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Aguecheek's beef

A funny remark in *Twelfth Night* has continued to stymie editors and critics. 'I am a great eater of beef,' Sir Andrew Aguecheek says to Sir Toby Belch in their first scene together, 'and I believe that does great harm to my wit.' To this Sir Toby immediately replies, 'No question.'¹ The remark is funny partly because it has Sir Andrew openly avow his own stupidity and partly because Sir Toby seconds the avowal. But it is also funny because Sir Andrew attributes his stupidity to eating beef. Even today, on the stage, the remark elicits laughter. But why should eating beef make one stupid? Why should thinking so be funny? And how are we to understand the apparent connection between beef-eating and stupidity given the fact that in the very next line Sir Andrew complainingly disavows it? 'An I thought that [i.e. that beef harms the wit],' Sir Andrew insists, 'I'd forswear it.'

In trying to gloss the remark, editors have cited evidence about attitudes towards beef-eating in Elizabethan England which suggest that beef was thought to impair mental health. The evidence is invariably cited out of context, however, and provides a one-sided and misleading view of the subject. In The New Variorum Edition, for example, we find recorded the glosses of a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors all of whom gesture towards an explanation without really arriving at one. The first of the editors documented cites Andrew Boorde's *Dyetary of Helth* (1542): 'Beefe is a good meate for an Englysshe man, so be it yonge, & that it be not kowefleshhe; For old beefe and kowfleshe doth ingender melancolye and leprous humours.' The second editor cites Thomas Cogan's *The Haven of Health* (1584): 'Galen affirmeth that biefe maketh grosse bloude and engendreth melancholie, especially if much be eaten, and if such as doe eat it be of melancolie complexion.' These remarks are supplemented by a quote from Lyly's *Euphues and His England* about the ill-effects of a 'gross diot' on the wit and a line from *Troilus and Cressida* (2.1.14), where Ajax is accused by Thersites of being a 'beef-witted lord'.² Neither of the last

two citations, however, definitively explains the specific causal relation Sir Andrew alludes to between eating beef and having a dull wit; one says nothing about beef and the other says nothing about causality. Neither of the first two citations, on the other hand, speaking from the point of view of medical authority (both Boorde and Cogan were university-trained physicians) says anything about the effects of beef on the intellect. Boorde only says that old beef may cause melancholy and leprosy. Cogan says that, according to Galen (and in this he is accurate) beef engenders 'gross blood' and may lead to the onset of melancholy, particularly among individuals predisposed towards melancholia. But melancholia (not to mention leprosy) has nothing to do with impaired intelligence; in fact, many writers, including Timothy Bright, Juan Huarte and Robert Burton, associated melancholy with intellectual ambition.³

Modern editors haven't done any better by the passage. An original spelling edition of the play published in 1969 simply reiterates the irrelevant idea that 'Elizabethan medicine held that excessive eating of beefe caused "grosse blood" and melancholy'.⁴ The Cambridge New Shakespeare edition of 1971 (based on a 1935 edition) goes no further than to quote the sentence from Thomas Cogan about Galen's attitude towards melancholy.⁵ A. L. Rowse's *Annotated Shakespeare*, published a few years later, doesn't do much better, although it begins to register a change in outlook. Rowse seems to have taken note of the fact that observations about melancholy have little to do with stupidity, and starts what would be a common break from earlier glosses by dropping the allusion to Galen. But Rowse's gloss, like many to follow, explains the line by begging the question. In order to account for the fact that Sir Andrew associates beef-eating with stupidity, Rowse writes that 'Too much beef was believed to make men dull'.⁶ This is to say little more than that Sir Andrew associates beef-eating with stupidity because Sir Andrew associates beef-eating with stupidity. The New Cambridge Edition of 1985 follows a similar procedure, while also including yet another citation of Thersites calling Ajax 'beef-witted'. But the editor goes beyond Rowse's appeal to a general but unspecific belief ('too much beef was believed . . .') by making this belief *proverbial*. 'Beef was proverbially supposed to make a man stupid', the editor writes, and then refers the reader to Dent's index of proverbs, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language*.⁷ I will return to the so-called proverbial evidence below; suffice it to say, at this point, that Dent fails to cite any 'proverb' in the usual sense of the word and that Dent himself indicates that the proverbial nature of this particular idea is questionable at best.⁸

Missing from these accounts is an engagement with the actual discourses of eating, drinking, morality and medical opinion that were circulating at the time when Shakespeare wrote the play – discourses with which *Twelfth Night* itself is doubtless engaged. Although none of the editors cites a medical or dietary authority that explicitly associates beef-eating with a dulling of the

wits, most of them nevertheless assume that such an association must have been a prominent, even proverbial opinion. Indeed, most of these accounts begin from the supposition that either 'contemporary medicine', as the Oxford editors put it, or Shakespeare's cultural field in general included a body of well-established and universally approved beliefs about the body and the ministration of its needs, which characters in Shakespearean plays might cite whenever it was germane to do so. The supposition seems to be that the cultural field of dietary lore was a repository of regularized ideas that Shakespeare and his characters were entitled to draw upon like money from a bank, and then spend before the audience in exchange for responses like laughter and approval. This supposition even survives the failure of scholarship to turn up cases of the authoritative beliefs upon whose existence it depends.

Certainly, it would be asking too much of editors to provide a detailed explanation of the complex cultural and scientific field in which the Shakespearean text participates with regard to what seems to be so relatively insignificant a detail, a passing remark tossed off in the course of a drama that is about to move in other directions. But one might also expect something more than inaccuracy, irrelevance and question-begging, especially since, on deeper examination, the remark about beef may not be so insignificant at all. 'What is life?' Sir Toby asks Sir Andrew at one point, trying to engage the latter in the witty dialogue of studious courtiers. The answer, both Sir Toby and Sir Andrew agree, is that 'life consists in eating and drinking', which leads to a further conclusion: 'let us therefore eat and drink' (2.3.10–12). The subject of eating and drinking has long been regarded as one of the major themes of the play: since the 1950s critics have often called our attention to the rhythms of carnivalesque revelry celebrated in the play,⁹ as well as a corollary 'morality of indulgence' which it examines.¹⁰ But what kind of conclusion is it that Sir Toby and Sir Andrew agree upon? What kind of claim was it to make at the beginning of the seventeenth century to say that life consists of eating and drinking? And how might such a claim be associated with a decision, like the one which Sir Andrew seems to be quite proud of, to consume excessive amounts of beef?

Sir Andrew's beef ('beef' = a 'complaint', but only, according to the *OED*, since the late nineteenth century) evidently refers us to the idea (not entirely foreign to us today) that the foodstuffs one consumes may have a significant impact on one's personality, that what one eats has an important impact on who one is. Sir Andrew's remark doesn't explain to us how different foodstuffs might bring about its effects on personality, and indeed rejects the idea of its doing so in one particular instance. But Sir Andrew's 'beef' also slides into the play's often admired celebration of materialism and indulgence, and is itself an instance of the materiality the play seems to extol. However, because criticism has yet to be sufficiently engaged with the discourses of eating,

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drinking, morality and medical opinion within whose universe Sir Andrew operates, it has been unable to clarify what kind of decision it is that Sir Andrew has reached. It has made it impossible to understand the beef as a choice.

Dietary advice in fact circulated widely in Shakespeare's England, and Shakespeare was clearly familiar with a good deal of it. But a survey conducted of the dietary manuals which would have been available to Shakespeare shows that only one author out of many explicitly associated beef-eating with impaired intelligence. Others indeed associated it, as Galen did before them, with melancholy and 'gross blood'. But many also extolled the benefits of beef, and some writers tried both to reiterate Galen and outflank him, providing important exceptions to Galen's rule by introducing new ideas or new evidence that Galen and his followers hadn't been able to take into consideration. Medical science was not a static system, and it did not demand conformity in all matters great and small. Nor was it a simple repository of ideas. In fact, traditional Galenic science was about to undergo a major revolution. A number of challenges to Galenic thought were already being registered.¹¹ And popular culture, rather than pausing before the cultural capital of medical opinion and holding it in awe, seems rather to have been engaged with it quizzically and dialogically, bringing to it opinions, practices, habits and needs to which Galenic science was not always equipped to respond. If food was central to health, as far as both professional physicians and laymen were concerned – if good food, indeed, was the very stuff of good health in the Galenic system, and known to be such (though perhaps in vaguer terms) by the lay public as well – food was also central to other aspects of the life of the body: to social structure, to religious ritual, to economic behaviour, and even (as in its own way, Galenic science already recognized) to the formation of identity. Pleasure, of course, was important too. But how does one correlate pleasure and health, or pleasure and social structure and so on, with regard to food or to any other biological requirement? And what kind of process of correlation is it through which various domains of social practice and affective life intersect in the conduct of a culture? What role might medical writers be presumed or allowed to play in this correlation of affect and practice?

The 'regimen of health', according to which different kinds of foods are either recommended or censured for the sake of good health, actually antedates Galen, going back to the Hippocratic writers of the fifth century BC, though Galen's writings would be by far the most influential. It would be given an especially energetic and thorough revival in the hands of the medical writers of Semitic Spain like Avicenna and Maimonides and eventually among the doctors at a new school of medicine established in Salerno, where a popularizing version of Galenic dietetics, the *Regimen sanitatis Salerni*, would be produced in the late thirteenth century. This latter

text circulated widely, and was rendered into English by Thomas Paynell in 1528 and by Sir John Harington in 1607. The Galenic regimen entailed a major problem for Paynell's and Harington's readers, however, which Harington's title, *The Englishmans Doctor*, tries to dissimulate. All the pre-sixteenth-century writers, from Hippocrates to Galen, from Avicenna to the anonymous author of the Salerno *Regimen*, inhabited the Mediterranean basin, and addressed themselves to food customs and habits that had evolved in a Mediterranean climate in keeping with Mediterranean agronomic and cultural practices. The 'Southern' peoples of Europe from antiquity forward commonly preferred a diet more reliant on grains, vegetables, poultry and seafood and less reliant on the consumption of red meat than the 'Northern' peoples who would come to dominate the cultures (and the cuisines) of northern France, Germany, Scandinavia and the British Isles.¹² Part of the 'Southern' attitude towards food, which persists at least in Italy to this day, is actually a prejudice against beef and a preference for lighter sources of animal protein, including veal, eaten in relatively small portions; Mediterranean regimens reflect this.

The apparent medical basis for the Southern attitude is well expressed (if not without circularity, and some regret) by the Northerner Burton: 'In general, such meats are generally commended which are moist, easy of digestion, and not apt to engender wind, not fried, nor roasted, but sod . . . hot and moist, and of good nourishment.'¹³ In application, however, the medical basis frequently turns out to be an expression of cultural bias, based on a long history of agronomic developments. In Platina's widely distributed *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* (1450), for example, an adaptation of the traditional Galenic regimen which goes into the medical (and ethical) qualities of different foodstuffs in more detail than most of its predecessors, and which seems to have been a source for many English writers, the question of beef is put this way: 'Beef is of a cool and dry nature,' Platina writes, 'being very hard both to cook and to digest. It offers gross, disturbed, and melancholic nourishment. It drives a person toward quartan fever, eczema, and scaly skin disease.' However, 'veal is more safely eaten because it is almost of medium nourishment, and so the tables of the nobility seek it frequently, with no harm.'¹⁴ Theory favoured young and tender meat; Italian gentry favoured veal, and ate veal in part (on the evidence of Platina's choice of words) because veal (perhaps due to its relative rarity) was a status symbol. So, medical convention and observation aside, Platina both condemns beef (a foodstuff seldom eaten in pre-modern Italy, oxen being raised to maturity, if at all, as draft animals) and recommends veal (a luxury food). The social value of veal doesn't trump convention and observation, but helps determine them; theory ('medium nourishment') and observation ('with no harm') are correlated with a practice that has emerged for the most part independently of them.

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Of course, cultural prejudice alone wasn't responsible for the Mediterranean disdain for beef. The Galenic regimen followed complicated routes of observation, analogy, metaphorical substitution, inference and deduction. It was a science of similitudes and correspondences, based on the fourfold categories of humoral physiology (wetness, dryness, heat and cold), which also entailed a good deal of etiological analysis, and it was grounded in sense perception. Within the framework of Galenic medicine, one can find any number of scientific reasons why beef should be considered cold, dry, gross and disturbing. Beef is cold and dry in part, for example, because it is 'very hard both to cook and to digest'. It takes longer to cook than other meats – that is, it requires a greater expenditure of energy in order for it to undergo the processes of heating and liquefaction that were thought to be the essence of both cooking and digestion. Or, again, beef is 'gross' because it is an excessively fleshy form of flesh; it is heavy and dense; it is 'rich,' as we might say today, and poses a certain challenge to digestion that lighter foods seldom offer. Beef requires extra enzymes to be digested (although pre-modern dieticians didn't know this, they seem to be responding to the effects of this attribute of beef), enzymes which individuals often lose the ability to produce unless they eat beef with some regularity. So many inhabitants of the Mediterranean basin may have found beef difficult to eat in part because they seldom ate it. Hence, too, derives the idea that the nourishment which beef provides is 'disturbed' (both out of balance and imbalancing, I think this means), since sometimes it could overwhelm the digestion system: as beef is both tougher and fattier than lighter meats, even among those habituated to it beef can cause sensations of fullness, what the Renaissance called 'repletion', more readily than other foodstuffs. (Repletion itself was generally thought to be a bad thing: one was told to leave off eating before feeling full.) As for melancholy, dry skin or fever – these phenomena, too, could be associated with beef through the Galenic byways of similitude, analogy and causal explanation. The purported coldness and dryness of beef could cause it to be associated with an overproduction by the body of the cold and dry humour black bile, the material cause of melancholy. The purported dryness of beef, by another line of reasoning, could cause it to be associated with a drying out of the body symptomized by dry skin and other skin disorders (including leprosy, by some writers). The purported coldness of beef, by still another line of reasoning, could cause it to be associated with fevers, the body sometimes being held, by way of a kind of defence mechanism, to produce an excess of heat within itself to compensate for the excessive 'coldness' of the foodstuff it was being 'nourished by'.¹⁵

But the effects of eating different kinds of foods and the categories through which alimentation was explained were always discovered in contexts that were already culturally and socially determined. The very adoption of Galenic authority is the first of those cultural practices, as is, again, the

adoption of whatever food taboos, agronomic practices, habit-conditioned responses and other material determinants there were that lay behind the scientific apparatus of Galenic preferences. The application of the Galenic apparatus to Italian products and habits is yet another. The attempt by Platina to intervene in the field of food production and consumption, to adapt classic medical authority to the modern pursuit of 'right pleasure and good health' (Platina, a cleric, on the whole being more ascetic than Galen) and to prepare the adaptation for publication, represents the adoption of quattrocento humanist impulses in the spirit both of the professionalization of classical learning and the imposition of a 'civilizing process' on Italian habits.¹⁶ Finally, the actual contents of Platina's recommendations, with their explicit approval of food practices already valued among members of his own society and supported by the structure of the Italian economy, even if Platina is also trying to professionalize and 'civilize' them, reflects a scientific approach to the culture of food which is as much a mimetic representation of its subject as it is an analytical exposition of its natural laws.

English writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were similarly involved in a complicated process of replicating classical learning and intervening in the structure of material culture. But English writers faced a somewhat different task than their Mediterranean models, for they were working from models based on foreign culinary practices. All university-trained dietary writers in England were heirs to the tradition according to which Mediterranean habits were taken for granted, and beef, for one, was thus held to be gross, hard to digest, energy-draining and disease-inducing; they were heirs to this tradition, and likely to try to apply it, even though all of them also knew that the people of England, especially the gentry, had somewhat different habits and, among other things, ate a lot of beef. But beef, again, wasn't only one kind of foodstuff among others; it was already a highly marked and common source of animal protein, an especially prized substantive, as it were, in the vocabulary of the English meal. Moreover, there was no evidence that on the whole the English were any less healthy than the people of Italy or France. On the contrary, to many observers the English seemed both better fed and healthier than their counterparts in the South.¹⁷ Thus we hear remarks like Thomas Cogan's (remarks, however, which editors have ignored, while quoting Cogan citing the opinion of Galen), telling us about the benign centrality of beef in the English diet and, indeed, in English culture as a whole. 'Biefe,' Cogan writes,

is of all flesh the most usuall among English men. . . . I neede not to shew how plentifull it is throughout this land, before all other countries, and how necessary it is both by sea and for the vitailing of ships, and by land for good house keeping, insomuch that no man of honour, or worship, can be said to have good provision for hospitality, unlesse

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there be good store of biefe in readinesse. And how well it doth agree with the nature of Englishman the common consent of all our nation doth sufficiently prove. Yea, that it bringeth more strong nourishment than other meats, may plainly be perceived, by the difference of strength in those that commonly feed of biefe, and them that are fed with other fine meats.¹⁸

There was a discrepancy between Galenic theory and English preferences and practice far wider than any modern Mediterranean writer had to face when responding to modern Mediterranean life. In fact, English habits contradicted Galenic theory, and to compensate for the contradiction English writers were forced to resort to some rather ingenious measures. Some writers said that it was all right if English ate 'kowfleshe' as long as it was young, that is almost still veal, or else as long as it was 'powdered', that is preserved in salt, and some of its 'ill juice' therefore removed.¹⁹ Some also said that habit or 'custome in feedynge' could have a salutary effect: oftentimes what people ate customarily was better for them than anything else, even if in principle what they customarily ate was bad for them. Pleasure and appetite, conditioned as they were by habit, were recognized to play a role in a healthy diet too; a 'temperate appetite,' unlike (say) the 'distempered appetite' that, figuratively speaking, Olivia accuses Malvolio of being affected by, naturally led the body to the ingestion of healthy foodstuffs, and a temperate appetite for beef, triggered by 'custome in feedynge', might well be a guide to pleasure and good health alike.²⁰

More famous, perhaps, is the idea suggested by writers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that climate condoned the difference in English dietary habits. England was colder than Italy or Spain; and so to compensate, the English had evidently acquired hotter stomachs than the peoples of the Mediterranean. They could eat more food and 'colder' foodstuffs like beef because climate had made their stomachs more 'choleric' and their constitutions more vigorous.²¹ In fact, so widespread was the practice of beef-eating among the English, and so widespread the idea that the English were following their own uncommonly vigorous natures in adopting it, that an Italian observer, speaking on behalf of Italian habits, could appeal to just the opposite idea in order to explain the Italian distaste for beef: 'the great heat which we endure nine months out of the year,' he wrote, 'causes us to lose interest in meat, especially beef which we cannot even look at let alone eat.'²² Clearly, the Italian distaste for beef alluded to here, whatever the explanation, approached the level of disgust that can only be elicited by a taboo. But some writers even went so far as to suggest that English beef was different from the beef of the Mediterranean world. 'All these authours (in mine opinion),' Cogan wrote about the Mediterranean dieticians, 'have erred in that they make the beife of all countries alike.'²³ And others, including

Timothy Bright and William Vaughan, simply rejected Galenic prescriptions altogether: they retained conventional Galenic categories, but claimed to base their categorizations on direct and original observation. Beef did relatively well under such scientific conditions; it was found to be neither too particularly gross nor too particularly melancholic.²⁴

As for beef causing stupidity, the only medical reference concerning this phenomenon available to Shakespeare may have been a book written by the Italian humanist Guglielmo Grataroli (1516–68), translated into English as *A Direction for the Health of Magistrates and Studentes* (1574). 'As for grosse meates that are drie and harde as cowes Beeif and such like,' Grataroli writes, 'I utterly disalow: because beside many other harmes that it bringeth by reason of the hardness of it, and difficultie to be digested, this namely is one, that it inferreth harme to the reasonable part of man which is the minde.'²⁵ The word 'harme' here, which is echoed by Sir Andrew ('I believe [eating beef] does great harm to my wit'), provides the kind of verbal clue which scholars on the trail of sources typically look for; and so, by traditional standards of evidence, if there is a 'source' for Sir Andrew's remark, this obscure reference in a relatively obscure regimen for health may well be it. Certainly the context of Grataroli's remark, a regimen specifically designed for the benefit of educated men, who, like Sir Andrew, have independent incomes and thus the leisure to care for themselves according to the highest medical standards, provides an ironic counterpoint to the caricature of the Renaissance ideal of the educated and independent man that Sir Andrew represents.²⁶ The context of Grataroli's regimen provides an interesting comment on the action of *Twelfth Night* as well by its concern for individual differences (particularly those having to do with class) and its openness to experiment and doubt.²⁷ But Grataroli is openly hostile to the loose-living that Sir Andrew and his friend Sir Toby are shown to indulge in, and certainly would have been upset by the idea they both playfully suggest that, since 'life consists in eating and drinking', 'let us therefore eat and drink'. 'But who is he,' writes Grataroli,

not onely among us Christians, but even among *Paynims and Epicures*, so blockishe and insensate, to thinke that he is borne only for himselfe and for his owne private commoditie without having any respect or regarde at all, either of matter or person in the societie of humane life? Unto such as these (if any suche be) we do not addresse these our precept[s], but unto those which at such times as they have convenient leisure to surcease from their charges and offices accordinge as their calling and vocation is . . . and not to addict themselves to voluptuousness and bellychere, as though they believed there were none other life but only this fraile and transitorie life, and therefore securely to wallow in their disordered and lascivious appetites.²⁸

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A stronger condemnation of a pair of knights who agree that life consists of eating and drinking is difficult to imagine – unless one should turn to Malvolio's condemnation of the pair in Act 2. One can almost hear Sir Toby responding to Grataroli by asking whether there shall be no more cakes and ale; and one can almost hear Grataroli waxing indignant, as the Marxist critic Eliot Krieger would later do, in response to Sir Toby's notion that though eating and drinking are the very stuff of it and much to be indulged in, 'care's an enemy of life'.²⁹

But Sir Andrew's remark provokes laughter. There is something risible about it. The word 'beef' itself is perhaps a funny word.³⁰ The ingestion of beef, healthful or not, may be risible in a Bergsonian sense, calling attention as it does to the mechanical, the unemotional automatism in otherwise normal human conduct: the idea of 'beef' already implies a Bergsonian objectification of oxen, put to the use of a Bergsonian objectification of hunger. The very idea that eating a certain foodstuff may make a person stupid is funny too. How, an uneducated layman might ask, do those doctors come up with these ideas? Who do they think they're fooling? (We know, for example, that though all doctors cautioned against it, Elizabethans regularly ate raw fruit. We also know that Shakespeare could be quite sceptical about claims that the development of the intellect was founded in natural rather than social processes, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*: 3.314–18.) An additional dimension of the humour of the remark may be more culturally specific. It may be based on something like the situation in *The Tempest*, where Trinculo amusingly postulates that in England 'any strange beast . . . makes a man'. In other words, the humour of the jest may come at the expense of English habits, precisely because they are English, though expressed on the English stage by an English actor. Even if the action of the play is set in a half-mythical Illyria and the Illyrian setting may be of some thematic and cultural significance,³¹ *Twelfth Night* is often considered to be a play 'really' about Shakespeare's England, and indeed to be among the most English of his comedies, a kind of quasi-city comedy, with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew (both bearing Anglicized names) exemplifying the most egregiously English of the play's characters. And so the remark where Sir Andrew seems to be making fun of his own stupidity, and then refuses to follow opinion and eschew the eating of beef, may be evocative of a kind of 'sympathetic laughter'.³² We laugh at Sir Andrew not because he is different from us but because he is like us, especially those of us (like much of Sir Andrew's audience) who are addicted to beef.

But that brings us back to the proverbial wisdom to which Sir Andrew's remark allegedly responds. The proverb, it turns out, hinges on four citations: an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, two passages from the writings of Thomas Nashe, and an entry in a French–English dictionary published in 1611.³³ The *OED* provides a definition of 'beef-witted' or 'beef-brained'

as 'thick-headed, stupid'. Its first citation is in fact from *Troilus and Cressida*. As for Nashe, whose remarks are the only ones cited that antedate *Twelfth Night* and *Troilus*, in one text the satirist asks whether 'lives there anie such slowe yce-brained beefe-witted gull' as to believe in pseudo-sciences like palmistry or physiognomy.³⁴ In another, in the course of an extended Jeremiad against the habits of the English, Nashe writes, 'For shame, bury not your Spyrtyts in Biefe-pots. Let not the Italians call you dul-headed Tramontani.'³⁵ The dictionary that Dent cites is actually *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* by Randle Cotgrave, and Dent cites Cotgrave defining a French expression, 'Teste de boeuf'; Cotgrave says that a 'teste de boeuf' is 'a joulthead, jobernoll, cods-head, grouthead, logerhead; one whose wit is as little as his head is great'. What we have here is a series of tropes dating from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – some metaphorical, some metonymic – where the word beef is associated with the idea of a slow or dull wit. But we don't have anything that can be identified as 'proverbial' in any usual sense of the word, and, with one exception, none even hints at a causal relation between stupidity and the consumption of beef.

Instead, these tropes seem to be based on any of these three ideas: (1) a common attitude towards the lumbering complacency of cattle and the large heads these frequently stupefied beasts nevertheless carry on their shoulders ('a wit as little as his head is great'); (2) a possibly related expression equating oxen with foolishness, so that to 'make an ox' of a man (as Thersites also complains about the 'beef-witted' Menelaus (4.7.56)) is to make a fool of him; and (3) the truly proverbial idea, with a sound basis in medical lore, that eating too much (too much of anything, that is) dulls the wit. All these factors certainly play a role in Nashe's remarks: a 'beef-witted gull' is someone who has been made an ox of – caused to believe in an inherently stupid idea. A person whose 'spirits' have been buried in a 'beef-pot' is someone who is guilty of over-indulgence and has allowed too much energy to be consumed in feeding and digestion. Nashe is using 'beef' as a synecdoche for 'a lot of food' and, at the same time, nodding in the direction of the boorish, carnivorous over-indulgence that was commonly associated with English people by the French, Spanish and Italians. 'In all other things *English* men are the stoutest of others,' Nashe writes, 'but being Schollers, and lyving in their owne native soyle, theyr brains are so pesteerd with full platters, that they have no room to bestirre them.'³⁶ 'It is not for nothing,' Nashe writes in another context, 'that other countries, whom we upbraid with drunkenness, call us burston-bellied gluttons for we make our greedy paunches powdering-tubs of beef, and eat more meat at one meal than the Spaniard or Italian in a month. Good thrifty men, they draw out a dinner with sallets.'³⁷ The point isn't that eating beef makes one stupid; it is that from the point of view of high Mediterranean culture, it is stupid to spend too much time and money on eating and drinking. 'Those people over there, beyond

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the mountains', i.e. the 'Tramontani' might do it; but the Tramontani (as Florentines proverbially maintained) are a dull-headed sort.

In any case, it should be clear by now that, far from being a reiteration of proverbial wisdom or the consensus of 'contemporary medicine', Sir Andrew's reference to the effects of beef-eating resonates with a number of not always compatible cross-references in medical and proverbial lore, and it takes part in an ongoing dialogue about a variety of concerns over issues for which no definitive answers were available, but which circulate tellingly throughout the play in which Sir Andrew's beef appears: concerns about national identity (what was it? what did it mean? how in keeping with the habits and physiology of national character should educated people live?); concerns about the relation between a scientific authority stemming from Mediterranean sources (invested in the material practices of Mediterranean society) and a growing English intellectual community which was developing ideas of its own; concerns with how to administer to the body, how to respond to its appetites, given the implications of administering to it both for morality and health. (I've been 'drinking healths to my niece', Sir Toby says in a quibble, using a genuinely proverbial expression to pretend that over-indulgence may well be the opposite of itself.) Sir Andrew is not expressing his little joke about anything so weighty as the boundaries of empire or competing theologies of grace. Nothing so consequential as religion or politics *per se* is being made into the object of a jest. But in the world of *Twelfth Night* even beef-eating amounts to a kind of political act. It is an act of deliberate if possibly foolish policy, a decision to live one way rather than another, to take care of the self in one way rather than another, and to do so in a way that has implications for one's class and national identity, as well as for one's relation to scientific and moral authority and what amounts to the symbolic life of alimentary physiology.³⁸ Even when transported by fantasy to Mediterranean Illyria, the upper-class Englishman of the time had his needs – needs real and imagined, needs habitual and biological – and unlike his more fastidious counterparts in hot and thrifty Italy, he was eating a lot of beef. Funny as it may seem – and usually it is funny – no scientific authority imported from Greece or Rome was going to change that.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 *Twelfth Night, or, What You Will*, Oxford Shakespeare, ed. Roger Warren and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.3.81–3. All citations from *Twelfth Night*, noted in the text, will be taken from this edition. Other citations from Shakespeare are taken from the *Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
- 2 *Twelfth Night, or; What You Will*, New Variorum Edition, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1901), p. 43.
- 3 Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (London, 1586); Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: Vintage, 1977); Juan Huarte, *The Examination of Mens Wit*, trans. Richard Carew (London, 1594).
- 4 *Twelfth Night, or; What You Will*, ed. Sydney Musgrove (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 90.
- 5 *Twelfth Night, or; What You Will*, Cambridge New Shakespeare, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson (1939) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
- 6 *The Annotated Shakespeare*, ed. A.L. Rowse, 3 vols (New York: Potter, 1978), vol. 1, p. 513.
- 7 *Twelfth Night, or; What You Will*, New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); R.W. Dent, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
- 8 As for subsequent editions, it may suffice to note that neither the recent Oxford Edition nor the revised Riverside Shakespeare do much more than reiterate Rowse's position. 'Contemporary medicine,' the Oxford editors write (in a note repeated verbatim in the Norton Shakespeare) 'held that beef dulled the intellect.' The Riverside Edition, more concisely, states that Sir Andrew's remark 'reflects a current belief.' *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
- 9 C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959); Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985); Terence Hawkes, 'Comedy, orality, and duplicity in *Twelfth Night*,' *New York Literary Forum* 5–6 (1980), pp. 155–63.
- 10 John Hollander, 'Twelfth Night and the morality of indulgence,' *Sewanee Review* 68 (1959), pp. 220–38; Eliot Krieger, *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
- 11 Harold J. Cook, *The Decline of the Old Medical Regime in Stuart London* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); David Hoenerig, *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance* (Wilmington: University of Delaware Press, 1992); Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (New York: Norton, 1997); Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- 12 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation and Capitalism*, Volume 1: *The Structures of Everyday Life*, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); Massimo Montanari, *The Culture of Food*, trans. Carl Ipsen (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); T. Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

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- 13 Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 2, p. 22.
- 14 Bartolomeo Platina, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Critical Edition and Translation of De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine*, trans. and ed. Mary Ella Milham (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998), p. 231.
- 15 Many foods were of course held to cause fevers if consumed by the wrong person at the wrong time, and largely as a result of this principle of 'coldness' triggering an excess of heat. Thus the famous Shakespearean sonnet, 'My love is as a fever still, longing / For that which it is nourished by'. But by a similar logic a food that was too 'hot' and 'dry' could be held to cause the heat of anger (i.e. a condition of high choler). Thus Petruchio could warn off Kate from eating overcooked, cholera-engendering meat, claiming that 'better 'twere that both of us did fast, / Since, of ourselves, ourselves are choleric, / Than feed it with such overroasted flesh' (*Shrew*, 4.1.154–6). It was proverbial too (and this might be the ironic source of Sir Aguecheek's otherwise absurd name) that a person with a threatening heat of anger in his looks (an anger which, of course, Sir Andrew shows himself to be incapable of) was someone who looked 'as big as he had eaten bull beef', an idea related to our current word 'bully', meaning a threatening ruffian. Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs of England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), B709–719, pp. 70–1.
- 16 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
- 17 Alison Sim, *Food and Feast in Tudor England* (New York: St Martins Press, 1997), p. 79.
- 18 Thomas Cogan, *The Haven of Health* (London, 1612), p. 130.
- 19 For example, see Andrew Boorde, *The Fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge. A compendious Regyment; or A Dyeatary Helth* (London: Early English Text Society, 1870), p. 271.
- 20 Thomas Elyot, *The Castel of Helth* (London, 1541), p. 17.
- 21 William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 123; Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 1, p. 218; Cogan, p. 131.
- 22 Giacomo Castelvetro, *A Brief Account of all the Roots, Greens and Fruits that are Eaten in Italy either Raw or Cooked* (London, 1614); quoted in Montanari, *Culture of Food*, p. 113.
- 23 Cogan, p. 129.
- 24 Bright, *Treatise of Melancholie*, p. 28; William Vaughan, *Naturall and Artificial Directions for Health* (London, 1600), pp. 33–4.
- 25 Guglielmo Grataroli, *A Direction for the Health of Magistrates and Studentes* (London, 1574), sig. H4-Hrv.
- 26 See John Draper, *The Twelfth Night of Shakespeare's Audience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1950).
- 27 'Forasmuch as the natures and complexions of men be divers,' Grataroli writes, as Platina had before him, 'they also require a diverse trade and order in diete and exercise.' Moreover, 'whereas there is both diversitie in bodies and also diverse trades of livinge, it cannot be that any one absolute way should be appointed to serve everie nature in everie facultie generally' (Grataroli, *Direction*, sig. B4).
- 28 *Ibid.*, sig. B4v2.

- 29 Krieger, for good reason, cautions us not to be taken in by the complacent narcissism that Sir Toby's social position allows him to 'indulge' in.
- 30 Although much of my argument is based on the idea that the languages of food and drink are subject to considerable historical and cultural variation, the differences to be noted (say) from Shakespeare's time and our own are not absolute, and much of what resonated in Shakespeare's day may still resonate in ours. In the spirit of this remark, on the subject of the funniness of the word 'beef' (an idea, by the way, that I first appreciated while listening to a radio interview with the divine and immortal comedian Phyllis Diller), I suggest that the reader try an experiment, adding various animals and names for their flesh to the epithet '-witted': pig-witted, pork-witted, lamb-witted, chicken-witted, cow-witted, beef-witted, goat-witted, venison-witted, wine-witted. Which of these is the funniest? Why?
- 31 Susan Mosher Stuard, *A State of Deference: Ragusa/Dubrovnik in the Medieval Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 214.
- 32 David Richman, *Laughter, Pain, and Wonder: Shakespeare's Comedies and the Audience in the Theater* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), pp. 21–2.
- 33 R.W. Dent, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 56.
- 34 Thomas Nashe, *Works*, ed. Ronald. B. McKerrow, 5 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), vol. 1, p. 370.
- 35 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 122.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 200. Compare, however, the remarks of Phillip Stubbes to the opposite effect, such that gluttony is expressed in the eschewal of plain, simple meals centred on beef, in favour of more complex, continental meals, whose variety of dishes comprise a 'nicetie', not to mention 'vanitie, excesse, riot, and superfluitie'. Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), reprinted edition (New York: Garland, 1973), sig. G3v4.
- 38 For classic statements of how a symbolics of alimentation might work, see Roland Barthes, 'Toward a psychosociology of contemporary food consumption', in R. Foster and O. Ranum (eds) *Food and Drink in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 166–73; Claude Levi-Strauss, 'The culinary triangle', *Partisan Review* 33 (1966), pp. 586–95. A recent revival of classic structuralist analysis in the sociology of food is discussed at length in Roy C. Wood, *The Sociology of the Meal* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).