The Dramatic Transformation of Food in Tristan L'Hermite's Le Parasite

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Tristan l'Hermite's Le Parasite, written in 1653, was an immediate and enduring success. This, his last play, was unlike anything he had produced earlier. While the subject was not original (it is based on a 1585 Italian play entitled Angelica by Fabrizio de Fornaris), Tristan's treatment of the subject was indeed innovative. The figure of the Parasite had fallen out of favor in the 1630s and had largely disappeared from the stage by the time Tristan wrote this play, so it was incumbent upon the playwright to do something innovative with the traditional comic figure. Indeed, it is precisely in the treatment of food - so closely tied to the parasite - that this comedy, which Claude Abraham calls "a gigantic burlesque feast" (Tristan 115), breaks new ground.

Fripesauces, the parasite of the title, incorporates all of the traditional elements of the comic figure: an obsession with food, extended enumerations of what he has eaten or longs to eat, a projection of his own fixation onto everyone around him, and a happy ending, which in this case includes not only the prospect of a huge feast, but also the keys to the larder and wine cellar. The play combines a standard Italian Renaissance plot with a group of rather dated stock characters: the bragadoccio Capitan and his valet, the female servant Phénice,¹ as well as of course the parasite Fripesauces. The young lovers seek to overcome the obstacles separating them by having the young man, Lisandre, pretend to be his beloved Lucinde's long-lost brother, who was carried off by pirates at the age of two. The stock characters operate on the margins of the central plot, abetting and thwarting the young lovers. However, by every quantifiable measure, the play belongs to Fripesauces: he

¹ Roger Guichemerre says that in Le Parasite, "les personnages sont ou bien des caractères conventionnels - les amoureux, les pères - ou bien des types traditionnels un peu démodés - la nourrice, le capitaine, le parasite" ("Lyrisme" 75).
appears in every act and in the largest number of scenes; he has the largest speaking role – over a quarter of the entire play – and is onstage far more than anyone else.2

Structuring a play around a dated parasite figure is a risky dramatic strategy: Guichemerre notes that the repetition typical of the parasite and his activities (always hungry, always enumerating food) courts boredom in the spectator (Comédie 126). Furthermore, the parasite himself is dramatically problematic, as he is a figure of immobility and dependence, of ingestion and consumption. Tristan succeeds, however, in making this potentially monotonous subject central and indeed dramatic. Here food does not pass quietly from host to parasite, but explodes in numerous directions. Fripesauces’s identification with food is contagious and spreads outwards to other characters, in particular to the Capitan. This explosion of food works to transform objects and people into food, while at the same time food itself is transformed into something else in a comic metonymic string encompassing medicine, animals, sexual desire, bodily functions, and even violence. It is this transformational power of food in Le Parasite that I propose to explore.

Fripesauces and his body provide the obvious starting point. His capacity for food and drink is of course prodigious. In his self-description, Fripesauces turns himself into a kind of automatic eating machine: "Ma bouche à mon resveil s’ouure deuant mes yeux" (v. 60).3 Speaking to his own intestines, he blurs the distinction between his body as a consumer of food and the food consumed: "Boyaux lâches & plats, vous deuindrez rondins;/Je m’en vay vous remplir comme de vrais boudins" (vv. 1747–48). His intestines are thus to be transformed into comestibles. Descriptions of his hunger go well beyond colorful images of emptiness: in a different scene Fripesauces transforms the same "boyaux" into a habitat for hungry animals: "plus de deux millions/De chiens, de rats, de loups, & de lions,/Qui fut fait de la peau d’un gras cochon de laïct," (v. 110). Medicine does not take the same trajectory as food: it will cause Fripesauces to "aller, par estre coeffe selon ma fantaisie," (v. 87–90). Images of animals are frequent in this play, but nowhere else does the verbal extravagance reach such a level. His hunger itself has body parts (dents, griffes).

In the first scene in which he appears (I, 3), not only does Fripesauces repeatedly turn the conversation to food and away from Phénice’s efforts to help her mistress, but more surprisingly, he turns Phénice herself into food. He constructs a blason in which he imagines transforming parts of her face into edibles: her nose, for instance, might be a calf’s foot and her eyes, little pâtés. Dorothée Scholl states that Fripesauces’s obsession with food “va ici jusqu’au fantasme anthropophage” (64). At another point, Fripesauces turns the gifts that the Capitan promised him in exchange for his aid into food. This begins as a misunderstanding; the first object mentioned is a pot which the Capitan understands to be a kind of helmet. Fripesauces, of course, thinks of a receptacle for food. But from there Fripesauces takes off with two other objects offered by the Capitan, a “Corselet” (v. 343) and a “coutelas” (v. 344), into far more fanciful transformations involving a “gras cochon de laïct” (v. 348) and wine.

The desire for food tracks verbally from the food itself to the consequences of its absence, to ingestion, and also touches on medicine and evacuation. Through varied strings of associations, the spectator is led out from the central point of food (and drink)4 to surprisingly far-flung regions. In Fripesauces’s first scene (I, 3), the parasite equates his hunger with illness, and points to a problematic relationship between food and medicine. He confuses the name “Hipocrate”, the famous doctor, with “hipocras”, a delicious drink made with wine (v. 101). Then Fripesauces speaks of swallowing a hundred medicinal herbs and a hundred roots, the verb being one shared with the consumption of food. But the ingestion of medicine is not limited to the mouth, as Fripesauces suggests when he speaks of having “Receu vingt lauemens, humé vingt medicences” (v. 110). And medicine does not take the same trajectory as food: it will cause Fripesauces to “aller, & par haut & par bas” (v. 111), and thus provide little satisfaction. The subject of excrement gets disquietingly close to the mouth when Fripesauces discusses the doctor whom he compared to Hippocrates: this man of medicine inspects his patients’ feces and “Couche souvent du nez au boullet d’vn bassin” (v. 104).

The repeated associations with violence constitute perhaps the most surprising transformations of food. In describing the preparations for the feast that Fripesauces expects from Lisandre if his plan succeeds, the parasite

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2 Fripesauces is on stage for 19 of the 31 scenes (Phénice is next with 14 scenes); only Fripesauces and the Capitan are on stage in all five acts; Fripesauces speaks over 457 lines (out of a total of 1750), while the Capitan, in second place, has nearly 265. Finally, Fripesauces is onstage for 1199 lines, with Phénice trailing behind him with 769.

3 All citations are taken from Jacques Madeleine’s edition of Le Parasite.

4 le ne voudrois m’armer qu’auc de corset
Qui fut fait de la peau d’vn gras cochon de laïct,
Et pour estre coeffe selon ma fantasie,
le voudrois pour mon pot, vnit pot de mauoiuse;
l’en remplieros vnit verre aussi long que mon bras,
Qui pour fendre les airs seroit mon coutelas. vv. 347–52

5 Fripesauces seems equally enamored of both. Food, however, lends itself more readily to colorful transformations in the play.
speaks in terms of a bloody massacre: “Il faut que le cousteau, s’escrimant en
amy,/Fasse en la basse cour la saint Barthelemy” (vv. 625–26). This butchery
will involve assaulting not only the henhouse, but caskets of wine as well.
The disproportion between Saint Barthélemy and dinner, as well as the
disjunction between stabbing the living and the inanimate are dizzying.
Furthermore, the parasite transforms food into an agent of violence: addressing
a list of different kinds of food that he longs for, Fripesauces concludes:
“Puissez-vous estrangler ceux qui m’en ont sevré” (v. 1398). As we noted
earlier, one of the directions in which food radiates throughout the play is
from character to character. Here the violent potential of food extends first to
Lisandre. Eager to confront his rival, the Capitan, the young man proclaims:
“le m’en vay le chercher pour luy manger le cœur” (v. 530). Later in a violent
diatribe against Fripesauces, whom he believes to have betrayed his plans
to the Capitan, the same Lisandre details the damage he intends to do to a
series of body parts belonging to the parasite, and concludes by transforming
Fripesauces into an object that is being prepared for consumption: “le veux
[...]/Le letter à vau l’eau, le bouillir, le griller” (vv. 577–78). Phénice as well
brings together food and violence, in her case in the form of the receptacles
and utensils associated with food and its preparation. She threatens Lucile,
Lisandre’s father, with “vn pot de marmelade” (v. 964) when he knocks on
the door looking for his son, and plans a similar attack should Alcidor,
the long-lost father of Lucinde, attempt to enter the house: “Ile aura sur le
corps marmite & cremeniere/[...]/Il seroit affeuble d’vn couvercle de pot;/le
luy ferois voler toutes les vestenclles” (vv. 1304–07). Fripesauces uses similar
painful imagery to describe being banished: “on m’a casé comme vn pot de
fayence” (v. 1454).

Food is often personified, as when Fripesauces launches into an extended
farewell speech to all the food he is leaving behind when Manille banishes him
from the house in which he has been a parasite for over six years: “Adieu coquhs rotis, adieu chapons bardez,/Adieu petits dindons, tant
bardez que lardez” (vv. 1393–94), and so forth. Claude Abraham calls this
“a direct parody of the lovers’ farewell, in which the swain was expected to
bid farewell to each aspect of the woman’s blason” (Tristan 118). Food is thus
transformed into the beloved.

It is normal to transform animals into food, but here Fripesauces does not
allow the transformation to occur through the intermediate steps of
killing and cooking; he is so hungry that he “ne fait[il que gober les mouches
en volant” (v. 1420). The various strands of transformation between food,
animals, and people may become confused: Fripesauces sees the Capitan
and says: “Qu’il a l’estomac haut, que n’est-il vn coq d’Inde! /le l’irois at­
taquer encor qu’il fut bardé” (vv. 286–87), suggesting a resemblance to an
animal that he might assault in order to eat.6 In the frenetic exuberance
of transformation, Tristan l’Hermite renews the traditional theme of food,
makes it especially comic, and allows it to extend outward from the figure
of Fripesauces. We will examine that outward movement further, but first
I would like to consider the dramatic potential of food and the innovation
that Tristan contributes to that domain.

Food is by its nature concrete; subject to transformations of all sorts, but
nonetheless concrete. The stage tradition of the parasite, however, focuses on
the verbal: long enumerations of food desired or food consumed, food promised
or bargained for, the food of the future and the food of the past. Tristan
goes a step farther and allows food its concrete reality, albeit briefly, by having
Phénice arrive on stage in act 1, scene 4 with a covered plate. By presenting
actual food on stage, the whole subject becomes infinitely more dramatic. No
longer is food, like the Capitan’s heroism, a mere verbal construct, but it has a
concrete referent. Tristan plays with this referent by having Phénice hide
the food on the plate; she will not reveal it or give it to Fripesauces until he
listens to her long récit, understands the plan to unite Lisandre and Lucinde,
and accepts the task of instructing Lisandre. The power of the plate’s physical
presence and the fact that the contents are hidden work to tease both Fripes-
auces and the audience: the stage directions tell us that “Il veut toucher au
plat.” One can easily imagine the stage movements surrounding that desire.
Even more dramatic is the fact that Fripesauces actually eats the contents of
the plate in front of the audience. He is not satisfied, of course: “mais de tels
mets ne me contentent pas” (v. 212), he complains. The physicality of the act
of consumption is underlined by Phénice’s exclamation: “Lescher encor le
plat!” (v. 219). This rare and frustratingly inadequate moment of satisfaction
is mirrored by Lisandre and Lucinde’s embraces, which, like Fripesauces’s
food, are briefly visible onstage and also reported as occurring offstage.7 De-
sire is thereby made concrete, and thus more dramatic. Through food’s con-
crete sacrality in the play as well as through Phénice’s game of concealment,
the opposition between illusion and reality is evoked, leading the spectator
to a string of associations involving the Capitan’s tenuous relationship with
reality, as well as the eternal question of where to situate the young love of
Lisandre and Lucinde. The concrete reality of food onstage suggests that
such questions will be sorted out by the play, with a denouement in which

6 A similar possibility for transformation from human to animal to food is suggested
in Lisandre’s description, quoted earlier, of boiling and grilling Fripesauces.
7 Apparently in Fornarisi’s play, the offstage satisfaction was greater. There, the newly
united siblings lock themselves in a bedroom. The servant, spying through a crack
in the door, sees them on the bed together for an extended period of time (Made-
eleine ix).
the Capitan is humbled and banished, and the lovers are given a concrete reality – marriage – that will long outlast their burning love.

In part because of the question of illusion and reality, and in part because food regularly moves out from Fripesauces to entangle and encompass other characters, the figure of the Capitan is particularly important to the dynamics of Le Parasite. It is worth noting that it is not uncommon for these two traditional characters – the parasite and the bragadocio captain – to appear together in comedy (Madeleine xix–xx). Where traditionally they play against one another or constitute independent sources of comedy, here we find a surprising degree of interpenetration whereby each comes to occasion­ally resemble the other. Fripesauces resembles the Capitan through his appropriation of heroic discourse. The Capitan recounts a fantastic voyage, undertaken to liberate Lucinde’s father, involving a threat to four crowns and the death of six minor kings. Fripesauces uses exaggeration and accumulation in a similar fashion, but in order to recount meals that he has consumed or, more often, that he desires. In fact, he has considerably more verbal set pieces than does the Capitan. The Capitan’s tirades are comic because they are characterized by the absence of a concrete referent; that is, when faced with a situation in which he must demonstrate his courage, the Capitan turns tail and runs. Similarly, with the exception of the small dish of food discussed above, Fripesauces’s descriptions of food have a problematic relationship to concrete reality. Furthermore, as Abraham notes, the parasite’s discussion of food is scattered with martial references: “Ce que les tirades héroïques du Capitan ont de comique est rehausse par l’écho doublement burlesque des tirades de Fripesauces qui parle sans cesse de batailles épiques dans la cuisine et de massacres dans la basse-cour en de délicieuses parodies des rêves du miles gloriosus” (“Jeu” 26–27). Thus Fripesauces is transformed into a kind of matamore of food.

More surprising in a play entitled Le Parasite, the Capitan encroaches on Fripesauces’s terrain as well. He discusses food with his valet, dispatching him to the market to get him something to eat, inquiring whether his horses have been given oats, and later sending his valet off to drink with Fripesauces. The Capitan’s parsimony in these areas is amply noted: his plans for the midday meal center around chestnuts, olives, and plums. Indeed, Fripesauces objects at some length to the Capitan’s pretensions in the domain of food:

Comment me traittes-tu quand je mange chez toy?
De ces gardes-foyers de la rotisserie;
De quelque aloyau noir qui pût comme voyrie;
D’un lapin qui sans teste a bien le goust d’un chat;
D’une olue parfois qui nage dans vn plat,
De raues, de fenouil, & de fanfaronades
Qui rendent pour huit iours les oreilles malades. (vv. 706–12)

Note that in the last two lines the Capitan’s heroic discourse becomes another kind of food, albeit not a satisfying one. More important is the fact that the Capitan is repeatedly referred to as someone who eats. A secondary character calls him “vn mangeur de charettes ferrées” (v. 512), which, according to Furetière, is an expression used to designate a fanfaron. Fripesauces undermines his own efforts to distinguish himself from the Capitan when he describes the latter as “ce mangeur de Dragons” (v. 642) – a heroic eater – and simultaneously credits and discredits the Capitan by saying: “et qui, si l’on en croit son discours ridiculé, Ava­leroit vn Diable ainsi qu’vn Pilule” (vv. 643–44). The Capitan most closely resembles Fripesauces, however, when he verbally transforms Lucinde, briefly his fiancée, into food:

Elle peut bien dormir la grasse matinée;
Pour auoir le teint frais, le visage arrondy,
La goge ferme & pleine & le sein rebondy
Car elle est destinee, ainsi qu’on le remarque,
Pour estre en peu de temps vn morceau de Monarque. (vv. 294–98)

In this passage the Capitan echoes Fripesauces’s earlier transformation of Phénice into a blas­son in which each part is compared to a comestible. The transformative power of food thus encompasses the Capitan, but the operation works in both directions: Fripesauces is himself transformed into a figure of empty but vocal heroism.9

Neither Fripesauces nor the food he is so closely associated with limit themselves to being a side show in this traditional comedy of disguised identity and young lovers. It is the parasite who intervenes in the escalating crisis of the penultimate scene and brings events to a happy resolution through his simple suggestion of marrying Lisandre and Lucinde to one another. Food and drink are crucial bargaining chips in almost all of Fripesauces’s dealings, most explicitly when Phénice seeks to use him to set up the disguise scheme. Negotiations involving Fripesauces and food parallel the negotiations surrounding the choice of a husband for Lucinde, negotiations that grow more

8 In fact it is interesting to note that the discourse of Tristan’s Capitan is far less developed and extensive than is usually the case in plays containing this traditional character. The central focus on Fripesauces may account for this reduction.

9 Indeed, one of the Capitan’s longest speeches is a heroic narrative situated in the future describing his explosive planned revenge on Lucinde and her family (vv. 1537–52).

10 Similarly, the parasite Ergasile in Jean Rotrou’s Les Captifs ou les esclaves (1638) takes on certain characteristics of the miles gloriosus at the end of the fourth act of that comedy.
complicated as the Capitan loses the mother's favor and the long-lost father returns to claim his rights. Finally, Lucinde and her mother Manille, while they do not mention food themselves, are set out by the plot to be consumed sexually, Lucinde by the husband she will be assigned and Manille by her newly returned spouse, Alcidor. Fripesauces's gleeful expressions of satisfaction at the play's end are a reflection of the sexual satisfactions promised by the resolution of the plot. The transformations of food we have tracked parallel Lisandre's transformation into Sillare (the long-lost brother) and back again, as well as the theatrical transformation of the old man, called upon to act a part, into Lucinde's real father Alcidor. Thus food, which has almost nothing to do with the plot per se infiltrates all corners of this comedy, drawing the material of traditional comedy to it, and consuming everything it touches.

Bibliography


\[11\] There is one small exception: when Manille banishes Fripesauces, she is specific about the consequences: "Tu ne sausseras plus ton pain dans ma marmite" (v. 1372).