

---

## Introduction

### Food with Many Layers

Chih-Hsin Lin

When the board members of the Taiwan Association of Classical, Medieval and Renaissance Studies (TACMRS) chose “Food: Sacrificial, Spiritual, and Secular” as the conference theme of our Fourteenth International Conference, we were hoping to offer an interdisciplinary banquet for scholars of pre-modern studies in Taiwan and abroad. The conference was held on Oct. 23rd and 24th, 2020 and attracted historians, literary scholars, theologians, and art historians, with three keynote speakers and thirty-two presenters from nine different countries, including sixteen online presentations. As we enjoyed this banquet with dishes of such a wide range of themes, methodologies, and disciplines, we were able to enjoy nourishment across cultures, times, and geographical barriers. It seemed that we were able to transcend our own physical existence for a moment through such a banquet, and hopefully this special issue, with a display of some sample dishes, will do the same for its readers.

In the two perspective essays, both keynote speakers show that food always carried a cultural significance. Prof. Emily Gowers points out that even the great Roman Empire pondered upon what kind of food could best represent and shape its cultural identity. She examines Apicius’s *The Art of Cooking* (*De Arte Coquinaria*) to explain how Romans were “[s]plit between simplicity and complexity, nature and art, speed and leisure, Rome and home” (115) when trying to keep a balance between “the moralizing [impulse], expressed in the sumptuary laws” and “the sense that having a cook and being interested in food was to be wired up to the world, to be a full human being, to give Rome a place on the

---

*Ex-position*, Issue No. 45, June 2021 | National Taiwan University  
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.202106\_(45).0001

**Chih-Hsin LIN**, Associate Professor, Department of English, National Chengchi University, Taiwan

cultural map” (107).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, with information from 150 cookbook manuscripts, Prof. Paul Freeman demonstrates the effort of the medieval aristocracy to build prestige with a food aesthetics that prefers “[s]urprise, novelty, and beauty” to “simplicity or naturalness” (91). He explains their preference for the syntactic cuisine, in which “meat was often highly processed . . . to make the result blend better with sauces” (91), using as examples recipes for lamprey with its blood as the sauce and recipes for peacock with its tail as part of the dish for decoration.

Such an awareness that our physical appetite leads us to something beyond our physical existence is prominent in both the Eastern and Western cultures. In the Chinese culture, when Kao Tzu states that “[a]ppetite for food and sex is nature” and argues that a sense of benevolence is internal and does not indicate the goodness of human nature while a sense of rightness is external (*Mencius* VI.4), Mencius replies that when “a basketful of rice and a bowlful of soup . . . are given after being trampled upon, even a beggar would not accept them” (*Mencius* VI.10). Here Mencius shows that food, as offered and consumed by human beings, triggers our internal sense of rightness, and that our acceptance or rejection of it indicates the existence of such a moral and ethical sense. Around the same period, in the West, Aristotle proposes in *Metaphysics* that “the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of wish”: he argues here that “desire is consequent on opinion rather than opinion on desire” (XII.vii.1072a, 1694). That is, he believes that “thinking is the starting point” of any kind of desire while “thought is moved by the object of thought” (XII.vii.1072a, 1694). For Aristotle, appetite for food or any other desire indicates that human beings will always be drawn toward the unmoved mover and thus brings us to a metaphysical understanding of our motivations. Even the modern psychologist Abraham H. Maslow, who defines food as a physiological need, emphasizes that “the person who thinks he is hungry may actually be seeking more for comfort, or dependence, than for vitamins or proteins” (375). It seems that our appetite for food can either be a metaphor that helps us understand our moral, ethical, and existential nature or carries the metaphysical goal of providing us with a path to experience such nature. All the essays in this special issue demonstrate how food is presented in pre-modern Western texts with such multiple layers of significance.

As a metaphor, the consumption of food can be used to examine how human beings understand the reception and formation of knowledge as a process to shape one’s sense of existence. David Ruzicka’s study of Dante’s metaphors of nutrition in *Inferno* I suggests such a metaphorical connection between food and knowledge

---

<sup>1</sup> The page references to articles featured in this issue are given in parentheses.

in literature. He dwells on the meaning of the symbol *Veltro*, the hound that is prophesied to defeat the she-wolf, a symbol of cupidity, and examines how sinners in the inferno are eaten without nourishment while the saints in the purgatory and paradise grow with nourishment. He then explains that for Dante, as discussed in *Convivio (The Banquet)*, the desire for knowledge, for a vision of God, unlike other kinds of appetites, helps human beings grow and that “the force that will eventually triumph over the wolf is indeed the poem itself, through which the reader will learn to cultivate a philosophical appetite” (17). The metaphor here both helps clarify the importance of an intellectual/spiritual pursuit with the help of literature and shows the danger of physical appetites.

Such metaphors may not simply be a literary expression for clarity or liveliness; they may exist because food, as discussed in pre-modern literature, history, and theology, always carries social or spiritual significance. In Denise Ming-yueh Wang’s essay on the Cook in *The Canterbury Tales*, she recognizes the possible influence of gluttony satire and literature of sin on the descriptions of the stale food the Cook prepares and the “mormal” on his shin, but she argues that the tradition does not “sufficiently account[] for the meaning and force that Chaucer gives to the Cook’s breach of trust” (34). She dwells on the word “uncleanliness” to explain how “[t]he concern with food safety and the fear for food fraud . . . reflect the working lives of victuallers in Chaucer’s London” and “the pilgrims’ earthly life in a fallen society” (39). The mormal on the shin of the cook as analyzed here not only reflects the lack of his work ethics but also threatens “the public health of the community” (42). Food served then implicitly suggests the social and moral status of the preparer and the (ill) health of society, even when described literally.

Such metaphors may also be developed over time. In her essay “Honey, Bees, and Chastity,” Hiu Ki Chan examines several monastic texts to show the development of the apian metaphor, including the accounts of Anthony’s and Ambrose’s lives and discussions of virginity by Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Maximus of Turin, Venantius Fortunatus, and Aldhelm of Malmesbury. She finds that the apian metaphor was originally used to illustrate “passive sexual abstinence” (50) or the pursuit of virtues through an ascetic life (51), but it later became specifically a metaphor for more “active intellectual pursuits” (50), helping redefine chastity as the “faithfulness in biblical studies and the transmission of an orthodox monastic tradition” (60). In a sense, she explores a metaphysical understanding of the metaphor as established by Augustine, who sees bees as well as all insects and animals as “a thing (*res*) which itself is an allegory of the mystery of virginity,” not merely “an example to imitate” (54) or a didactic tool.

Such a metaphysical understanding of food is the focus of Emanuele Angiola's study of "Christian Sacraments as the Fulfillment of Human Experience." Angiola studies Joseph Ratzinger's treatise on sacraments and tries to establish an anthropological foundation for them, especially for the Eucharist. He cites Ratzinger to argue that "signs or symbols do more than *express* the structure of reality; they *are* its structure" (75). He argues that the sacraments as a sign illustrate that "the material dimension must mediate a human's spiritual experience" (76): he believes that sacraments are "specific acts that perpetuate the mission of Christ among humankind" throughout history (79), and that "the eschatological banquet . . . brings joy and strength into the present life" (84) as "it shows us how all materiality and history can be sanctified" (86). In this context, food can be a mirror used to understand human nature with its body and spirit, as it carries such mysterious power to enter as well as transcend history and physical existence. Or, perhaps it is in human nature to find metaphysical significance for physical existence, to desire both the physical in the spiritual and the spiritual in the physical, with food being the center of our physical experience.

As the special issue is being published, the Covid-19 pandemic has been confining most people in Taiwan to their dwellings and threatening their lives and livelihood. Banquets are banned, and even family gatherings for the Dragon Boat Festival are discouraged. The traditional market where people might have developed cross-generation relationships through food suddenly becomes a dangerous place. However, many people still find it necessary to go to the market fully-masked or deliver food to the doorstep of their loved ones, in person or through food-delivery services. More than ever, people start to realize that food as a physiological need forces us to keep in contact with people even during the pandemic, that the food we eat and cook decides our daily routine and shape our cultural identity, and that eating with family and friends do help bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment. If the pandemic has somehow diminished the complex roles food plays in our lives, hopefully this special issue can be digested to provide us with intellectual nourishment and build for us intellectual connections, or, even better, bring us spiritual energy and health despite our physical confinement during the pandemic. If this wish comes true, if the magic of food works again, we can show our great gratitude to all the chefs who make the Conference and the special issue not just a meal but a banquet that helps us transcend our physical and cultural limitations.

## WORKS CITED

- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Trans. W. D. Ross. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Vol. 2. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984. 1552-1728. Bollingen Series LXXI.
- Maslow, Abraham H. "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review* 50.4 (1943): 370-96. *EBSCOhost*. Web. Accessed 12 June 2021.
- Mencius. *Mencius: A Bilingual Edition*. Trans. D. C. Lau. Rev. ed. Hong Kong: Chinese UP, 2003.

**Introduction  
to Feature Topic**