast when she becomes a widow—"No earth to me give food" (3.2.198)—a decision Hamlet applauds in hope of catching Gertrude's conscience. Hamlet later denounces "the fatness of these pury times" (3.4.144) to his mother, perhaps conveying his disapproval of the feasting at Elsinore in what should be a period of fasting or abstemiousness. While some Protestant Reformers criticized the collective fasting stipulated by the old calendar as a meaningless external observance, many continued to sanction solitary fasting as an unpremeditated expression of personal grief. Hamlet's insistence on the authenticity of his "forms, moods, shapes of grief" would also apply to a personal, commemorative fast.²⁹ Feasibly, the final phrase, "shapes of grief" (another reading from Q2 often emended to "shows" by modern editors), could even glance at the lean figure resulting from a meager diet. Given this obsession with fasting, Hamlet's mysterious "within that passeth show"—the subject of so much critical rumination—may conceal not only a new gestational stage in modern subjectivity, but also an empty stomach.³⁰ Indeed, the two are perhaps more closely linked than one would suspect at first blush. In drawing out the distinction between a public and private fast, Protestant divines such as Thomas Becon repeatedly appeal to interiority as the focal point of the experience. In Reformation England, fasting becomes less of an exercise in affirming communal bonds through shared sacrifice and more a means of cultivating an inner spiritual fortitude. In his 1551 treatise, Becon defines fasting as a "forbearing of meats, drinks and other pleasures in which the outward man delighteth." According to Becon, a genuine fast requires a spontaneous renunciation in response to one's own spiritual condition at

the moment, rather than a rote custom done according to a time-table dictated by the Church. Although scriptural warrants for fasting exist, Bacon is quick to point out that they occurred only when "out of a mourning and sorrowful heart dyd sprynge outward ... unfayened tokens of sorowe and mourning." Hamlet's private fast thus emphasizes his alienation from the court and underscores his Protestant-inflected nourishing of the "inward man."³¹

"Slave's Offal": Hamlet as Failed Butcher

An aversion to meat would also help account for the further tendency in Hamlet's imagery to cluster around (expanding Spurgeon's category) animal husbandry and butchery. For instance, his comment "you cannot feed capons so" alludes to the inhumane methods used to fatten castrated chickens, known as cramming (3.2.86). As Joan Thirsk explains:

Capons were crammed with barley, wheatened bran, and warm ale or beer, or if economy dictated, were given seeds of cockle (*Lychnis*) and leaves and seeds of meliot (a sweet clover).³²

Understanding this agricultural practice sheds light on another murky development in the play. As Hamlet ponders murdering his uncle in 3.3, he finds himself unable to deliver the death-blow, reasoning that Claudius's prayers have rendered him "fit and seasoned for his passage" (3.3.86). Despite the boatloads of ink spilled on Hamlet's fatal delay here, none, to my knowledge, have noted that he imagines Claudius as livestock about to be unsuspectingly slaughtered.³³ Hamlet's reluctance in this scene could in part be explained, as his own comments insinuate, as a backlash against the manner of his father's murder. The Ghost informs Hamlet he died from a poison "hebenon," which is possibly a corruption of the plant henbane, or *hyoscyamus niger*.³⁴ Ingested in large quantities, henbane is lethal and, as its name implies, was used to kill poultry. In his compendium of scientific/homeopathic experiments, Thomas Hill offers tips on how to kill hens and ducks: "cast to them the seed of henbane and they will fall downe as they were dead."³⁵ In small quantities henbane can have a soporific effect and was sometimes mixed into forage and fodder with the idea that "the tendency to stupor and repose caused by these plants is conducive to fattening."³⁶ When Hamlet agonizes over the fact his father was killed "grossly full of bread," he pictures him as a capon crammed with wheat-bran and then given henbane (3.3.81).

If, as Edward Berry has recently illustrated, the hunt begins to provoke discomfort in early modern England, the same "structure of feeling" also raised questions about the propriety of meat-eating as well.³⁷ The citizens in Thomas More's imaginary commonwealth delegate the grisly chore of hunting to slaves and despise butchers as pariahs, believing that habitual killing has irredeemably blunted their moral sensitivity.³⁸ In Bruno's *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* (dedicated to Philip Sidney), the allegorical figure of Wisdom (Sophia) similarly associates hunters with butchers who

administer to our inordinate gluttony to which the food ordained by Nature, more fitting to the complexion and life of man, is not enough. ... So the art of the hunter is an exercise and an art no less ignoble and vile than that of the butcher, since the savage brute has no less the quality of the beast than the domestic and rustic animal.³⁹

Revulsion for these professions is also memorably voiced in Philip Sidney's eclogue "As I my little flock on Ister Bank." Following a long established tradition that early man was a vegetarian, the poem imagines the cultural turn toward animal domestication and meat-eating as the ecological equivalent of Adam's fall:

And when they were well used to be abused,
For hungry throat their flesh with teeth he bruised;
At length for glutton taste he did them kill;
At last for sport their silly lives did spill.⁴⁰

Here Sidney likens the craving for meat to gluttony, an argument not all that different from Peter Singer's in *Animal Liberation*, who asserts that human beings can lead long healthy lives without killing animals, and choose not to out of a preference for a diet rich with the flavor of animal flesh.⁴¹ This point resonates even more loudly in Sidney's Elizabethan English, in which the word "spill" carries the force of "waste." Through mordant wordplay on "well used" (i.e. accustomed) and "abused," and the repetition of grammatically symmetrical phrases, the poem de-familiarizes entrenched practices of meat-eating and hunting and links them with gratuitous violence.

In *As You Like It* (written shortly before *Hamlet*), Adam warns Orlando that his brother's house is "but a butchery:/ Abhor it" (2.3.28-9). While, as Jaques' lament for the wounded stag makes abundantly clear, the Duke's poaching recapitulates his brother's usurpation, the journey to Arden, nevertheless, implies a return to a state of ecological innocence.

Given the play's questioning of the hunt, it is not coincidental that during the pastoral banquet in 2.7, Orlando specifically refers to the food as "fruit" (2.7.98). Shakespeare could have written "meat" and preserved the iambic pentameter. With this single word, he nudges audience members to infer that the Duke and his men are eating a vegetarian meal (a point Kenneth Branagh drives home in his recent film adaptation of the play). Jaques' unflattering portrait of the justice and his "round belly with good capon lined" (2.7.153) casts further aspersions on meat-eating. Despite the reference to offstage hunting, the vegetarian feast in the forest emphasizes the Edenic nature of Arden, and signals the play's movement towards a harmonious co-existence both among the social classes and the other inhabitants of the non-human environment.

Images of animal slaughter punctuate several of Shakespeare's works, including *Julius Caesar*, when Brutus cautions: "Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers Caius" (2.1.166); Mark Antony's anguished cry, however, foils the conspirators' attempt at image management: "Pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth / That I am meek and gentle with these butchers" (3.1.257-8). In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, meanwhile, Falstaff compares himself to a "barrow of butcher's offal" dumped in the Thames. While Falstaff's speech is comic, animal slaughter also provides one of the most poignant epic similes in all of Shakespeare:

And as the butcher takes away the calf,
 And binds the wretch, and beats it when it strains,
 Bearing it to the bloody slaughterhouse,
 Even so remorseless have they borne him hence;
 And as the dam runs lowing up and down,
 Looking the way her harmless young one went
 And can do naught but wail her darling's loss;
 Even so myself bewails good Gloucester's case.

(2 *Henry 6* 3.1.210-17)

The affective power of Henry VI's speech depends on the audience's familiarity with such sights in the city shambles, a spectacle from which the methods of industrial farming insulate most urban-dwellers today. Early moderns, in other words, were much closer to the meat industry than moderns, and rather than de-sensitizing them to the violence the shambles were a constant reminder of the bloodshed required to put beef upon their plate. Although not a vegetarian himself, the sixteenth-century Protestant martyrologist John Foxe admitted "such is my disposition that I can scarce pass the shambles where beasts are slaughtered, but that my mind recoils with a feeling of pain."⁴²

Working up the temerity to kill Claudius in cold blood, Hamlet tries to think of himself as a butcher—"I should a fatted all the region kites / with this slave's offal"—but during the confession scene he proves unable to assume the persona (2.2.556). His reluctance to identify himself with what someone of his rank would consider a distasteful profession leads to his inability to avenge his father. This moment highlights one of the key differences between Hamlet and Macbeth, who murders the sleeping Duncan and is branded a "butcher" at the conclusion of his tragedy (5.11.35). Hamlet also thinks of murder as butchery during his banter with Polonius regarding Brutus's assassination of Julius Caesar: "'Twas a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf" (3.2.95). More than foreshadowing of the murder behind the arras, the jest conveys repugnance for the butcher's trade.

Shakespeare the Butcher Revisited: Polonius and the Killing of the Calf

The recurring imagery of animal butchery in Shakespeare seems appropriate given the first biographical tidbit ever recorded about the playwright. In his early modern collection of celebrity gossip, John Aubrey reports that

his father was a Butcher, & I have been told heretofore by some of the neighbors, that when he was a boy he exercised his fathers Trade, but when he kill'd a Calfe, he would do it in a high style, & make a Speech.⁴³

Long dismissed as a "patently ludicrous anecdote" by Shakespearean biographers, Katherine Duncan-Jones has recently outlined some compelling reasons for re-opening the case-file.⁴⁴ First, John Shakespeare was a whittawer, or dealer in leather goods, and while health regulations prohibited him from slaughtering animals on his property, he would have received his skins from and thus been a business partner with the town butcher. Civic documents in fact reveal that the playwright's father served as a constable with and did some book-keeping for a William Tyler who ran a slaughterhouse on Sheep Street. Since we now know that John Shakespeare violated trade laws by engaging in wool-brogging, it is not impossible that he may have violated legal codes forbidding the slaughter of animals on his land.⁴⁵

There is even contemporary evidence indicating that a past connection with butchery followed Shakespeare to London. In the preface to Greene's *Menaphon* (c.1589), Thomas Nashe hurls some disparaging

quips at upstart, non-university educated playwrights, who presume they can compete on the public stage with their "killcow conceits."⁴⁶ Although most scholars date Shakespeare's arrival in London around 1590, the timeline remains anybody's guess, and this allusion could feasibly refer to the glover's son from Stratford. Reluctant to imagine the young Bard bloodying his hands in such a distasteful trade, modern biographers have speculated that Aubrey's anecdote preserves a garbled recollection of Shakespeare's participating in the Christmas mumming play known as the killing of the calf.⁴⁷ Since whittawers and butchers collaborated on guild plays in the nearby town of Coventry, it is not implausible that the young Shakespeare may have taken a role in such productions. The suggestion is an intriguing one and there is, I believe, textual evidence that Shakespeare was at least aware of this folk drama.

Records of this mumming play, though scarce, do survive: in December 1521 a calf-killing show was performed before Henry VIII's daughter, Princess Mary: court records log a payment: "to a man at Wyndesore for kylling a calfe before my ladys grace behynde a clothe."⁴⁸ In some parts of England these civic skits continued up until the early twentieth century, and modern accounts flesh out, as it were, the Tudor ledger. No animals were actually killed. Rather the performers, often children, concealed themselves behind a screen where they wielded a pair of horns, a basin of blood, and some raucous sound effects to create the illusion of slaughtering a calf. To Shakespeare's audience, the murder of Polonius—who has just been compared to a calf in the previous scene—behind the arras would recall this peculiar folk-play. The link becomes more probable given that Shakespeare here departed from his sources; Saxo's counselor hides in the straw of the Queen's bed, while Belleforest's conceals himself beneath a "loudier," or bedspread.⁴⁹ Shakespeare, assuming he did not adopt a revision made by Kyd, shifts Polonius behind the arras so that his murder will evoke the mumming play of the killing of the calf behind the curtain which he himself—if we accept this interpretation of Aubrey's story—participated in as a youth. The association with the mumming may imply that during early performances at the Globe Polonius's slaying had a meta-theatrical resonance that eludes modern audiences, a resonance that makes his death more like ritual sacrifice than hot-blooded murder.

Even if Aubrey's anecdote is spurious, the idea that Shakespeare would kill a calf "in a high style," i.e. a tragic register, can be salvaged as a valid piece of literary criticism, reflecting an awareness of how his plays imaginatively blur the boundaries separating, in this case, the bovine and the human. To treat a calf as Caesar or vice versa, even in jest, points toward a correspondence across species that Rene Girard perceives as

common among agrarian societies that practice animal sacrifice.⁵⁰ The intent may be not so much to ennoble calves as to de-humanize Polonius (Hamlet even refers to him as a "rat" before delivering the death-blow), but the upshot remains the same: the gap between humans and animals is much narrower than is dreamt of in our philosophy.

The collapse of the ontological divide between beast and human emerges even more clearly in Hamlet's treatment of Polonius's corpse. In Belleforest's *Hystorie*, the Prince throws the dismembered body down the privy "so it might serve for foode to the hogges."⁵¹ Although Shakespeare omits this grisly detail, his revision asserts in effect that the same fate will befall all bodies even those respectfully interred in the earth.

King Claudius: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet: At supper.

King Claudius: At supper? Where?

Hamlet: Not where he eats but where a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures. else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots.

(4.3.20-3)

From presiding over a carnivorous banquet in Act 1, the portly Claudius is forced to consider himself a dish being fattened for a necrophagic feast. In illustrating "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (4.3.30), Hamlet presents a twist on the Pythagorean notion that meat is mysteriously contaminated by its promiscuous odyssey through the food chain. Hamlet's morbid ecology is also very much aligned with ecocriticism in its rebuke to anthropocentric assumptions promoted by Christian theology: of all the creatures on God's green earth, man alone, it was believed, possessed an immortal soul and would be resurrected in bodily form, a point reaffirmed in the funeral services in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. After questioning the conventional Church dogma regarding the afterlife Hamlet soberly concludes that human beings are in fact more animal than angel.

To return to the issue of Hamlet's diet, most of the key incentives motivating vegetarians today—a desire to avoid gratuitous suffering, health concerns, even efficient land-use and reducing hunger—were already circulating in sixteenth century Europe; Leonardo Da Vinci, often upheld as the quintessential Renaissance man, was also a devout Pythagorean. Yet a glaring caveat remains to be addressed: Hamlet it seems does not only want to eschew meat, but all forms of food. Rather than express compassion for animals, his fast primarily signifies a wish to

somehow transcend or exempt himself from the biological cycle of growth and decay, and the resultant putrefaction at which his gorge later rises. Like Kafka's Hunger Artist, who sets his cage alongside a menagerie, Hamlet not only grasps the strangely performative nature of the fast but also creates a sense of his metaphysical striving by juxtaposing it with the animal condition:

What is a man
If the chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed?—A beast, no more.
(4.4.23-5)

His speeches manifest disgust with feeding and, by extension, with carnality itself; he is notoriously repulsed by his mother's sexuality, which leads him to perceive her bed as a "nasty sty." However, if Hamlet seems repulsed by the carnal nature of human beings, including himself, the play gradually moves away from this mentality toward the serene acceptance of man's animality. During the duel, Gertrude states that her son is "fat and scant of breath" (5.2.230) – the word most likely means hot and sweaty (cf. *1 Henry IV* – 2.5.1), but after the repeated negative valence given this word, Shakespeare may be hinting that Hamlet has resumed eating in Act 5—the point at which he also ceases to soliloquize.

Certainly Hamlet's philosophy is very different from the humanism often smeared as a target of ecocritical abuse.⁵² Long upheld as a *locus classicus* of Renaissance humanism, the Prince's famed monologue, "O what a piece of work is a man," culminates with the Epicurean assertion that this work is ultimately no more than dust. As the play progresses, even dust is shown to be a poetic euphemism for the nauseating reality of physiological decay. Hamlet's curious considering upon mortality leads to an emphatic recognition of the human body as nothing more than a temporarily animated hunk of meat. Recall the lyrics of the grave-digger's song:

O, a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.
(5.1.88-9)

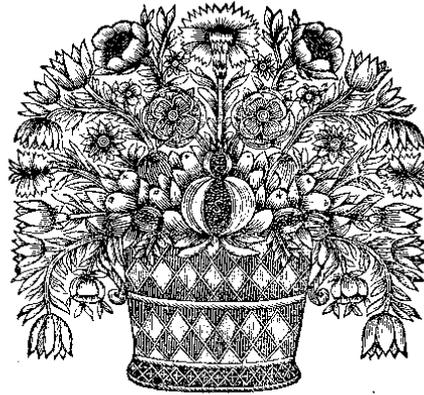
He repeats the refrain twenty lines later, driving home the pun: "Meet" means apt, fitting, but also dead flesh. Hamlet's fantasy that even Julius Caesar decays into anonymity in the earth reveals that the play also participates in the pro-republican critique of absolutism.⁵³ "Here's fine revolution, an we had the trick to see't" (5.1.83). Although Hamlet reaches

for a political term here, the thrust of the critique is not primarily political; instead Hamlet appropriates the word "revolution" to imagine death as the restoration of a Republic of Nature unifying all creatures in the grave. Rather than a poetic testament of the metaphysical grandeur of man, *Hamlet* is often critical of existential hubris and eager to expose human dominion as illusory.

To sum up, Hamlet confronts us with an insoluble paradox; he has a keen empathy for animal suffering and likely avoids eating animal flesh, yet does so in part because he wishes to escape from his own flesh, to dissociate himself from his carnal nature; he is awed by the unrivalled dignity and mental prowess of human beings, yet acutely conscious that humans are biologically akin to beasts, locked in the same cycle of birth, growth, decay which nullifies any pretensions to supremacy. He reduces his consumption through fasting, yet his individual Protestant fast departs from the collective Lenten fast of Catholic tradition, which was synchronized with a period of scarcity. He anticipates the Cartesian cogito and its withdrawal from its environment but also experiences both Cartesian and Copernican doubt that undermines the assumption that mankind occupies the zenith of creation. He is therefore a quintessential specimen of the conflicted, contorted attitudes of modern Western civilization towards non-human nature—that, with apologies to Orwell, all animals are equal but some are more equal than others.

This essay may strike some people as merely the latest attempt to remold Hamlet in our image; since every generation from Goethe to Joyce, Coleridge to Greenblatt, have done so, it seems naïve to assume we can avoid this completely. Hamlet's anxiety about what to eat or not to eat, although different in some ways from current environmental soul-searching on this subject, is a tribute to the phenomenal, virtually life-like complexity of the character, and the play's seemingly inexhaustible capacity to absorb and reflect upon the various ethical conundrums of ensuing generations of readers.

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¹ Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961), 119-21.

² Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Diaries and the Plays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 80. Ken Albala largely agrees with Fitzpatrick that vegetarianism was viewed as unhealthy; however he notes that notions of a healthy diet differed widely based on temperaments. Thus "individuals with strong or 'hot' stomachs could digest tougher and heavier foods, whereas the weak and delicate needed to subsist on lighter fare. Beef would nourish the former but be impossible to digest for the latter, offering no nutritional value." *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 6. See also Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London: Penguin, 1983), 287-300. A stimulating overview of the subject can be found in Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993).

³ John Taylor, *The Old, Old, Very Old Man: Or the Age and Long Life of Thomas Parr* (London: 1635). 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). Although Appelbaum cautions (rightly, I think) that a fully formulated discourse of ethical vegetarianism did not emerge until the late seventeenth-century, his findings largely corroborate my thesis that *Hamlet* betrays "an anxiety concerning the ontology of food and the brutality of eating meat" (184-87, 26).

⁴Plutarch, "Of the Eating of Flesh," in *Plutarch's Lives and Writings*, ed. A.H. Clough and William Goodwin (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton and Kent, 1914), 10:3-16; Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. Gillian Clark (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2000). A Latin translation of Porphyry's text had been printed in Venice in 1547; *Hermetica*, ed. Brian Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 92. On Spenser's Savage

Man, see Donald Cheney, *Spenser's "Image of Nature"* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966), and G.M. Pinciss, "The Savage Man in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Renaissance English Drama," in *The Elizabethan Theatre VIII*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Ontario: P.D. Meany, 1982), 69-89.

⁵ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), 5.7.10.

⁶ Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphosis: The Arthur Golding Translation*, ed. John Frederick Nims (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2000), 15.507-523. For more on the sources of this 404-line speech and Ovid's motives in inserting it a climactic juncture in the book, see Philip Hardie, "The Speech of Pythagoras in Ovid's Metamorphoses 15: Empedoclean Epos," *Classical Quarterly* 45, no.1 (1995), 204-14.

⁷ Elizabeth D. Harvey, "The Souls of Animals: John Donne's Metempsychosis and Early Modern Natural History," in *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*, ed. Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garret Sullivan (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 55-70, 55. Donne even raises questions about the ethics of eating fish: the supposedly pious act of abstaining from beef and poultry turns a Lenten fast, from the fishes' perspective, into a kind of Church-sanctioned genocide.

⁸ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 295, 297.

⁹ Joan Thirsk, "Food in Shakespeare's England," in *Fooles And Fricassees: Food in Shakespeare's England*, ed. Mary Ann Caton (Seattle: University of Washington, 1999), 13; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 41. Werner Rosener, *The Peasantry of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 149. On the ubiquity of fish in the diet of the English poor, see Brian Fagan, *Fish on Friday: Feasting, Fasting, and the Discovery of the New World* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), and Edward M. Test, "The Tempest and the Newfoundland Fishery," in *Global Traffic: Discourses and Practices of Trade in English Literature and Culture from 1550 to 1700*, ed. Barbara Sebek and Stephen Deng (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 201-220.

¹⁰ John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), 2.340-45.

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 206.

¹² Barbara Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1966), 200-2, 219-26.

¹³ *The order and doctrine of the generall fast appoynted by the Generall Assemblie of the churches of Scotland, holden at Edenburgh the 25. day of December, 1565.* (London: 1603). One of the many proclamations from the Commonwealth

era is *Votes of Parliament for setting apart a day of publique fasting and humiliation*. Wednesday the ninth of February, 1652. (London : John Field, 1652 [i.e. 1653]).

¹⁴ *Orders conceaued and set doovne by the Lords of her Maiesties Priuie Counsel, by her highnesse special direction, to be put in execution for the restraint of killing and eating of flesh* (London: 1589). A proclamation in 1591 raised the number of butchers who could conduct business during Lent to five; the number grew to eight by 1610.

¹⁵ Thirsk, "Food in Shakespeare's England," 14.

¹⁶ Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (New York: Garland, 1973), G3 4v.

¹⁷ Thirsk, "Food in Shakespeare's England," 14. Appelbaum, *Aguecheek's Beef*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare*, 80.

¹⁹ All Shakespearean citations are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 2008).

²⁰ Richard Gardiner of Shrewsbury, *Profitable Instructions for the Manuring, Sowing, and Planting of Kitchin Gardens* (London: 1599), A3v.

²¹ For an authoritative survey of the ambiguous medical theory underlying this remark, see Appelbaum, *Aguecheek's Beef*, 3.

²² *Ibid*, 19.

²³ L.C. Knights, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" in *Modern Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Alvin Kernan (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 45-76.

²⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002), and William Hamlin, *Tragedy and Skepticism in Shakespeare's England* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

²⁵ Francis de Belleforest, "The Hystorie of Hamblet," (London: 1608); rptd. in *The Sources of Hamlet, With an Essay on the Legend*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz (New York: Octagon Books, 1967), 235.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 235.

²⁷ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 1:219.

²⁸ See the accounts "Of wonderfull fasting," in Joannes Jonstonus, *An History of the Wonderful Things of Nature* (London: 1657), 315-16.

Though nourishment be necessary for our life, yet there have been many, that have lived along time without it. In Saint Augustine his days, one lived 40, days without eating any thing. Another, in the

time of *Olimpiodorus the Platonist*, for so long as he lived, he neither fed nor slept, but only stood in the Sun to refresh himself. The daughter of the Emperour *Clotarius* fasted eleven years. *Petrus Aponus* saw one fasted 18 years. *Rondeletius* saw one fasted ten, and afterwards became a fruitfull Mother. *Hermolaus* knew a Priest who lived in health 40 years without any thing, but by sucking in the Ayr. Lastly, one *Nicolaus Helvetius* under *Waldensis*, Anno 1460, after that he had five Children by his Wife, lived a solitary life, and neither ate nor drank in 15 years. Some dare affirm, that he fasted 22 years; and *Bocatus* saith, that this party, or another, fasted 30 years. *Mago Carthaginensis*, and *Lasyrtas Lasionensis* lived without taking any liquid substance all their lives, *Athen. l. 2. c. 2*. One that *Coelius* speaks of, that was by Country of *Tomos*, did the like at *Naples*; and *Aristotle* speaks of *Andronis* of *Greece*.

²⁹ Hamlet's position resembles that of the Swiss Reformer, Huldrych Zwingli during a controversial incident in the history of Protestantism. In 1522 a Zurich printer served sausages to a group of friends on the first Sunday in Lent. Out of the twelve Reformers, Zwingli alone refused the sausage but later published a sermon arguing that the meat-fast during Lent was unnecessary. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Viking, 2003), 135.

³⁰ Critical studies which have taken this line as anticipating or inaugurating modern subjectivity include, Francis Barker, *Tremulous Private Body* (London: Methuen, 1984), 35, and Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1-6.

³¹ Thomas Becon. *A Fruitful Treatise of Fasting* (London: John Day, 1551), B2.

³² Thirsk, "Food in Shakespeare's England," 14.

³³ Rather than focus on animal slaughter, Appelbaum likens King Hamlet's poisoned body to a "fungus-encrusted wheel of cheese" (24).

³⁴ A definitive identification of the poison has proved elusive. Some scholars believe it may be "the juice of Hebon" (3.4.101) Marlowe refers to in *The Jew of Malta*, but henbane's Latin name (*hyoscamus niger*) could feasibly have led Shakespeare to conflate it with ebony. See Variorum *Hamlet*, and Henry Bradley, "'Cursed Hebenon' (or 'Hebona')." *Modern Language Review* 15.1 (1920), 85-87.

³⁵ Thomas Hill, *A briefe and pleasaunt treatise, intituled, Naturall and artificiall conclusions: written first by sundrie scholers of the Vniuersitie of Padua in Italie, at the instant request of one Barthelmewe a Tuscan: and now Englished by*

Thomas Hill Londoned [sic], as well for the commoditie of sundrie artificers, as for the matters of pleasure, to recreate wittes at vacant tymes (London: 1581), 31.

³⁶ Maud Grieve, *A Modern Herbal* (New York: Hafner, 1971), 399. Evidence for use of henbane as a poison can be found in Charles Estienne's popular husbandry manual, *Maison Rustique*:

Take of the root and seed of Henbane a good quantitie, and lay it to steepe in a basen full of water a whole day and a night, afterward put thereinto Wheat, and boyle all together vntill the said Corne be well steept and swelled, afterward you shall put of the same Corne in the said place, for the wild Duckes will runne vnto it, and as soone as they shall haue eaten it, they will fall downe all astonishe and giddie. This kind of fowle is made fat in such manner as the young Geese, that is to say, with the same food.

Maison Rustique, or the countrie ferme, trans. Richard Surfleet (London: 1600), 109-110. In the best-known early modern herbal (published 1597), John Gerard observes that henbane flourishes "about dunghills and untoiled places," like the unweeded garden Hamlet sees as a synecdoche for the world in Act 1. John Gerard, *Gerard's Herball* (London: Spring Books, 1964), 87. Situating Gerard's comment alongside Hill's advice—"To fat Hennes or Capons" (30) by letting them feed on herbs that grow on dunghills — offers further evidence that small amounts of henbane may have been a source of capon feed in the early modern period.

³⁷ Edward Berry, *Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

³⁸ Thomas More, *Complete Works*, vol. 4. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965 only give the year of volume 4), 139.

³⁹ Giordano Bruno, *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, trans. Arthur Immerti (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1964), 261.

⁴⁰ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Jean Robertson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 259.

⁴¹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon, 1975), 145.

⁴² Qtd. in Keith Thomas, 293. Hamlet's attempt to imagine himself as a butcher also helps clarify his mocking of Polonius as a "fishmonger." All of the Privy Council's proclamations restricting the meat industry in Lent stipulate that four members of the company of fishmongers will be chosen to enforce the policy. Given the likelihood of corruption, the guild-members selected for this task would have to have a reputation for ethical integrity: which explains Hamlet's gibe at Polonius: "And I would you were so honest a man." Hamlet thinks of Polonius as fishmonger because

he polices Hamlet as fishmongers did butchers, obstructing his attempt to murder Claudius. For more on the rivalry between butchers and fishmongers, see Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 72-87.

⁴³ John Aubrey, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver L. Dick (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 275.

⁴⁴ Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Did the Boy Shakespeare Kill Calves?" *Review of English Studies* 55, no. 2 (April 2004): 183-95. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, Bodl. MS Aubrey 6, fo. 109; E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), 2:253.

⁴⁵ Greenblatt comments on John Shakespeare's wool-brogging in *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), 56.

⁴⁶ Nashe's remark appears in the preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1927), 5.

⁴⁷ The suggestion that Shakespeare participated in a calf-killing mumming play was first made by Douglas Hanmer in a review of *Shakespeare's Lives* published in *The Review of English Studies* 22, no. 4 (Nov. 1971): 482-85; Schoenbaum incorporated the idea into his *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, 74.

⁴⁸ Qtd. in Hanmer, "Shakespeare's Lives," 484.

⁴⁹ Saxo Grammaticus, "Hamlet," rptd. in *The Sources of Hamlet*, 114-15, and Belleforest, "Hystorie of Hamlet," rptd. in *The Sources of Hamlet*, 206. Confusingly, the English translator, influenced by Shakespeare's play, switches bedspread to arras. For more on this scene, see Yngve B. Olsson, "In Search of Yorick's Skull: Notes on the Background of Hamlet," *Shakespeare Studies* 3, ed. J. Leeds Barroll (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1967), 183-220, 204.

⁵⁰ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 3-4.

⁵¹ Belleforest, "Hystorie," rptd. in *The Sources of Hamlet*, 207.

⁵² David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). A standard dour view of humanist tragedy as inimical to environmental virtues can be found in Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 24.

⁵³ Hamlet must grapple with the ethics of assassinating an anointed ruler, or to take *Vindicae, Contra Tyrannos*. On the subversive political features of the play, see Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985),

186-93, and Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 184-204.