

SHAKESPEARE'S SIR JOHN OLDCASTLE AND JONSON'S URSULA THE PIG WOMAN

Shakespeare's cooks are not to be trusted. In *Titus Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens* the cook exacts revenge: Titus, having killed Chiron and Demetrius and announced his intention to bake their heads in a pie, announces "I'll play the cook / And see them ready against their mother comes" (V.2.203-04); Timon prepares to present his false friends with a meal of steaming water and stones, announcing "My cook and I'll provide" (III.5.14).¹ Both Titus and Timon apparently demean themselves by taking on the role of cook but their serving of others is a means by which to assert power over them. In *Romeo and Juliet* Capulet's servingman assures him that he will hire only the best cooks to prepare Juliet's wedding feast because he has a test for them: "Marry, sir, 'tis an ill cook that cannot lick his own fingers, therefore he that cannot lick his fingers goes not with me" (IV.2.6-8). In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Grumio and Petruchio complain about the cook's absence: the former asks "Where's the cook? Is supper ready" (IV.1.40) and is echoed by his master "Where is the rascal cook?" (IV.1.148). In *2 Henry 4* Sir John, taking no responsibility for his indulgences, claims that the fault lies with cooks and whores: "If the cook help to make the gluttony, you help to make the diseases, Doll" (II.4.43-44). Notwithstanding Sir John's prodigious appetite for sack and capons, Shakespeare makes cooks seem harmful and none of his plays portray them in a favourable light.

Where Titus "plays the cook", Ursula in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* cooks for a living. Ursula's nickname stems from the fact that she prepares and sells pork but also indicates that her body is imperfect; she is so obese that she is almost less than human: a "pig woman". Like Shakespeare's suspect cooks, Ursula is guilty of shady practices: adulterating tobacco with the herb colts-foot, selling as much froth as beer and taking the customers' drinks away before they are finished so she might sell them back again (II.2.90-106).¹ Justice Overdo, having overheard Ursula boast of her wrong-doing, makes a connection between her appearance and her behaviour: "This is the very

womb and bed of enormity! gross, as herself!" (II.2.107-08).

Constant references are made to Ursula's large size and she is teased for being fat:

QUARLOUS. Body o' the Fair! what's this? Mother o' the bawds?

KNOCKEM. No, she's mother o' the pigs, sir, mother o' the pigs!

WINWIFE. Mother o' the Furies, I think, by her firebrand.

QUARLOUS. Nay, she is too fat to be a Fury, sure some walking sow of tallow!

WINWIFE. An inspir'd vessel of Kitchen stuff! *She drinks this while.*

QUARLOUS. She'll make excellent gear for the coach-makers, here in Smithfield, to anoint wheeles and axle-trees with.

URSULA. Aye, aye, gamesters, mock a plain plump soft wench o' the suburbs, do, because she's juicy and wholesome: you must ha' your thin pinch'd ware, pent up i' the compasse of a dog-collar (or 'twill not do), that looks like a long lac'd conger, set upright, and a green feather, like fennel, i' the jowl on't. (II.5.69-82)

When we first meet Ursula she complains about the discomfort she endures: "Fie upon't: who would wear out their youth and prime thus, in roasting of pigs, that had any cooler vocation? Hell's a kind of cold cellar to't, a very fine vault, o'my conscience!" (II.2.42-45). The heat of the booth in which she prepares the pork, which here provokes the traditional association between kitchens and hell, makes Ursula sweat:

I am all fire, and fat Nightingale; I shall e'en melt away to the first woman, a rib, again, I am afraid. I do water the ground in knots as I go, like a great garden-pot; you may follow me by the S's I make. (II.2.49-53)

The hot weather also makes her sweat, as Knockem observes: "Troth I do make conscience of vexing thee now i' the dog-days, this hot weather, for fear of found'ring thee i' the body; and melting down a pillar of the Fair" (II.3.52-55). The focus on Ursula's huge body and the fact that she sweats is undoubtedly meant to be funny but also suggests that part of her body is going into the food she prepares: her sweat can be imagined dripping

1. All quotations of *Bartholomew Fair* are from Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. E. A. Horsman, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1960).

onto the meat that she bastes and then serves. It is a kind of cannibalism that the “pig-woman”, above termed “mother of the pigs”, serves up part of herself in the pork her customers will consume. Later, in the midst of a fight between Quarlous and Knockem she enters with a scalding-pan and falls:

Curse of hell, that ever I saw these fiends, oh! I ha' scalded my leg, my leg, my leg, my leg. I ha' lost a limb in the service! Run for some cream and salad oil, quickly! (II.5.151-53)

The sense that Ursula, like the pork she prepares, is herself consumed is here reinforced since she calls for “cream and salad oil” to put upon the wound, suggesting that it might be eaten.

Food is central to Sir John's life, not only in his desire to satisfy his appetite but also in the notion that others will feed upon him, which comes up a number of times. In *1 Henry 4*, pretending to be fatally injured in battle and hearing that Hal will have him embowelled, Sir John announces (after Hal has exited): “Embowelled? If thou embowel me today, I'll give you leave to powder me, and eat me too, tomorrow” (V.4.110-11); Sir John here alludes to *mumia*, or mummy (the remains of an embalmed corpse often consumed for therapeutic purposes). In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the gulled Sir John likens himself to “a barrow of butcher's offal” and vows “if I be served such another trick, I'll have my brains ta'en out and buttered, and give them to a dog for a New Year's gift” (III.5.4-8); later in the same play he compares himself to venison, telling Mistress Ford and Mistress Page “Divide me like a bribed buck, each a haunch” (V.5.23), and toward the end of the play Ford likens him to an Ox (V.5.119) and a hodge-pudding (V.5.150). In *1 Henry 4* and *2 Henry 4* Sir John is compared to the apple-john, a fruit usually eaten when over-ripe and withered in appearance. In *1 Henry 4* he describes himself as “withered like an old apple-john” (III.3.4) and in the sequel, the Second Drawer tells Francis that:

The Prince once set a dish of apple-johns before him; and told him, there were five more Sir Johns; and, putting off his hat, said “I will now take my leave of these six dry, round, old, withered knights”. It angered him to the heart. (II.4.2-9)

Sir John and Ursula are much alike. Ursula claims to sweat so much that she “water[s] the ground in knots as I go, like a great garden-pot” and Sir John “sweats to death, / And lards the lean earth as he walks along” (*1 Henry 4*, II.3.16-17).² Both are

compared to butter: Sir John is like “Titan kiss[ing] a dish of butter” (*1 Henry 4*, II.5.119-20) and “As fat as butter” (*1 Henry 4*, II.5.517) and Quarlous compares Ursula to a quagmire or bog that if a man were to sink into “'T'were like falling into a whole shire of butter: they had need be a team of Dutchmen should draw him out” (II.5.92-93). Both are inclined to self-important exaggeration: when Ursula scalds her leg and announces “I ha' lost a limb in the service” (II.5.152-53), she sounds like Sir John recounting his exploits in the war. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Sir John resembles Ursula when he attempts to pass himself off as Mother Pratt, the fat woman of Brentfort, and is beaten by Ford who announces “Out of my door, you witch, you rag, you baggage, you polecat, you runnion! Out, out!” (IV.2.171-72), abuse that we can easily imagine being hurled upon the similarly maligned Ursula.

Both Sir John and Ursula mock thin people, specifically associating them with conger and fennel: as noted above, Ursula ridicules thin women as “thin pinch'd ware, pent up i'the compasse of a dog-collar (or 'twill not do), that looks like a long lac'd conger, set upright, and a green feather, like fennel, i' the jowl on't” (II.5.69-82) and Sir John states that the Prince loves Poinso so much: “Because their legs are both of a bigness, and a plays at quoits well, and eats conger and fennel [...]” (*2 Henry 4*, II.4.246-47); these foods indicate a lack of virility, and perhaps suggest thin, feminine legs.³ According to *Literature Online* these are the only two plays in the period where the words conger and fennel collocate, so presumably Jonson was influenced by Shakespeare in his creation of Ursula, perhaps even in the choice of her name. In *2 Henry 4* Sir John sends a letter to “old Mistress Ursula, whom I have weekly sworn to marry since I perceived the first white hair of my chin” (I.2.242-44), and it is tempting to think that this name suggested to Jonson a suitable mate for Shakespeare's “fat-kidneyed rascal” (*1 Henry 4*, II.2.6).

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Falstaff was based and “is grotesquely appropriate for a man who notoriously did virtually sweat to death, being hanged in chains and burned at St Giles Fields [...]” William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thompson Learning, 2002), 53.

3. Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Diets and the Plays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 31.

2. As David Scott Kastan noted, the image of sweating to death recalls the historical Oldcastle upon whom