THE FOOD OF FOOLS:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE FOOLS’ GUSTATORY IMAGERY IN KING LEAR

by

Sara Rafferty Sparer

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Emily Stockard, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor

Jan Hokenson, Ph.D.

Jennifer Low, Ph.D.

Wenying Xu, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of English

Manjulatha Pendakur, Ph.D.
Dean, The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

Barry T. Rosson, Ph.D.
Dean, Graduate College

July 29, 2009
The character of the Fool in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* uses hitherto unexamined gustatory imagery as a linguistic device to achieve the literary fool’s function of imparting wisdom that masquerades as nonsense. While previous critics have analyzed the linguistic devices of puns, riddles, and rhymes used by medieval and Renaissance literary fools, this thesis argues not only that the Fool’s gustatory imagery constitutes the dominant motif in the play, but also employs food theory to demonstrate how these image patterns provide political commentary on the dramatic action. The Fool’s pattern of gustatory imagery is employed as well by characters who can be seen as variations on the wise fool. Through these characters, Shakespeare establishes a food chain motif that classifies some characters as all-consumptive, even cannibalistic, and others as their starving prey. The pattern of food imagery offers a range of perspectives, from highly critical to idealistic, on the play’s meaning and political relationships.
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INTRODUCTION

The wisest character of William Shakespeare’s King Lear may arguably be the Fool. A sidekick character, a second-rate man, the one dressed in motley and never given name or age, the Fool does not enter the play until near the end of the first act, and he disappears after the third. Though lowly in status and short-lived in time, the Fool provides important statements. John Danby, author of Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear (1949), notes that the “Fool’s statements have as much weight, for interpretation, as those of anyone in the play. . . . The Fool can see it all happening, and knows exactly how it works” (103-4). As befits a fool in the Renaissance version (see Kaiser), the Fool's statements and antics superficially provide humor in a dark play—incongruously bringing rhymes and fairy tales into heated political discussions—but they also contain revelations about the action. The statements that are both funny and nonsensical are also truthful and prophetic. The Fool discerns a past (where he was not present) that blinds the other characters, and the future (of a collapsed kingdom). He speaks of all this in coded language that appears nonsensical, but is wise and accurate in its predictions and reflections.

One intriguing questions is how any literary Fool uses language so as to accomplish so many functions. How can a Fool’s line make us laugh while it prophesies doom? How does the Fool’s truth gain acceptance in a place where the egotistical king tolerates only flattery? Riddling, subversive talk is a hallmark of all medieval and
Renaissance fools and their fool feats are often achieved through linguistic devices or such wordplay as parables, double entendres, rhyming and puns. This thesis examines one linguistic strategy of Lear's Fool, the coded language of food and eating. References to such food items as a cracked egg, a shelled peascod, crabapples, and eel pies enliven the Fool's speech, as do references to activities surrounding food and eating, such as food preparation, consumption, deprivation, and starvation. This thesis reconfigures previous understanding of the play's image patterns by analyzing the use and implications of the Fool's linguistic strategy of gustatory metaphors, as well as their fundamental anchoring of the larger arc of food imagery that comments upon the play's characterization, plot, and motifs.

Andrew Hadfield in Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics (2004) explains why Lear's Fool must resort to disguised language: “In such states, political comment and advice has to be carefully coded or it risks incurring the 'dragon's wrath'. . . Set against Kent's blunt attempt to advise the King while remaining loyal is the Fool, whose own advice consists of a series of cryptic maxims, or allegorical fables” (101). As soon as the Fool first appears on the stage in I.4 he resorts to various behaviors to teach his wisdom to Lear in code. He sufficiently confuses and entertains Lear with disguised manners that include offering Lear his coxcomb (thus implicating the King as fool), preaching morals in rhyme, and invoking the “nothing” motif in a metaphor about lawyers. 

Intermixed within these comedic, coded behaviors is another linguistic strategy, the Fool's language of food and eating.

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2 Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer, you / gave me nothing for 't. (1.4.125-126)
Heretofore, critics have neglected the Fool’s gustatory imagery. Those who have examined Lear's Fool's speeches, such as John Danby, have analyzed language patterns other than food. In his chapter “The Fool and Handy-Dandy,” Danby sees the Fool's language as made up of what he calls the “handy-dandy,” meaning that it consists of combinations of contradictions and acts as a “see-saw” that counterweighs whatever anyone says. The Fool, for instance, observes that “excessive joy can make one weep, hysterical sorrow will sometimes sing” and the King “has made his daughters his mothers; [I]nstead of wielding the rod, he receives correction” (103). Danby notes that the contradictions of the handy-dandy language reflect the Fool's character, whose heart belongs to Lear, but whose mind can reason with the viewpoint of Goneril and Regan. The handy-dandy and the food language—interspersed within adages, fairy tales, and riddles—are only two elements of the Fool's language. Like the handy-dandy element of his language, the food talk is a multi-layered linguistic strategy suitable for a fool: It consists of a core of striking accuracy beneath a cavorting cover of comedy and incongruity.

Along with examining the Fool's language of food and eating, this thesis aims to point out that the gustatory imagery is more than a linguistic strategy of a Fool. While given thrust by the Fool, the food imagery functions as an index to the play's thematic argument. Many delineations in character and plot are made via food and eating. The characters' food-related activities correlate precisely to their division: The Lear camp (Lear, Kent, Cordelia, and Edgar) are associated with food deprivation or food production, while the Machiavellian figures (Goneril, Regan, and Edmund) are associated with extreme appetites and endless consumption. This pattern of food imagery, according
to most critics, is summarized in the line which conveys, as Edwin Muir puts it, “The note of the play itself, the summary judgment on the whole play: ‘Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep’” (10).

Such gustatory language, first associated with the Fool, becomes synonymous with enlightenment (fitting the play’s pattern of inversion), and only those characters who are enlightened or who undergo a positive enlightenment have access to it. By “enlightened characters,” I mean those characters who, while understanding politics, choose to act for love rather than political advantage. These characters include Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, Albany, and Lear. Gustatory language often does not appear in the characters’ speeches until they have undergone change. When Edgar becomes Tom O’Bedlam and Kent disguises himself, part of their “costume” is the incorporation of food metaphors into their speech. Lear's adoption of food metaphors happens more gradually and correlates with his growing enlightenment. Initially, Lear argues against the Fool, getting entangled in the Fool’s paradoxes, but the more Lear and the Fool interact, the more Lear copies his manner of speaking. He utters his own versions of the gustatory metaphors to couch his realizations of his daughters' cruelty as well as the loss of his power and personal dignity. Cordelia, the “ideal heart,” need not undergo a change and, hence, uses eating language from the start as a means of distinguishing her identity from her sisters’. In the end, the language of food gives these characters a covert but accurate means to express their true natures and to note the change in social hierarchies and political regimes. Because Edmund, Goneril, and Regan never undergo a growth in wisdom, they do not share the vision of the other characters and, therefore, their speeches are fittingly empty of any food references. Thus, while the Fool's food metaphors appear
as part of the fool's traditional subversive statements concealed with humor, they function as words of enlightenment and express a dominant motif in *King Lear*.

To my knowledge, no one has yet noticed how Shakespeare’s food imagery overarches the already well-documented motif of animal imagery. Through comparison to predatory animals, Regan and Goneril are figured as creatures of appetite, and this has been well-recorded. However, since previous critics see appetite only in terms of animals, their analyses tend to focus on the symbolism of the animal itself rather than on the eating activity of the animals. Because eating is an element taken for granted as a natural course, a lacuna in criticism has resulted. The animals are almost always featured in some activity related to eating, such as preying upon, consuming, and feeding others; starving, and even cannibalizing. These eating relationships are important.

To analyze literature through the lens of food and aliment is now a recognized critical pursuit. Food criticisms of culture and literature, especially in relation to cultural, material, and post-colonial studies, is a growing trend in the fields of (among others) anthropology, sociology, and, recently, literary studies. Bruce Boehrer, author of *The Fury of Men's Gullets*, analyzes the use of food language in the works of another Renaissance writer, Ben Jonson. The connection of food studies and specifically Shakespearean works is highlighted in Joan Fitzpatrick's *Food in Shakespeare: Early*.

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3 Robert Heilman notes that in *King Lear*, “the animal imagery is employed. . . to emphasize the ferocity and bestiality into which human beings can fall” (93). Audrey Yoder observes the various birds of prey to which Goneril is often likened “the cat, the tiger, the boar, and above all, to the serpent” (37). Yoder comments that by the time of Shakespeare, ideas about the similarity of men to animals seem to have fallen into two broad traditions: first, that tradition which found its best expression in 'Aesop,' attributing human qualities to animals and putting moral or political lessons into their mouths; and secondly, the tradition of the animal aspect of the pseudo-science of physiognomy, in which men evaluated themselves and their own characteristics by comparison with the animals which suggested these qualities. (2)

Bruce Boehrer says that “beast associations form a stock-in-trade of early modern English discourse on race, nationality, and ethnicity” (Boehrer, *Shakespeare Among*, 26).

4 “Twentieth century writers have used three major theoretical models to analyze the presence of alimentary motifs in

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Modern Dietaries of the Plays (2007). She states that her book “is the first detailed study of food and feeding in Shakespeare's plays” (1). Like Fitzpatrick's analysis, my study examines the early modern context of the foodstuffs to illuminate them as a device of characterization. However, Fitzpatrick's and my studies differ inversely. While she uses Shakespeare's plays' food references to illuminate an understanding of early modern food and dietaries, this thesis uses an understanding of early modern food and dietaries to illuminate the play.

This thesis presents a distinctive food study of literature because it analyzes the metaphors, not the actualities, of aliment. Unlike the literature examined by the majority of food studies critics, and unlike other political plays such Hamlet or Macbeth, there is no actual eating in King Lear. All references to food are metaphorical. Rather than devaluing the significance of the gustatory language, the metaphor allows the food references to carry greater weight by presenting layered meanings and multiple associations.

One of the accomplishments of the Fool's food images is that they simplify the characters' competing claims for rights of power through reference to the most fundamental structure: the food chain. When one speaks in terms of food, all perspectives about one’s relationship to the community, power, and identity are reduced to a very simple equation: who eats whom. This is a crucial equation in a play as politically complex as King Lear: rules are questioned, standards overturned; language is destroyed by lies, and the difference between bastard and legitimate issue is turned into a linguistic problem. In this realm, where reality seems up for grabs, there is only one way to get
around the spirals of rhetoric, and the Fool knows it: through the language of eating. As Alphonso Lingis reminds us, “All living things, however, gentle... however much marvel and adoration they evoke, are in reality segments of a global food chain, where nothing can live without eating, without devouring the lives of others, without being destined to feed the appetite of others” (126). Nothing is more basic, or powerful, than the food chain for explaining hierarchies of power.

Food studies is an appropriate methodological approach for analyzing *King Lear* because it is a political play, and food studies illuminate how eating reflects political positions. David Arnold notes that “food was, and continues to be, power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form” (qtd. in Counihan 2). Other food studies critics break down the specific kinds of power indicated by food consumption and production. Carole Counihan recounts the “many important studies that link the control of food to political and economic power” (2). This link between food and economic power is further detailed in Clarkson and Crawford's *Feast and Famine* (2001): “The production and distribution of food and drink are the basis of economic activity. The well-known definition of economics—the allocation of scarce resources among competing needs—is almost a definition of food markets” (1). The economic and political powers embedded in food, in turn, generally correlate to class or societal power. Alan Warde of *Consumption, Food, and Taste* (1997) explains sociologists' recognition of eating in that “The classical sociology of Marx, Weber and Simmel consider consumption a function of production, and consumption patterns a corollary of class position” (7). Once eating is understood as an activity that serves as an indicator of power—economic, political, social, and personal—then the exploration of foodstuffs and eating in *King Lear* offer a new way of
illuminating the complex political actives and messages of the play.

To give a brief example of how eating metaphors and political power operates in *King Lear*, let us examine the passage where food and power first intersect, surprisingly not in the words of the Fool, but in the speech of the King. In the opening scene, Lear uses alimentary language as a metaphor to bequeath his political power, giving over to Goneril and Regan the third of land once reserved for Cordelia. Lear commands,

“Cornwall and Albany, / With my two daughters' dowers, digest this third” (1.1.128-129).

Using the verb “digest” to bequeath land seems strange today, but was common in Shakespeare's time. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the literal uses of the word “digest” extended beyond those in current use and the word could be used to mean “to prepare by boiling or application of heat,” or to think over, to endure, to recover from, and, as it makes sense here, “To divide and dispose, to distribute” or “To disperse, dissipate” (*OED*). The wide-ranging uses of the term make it applicable to the context, but given that Goneril and Regan eventually become figures of appetite, and that many other alimentary references will follow, the word “digest” can operate on several levels.

Metaphors of food and eating can indicate, as food theorists have noted, not only who has what kind of power, but more particularly, how the powerful will use that power. This is a crucial question in *King Lear*, where Lear bequeaths his power with the assumption that the nature of the regime will continue unchanged, but where the audience and other characters recognize that the daughters will re-structure the power regime. The daughters' association with consumptive appetites relates to their political behaviors. The

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5 All *King Lear* quotes come from the Arden Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, edited by R. A. Foakes, 1997. This edition is a conflation of the 1608 quarto and the 1623 First Folio texts. The conflation has become the traditional format.
dark side to eating, that of an uncontrolled appetite, presents a threat to the body. As Lukanuski argues:

> We speak of a 'healthy appetite' always aware that there is the unhealthy appetite. Whether denied or indulged, appetite and hunger are regarded with suspicion. Appetite and hunger, because they are innate urges, are seen as mysterious and potentially dangerous. Regardless of what diet or discipline is followed, there is always the need, the hunger, that reminds us that we can never quite control our desires. Our appetite must be constantly monitored, and how we satisfy it even more carefully watched. (114)

If appetite is natural, it is only the balance, and the moderation, that is natural. Any extreme in appetite signals a danger. Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat argues that “Gluttony is a mutation: an aberration of a need which it ends up by controlling completely” (2). If the leader of a kingdom suffers from uncontrolled appetites of any sort, then that represents a threat to the body at large. In terms of a kingdom, overconsumption by one, when food is scarce or rationed, can mean less for the others. Furthermore, if the one in power eats without correspondingly feeding those lower on the hierarchy, then he jeopardizes the stability and continuation of the kingdom. On a symbolic and psychological level, overconsumption represents a selfishness, a greed, and the danger of sacrificing others for the fulfillment of oneself. When Goneril and Regan are implicated through food images as creatures of overweening appetites, their gluttony should be seen to endanger their wielding of power and the existence of themselves and their kingdom.

Another connection between the Fool’s food images and the characters of Goneril, Regan, and Lear that can be illuminated by food studies is that connection
between eating activity and gender identity. Counihan remarks that “There is the power that society allocates or denies to men and women through their access to and control of one essential resource: food. Men's and women's ability to produce, provide, distribute and consume food is a key measure of their power. The ability varies according to their culture, their class, and their family organization, and the overall economic structure of their society” (1-2). While the capacity to produce, distribute and consume indicates one's power as a man or woman, the type of food consumed and the manner of consumption can indicate degrees of masculinity and femininity. For men, universally across time and geography, the single most powerful food that announces their masculinity to others is meat. As Carol Adams states in “Eating Animals,” “Meat eating demarcates individual and societal virility. Men who decide to eschew 'meat' eating are deemed effeminate; failure of men to eat 'meat' announces that they are not masculine” (66). The food criticism studies regarding the relationship between eating habits and masculinity have obvious application to Lear. When we see a man, like the King, deprived of his ability even to eat at all, he becomes not just less of a king, but less of a man. Goneril's refusal to feed Lear dinner will initiate the King's emasculation through food, and this motif will be emphasized by the Fool's images of empty foodstuffs such as the egg shell and the peascod, as well as a knight's image of Lear as a starving animal, all which demarcate both political and male impotency.

Other characters are also de-gendered in by the Fool's, Albany's, and Lear's food associations with them. The connection between the female gender, femininity, and alimentary stuffs is explained by Susan Bordo, a leading cultural and material studies critic:
The image of a young, attractive woman indulging freely. . . would violate deeply sedimented expectations, would be experience by many as disgusting and transgressive. When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food. . . their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite. (18)

The transgressive eating habits of women and the notion of the connection between eating and sexual appetites have application to Goneril and Regan. We can see an image of indulgence, and a connection between voracity and sexual appetite in their characters. Their voracity is established through animal metaphors, and their sexual appetites occur in actuality with their desires for the bastard Edmund. The food and eating references of the play will de-gender Goneril and Regan. They will become, through these references, not just less womanly, but less human altogether. As we will see, the way Shakespeare characterizes Goneril and Regan through images of food and consumption will create the perception of these daughters as genderless creatures of unnatural horror, monstrosity, and devilishness.

Thus, in *King Lear*, the food language centrally established by the Fool and extended by the other variations of fool figures sets up immensely significant metaphors about the characters' natures, relationships, and actions. We never know exactly how Lear, or any character, reacts to the Fool. He is overlooked, hardly listened to, and forgotten in the end. What we do know is that the Fool is tolerated by an intolerant king, and his language serves as a light of truth in an inverted, gored realm. The language of food makes us laugh in a dark play of betrayals and Machiavellian creatures, but it is also the language of truth and prophecy. Shakespeare has infused into the food language of
fools and madmen the play's thematic code.

The chapters of this thesis show how the Fool’s food images establish a pattern for characterizing Lear and his daughters. Chapter One, “The Cracked Egg and Shelled Peascod: The Fool's Food Images of Impotence” demonstrates how and why the Fool's food choices consistently characterize King Lear as a figure of impotency, emphasizing his losses of power in the arenas of kingdom, home, and manhood. The Fool's food imagery reaches a more horrific climax when he uses food to characterize Lear's daughters: Chapter Two, “Eating Gone Wrong: Cannibalistic Cuckoos and Live Eels as Images of Horror,” shows how the Fool's food and eating metaphors consistently characterize Goneril and Regan, through their methods of consumption, as unnatural as fratricidal cannibals. When the Fool points out the monstrosity of the daughters through metaphors of food and eating, his language connects to larger motifs in the play that explore the lines of naturalness and unnaturalness, human and monster, as well as to the Machiavellian undercurrent of the new power regime. While the Fool is central in establishing the gustatory image pattern, his language exists within a framework of gustatory imagery operating in the play, and this will be explored in Chapter Three, “Food as the Language of Wisdom.” Kent, Edgar, Albany, and Lear, becoming, in their own ways, variations of fool figures, will echo the Fool's refrains in their own food language, connecting to and expanding upon the earlier metaphors. The language of food and eating, begun in the opening scene and threading through the play, is given thrust through the words of a wise Fool.
It is the Fool's position and dramatic function to offer revelations about the events and characters in the play, while concealing them with humor and incongruity. One primary linguistic strategy that the Fool uses is that of food imagery, and the revelations most prominent in his food images for King Lear signify impotence. Two of the Fool's richest and most complex food images are those of the cracked egg and the shelled peascod. These are traditional images of fertility—the egg and the peascod are both food objects that promise regeneration with centers of unborn young or seeds for planting—but the Fool's language painfully destroys that promise. The egg is cracked and eaten; the peascod emptied, and the result is fertility that is destroyed before inception. These images begin the association of impotence on a personal level, with the suggestion of Lear as hungry and unable to procure food enough for himself (elsewhere food imagery equates Lear with a hungry beggar who has not even bread scraps; another pictures him foraging after crabapples like a goat). When the King has lost the means to feed himself, he has lost the most fundamental power intrinsic to living creature. The Fool signifies other levels of powerlessness by playing upon the symbolism of the layers, shapes, and colors of the food objects. Shapes like a crown, the white, empty, cracked eggshell half indicates that while the outward marks of power—title, name, and history—may still exist for Lear—the substance of the power itself has vanished. With the shelled...
peascod, even the outward displays of power are denied, as is the promise of kingdom and manhood. In a revelation both obscured and presented by the food imagery of an egg and peascod, the Fool says that Lear is not just a king who has lost his political power, but a man fallen to the status of beggar, and a figure both emaciated and emasculated, and these gustatory associations will be picked up by other characters later in the play.

The Egg Riddle

In the “egg riddle,” the Fool explains to Lear how he can produce two crowns by cracking an egg. Though it first appears as a lesson in nothing more than serving preparations, significant implications underlie the passage. The image of the cracked egg in the egg riddle passage is one of the Fool's linguistic mechanisms to convey Lear's loss of powers:

Fool: Nuncle, give me an egg
and I'll give thee two crowns.

Lear: What two crowns shall they be?

Fool: Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest the crown i'the middle and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt.

Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away. (1.4.156-164)

The cracking, eating, and resulting crowns of the egg present, in the code of food, a
lesson and a prophecy, should Lear and the audience choose to heed it. The food image reveals the shifting of political power, comments on the folly of Lear's decision, and predicts that Lear's fall, which has already begun and will have dire results for the kingdom.

Situating the egg in its early modern context (as Fitzpatrick does with food in her study), helps us see why the egg would be such a useful way of presenting a metaphorical lesson in Shakespeare’s time. The egg in the early modern era was an important, if common, food. Joan Thirsk notes in *Food in Early Modern England* (2007) that “Well-to-do households bought large numbers [of eggs] at one time and used them very freely” (252). Albala indicates that eggs were cheap and abundant, as he tells us that eggs “were among the most prevalent foods in Europe at all social levels” (79). The egg's commonness is affirmed by Ray Tannahill, who dubs it “the humble egg” in *Food in History* (283). Because the egg was an everyday object, eaten by noblemen and peasants alike, the egg was a food that audiences of all classes understood, and so the egg presented in the riddle conveys the play's complex relationships and political dynamics in simple terms.

The egg is a layered food, consisting of shell and yolk. The Fool gives each part multiple symbolic correspondences. In both literal and symbolic terms, the most important part of the egg is the middle. The Fool alludes to the egg’s “meat” as the beginning of life and as a life force because the middle of the egg either holds the unborn young and promises regeneration of a species or becomes a yolk that can be eaten, providing its eater with energy and nutrition. Eggs, notes Albala, “were believed to be among the most nourishing of foods” in early modern Europe (79). The importance of the
middle part of the egg, nutritionally and biologically, equates on a symbolic level to power.

Power, of course, is a term with many delineations, and the middle of the egg can stand for one or several of those meanings. The yolk can represent political power, or the ability to control and care for a kingdom through both the feeding and providing for it and is associated with the promise of stability and regeneration (This is suggested through the Fool's use of the “golden” color in the egg metaphor to correlate the yolk with the King’s legitimate crown). The yolk may also represent patriarchal and reproductive power since meat-eating is associated with males and the yolk may be likened to sperm. Further, the egg meat may represent personal power via the capability to feed, provide, and care for oneself.

This equation of food with power of several kinds invoked by the Fool is an important equation noted by food theorists. David Arnold in *Famine* notes that “food was, and continues to be power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form” (qtd. in Counihan and Kaplan 2). Stephen Mennell in *All Manners of Food* asserts that “The prodigious consumption of meat by the secular and ecclesiastical upper classes has long been familiar. . . . The peasantry's diet was predominantly based on cereals and vegetables and was often sparse at that” (41). The equation of food with power, based on conditions in fact, is symbolic in literature.

Thus, there are biological, metaphorical, and theoretical reasons why the yolk in the egg represents Lear's power, but it represents this power only in the intact egg when the power is a protected whole that offered promise of continued stability, provision, and regeneration for the kingdom. As the riddle continues, the breaking of the egg signifies
the loss of the king's power; both middle and exterior undergo a series of changes for the worse.

According to the Fool's imagery, dividing the crown results in political impotence not just for Lear, but for the recipients of his power, Regan and Goneril. The egg is a layered food, so unlike a map or a loaf of bread, when an egg is cloven in half, not two, but three objects result from a cracked egg: two shells and a yolk. The two halves of a cracked eggshell have jagged edges that, cut-side up, visually take on the shape of the crown. The Fool uses the two shell halves to represent the two crowns bequeathed to Regan and Goneril. However, these shells of crowns are very different from the royal crown, and in this distinction lies the lesson of the egg passage. The shells are not golden, but white, which suggests that the daughters have only a shadow of the power. Further, the cracking of the egg leaves the meat, or power, without protection. Finally, the shells are emptied of their meat, and thus their power, once cracked open. This message in the egg underscores the messages of the play: When divided, power does not remain either protected or intact. With only half, the daughters have the shape and form, but not the function or the substance of power. The Fool simplifies the political problems of power transference into a simple visual lesson of cracking an egg. It is food imagery that explains the lesson in conveniently hidden terms, and it demonstrates impotence on both the part of Lear and his daughters.

The Fool is aware that he is more politically astute than Lear and he criticizes Lear within the egg riddle, enfolding the play's dominant motif of foolishness in his food passage. The Fool accuses the king of having “little wit in thy bald crown when thou / gave'st thy golden one away.” “Bald crown” functions as a multi-level pun. It recalls the
bald, white shell of the egg and symbolically functions as the crown that represents the king's power, which has emptied when divided. On another level, the baldness may represent the hairless state of the aged king's head and thus reinforce the emptiness of the wit within. The Fool uses the image of the “bald crown” to reaffirm the foolishness of the character who would divest himself of power. The Fool's food metaphors show Lear's frailty in reasoning—not only has Lear lost his political power, he has lost his wits.

If the Fool's egg riddle indicates that Lear and his daughters are all just empty shells of power, then he also indicates that he himself becomes the one with power. We see that, in his egg riddle, the Fool has “destroyed” the King's promise of power by eating that promise, the middle, himself. The Fool says, “after I have cut the egg i’ the middle / and eat up the meat” (1.4.156-164). The Fool pictures himself as the consumer of the egg, an alimentary indication that he is in the seat of power. Through his imaginary eating of the egg, the Fool suggests that he has some power, and he does. The Fool lacks political power, but he retains the power to speak, and the power to be heard by us. At this point, through his egg metaphor, he has revealed to Lear and to audience that Lear's division of the kingdom is a problematic one that has divested both him and his daughters of any real power. Unlike the land and the map, power cannot be divided into equal parts, and, if tried, power is lost and disaster threatens. This message, while hinted at early in the play, first comes to us explicitly through the egg passage, by the Fool who poses himself as the eater in his metaphor and indicates himself as the powerful.

In a parallel to Rabelais' Carnivalesque, the Fool is trying to warn Lear by using metaphors from the low, a practice likened to “festive misrule,” where the social order is inverted and the low character takes on authority in the play that has a transforming effect.
on the king. If the Fool's food language acts as a revelation, it also acts as protection. While kings and noblemen would not deign to speak of something as lowly as bodily functions such as eating, the Fool can speak about food because it is natural to his station. Food language seems to be the language of the low class, and the Fool capitalizes on it to shift it suddenly from the mundanity of Fools to a position to comment upon those who have the power.

Ultimately, the egg riddle presents an image of Lear's impotence. The Fool's images render himself as powerful and Lear as powerless. Without a “yolk” and without intact shells to protect it, Lear has divested himself of political power, personal food sustenance, the promise of regeneration and stability for the kingdom. He has left himself vulnerable and impotent.

*The Shelled Peascod*

Not fifty lines after the Fool presents the egg riddle to Lear, he utters another food image of impotence. In front of Goneril and King Lear, the Fool points at Lear and calls out, “That's a shelled peascod” (1.4.190). The peascod is a rich image and, similar to his handling of the egg riddle, the Fool plays upon the visual symbolic capacity of every element of the peascod to present his message. Starting from egg and proceeding to peascod, the Fool's order of food presents a decrease in desirability and edibility. As the foods shrink in size and nutritive potential, the Fool symbolically points out Lear's decreasing power and social status. The image of the peascod presents a message of complete impotence in the spheres of domesticity, society, kingship, and personal manhood.
When the Fool delivers the shelled peascod line, his actions underscore his words and reconfigure the power dynamics. When the Fool points at Lear as he says, “That's a shelled peascod,” he talks about Lear instead of to him. Moreover, referring to Lear in the third person, and directing his words towards Goneril, the Fool realigns himself with Goneril, making Lear the both outsider and inferior to his daughter and his Fool. The Fool seems to ally himself with Goneril, since his name-calling insults Lear. But the alliance may be a continuance of the subversive tactics he employs to deceive her.

The Fool's insinuation of Lear's impotence through the peascod image begins with the various associations of poverty that peascods had in early modern times. In Shakespeare’s time, vegetables were considered foods only fit for the poor, and those who consumed vegetable were associated with many types of powerlessness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “peascod” as “the pod or legume of the pea plant; a pea pod” and adds that Horace, in his *Art of Poetry* (1567), regards peascods as a paltry food, on status with inferior bread: “He can dyet with grudginge breade, and peasecoddes all alone” (*OED* 1). Peascods were meager foods lacking vital nutrition and something hardly worth consuming (nevertheless, edible). The Fool’s implicit association between Lear and the peascod likens him to a food of inferior status and quality, and to the lowly eaters of that inferior food.

While the egg and peascod may be linked in their shapes and layering, the substance of power, and the kind of power implied, differ. The Fool uses the egg passage to indicate a loss of political power with the reference to the shape of the royal crown; the shelled peascod completes the loss of political power with the loss of the power of manhood. Foakes remarks that the peascod passage contains “overtones of sexual
impotence” (203). The visual image fits: again invoked through a play on the shape, the peascod is phallic in shape and its emptiness of seed conveys impotency. Thus, the image of the empty peascod, of a vegetable barren of seed, suggests Lear’s incapacity to regenerate family and kingdom. The Fool's symbolic image of the empty pea shell, in a single blow, undercuts Lear’s power as king and man.

The Fool ultimately has no power to change politics; he can only teach those with power. The language of food is one of the Fool's mechanisms, if not to prevent, then at least to forewarn Lear of his loss of power (though, again, Lear is not yet aware of how complete that loss is). The Fool chooses images of emptiness for King Lear, images of fertility with the seed gone or the middle eaten by another. Through his food images, the Fool likens Lear not just to a king who has lost his political power but to a man who has lost powers to regenerate kingdom, family, and self.
CHAPTER 2

EATING GONE WRONG:
CANNIBALISTIC CUCKOOS AND LIVE EELS AS IMAGES OF HORROR

When the Fool moves from characterizing Lear through food imagery to characterizing his daughters, the gustatory images shift from signifying impotence to signifying the horrific and unnatural. Until now in the play, it is somewhat unclear which character is in the right—if Goneril is justified in her ill treatment of a stubborn, cruel, rascally old man, or if Lear, the generous King and father, is demanding what is rightly his. Each side has arguable justification. Kahn observes that “We don't know... whether Goneril has a just grievance against her father... We cannot be sure how to judge her brief appearance here... We can't look into the future; we can't even be sure we have an accurate report of the past. We know no more than what we have been told” (31). Up to a point, the audience may wonder whose entitlement should win out: the aged father's entitlements to a peaceful retirement or the daughters' entitlement to wield their power to stabilize the kingdom. The events, before reaching a climax in the plot, are foretold by the Fool, whose food images give an interpretation of the relationship between father and daughters. His linguistic strategy of food imagery implies that the daughters’ treatment of Lear is monstrous in its greed, yet the imagery does not lay all blame upon them. In bequeathing power to them, Lear has activated their vicious appetites that, metaphorically, threaten to consume him, the kingdom, and themselves.

The Fool's first food imagery of the daughters pictures them in the horrifying and
unnatural act of patricide through consumption, activated by an overindulgent parent. The Fool remarks to Lear, "For you know, nuncle, / The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it's had it head bit off by it young" (1.4.205-07). The passage's combination of animal and eating imagery is particularly striking because it pictures cuckoo fledglings engaged in the grotesque and startling cannibalization of their step-parent, the hedge-sparrow. The concepts of step-parents and beheading have obvious correlations to the sets of children and parents in the plot and subplot in the play. The children's implied parallel with cannibals is a horror as yet unrealized in the play, though the other characters will follow up the cannibal image in later acts. The analysis of this passage will begin with a close reading, continue with a critique of the animal imagery in terms of the alimentary motif, and close with an exploration of the political and Machiavellian suggestions embedded in the reference to cannibalism.

Analysis of Metaphorical Correlations and Implications of the Cuckoo Passage

The relationship between the hedge-sparrow and the cuckoo sets out the associations of “unnaturalness” because this relationship puts into question the origin and lines of descent of offspring. The cuckoo bird, as Dent explains, “lays its eggs and has them hatched in the nests of other birds”(45). That the hedge-sparrow feeds, but does not give birth to, the cuckoo recalls the play's thematic controversy of what makes a “natural,” or legitimate, child and the very definition of “natural.” Goneril and Regan are Lear’s biological offspring, and he “fed” them by raising them and empowering them, but their subsequent actions betray all sense of familial love and obligation. The false daughters speak lies and mistreat their kin; in doing so, they act in socially “unnatural”
ways and destroy their line of descent. They have become unnatural offspring, a motif that will continue in the Fool's further characterization of them.

Implicitly comparing the daughters to the cuckoos both brings to mind their unnatural ties and emphasizes their horrific acts. While it is one thing for children who have no blood ties to betray their guardian, it is another thing entirely for children who are blood offspring to turn on their parent. Unlike Edmund, the daughters are not fueled by a frustration at the law that denies them inheritance and legitimacy; they have already been granted land and power and still their appetites are not sated. The Fool's use of gustatory metaphors casts their mistreatment of their father and hording of power in terms of a horrific, bottomless appetite that drives unnatural betrayals.

The Fool's metaphors of appetite applied to Goneril and Regan encompass appetite in its various forms—for food, sex, and power. The Fool's hedge sparrow and cuckoo passage combines these closely associated appetites. The close relationship between food and sexual appetites is noted by food theorist Mary Lukanski, who explains that “It's not surprising that eating is closely associated with sex: hunger and appetite becoming metaphors for sexual desire” (114). Lukanski’s association between sexual and food appetites correlates to the condition of Goneril and Regan, and her description of the result of these urges.

As her passage continues, Lukanski describes the dreadful outcome if appetites are not reined in: “Sex, like hunger, is regarded as a powerful urge that must be tightly

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6 The etymology of “cuckhold” as it is derived from “cuckoo” might suggest an appetite of a sexual nature. As Alan Dent explains, though “it may not be a strictly logical reason—it is from the word, 'cuckoo' that the once-common term 'cuckhold' is directly derived. A cuckold, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, was ‘and still is’ a husband whose wife is unfaithful to him with one or more other men. The word, it seems applies only to the deceived husband, never to a deceived wife” (45).
controlled or society as we know it will be destroyed: paternity of children would be unknown; women would have no need to establish a family with one man; adults would prey upon children; life would be sacrificed in pursuit of pleasure” (114). Lukanski's observation plays out with shocking accuracy in *King Lear*: The women characters Goneril and Regan demonstrate “no need to establish a family with one man” as they both pursue affairs with Edmund. In the customary inversion of the play, the children prey upon the parents; many lives—Lear's, Cordelia's, Gloucester's, even the daughters' own—are “sacrificed in pursuit of pleasure.” When a kingdom lacks governance of all forms of appetite, these appetites (eating, sexual, and political) collapse a kingdom.

While the Fool's hedge-sparrow and cuckoo passage castigates Regan and Goneril for their uncontrolled appetites, the passage also places some blame upon Lear. The Fool seems to suggest that, like the cuckoo, the unnatural appetites are the “nature” of Goneril and Regan. They acted according to their unnatural nature; Lear acted out of foolishness, which liberated such appetites. The Fool suggests that Lear's metaphorically feeding Goneril and Regan “too long” spoiled the daughters—giving them a greedy sense of entitlement and releasing the controls, thus setting free their all-consumptive appetites.

*The Animal Connection*

The hedge-sparrow and the cuckoo passage is the first alimentary passage to refer to animals, and it is important to look at the ways that the passage connects with the animal motifs in the play. One could say that this passage sets up the dominant meaning of the animal imagery in the play and subordinates the animal imagery to the alimentary imagery.
The more usual way of reading the animal imagery is typified by Robert Heilman, who notes in Shakespeare that “the animal imagery is employed. . . . to emphasize the ferocity and bestiality into which human beings can fall” (93). Bradley notes the same. Certainly, using animal imagery to reflect, or warn of, the bestial side of humankind is a common practice among Renaissance authors. More recent critics have corrected Heilman with finer delineations of the man/beast relationship. Bruce Boehrer, for instance, criticizes the man/beast opposition as too simplistic a reduction and proposes a more complex understanding of Renaissance authors’ uses of animals to indicate specific levels of humanness and society. While these studies are helpful, none have explored how the animal imagery in *King Lear* reflects and interacts with the alimentary motifs.

If we are to interpret the animal imagery in *King Lear* more precisely, we must note that Shakespeare places animals in their relationship to food. When employing animal imagery, Shakespeare emphasizes gustatory tendencies. Sucking, gnawing, gorging animals appear in one scene; starved, “belly-pinched” ones in the next. Animal and food imagery combine in this context: certain animals consume, others starve, and all are part of a giant predator/prey food chain. Such emphasis on the eating habits of animals reveals that Shakespeare employs the animal imagery within the larger framework of the alimentary imagery dominant in the Fool’s language. Three different relationships to food are showcased: the consumers, the consumed, and the starving. *King Lear* is always represented by animals either starving or consumed. While the pattern of the starving King began with his lack of food in the Fool’s crust and crumb
passage,\textsuperscript{7} Kent will later incorporate the starvation in animal imagery when he describes the night in the hovel as “This night where in the cub-drawn bear would couch. . . and the belly-pinched wolf” (3.8.11-12). The “bear” and the “wolf” are at the top of the hierarchy within the animal kingdom and thus correlate in position with King Lear, but they are in an unusual condition, also parallel to King Lear, for they have empty bellies, caused by starvation (belly-pinched) and by overfeeding young (cub-drawn), suggestive of the overfeeding cuckoos.

That Goneril and Regan are figures of appetite is well-known, and their voracity is anchored through the animal imagery. They are always pictured as the animals that consume in a variety of ways—gorging,preying, cannibalizing. Along with cannibalistic cuckoos, they are likened to, or outright named, savage wolves, stinging adders, sharp-toothed vultures, gnawing rats, biting dogs, detested kites, and creature with “boarish fangs” that stick in “anoited flesh” (3.7.58) (Spurgeon 342). Such animal images implicate Goneril and Regan as beasts, as Heilman and others have observed. However, the connection between Goneril and Regan and beasts derives not from a reductive equation to animals, but from a more complicated equation of Goneril and Regan with animals who participate in the food chain in an unnatural way. To have to eat and be eaten for survival is one thing; to prey on one’s own parents when one has plenty is quite another. They are cannibals, and their father—and sometimes Gloucester and Cordelia as well—are on the plate. It is the combination of eating and animal imagery that renders Goneril and Regan not as beasts, but as lower than beasts—their eating preferences are

\textsuperscript{7} Invoking the imagery of bread scraps, the Fool remarks to Lear, "He that keeps nor crust nor crumb / Weary of all, shall want some" (1.4.188-189).
unnatural even in the animal kingdoms.

**Cannibalism**

The hedge-sparrow and cuckoo passage is the first animal passage to introduce us to the most shocking and horrific mode of food consumption, cannibalism. Lear seems to conceive of cannibalism as an heinous act committed only by people like the “barbarous Scythian.” While cannibalism was a known practice of certain tribes, Donnelly and Diehl confirm Lear's stance by noting that “Cannibalism in general was seen as an awful thing and charges of consuming human flesh were often leveled against foreigners as an expedient way to make them look like barbarians” (4). The traditional conceptions of cannibalism as barbaric and horrific may have stemmed from the Greeks, whose literature is the first to mention cannibalism.

The cannibalism references readily noted in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus* operate more subtly in *King Lear*. The motif begins in the first scene of the first act: outraged by Cordelia's seeming lack of love and obedience, Lear banishes her, saying, “The barbarous Scythian, / Or he that makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom / Be as well neighboured, pitied and relieved, / As thou my sometime daughter” (1.1.117-120). Lear threatens to treat Cordelia as he would a cannibal. In his foolish rage, the king threatens the wrong daughter with such treatment. The King's statement is a reversal of what is to come. Metaphoric cannibalism will take place, but not as he expected: his other two daughters will cannibalize him. The Fool takes Lear's cannibalism reference and sets it right in the hedge-sparrow and cuckoo passage, re-configure Goneril and Regan as the cannibals and Lear as the consumed.
The Fool's perspective will gradually be acknowledged by Lear. Later, he will refer to his daughters as “sea-monsters” (1.4.253) (who, in mythology, preyed on human flesh, see Foakes 207), and as “detested kites” (1.4.254).

In Shakespearean plays, a reference to any character as a cannibal implies that this figure is a threat to society. To have human beings set in a predatory relationship to each other destroys all trust and bonds of kinship that girds human relations; thus, predation destroys social order and political stability; cannibalism is anathema to civilization. In The Tempest, the character of Caliban poses a savage contrast to the civilized world of Prospero and Ariel. Erica Fudge notes the destruction of order through cannibalism in Titus Andronicus: “when Titus invites Tamora and Saturninus to eat with him, the antagonisms of the struggle for power appear to be set aside as Titus acts as overzealous host and Tamora as grateful guest. But the new-found harmony is short-lived; the revelation that the pie Titus has served contains Tamora's sons destroys all notions of order” (Fudge 84). To say the least, for a host to serve a human for dinner destroys all conceptions of the codes of civility; further, when a mother eats her son, she defies her care-giving definition and hierarchy and, instead, preys on her child, again destroying “all notions of order.” When cannibalism enters a society, relationships become suspicious; humans become food for each other; hierarchies overturn, and order turns to chaos. The Fool’s implication of the daughters as cannibals predicts the dire consequences of their rule and their abuse of King Lear.

The connection between other food imagery and this cannibalism is the debasement of the human in a more extreme but connected form. The cannibal imagery in the hedge-sparrow and cuckoo passage relates to the question, “What is human?” This
question becomes a dominant theme as the play continues and as the distinction between animal and human breaks down. Fudge notices a similar correspondence between cannibalism and the crisis of the human identity in *Titus Andronicus*:

But the play does not only show that the disruption of the meal equates to the disruption of civil order. At the moment of the revelation of the contents of the pie, one question is being asked, and it is a question that pervades the whole of the play: where is the human? In this scene the sons are mere flesh, mistaken for animals; Titus is a murderer and dismemberer of all values and order; and Tamora is a cannibal, or worse, the eater of her own children. (85)

The imagery of cannibalism links to the question, “Where is the human?” in *King Lear*. In the Fool's metaphor of the cannibalistic cuckoos, the daughters are reduced to monstrous beasts, and Lear reduced to a food for the beasts. When humans are both the consumers and the consumed, then there is no difference between a human life and meat on a plate. The Fool's statements give answers ahead of their time, playing out the themes in metaphors before they are played out in dramatic time. The Fool has all the answers from the start, but others overlook his commentary, as if to forestall the inevitable.

Beyond its commentary on the nature of humanity, the image of cannibalism is a metaphor that illuminates the political meanings of the play. Critics have analyzed the politics of the eleventh century *King Leir* and discussed how Shakespeare's version of *King Lear* comments upon sixteenth century English politics. Hadfield affirms that “Lear's attempted division of his kingdom into three portions would have appeared to contemporary playgoers, especially given that Lear's first imperious command is to ask for a map (1.1.36), as a breaking up of a unified Britain into its constituent nations” (98).
Hadfield also notes that “The hostile representation of a sycophantic and ineffective court in plays such as *Richard III* or *King Lear*, should also be seriously considered as interventions into contemporary politics, and not regarded as simply generated by the demands of the genre” (16). While scholars have long seen *King Lear* as a play about the breakdown of old power structures, the cannibalism motif in the play's imagery reveals the other half of the story—the fearsome nature of the political structure that seems to be emerging to replace it. Ann Thompson describes the shift in political structure as representative of the rising commercialism: “In this era, the old ethos is one of unreckoned generosity, magnificence and carelessness, whereas the new values stress providence, frugality, even calculation. Lear and Cordelia talk in the language of free giving, while Goneril, Reagan and Edmund think quantitatively, they put a price on things, they ask coldly, ‘What need one?’” (27). Certainly, the rise of mercantilism pushed commercialism ideals of providence, frugality, and calculation to the forefront. Shakespeare’s motif of cannibalism forewarns of something far more dangerous. Edwin Muir argues for a political implication of Shakespeare's cannibalism motif:

> Edmund represents a picture of the man of policy in the latest style, who regards the sacred order of society as his prey, and recognizes only two realities, interest and force. . . The sisters are harpies, but as rulers they act in the approved contemporary Machiavellian convention of Shakespeare’s time (24, 18). . . . They have words and acts only to meet the momentary emergency, the momentary appetite. (17)

If Edmund represents the new politicians, as Muir says, *preying* on “the sacred order of society” and the sisters represent the new politicians as hungry “harpies,” it follows that
Shakespeare’s vision of the new politics is worse than calculating and frugal. These reflections suggests that Shakespeare views Machiavellianism as savage, greedy, consumptive, and ultimately, cannibalistic.

Emma Parker adds support to Muir’s political reading of the human predator/prey relationships in *King Lear* by noting that Shakespeare would not be the last author to use eating imagery as political comment. Parker notes that the twentieth century novelist “[Margaret] Atwood, like Swift, uses cannibalism for caustic political comment” (363). Indeed, to examine closely the connection between food and power relationships in *King Lear* is to strip the play to its skeleton of emerging Machiavellian politics, and to show that, for Shakespeare, cannibalism is the most fitting metaphor for this new concept of capitalism.

The Fool's cannibalistic hedge-sparrow and cuckoo passage subtlety interweaves many of the play's themes: the animal imagery and the complicated or ambiguous distinction between human and beast, the question of what defines the legitimacy and duties of offspring, and the implication of Machiavellian politics overtaking the traditional monarchies. The Fool's combination of many themes in a single statement illuminates the multi-faceted nature of the food metaphors and their intricate entrenchment in the play's meaning and movements. The Fool's eating metaphors necessitate our exploration because they act as a cog for the revolving themes. The Fool both loves Lear and criticizes him, pities him and offends him. Through the eating imagery of the feeding hedge-sparrow and the greedy cuckoos, the Fool figures the daughters as creatures of unnatural appetites, insults Lear's manhood, insinuates him as the impetus, and now the victim, of his daughters' voracity, and envisions them all in a
shocking act of cannibalism. He knows he is right in his metaphoric prophecy, and ahead of our realizations, yet he conveys the horror with his customary off-handedness because that is all a Fool can do in a kingdom whose fall is already inevitable.

_Eel Pie_

The second food image that implicates the daughters as acting in an unnatural, horrific relationship with Lear, and that implicates his foolish actions as the impetus for their appetites, is that of live eels in a cook’s pie. The Fool presents the image in the scene where Lear seeks out Regan to find recourse from Goneril's abuse. But when he makes his appeal, Lear is not only told that Regan refuses to see him, he also sees his beloved servant Caius hanging in the stocks. Tortured by his daughter's cruelties, Lear cries out, “O me, my heart! My rising heart! But down!” (2.2.310). The emotional moment is cut short by the Fool, who responds with his customary combination of flippancy, cruelty, wisdom, and secrecy, this time couching his response in food imagery of rebellious eels:

Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels

when she put 'em i' the paste alive: she knapped ‘em

o’ the coxcombs with a stick and cried ‘Down, wantons,

down!’ (2.2.310-12)

The Fool's alimentary imagery of the eel-knapping cook continues to convey the important themes and forewarnings of other food images, but it does so with a horror not present in the food imagery associated solely with Lear.

Initially, the line may offer slap-stick humor—a cook batting at eel heads in a
pie while yelling at them. Yet beneath the humor lies the horrific. In an unnatural twist of
the food chain, slithering eels rise up in rebellion against their potential eater. The
unnaturalness is even more horrific because the Fool delivers it with humor.

While the eels most obviously correlate to Lear's rising heart, they have a more
subtle correlation to Lear's daughters. Since Lear insinuates elsewhere that he thinks of
his daughters as an extension of his own body, it may be suggested that the Lear's
daughters are, in a sense, his “heart.”

Analyzing the implications of associating Lear's daughters with eels can be
helped with an understanding of the early modern sensibilities of the eel. Caton and
Thirsk say that “large numbers of eels were available to be eaten in the East Anglian
fens” (14). The eels could be prepared in various ways: “Eels and lampreys were usually
grilled on a sheet of paper to prevent burning, but they were also pickled, smoked, served
cold in a jellied aspic or baked into pies with sweet and savory ingredients,” as is
presumably being done in this passage (Albala 72). Prepared properly, eels served as a
popular food, even for royalty. Albala adds that “records of royal banquets frequently
included eels, and many kings were even said to have died from a surfeit of eels” (72).
While eels could apparently be prepared into banquet foods for the upper classes, they
were, paradoxically, a “condemned” food. They derived this stigma because they lived in
an “unwholesome atmosphere,” because of their texture, and because of their perceived
asexual, spontaneous reproduction. Albala explains:

Eels and lampreys were believed to be among the most harmful of foods because
of the gummy viscous texture of their flesh. It may have been this very
prohibition that made them the object of intense gastronomic interest though, and
food writers thought that eels generate spontaneously, without parents, from rotting organic matter. The practice of using a dead horse's head thrown into the water to catch eels may have suggested that they were generated from the decaying flesh itself. (72)

That eels were both gorged upon at banquets and condemned as “harmful,” carries a symbolic correlation to Lear's daughters. The daughters are like the eels: while they have the potential to serve as royalty and have the outer accouterments of such, their natures may be likened to unwholesome eels.

The eel, here operating much like the cuckoo, further carries the implication of the daughters’ unnatural origins. Several statements in the play suggest the daughters’ denial of both familial bond and loyalty and renders them as originating not from their father, but from beasts: “She that herself will sliver and disbranch / From her material sap perforce must wither,” along with “Tigers, not daughters” (4.2.41) and “dog-hearted daughters” (4.3.46). The Fool’s eel and cuckoo passages, corroborated by these other references suggest that the daughters, while biologically descended from Lear, have generated spontaneously, like the eels, into monstrous beings.

The eels show a clear correspondence to actions played out in the passage: that which is intended to provide sustenance rises up in nightmarish rebellion. Just as the cook expected obedient eels to feed the hungry, Lear expects his offspring to obey him and continue to bring sustenance to him and the kingdom. They do not. The thing that is supposed to bring nourishment rebels, and the action has reached a climax.

The other part of the imagery in this passage is the cook, who represents Lear, and this shows the other half of the Fool’s commentary. The comparison of Lear to the cook
feminizes him, in a continuation of the effeminate associations of Lear found in the shell ed peascod image. This is the first reference to food preparation in the text and the act of food preparation is one that, in the early modern era, is, above all, a woman's place and duty. To cast Lear not as a food hunter or provider, but as a cook in the kitchen, completely emasculates him. The femininity is heightened by the fact that the Fool makes the cook a “cockney.” The cockney, according to the OED, is “A derisive appellation for a townsman, as the type of effeminacy, in contrast to the hardier inhabitants of the country” (3). The emasculation of Lear has been implied by many of the food images, and the message is clear: the king's loss of power correlates with a loss of food, a loss of a man's ability to provide food, and, therefore, a loss of manhood. The loss of Lear's power as a king sears through to his loss of power as a man.

In suggesting that the cook’s foolishness parallels Lear's, the Fool casts some responsibility for the kingdom's impending disintegration on Lear. While the Fool may sympathize with Lear, his passages do not redeem Lear's character. The Fool’s image of the eel-swatting cook presents a scene where the blame of offense lies more upon the cook than the eels. The cook’s foolishness is that she should have killed the eels before putting them into the pie crust, just as Lear should have either accepted or challenged his daughters in a more effective manner. In effect, the Fool brings attention to the foolishness of Lear. This foolishness is made explicit with the pun on “coxcomb,” which can refer to both the eels' heads and the customary fool's cap. Any actions the king or cook would take now to rectify the situation are now rendered futile because of their tardiness. The Fool’s image teaches that the eels and daughters are acting according to their nature; the nightmare was brought through the delusion and foolishness of the cook
and of Lear who failed to see it.

Lear’s commanding of obedience from both his own heart and his daughters is now futile. They are both forces working against him and he no longer has the power to rectify the situation, as his delusion and his foolishness have allowed it to perpetuate and blossom. The civil war rages both in the body of the kingdom and in the body of Lear the man. The passage conveys the horror that will descend upon the kingdom. Both the eels and the daughters, both the cook and the King are at fault: the first for their paradoxically naturally (unnatural) offensive natures, the latter for their foolishness in not recognizing these natures and so allowing them to operate unrestrained. This picture of eel heads rising out of a pie, and a clownish cook who swats at their heads with one stick telling them “down. . . down,” gives us an image that combines the the carnivalesque with the nightmare of unnatural monstrosity.
CHAPTER 3
FOOD AS THE LANGUAGE OF WISDOM

This thesis has argued that the Fool is central in establishing a larger framework of gustatory image patterns in *King Lear*. But equally significant is the use of food imagery by the play's other characters. The Renaissance, and especially Shakespearean, convention of the “wise fool” is played out by other characters in *King Lear*, who become variations of a fool figure in the sense that they pick up the Fool’s position, function, and gustatory language. In the eyes of the world, Edgar, Kent, and Cordelia act foolishly by returning to help those who have banished them. Kent and Edgar take on debased roles, the former a servant, the latter a mad beggar, that that give them a fool-like license. Like the Fool, they also take on roles of companion, protector, and commentator. King Lear, who has made foolish assumptions and decisions all along, arguably turns into a veritable fool at the play’s climax when he is bereft of all but a hovel, keeps company with fools, and becomes crazed himself. While each character becomes a different variation of a fool, one thing that they have in common is the adoption of gustatory imagery into their language once they take on the foolish disguise. The moment that each of these characters shifts from a figure of nobility into a fool figure, a defining element of their speech shifts as remarkably and instantaneously as their costumes: they begin use alimentary images. The food language, predominantly associated with the licensed Fool, becomes a linguistic device they all use to express their wisdom as fools.
Food as a Marker of Fools' Identity

Eating habits are a potent indicator of personality traits and a common means of demarcating character in early modern literature. Ken Albala, author of *Food in Early Modern Europe* (2003), explains:

It would be remiss to neglect the way writers use eating habits and preferences as a way to delineate character. The reader needs only the briefest description of a meal to form a complete mental image of the person eating it. . . . Shakespeare knew well the value of describing eating habits to disclose personality. . . . Shakespeare makes extensive use of food stereotypes, especially for ridiculing foreigners. (242-3)

Facets of personality, station in life, and personal idiosyncrasies can be revealed through what a character eats or does not eat, how much or how little, or in what way and for what reason he eats. Food is a powerful way to establish identity, and the literary device is invoked by the variety of debased figures in *Lear*.

In critical studies of this play, the identification of Cordelia as fool is commonplace, and Cordelia’s use of alimentary language to establish her identity follows the same pattern as the Fool's. Unlike Kent and Edgard, Cordelia, as the “ideal heart” need not undergo a change to become an enlightened fool, and so her eating references begin in the first act. Cordelia uses alimentary metaphors in her response to Lear’s request to announce her love for him. Like the Fool’s gustatory language, Cordelia's alimentary metaphor functions on several levels. Along with answering Lear, the alimentary metaphor functions to describe her identity, and particularly to distinguish herself from her sisters. If Goneril and Regan are branded as unnatural consumers,
Cordelia’s self-perception is the opposite. She claims, “I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth” (1.1.91-92). Literally, this means she cannot find the words to express the depth of her love for her father. Metaphorically, it indicates that Cordelia is not capable of eating her own flesh and blood, as her sisters do. She will not prey upon others, nor will she consume her own body in a self-destructive manner. She knows herself and is accurate in her own self-identification, using the pattern of food delineations that are used throughout the play by the Fool. In fact, throughout the play’s imagery, Cordelia stands between the two extremes of consumption and starvation as a “food producer.” She is described as having a “ripe” lip and is associated with a high-grown field, both food images of fertility and sustenance.

Kent can be seen as a variation of a fool figure, and appropriately, he uses food language as a means of establishing his new identity as servant to Lear. Kent’s outspoken character may be seen as foolhardy because it results in his banishment by Lear and in his being stocked by Oswald. Resuming a debased position, at his own peril, in order to care for the man who banished him, would brand him as foolish in the eyes of the world. While Kent does not use fool language like the Fool to implant lessons, he does use food language as part of his initial disguise to solidify his identity—an identity that now makes him acceptable to Lear. When Lear asks the disguised Kent to identify himself—to declare who he is, what he does, and what his service is—Kent replies:

I do profess to be no less than I seem; to serve him
truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is
honest, to converse with him that is wise and says little,
to fear judgment, to fight when I cannot choose—and
to eat no fish. (1.4.13-17)

Kent gives a list of admirable traits—honest, trustworthy, wise, courageous—and ends with the curious tag “to eat no fish.” The talk of abstinence from fish amongst the other lofty traits seems so incongruous to the modern day reader that it may be “enough to provoke laughter” as Foakes notes. Even in early modern England, the phrase may have come off as humorous, intended for the audience’s reprieve. But then again, like the Fool who combines humor and wisdom in his food talk, Kent may be invoking fish’s special significance for the early modern English. One of the most notable designations of fish in this period was its prominence on fasting days. As noted by Thirsk:

Compulsory fish days were once a routine, taken for granted by our forebears throughout the Middle Ages until the mid-seventeenth century. . . . As Thomas Cogan affirmed in 1584, half of every year in his lifetime was taken up with eating fish. Friday and Saturday were fish days until the late Middle Ages; Saturday was reintroduced by Parliament in 1548, and Wednesday was added in 1563 by Elizabeth. (265)

These three days of obligatory fish eating remained “in force until the rules were abolished under the Commonwealth as a Popish observance” (159-60). Fish carried connotations of religious observance, aestheticism and denial. Furthermore, fish was a more abundant and affordable source of protein than meat, and thus was held in contrast to “flesh” or meat, the food of the upper classes. Thereby, eating fish also carried the association of lower class. Because fish-eating had these varied associations, critics have contested opinions about Kent's phrase “to eat no fish.” Foakes says that Kent "may be signaling that he is a proper man, and eats only meat (so Capell); or that he is a
Protestant, and does not fast on Fridays (so Warburton); or that he has nothing to do with women (so Cam), or all of these things” (193). In the context of the patterns already established by the Fool's food language, that of labeling Goneril and Regan as “consumers,” Kent, like Cordelia, differentiates himself from this label. In saying he does not eat fish, he presumably eats other things, but he casts himself in his language as a non-consumer and places himself through his eating habits into association with Lear and Cordelia. Kent, who was banished for speaking in a direct reprimand, can now be seen in a situation similar to the Fool. In a realm where the King believes more in facades than truths, characters loyal to him must both disguise who they are (banished noblemen) and reveal what they are (loyal supporters). While the the Fool uses tales and riddles of food imagery, Kent speaks of food in direct statements. Like the Fool, however, Kent comes to talk about food as a successful method of conveying truths, protecting the king, and hiding under facades accepted by the King.

Along with using diet to express his own disguised identity once he turns fool, Kent also uses diet to identify others. When Oswald asks Kent, “What does thou know me for?” (2.2.13), Kent responds with a list of insults. Included among them is a reference to eating habits: “A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud shallow, beggarly . . . knave, beggar, coward, pander and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch” (2.2.14-21, emphasis added). The food reference, “eater of broken meats,” is just one among many methods by which Kent identifies Oswald’s heinous character. To be an “eater of broken meats” is an ambiguous designation. The OED recognizes a use of “broken” the late fourteenth through late nineteenth centuries to refer to “broken bread, meat, victuals, etc.: fragments of food left after a meal” (1.b). The phrase reflects
Oswald's debased character: it brings to mind the sense that Oswald eats the leftovers handed down by his mistress. He is an opportunis and his greedy attitude as a servant contrasts to Kent's loyal and unselfish one. Like Goneril's appetite as figured in the Fool's metaphors, Oswald’s metaphoric consumption of meat described in Kent's passage suggests that he lusts after unmerited power, eats cast-off scraps of those in power, and exploits power that was ill-gotten and is now ill-used.

Like Kent, Edgar debases himself after his banishment from the kingdom and returns, lowly but wiser, in a disguise that allows him to take care of his father in need. Like Kent’s disguise as a servant, Edgar's disguise allows him to speak truths, and he uses this language of food to establish his new identity as a madman. In accordance with the paradox of the wise fool, Edgar, as heir to Gloucester, was foolish in that he was too credulous. Now, as a mad beggar, he is wiser in that he is knowledgeable about evil, as his talk reveals. Keen to cast off all accouterments of a noble identity—clothes, speech, and, most of all, diet—Edgar forms himself in to “Tom O’ Bedlam.” As soon as his father, Gloucester, asks the disguised Edgar who he is, Edgar calls himself “Poor Tom.” He offers proof of his outlandish identity through food, a long, detailed list of disgusting new dietary preferences that would surely not be the meals of a nobleman's son:

_Gloucester_: What are you there? Your names?

_Edgar_: Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water --; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cowdung for salads; swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; . . .
But Mice and rats and such small deer
Have been Tom's food for seven long year. (3.4.125-35)

The long list of repulsive meals and the self-identification through these eating habits operate to secure the nobleman Edgar's disguised identity as the crazy Tom O’ Bedlam. His list includes specifically the foodstuffs that the early moderns would have recognized immediately as “condemned foods,” as Albala explains:

There were few foods condemned outright according to this theory. But the few positively harmful foods were usually those difficult to categorize as flesh, fish, or fruit. . . . Frogs were a universally condemned food, again partly because they were so difficult to categorize. . . . Any food raised in an unwholesome atmosphere was equally suspect: waterfowl that feed on muck in stagnant pools, vegetables grown in marshy malarial fens. . . . unhappy animals wallowing in their own filth. The defects of the environment and fodder would eventually be passed onto whomever ate such foods. (221)

Edgar’s claim to consume the animals that live in the “unwholesome atmospheres,” and his more disgusting claims to eat filth itself—the stagnant “green mantle” and the “cowdung”—operate to secure his station as a beggar and turn himself into the condemned outcast. Albala adds that “another simpler way of thinking about food might be called the doctrine of similarities. Following its logic, the characteristics of any given food, usually an animal, are directly transferred into the consumer. You literally become what you eat” (222). Edgar relies on disgusting foods because he wishes to transform himself from the son of a nobleman into a Poor Tom before his father’s, and our, eyes. Through his eating habits, he presents himself as a pathetic, crazy, filthy fool, and his
status as an outcast is confirmed by the diet he describes. Like Kent, Poor Tom relies upon food to establish a disguised identity in order to remain a loyal caretaker of the father he loves; like the Fool, his alimentary language provides commentary on the actions of the play through metaphor in the voice of a mad malcontent.

_Food as Reflection, Revelation, and Prediction_

When speaking of what he eats, Edgard uses diet as a means of establishing identity; when speaking of what is eating him, however, Edgar uses food language for another means. His images of fiendish consumers operates to reveal his understanding of evil and his response to it. When speaking in the hovel as Poor Tom, Edgar concocts images of various devils within him, speaking to him and eating him:

Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness. Pray, innocent, and beware the foul fiend. . . .

The foul fiend bites my back. (3.6.6-8,17)

Foakes explains that the references in Poor Tom's speech combine Harsnett's devils, “Nero” and “Fratetto,” the classical mythological river Styx (the lake of darkness), and Chaucer's fisherman "Nero" from the Monk's tale (287). Foakes deems the hodgepodge “Poor Tom's nonsense” (287). However, when the alimentary imagery of the passage is examined in the context of the play, then the “nonsense” turns out to be good sense. The “foul fiend” who “bites” Edgar's back might conceivably be understood to refer to his own brother, Edmund. Edmund attempts to turn Gloucester against his son Edgar so that Edmund, though a bastard, can usurp, and claim the noble title and inheritance. Edgar’s
new understanding of the presence of evil is expressed through the language of eating, specifically with Edmund as the consumer and Edgar as the prey, a perception analogous to Goneril and Reagan, who prey on their family out of a greed for power. The picture of Edmund as feeding fiend is new among alimentary images. While the Fool has heretofore compared the daughters' gluttony to animals, the connection between eating and hell established here by Edgar in reference to his brother is another variation on the eating motif. This analogy between eating and hell is further elaborated by Lear in references to his daughters, and is made more explicit in subsequent passages.

Edgar's talk of devils hungry for food continues when he remarks, “The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale. Hoppendance cries in Tom's belly for two white herring. Croak not, black angel, I have no food for thee” (3.6.29-32). The talk of hearing the voices of fiends in the stomach cannot be dismissed as simply part of Edgar's disguise as a madman. The foodstuffs and eating images carry important symbolic revelations. While “white fish” literally indicates “fresh, or salted but unsmoked” (Foakes 289), the “white herring” is clearly being symbolically contrasted in color with the “black angel” to indicate a metaphoric battle between good and evil. The nightingale, the “black” angel, and Hoppendance (from Harsnett where this devil's name is “Hoberdidance’) all refer to the fiend, who wants to consume the “two white herring.” Edgar, however, says he has “no food.” His stance of denying food to the black angel indicates that he does not allow the voices of appetite to influence or control him. Further, it indicates that he wants no part in the group of consumers (Goneril, Regan, Edmund), nor will he become a consumer or devourer himself. The talk of hungry devils may appear as nonsense, a sure means of disguising Edgar as a crazy Tom O' Bedlam,
but when placed in the context of established image patterns, the alimentary imagery carries symbolic significance. The food and eating language affirms Edgar’s loyalty to Lear, reveals his knowledge of the evil characters’ intentions, and is based on the equation of food consumers with betayers of social norms that the Fool has been identifying all along.

Another of Edgar's passages that features consumers as betayers shifts away from the metaphor of hungry fiends to a more agrarian one of hungry sheep in the corn. Such images reflect not his brother's evil nature, but the natures of Goneril, Regan, and the king. More in the manner of the Fool's riddle talk, the passage carries a lesson. Directing his speech at Lear, Edgar warns him cryptically:

Let us deal justly.
Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?
Thy sheep be in the corn;
And for one blast of thy minikin mouth
Thy sheep shall take no harm.
Purr, the cat is grey. (3.6.40-45)

The passage starts with contextually accurate response, but then sweeps to shepherds and sheep, and, perhaps as a means to deter discovery, ends with cat sounds. Edgar's metaphoric images, like the Fool's, are disjointed and the talk seems humorously out of context: When Lear calls for a mock trial in the hovel, and hears Poor Tom talk of sheep, corn, and cats, implications get lost, and the odd metaphors secure Tom's identity as a crazy man. The editor, Foakes, seems to succumb to Edgar's clever disguise and initially overlooks any deeper significance of the verses; he calls the above “nonsense verses” and
claims them void of any “obvious application” (289).

Yet, Foakes' explanation of the passage indicates that Edgar's passage of grazing sheep does have significance for the play when interpreted metaphorically: “[Edgar] may be glancing at Lear as a ruler (shepherd) whose subjects have gone astray. . . . The sleeping shepherd has allowed his sheep to trespass into the cornfield, where they can get bloated and die, but he can summon them back with one shrill cry” (289). When we see the negligent shepherd as a symbol for Lear, and the chomping sheep as symbols of Goneril and Regan, then a wise lesson emerges. Lear has let his children roam too free and they will subsequently give in to appetites of all sorts and gorge themselves until they take away sustenance from others and, eventually, glut themselves to death.

While the threat of the daughters' destruction of the kingdom through metaphors of consumption has been the Fool's refrain throughout, Edgar displays a more optimistic outlook: the sheep are grazing, their nature is one of consumption, he admits, but Edgar conveys that Lear is in charge. Lear, as their shepherd, still retains the ability to rein them in, if he would just, so to speak, “blow the whistle” on their misbehavior. Edgar also demonstrates concern for the daughters, wishing that they “take no harm.” Edgar blames both spoiling parent and spoiled children, but he ultimately believes that a reversal is possible.

An additional part of Edgar’s optimistic outlook derives from his vision of a source of sustenance—corn. While the Fool's metaphors contain only the eaters and the eaten, the consumers and the starved, Edgar provides an alternative vision: a picture of “corn” which provides nourishing food—a picture of food and eating where everybody can eat, no one need starve, and feasting can be done without anybody having to prey
upon another.

The idea that the corn stands as a symbol of hope for the kingdom is supported later on when Cordelia, finding her crazed father lost in a cornfield, says:

Alack, 'tis he. Why he was met even now
As mad as the vexed sea. . .
Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,
With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers
Darnel and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn. (4.4.1-6)

Cordelia's vision, like Edgar's, speaks of a destructive force—the weeds, symbolic of her sisters—threatening to choke and destroy the sustenance, but, again, her vision encompasses the optimistic belief in the hopeful recourse: a “high-grown field” (4.4.7) of “sustaining corn.” Cordelia understands the importance of the corn as sustenance for all, while Edgar's concern was more for the gorging sheep. Nevertheless, it seems that Edgar and Cordelia both understand the needs of the kingdom, the need to eat and satiate appetites of all sorts, but also the need of a strong king to moderate that eating and maintain a necessary balance between production and consumption. Edgar and Cordelia, as fool figures, invoke alimentary language in manners similar to the Fool, but their metaphors illustrate a more optimistic belief that Lear has retained the power to herd in his too-hungry sheep and save the kingdom with the remaining resources. And such optimism is another aspect of folly.

*The King's Wise Foolishness Expressed in Food Language*
Unfortunately, that optimistic possibility insinuated by Edgar and Cordelia does not take place within the bounds of the play's events. While peace and prosperity may be established eventually, the play ends with starvation, suffering, and consumption. Lear, as Kent and Edgar have done, will turn into yet another variation of the fool figure. His literal foolishness arises from an impoverished knowledge of himself and his daughters’ true natures that leads him rashly to bequeath his power to Goneril and Regan. As they deny him his kingly prerogatives, he becomes a more debased and impotent figure. Like the other fool variations, his fall correlates with a growing enlightenment, and he comes to express his newfound wisdom in gustatory images. Gradually, Lear takes on a madness of which he and others are aware, though, unlike the other fool variations, his transformation into a foolish figure is not an intention nor a disguise, and not something he can cast off by the play’s end.

Before examining Lear’s gustatory language that marks his transition into fool, it is important to note that when the Fool disappears from the play, the other characters begin to use images of food in his place. The food imagery used to designate Lear then emphasizes Lear’s impotence through images of starvation that function not only in metaphorical terms, but also in reflection of actual conditions. One of the king's knights comments that Lear's hovel experience takes place upon “This night wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch, / The lion and the belly-pinched wolf” (3.1.12-13). The message echoes the Fool’s images. Bears, lions, and wolves are traditionally the kings of the beast who, like Lear, have fallen in status into positions of starvation due to voracious offspring who have sucked them dry. Starving and “couching” show the animals in positions of impotence, in accordance with the Fool's reference. The image also points to
the culpability of the parents. If the starvation is the sad result of and voracious children, the parent is culpable for allowing it, for overfeeding them at the parents' own expense, much like the cuckoo.

In the pattern of the fool figures who use gustatory language to convey new understanding, Lear too becomes wiser in his fallen status and voices his knowledge in terms of food. Banished from his daughters’ homes and taking shelter in a hovel, he keeps company with fools. In his beggarly condition, he reaches the lowest status in terms of social hierarchy, but in the inverted fashion typical of the play, he reaches a higher level in terms of social understanding and self-enlightenment. One enlightened quality he develops through his beggarly condition is compassion for those who suffer his plight of homelessness in the storm. Like the other fool variations, it is in his debased condition that he expresses an awareness of the suffering of others and a wish to finally submit to a caretaking position and serve the “wretches”:

*Lear*: Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides. . .
defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this. . .
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just (3.4.28-36)

King Lear wishes not to horde his wealth, but to distribute it, thus contrasting himself
from the all-consumptive appetites of Goneril and Regan and re-aligning himself with the association of food supply and distribution of Cordelia. Now that Lear's power has been divided, denied, and consumed, he has developed the inner attributes of a great king—the compassion and wherewithal to become aware of the needs of his kingdom. While it may be too late to exercise power and save a kingdom, his own path to self-improvement and enlightenment was brought about in part by a changing relationship to food—a change from feaster to beggar—and such change in eating status, and thus in social status, will redeem his character.

If it has taken starvation, along with abuse, abandonment, and a hovel, to enlighten the king about the lowest classes of his kingdom, these have also brought enlightenment about the true natures of his daughters. Once they used dramatic professions of love to trick him into giving away his power, but Lear has learned of their duplicitous natures. Lear demonstrates his awareness by copying the Fool's talk of consumption to describe his daughters' natures. He refers to Goneril and Regan as “sharp-toothed” vultures (2.2.323) and “pelican daughters” (3.4.74).8

Lear as fool will shift the metaphorical description of his daughters from predatory animal to even more debased imagery in the language of food. When Lear thinks of the daughters' show of ingratitude and their exploitation of his generosity, he invokes the metaphor of a single body feeding upon itself. This recalls the image of

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8 Lear’s use of animal counterparts to symbolize his daughters’ appetites are taken up by other characters. Kent calls them “dog-hearted daughters” who “sting / His mind so venomously” (4.3.46-47). Gloucester says to Regan that he “would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his eyes; nor thy fierce sister / In his annoited flesh stick boarish fangs” (3.7.56-57). And Albany calls his wife and her sister “Tigers, not daughters” who “perforce prey on” (4.2.41) humanity like “monsters of the deep” (4.2.50-51). The metaphors of ravenous animals, initiated by the Fool, are taken up as a chorus by other characters. Such has been exhaustively documented.
cannibalism presented earlier in the Fool’s cannibalistic cuckoo passage, but brought to a new extreme. Cannibalism is even more horrific when the consumed is both self and other. Lear remarks:

This tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else,
Save what beats there, filial ingratitude.
Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to it? (3.4.12-16)

The daughters’ ravenous nature has resulted in their eating the hand that gave them the crown. They eat with ferocity; the mouth is engaged in vicious “tear[ing]”. While the metaphor of such hungry children echoes the cuckoo cannibalizing its parent, Lear’s metaphor suggests a punishment the Fool never foresaw. If Lear and his daughters are seen as parts of the same body, then in consuming their father (the hand) the daughters will destroy themselves. Lear forecasts the downfall of both his daughters and himself through the alimentary metaphors.

The identification of Goneril and Regan as “this mouth” is of even greater significance than mere body part; through this image, Lear shifts the association of his daughters from animals to fiends. The mouth, deemed the “giant maw” by Spencer, was the common name for Hell in the early modern period. Mouths symbolize consumption without production; appetite without reason or love. In this, Lear calls his own daughters not just animals, but devils. To shift the metaphor of the daughters’ appetites from one of beastliness to one of fiendishness moves them down lower on the moral spectrum. It recalls the former passage where Edgar describes Edmund as the hungry fiend biting his
back. Consumption that destroys its family, and itself, is finally pictured as so horrific as to be part of hell itself.

In a subsequent passage, Lear makes this implication of consumption as the evil of hell explicit:

The fitchew, nor the soiled horse, goes to 't with a more riotous appetite. Down from the waist they are centaurs, they women all above. But to the girdle do the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiend's: there's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption! (4.6.120-125)

Lear’s enlightenment also climaxes at this point. He recognizes, presumably without full knowledge of their rendezvous with Edmund, that his daughters are creatures of all appetites—for sex, for power, and for food. He has become like the Fool who knows without seeing or hearing.

The metaphors of eating that the King uses reflect both his craziness and voice his enlightened perceptions. At one point, he says, “We'll go to supper in the morning” (3.6.81). He is obviously aware of the need to consume and hungry for the dinner denied to him the night before. Yet, he has totally lost his sense of time and is confused about the time of day and the appropriate meal. Lear becomes so delusional at the end as to believe he sees a non-existant mouse and the cheese to feed it with: Look, look, a mouse: / peace, peace, this piece of toasted cheese will do ‘it” (4.6.88-89). His vision is hallucinatory, but in desiring to give the mouse sustenance, Lear acts like a king by showing care for the least of his subjects. It is appropriate that, much like frogs and eels were associated with
condemned persons, cheese was the food associated with fools. In the play, as in the line, it seems all talk of peace turns into foolishness since the pun is that the kingdom is left not in peace, but in pieces like the cheese of the mouse.

Those characters who become debased in various ways find the Fool's food language useful and make it a dominant motif of the play. The discussion of food, because it has the capacity to come across as nonsense, madness, and delusion, works to solidify the characters' new identities as a servant (Kent), madman (Edgar), or veritable fool (King Lear). At the same time, the language of food is a useful linguistic device to convey the various fool figures' newfound wisdom. These characters echo the Fool's previously established positioning of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund as consumers and Lear as beggar and prey. In their transition between wisdom and foolishness, they express food metaphorically to establish their enlightened awareness of reality. Simultaneously, the misinterpretation of their references establishes the foolishness of the listeners.

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According to Francisco Márquez Villanueva, cheese is considered as the food most appropriate and adequate for the fool, as he says, “El queso se consideraba como alimento más propio y adecuado para el loco” (93).
CONCLUSION

Although the king was promised rescue from starvation together with deliverance
to “where food and fire were ready,” the promise of food—and the promise of social
recovery it symbolizes—goes unfulfilled. By the end of the play, the daughters' appetites
have exhausted themselves, destroying others as well as themselves, as Lear predicted.
Regan poisons Goneril; Goneril kills herself, Edmund confesses all, but only after it is
too late to save the hanged Cordelia, and Lear dies, feeling the sorrow of complete loss.
According to the logic of food metaphors, starvation brings self-enlightenment, while
unbound appetites lead to the destruction of self, family, and kingdom. The alternative to
the extremes of starvation and consumption is the idealvision of “sustaining corn,” which,
although suggested, is never realized

Insofar as the food chain instantiates the power dynamics of the play, each
caracter’s relationship to food—consumption, deprivation, or production—indicates his
or her true nature. Further, metaphors of starvation prophesy Lear's loss of power as king
and man. The alimentary images are a coded language of nonsense that encompass the
vast themes of foolishness and wisdom, gender roles, and power plays. They form a
textual backbone, while functioning like a prism refracting the most crucial conflicts in
the play. Lowly, nonsensical, and wise, the Fool's and fool figures' alimentary imagery
offers an avenue, heretofore unexplored, of the ways of reading and interpreting King
Lear.
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