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## Subjectivity and objectivity: the case of Sir Thomas More

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"Subjectivity and Objectivity: The case of *Sir Thomas More*" by Joan Fitzpatrick, University College Northampton<sup>1</sup>

My paper focuses on consumption considered to be physically or morally reprehensible or strange as a distinct indication of alterity in the play *Sir Thomas More*. This is an inherently interesting text since it is thought that part of it represents the only piece of creative writing by Shakespeare that has survived in manuscript. The textual history of this play and its authorship is complicated but may be briefly summarised. The play exists solely as British Library manuscript Harley 7368, in several hands, and comprising 22 sheets. Most of the writing is in the hand of Anthony Munday, although additional sheets in different hands have been inserted. The front of the first sheet contains a provisional licence from Edmund Tilney, the state censor, requiring alterations before public performance. The additions might represent changes to the play made after Tilney's objections were known but this theory is difficult to sustain because in some ways the changes (such as the re-writing of the scene in which More quells the rioters) make matters worse. This problem is treated in the Revels edition of the play by its editors Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori () and more fully in Scott McMillin's book *The Elizabethan theatre and 'The Book of Sir Thomas More'* ().

In the play, foreign culinary appetites are invariably associated with physical and sexual degeneracy and there is a perception that foreign consumption is harmful to English natives. The play's interrelation of food and civil disorder can be contextualized in the light of the food shortages in the 1590s and early 1600s that gave rise to real riots. As we shall see the basic need for food is related to the desire for sex and accusations of foreign gluttony are accompanied by accusations of their voracious sexual appetite suggesting that all kinds of foreign appetites demand control in order that English national security be maintained.

Scott McMillin and the Revels editors concur, as do most scholars, that Shakespeare is probably Hand D and therefore wrote 2.3, the scene which depicts events leading up to the riots of Londoners against resident foreigners on May Day 1517. The riot's leaders--John Lincoln, Williamson and his wife Doll, George and Ralph Betts, and Sherwin--are angry at the behaviour of foreigners in London and have planned a violent uprising against them. Shakespeare's contribution comes before the entry of Sheriff More of London who has been sent by the authorities to calm the situation: [no. 1 on handout]

*Enter [at one end] LINCOLN, DOLL, CLOWN, GEORGE BETTS, [SHERWIN,] WILLIAMSON [and] others; and [at the other end] a Sergeant-at-arms [followed by MORE, the other Sheriff, PALMER and CHOLMLEY].*

*Lincoln.* Peace, hear me: he that will not see a red herring at a Harry groat, butter at elevenpence a pound, meal at nine shillings a bushel, and beef at four nobles a stone, list to me.

*Another citizen.* It will come to that pass, if strangers be suffered: mark him.

*Lincoln.* Our country is a great eating country, *argo* they eat more in our country than they do in their own.

*Clown.* By a halfpenny loaf a day troy weight.

*Lincoln.* They bring in strange roots, which is merely to the undoing of poor prentices, for what's a sorry parsnip to a good heart?

*Another.* Trash, trash! They breed sore eyes, and 'tis enough to infect the city with the palsy.

*Lincoln.* Nay, it has infected it with the palsy, for these bastards of dung--as you know, they grow in dung--have infected us, and it is our infection will make the city shake, which partly comes through the eating of parsnips.

*Clown.* True, and pumpions together.

*Sergeant.* What say you to the mercy of the King?  
Do you refuse it?

*Lincoln.* You would have us upon th' hip, would you? No, marry, do we not; We accept of the king's mercy; but we will show no mercy upon the strangers.<sup>2</sup>

The accusations rehearsed against the foreigners in this scene is that they have a detrimental effect upon the economy, specifically inflation, they have strange culinary practices, and they bring disease. Most significant however for the purpose of my argument is the belief that vegetables grown by the foreigners infect Londoners and undermine the security of the city: "for these bastards of dung--as you know they grow in dung--have infected us, and it is our infection will make the city shake". As the Revels editors pointed out, parsnips are confused by Lincoln with potatoes which were discovered by the Spanish in the West Indies and imported into England in the late 1580s (). Whether or not the 'bastards of dung' are the 'parsnips' (potatoes) or the foreigners is unclear, and perhaps there is a deliberate conflation of both. The body's consumption of infected vegetables becomes a powerful symbol for what the rioters believe to be the detrimental effect of London's absorption of aliens. Just as the body consumes that which will infect it so London incorporates the means of its own destruction by allowing the aliens to remain. Just as a body that has been poisoned should purge itself of the poisonous matter to ensure its well-being so violent efforts to purge London of foreigners are considered necessary by the rioters to ensure the safety of the city. The city will 'shake', become weak and feverish, if its people are made sick but the city will also 'shake' at the hands of the rioters if things are allowed to continue as before; shaking is the symptom and the cure.

Pernicious consumption is a powerful symbol of foreign influence in *Sir Thomas More* and it is not surprising that eating, an essential human behaviour, should be made to seem unnatural in the case of foreigners: even their food is harmful. Certain vegetables appear to have acquired their negative reputation from a general association with the place from which they came and the nationality of those responsible for their importation to England. Suspicion toward the potato was presumably due to its association with Spain and its foreign origin (the association with Ireland coming later). Notably the parsnip, with which Lincoln confuses the potato, was imported to England from France, another traditional enemy ().

Although the complaints levelled against foreigners in 2.3 centre on food they have previously irritated Londoners with their sexual rapacity: in the opening scene of the play De Barde accosts Doll, Williamson's wife, and boasts about his previous sexual exploits with Sherwin's wife. De Barde aggravates the offence when he boasts to Betts "I tell thee fellow, and she were the mayor of London's wife, had I her once in my possession I would keep her, in spite of him that durst say nay" (1.1.46-49). The notion of sex with the wife of an English official is here meant to constitute a general insult to the English nation. Notably, in the same scene Caveler enters with a pair of Doves which he has apparently stolen from Williamson. Doll's admonishment-"How now, husband? What, one stranger take thy food from thee, and another thy wife?" (1.1.31-32)--alerts us to an oft-repeated association in the play between the behaviour of the foreigners and food. 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 just as the penetration of English women by foreigners emasculates English men, so too does their dictation of what English men should eat: Willams is forced to settle for modest fare and denounced as a "hind", a female deer.

Lincoln has arranged for the Londoners' complaints against the strangers to be read from the pulpit during the following week's sermons, and the specific complaints that foreigners steal English jobs and thus reduce English men to poverty are initially couched in terms of food: **[ no 2 on handout]**

*Lincoln (reads).* To you all the worshipful lords and masters of this city, that will take compassion over the poor people your neighbours, and also of the great importable hurts, losses and hindrances whereof proceedeth extreme poverty to all the king's subjects that inhabit within this city and suburbs of the same. For so it is that aliens and strangers eat the bread from the fatherless children, and take the living from all the artificers, and the intercourse from all merchants, whereby poverty is so much increased, that every man bewaileth the misery of other, for craftsmen be brought to beggary, and merchants to neediness. (1.1.106-116)

The complaint that foreigners take bread from the mouths of fatherless English children illustrates how ineffectual English men have become in the face of hostile foreigners, something previously noted by Doll who threatens the strangers with violence from English women since English men do not take effective action: "I am ashamed that freeborn Englishmen, having beaten strangers within their own bounds, should thus be braved and abused by them at home", says Doll (1.1.77-80). That the foreigners consume more than their fair share of English food and English wealth is apparent even to the nobility; Shrewsbury expresses concern that the aliens responded to the King's grace with insolence and "fattened with the traffic of our country / Already leap into his subjects face." (1.3.14-15).

John Jowett has claimed, based on stylistic analysis (), that Henry Chettle (not Munday as is usually claimed) wrote the first scene of the play and several others wrote: "over one-third of the original text" (). For my purpose however, the question of the authorship of particular scenes is less important than the thematic parallels that can be traced between them. The authors of the first scene and Hand D, whosoever they were, focus on food and foreignness in a manner which suggests influence, although it is unclear in which direction, whether or not it was conscious,

or whether Hand D was also influenced by the section of Holinshed's *Chronicles* upon which the first scene is closely based (). Analysis of the *Chronicles* again proves illuminating in the context of food and foreignness: **[3 on handout]**

About this season there grew a great **hartburning** and malicious grudge amongst the Englishmen of the citie of London against strangers; and namelie the artificers found themselves sore grieved, for that such numbers of strangers were permitted to resort hither with their wares and to exercise handie crafts to the great hinderance and impouerishing of the kings liege people. Besides that, they set nought by the rulers of the citie, & bare themselves too too bold of the kings fauor, wherof they would insolentlie boast; vpon presumption therof, & they offred manie an iniurious abuse to to [sic] his liege people, insomuch that among other accidents which were manifest, it fortuned that as a carpenter in London called Williamson had bought two stockdooues in Cheape, and was about to pay for them, a Frenchman tooke them out of his hand, and said they were not meate for a carpenter. ().

Although Holinshed is an importance source for the first scene, the play contains material not present in the prose source and has a greater focus on foreign food. It is entirely possible that the pun on 'hartburning' in Holinshed [in **bold** in extract no 3] triggered for the composer of the first scene a connection between the Londoners' grievances, foreigners, and food and he decided to elaborate upon the references to food in the *Chronicles*. 'Heartburning' in the sense of grudge and in the sense of a stomach ailment was current in the period (OED heart-burning *sb.* 1 and 2). Most notably, the first scene of the play saw the invention of Doll which allows for an emphasis on the sexual misbehaviour of the foreigners in the context of anxieties about foreign influence on English food. In the *Chronicles* just after the passage referring to hartburning Lincoln is recorded as saying that foreign trade makes "Englishmen want and starue" whilst the foreigners "liue aboundantlie in great pleasure", a hint at the sexual abandonment which is made explicit with reference to the foreigners as "raueners" (), a word which implies sexual force as well as robbery (OED ravener *sb.* 1 and 2). Again, it is possible that hints of sexual rapacity in the *Chronicles* were noted by the composer of the first scene of the play and expanded upon in his creation of Doll so that sexual misbehaviour is considered in the context of goods, wives, and food in order to suggest that the foreigners are responsible for several kinds of pernicious consumption.

In 2.1, revised by Hand B (probably Thomas Heywood), the Clown urges action against the foreigners: **[no. 4 on handout. short but worth reproducing]** "Come, come, we'll tickle their turn-ups, we'll butter their boxes. Shall strangers rule the roast? Yes, but we'll baste the roast" (2.1.1-3). This may be nonsense with 'turn-ups', a pun on 'turnips', simply referring to the turned-up part of a garment (OED turn-up *a.2*) or may carry an altogether different meaning. The Revels editors gloss "we'll tickle their turn-ups" to mean 'kick their bottoms' since a sense of 'tickle' recorded in the OED is 'chastise', and 'turnups' indicate 'the backside of breeches' as well as carrying an association with French parsnips (). Yet it seems more likely that the clown is using 'tickle' in a lewd sense because 'turn-up' meant prostitute (OED turn up *sb.1*) and foreign men have behaved with sexual impropriety toward English women earlier in the play. Thus 'tickling the turn-ups' of foreigners would mean fornicating with foreign women, here denounced as whores. That the clown might be referring to sexual violence problematizes the claim by the Revels editors that the

introduction of the new role of the Clown by Hand B was intended to result in a "lightening" of the riot scenes ().

The punning on food and violence, specifically sexual violence, continues with the notion that the foreigners will have their boxes buttered. The Revels editors suggest that as well as carrying the violent sense of beating heads the phrase is "based on 'butterbox', the current nickname for a Dutchman" (). It is equally likely however that 'buttering boxes' refers to sexual intercourse: Gordon Williams provides examples of 'box' meaning 'vagina' and 'butter' meaning 'semen' in early modern usage (). That the Revels editors should ignore the sexual implications of the Clown's revenge fantasy is puzzling especially since the Clown, more than any other rioter, intends specifically sexual violence toward foreign women: "Now Mars for thy honour, / Dutch or French, / So it be a wench, / I'll upon her" (2.1.50-53). That the Clown is preoccupied with foreign women as whores is further suggested by his estimation of Doll as their opposite: "Ay, Lincoln my leader / And Doll my true breeder" (2.1.5-6). She stands for chaste English women everywhere who will not allow their 'boxes buttered' by foreign bullies, as made clear in the opening scene of the play. Ruling the 'roast', presumably London, continues the punning on food as does basting the roast, which implies violence, as suggested by the Revels editors, and perhaps more specifically burning, since the rioters discuss setting fire to houses belonging to foreigners. It seems likely that Hand D picked up on and repeated associations drawn between foreigners and food in the earlier part of the play in an effort to fully realise the extent of their pernicious consumption; they not only devour the wives of London's citizens but their food, their profits, their culinary culture, and their general well-being.

The extended association between the foreigners and food in the early part of the play continues with More's appeasement of the rioters and this is where the philosophy comes in: he argues that if violence were to rid them of foreigners then some day violence might be used by others to get rid of them: "other ruffians . . . Would shark on you and men like ravenous fishes / Would feed on one another" (2.3.90-93). The trick of More's celebrated speech to quell the rioters is to switch subjectivity and objectivity by presenting them with a powerful image of themselves as potential outcasts. Indeed, one of the most powerful reasons to believe that Shakespeare wrote this scene is that known Shakespeare works also display this rhetorical device, one of the dramatists signature deployments of everyday philosophy and psychology.

In *Sir Thomas More* foreign contact triggers the city's ingestion of poisonous strangers, yet simplistic notions of civility and savagery are problematised via the savage potential of the rioters admonished by More and forced to consider themselves as potential outcasts. Warnings about the impact upon a nation's sense of itself that colonialism may entail had already come from an Elizabethan poet working as a civil servant in England's first colony, Ireland. In *The Faerie Queene* Edmund Spenser refers to the civilising influence of Brutus on ancient Britain. Before the coming of Brutus the land was a "saluage wilderness, Vnpeopled, vnmanurd, vnprou'd, vnpraysd" (2.10.5.3-4) and its inhabitants were barbaric "But farre in land a saluage nation dwelt, / Of hideous Giants, and halfe beastly men, / That neuer tasted grace, nor goodnesse felt," (2.10.7.1-2). England's savage past is a painful memory which undermines notions of inherent English civility and implies the need for

constant vigilance against degeneration. In *Sir Thomas More* the traffic is in destabilizing and threatening figures whose behaviour undermines a precarious order. This can perhaps be read as a warning against unwise expansion abroad, most visible in the presence of foreign food at home. The danger that food signals is the incorporation of foreigners, because classical history provides evidence of a particularly spectacular fall, but there is also a warning that xenophobia, the particular response to a perceived threat, is even more savage than the ills which precipitate it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to The British Academy for supporting this research with the award of an Overseas Conference Grant.

<sup>2</sup>All quotations of the play will be from .