

Introduction

I Taste: An ‘Apish Art’?

In his *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691–92), a history of writers and bishops educated at the University of Oxford between 1500 and 1690, the antiquary Anthony Wood includes a brief description of the life of the scholar, educational reformer, and sometime Dean of St Paul’s, John Colet. A humanist luminary, Colet was ‘exquisitely Learned’, being (as Wood comments approvingly) ‘no stranger to *Plato* and *Plotinus*’, but somewhat indifferent to their scholastic commentators: ‘Schoolmen, he seemed not to delight in.’¹ Colet was also profoundly pious, taken by later reformers as an early proponent of their cause: the churchman and historian Thomas Fuller calls him ‘*a Luther before Luther*’.² After his death from a sweating sickness in 1519, Colet’s achievements were acknowledged, as Wood reports, by the construction of ‘a comly Monument set over his Grave’ in a wall of St Paul’s, which stood ‘whole and entire till 1666 [and] was then consumed in the dreadful Conflagration that happened in the City of *London*’.³ About fourteen years later, the wall that contained Colet’s body was taken down, and his coffin was revealed. Wood describes how, ‘out of curiosity’, the politician Edmund Wyld and the mathematical instrument maker Ralph Greatorex paid the ruins a visit. Encountering Colet’s newly uncovered burial place, Wyld and Greatorex ‘did thrust a probe or little stick into a chink of the Coffin, which bringing out some moisture with it, found it of an ironish tast, and fancied that the body felt soft and pappy like Brawn’.⁴

From a twenty-first century perspective, Wyld and Greatorex’s tasting of the ‘moisture’ in Colet’s last resting place is peculiar to say the least.

¹ Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, B3r.

² Fuller, ‘The Life of . . . Dr. *Colet*’, in Colet, *Daily Devotions*, A3v.

³ Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, B3v.

⁴ Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, B3v. Mark S. R. Jenner notes that John Aubrey also recorded this incident in *Brief Lives*, ed. Clark, 181, cited in Jenner, ‘Tasting Lichfield’, 655.

What impulse led these two eminent men to sample the coffin's revolting contents? Wood himself offers no commentary on this disconcerting moment, simply reporting the men's impressions. In fact, their odd act of tasting can be interpreted in a number of ways. Amongst other things, it becomes more explicable if we take into account to the importance of the sense of taste to the world of early modern experimental philosophy, in which both Wyld and Greatorex participated; the former was a fellow of the recently founded Royal Society, and the latter was a regular attendee at Society meetings. Within this milieu, flavour was considered an important guide to determining the nature and properties of unfamiliar substances. It is, however, difficult to believe that their 'curiosity' was purely taxonomical: after all, they must have had a pretty good idea of what the coffin contained. What other impulses – intellectual or affective – might be at play here?

It is, perhaps, relevant that humanist scholarship was often described in terms of taste: the scrupulous reader was compared to a bee using his or her sense of taste to distinguish between the flowers of rhetoric. Given Colet's reputation for humanist rigour, and the desire of members of the Royal Society to overturn what they saw as the bookish pedantry of humanist scholarship in favour of a new emphasis on sense experience as a source of knowledge, we might see Wyld and Greatorex's act of tasting as symbolising the replacement of one epistemology (the humanist ideals embodied in Colet) by another (the empiricist ideals propagated by members of the Royal Society). From this perspective, Wyld and Greatorex's tasting of the contents of Colet's coffin can be taken as an expression of contempt, an act of rebellion against the insidiously resurfacing corpse of humanism – a suggestion that is supported by Wood's report of their unceremonious, irreverent 'thrust[ing]' into the chink in the coffin, as well as the description of Colet's body as 'soft and pappy like Brawn': literally, so much dead meat. From quite another perspective, however, it might be taken as an expression of extreme veneration. Occurring in the church where Colet served as dean, the men's actions can hardly avoid recalling the Catholic practice – deplored by Colet himself – of touching, kissing, and even licking the bodily remains of saints.⁵

Wyld and Greatorex's tasting of Colet's remains, then, is more than a titillating but opaque footnote to the posthumous career of an eminent scholar. Wood's brief record of a fleeting sensory experience gestures

⁵ On the touching, kissing, and licking of holy relics and images, and on Colet's antipathy to such practices, see Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures*, 1–3 and 20.

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towards a range of more momentous concerns, including the growth of experimental science out of older, humanist forms of knowing, and tensions between Catholic and reformist modes of worship. As such, it stands as an apt introduction to this book, which argues for the importance of taste – understood both as a physical sense associated with the mouth and as a figurative term for different forms of knowledge and experience – to the experience and articulation of key developments in the literate, religious, and social cultures of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. For Wyld and Greatorex's predecessors and contemporaries, the sense of taste was not only a source of gastronomic pleasure; it was also a means of understanding the world around them.

Early modern literature and culture abounds with the language of taste. To take just one high-profile example, the word and its cognates appear 111 times in Shakespeare's works, and related vocabulary is also frequent: perhaps most strikingly, 'sweet' appears 873 times, and its variants and compound words are also numerous.⁶ Despite this ubiquity, however, and despite a cross-disciplinary explosion of interest in the senses over the past couple of decades, taste remains relatively neglected by scholars of the early modern period.⁷ This disregard seems strange given the central importance of the so-called lower senses, including taste, for the originators of the Annales School, whose work has been so foundational for later historians of the senses. According to Lucien Febvre, 'the men of the sixteenth century . . . were open-air men, seeing nature but also feeling, hearing, sniffing, touching, breathing her through all their senses'.⁸ Perhaps, then, one reason for the scholarly neglect of taste is precisely (if paradoxically) its

⁶ See Spevack, *The Harvard Concordance*, 1253, 1328–41. On food, taste, and cooking imagery more generally, see Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, 83–85, 117–24, and 320–24.

⁷ In scholarship on the Middle Ages, the case is slightly different; work on taste in this period is relatively extensive, although often with a tight focus on the role played by the sense in religious discourses and practices. See, for example, Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty*, chapters 3 and 4; Woolgar, *The Culture of Food*; and Walter, *Middle English Mouths*. For the more general explosion of interest in the senses, see, for example, the six-volume Bloomsbury series *A Cultural History of the Senses*; the University of Illinois Press series *Studies in Sensory History*; and the journal *Senses and Society* (founded in 2006). Significant book-length works on the early modern senses published within the past two decades include (inter alia) Smith, *The Acoustic World*; Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*; Cockayne, *Hubbub*; Smith, *The Key of Green*; Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume*; Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*; Sanger and Walker, eds., *Sense and the Senses*; Boer and Göttler, eds., *Religion and the Senses*; Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures*; Roodenburg, ed., *A Cultural History*; Craik and Pollard, eds., *Shakespearean Sensations*; Smith, Watson, and Kenny, eds., *The Senses in Early Modern England*; Kern-Stähler, Busse, and Boer, eds., *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*; and Macdonald, Murphy, and Swann, eds., *Sensing the Sacred*. For an overview of work on Renaissance literature and the senses up to 2009, see Cahill, 'Take Five'.

⁸ Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief*, 424.

very omnipresence in the culture of this period: in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the language of taste is so pervasive that it becomes unremarkable; so overdetermined as to be indeterminate. It is also relevant, however, that for Febvre the supposed predominance of these senses should be taken as evidence of a culture inclined to affect rather than intellect: ‘their “affective” senses, as we call them, taste and touch, and hearing as well . . . were exercised much more and were more highly developed (or less atrophied) than ours’.⁹ As a result, ‘their thoughts existed in a more clouded and less purified atmosphere’; denizens of this murky era were ‘accustomed to wallowing in imprecision’.¹⁰ In this narrative – later developed by Michel Foucault – the first glimmerings of modernity were coeval with a new emphasis on what Febvre calls ‘the intellectual sense par excellence, sight’, as in the seventeenth century vision was ‘unleashed in the world of science’.¹¹

In recent decades, however, a range of scholars have challenged this narrative, arguing – in Mark M. Smith’s words – that the ‘non-visual senses remained central to the elaboration of modernity in many of its forms and configurations’.¹² More specifically, scholars of early modern literature and culture have worked to recover the social, cultural, and (crucially) intellectual and epistemological significance of the lower senses in this period. Holly Dugan, for instance, has revealed the central importance of smell as a mode of social, religious, medical, and commercial understanding, whilst Joe Moshenska explores how early modern authors debated the value of touch as a means both of accessing the divine and of understanding the material and physical world.¹³ Most pertinently here, Wendy Wall has shown how early modern English recipe books provided creative and intellectual stimulation for the women who

⁹ Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief*, 425. See also Febvre’s protégé Robert Mandrou: ‘smell and taste, the most affective of the senses, were much more developed than they are with us. These, along with hearing, weighed heavily in favour of the emotional rather than the rational.’ *Introduction to Modern France*, 55. On other critical narratives that similarly trace ‘a cultural shift away from an affectively charged, enchanted and immediately accessible world’ associated with the lower senses towards ‘a rationalized, distanced world’ associated with vision, see Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures*, 10–11.

¹⁰ Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief*, 425, 439.

¹¹ Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief*, 438, 432. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault identifies a transformation in the sensory regimes associated with institutional and political authority as a constitutive aspect of modernity: whereas in the premodern West authority was identified with visibility, in the Enlightenment it comes to be associated with visibility, and particularly with the use of surveillance as a disciplinary tool.

¹² Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 14.

¹³ Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume*, and Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures*. On the association between smell and knowledge in this period, see also Sophie Read: ‘smell came to be seen as an index of truth, irresistibly revelatory of the nature of things’. Read, ‘What the Nose Knew’, 176–77.

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composed and used them. Less concerned with the consumption of food than with its production, Wall's work has nonetheless shown how recipe books 'marked evolving and contested meanings of taste that configured and reconfigured sensation, status, and aesthetics'.¹⁴

Building on and developing such scholarship, this book aims to recover the connotative richness and multiplicity of taste in early modern England. Two allegorical prints, from separate series published in England between 1625 and 1640, offer a fascinating take on this multiplicity, personifying taste ('Gustus') visually, as a young woman (Figures I.1 and I.2).¹⁵ The accompanying verses offer a commentary. The first warns that:

*Som with the Smoaking Pipe and quaffing Cupp,
 Whole Lordships oft have swallow'd and blowne upp:
 Their names, fames, goods, strengths, healths, & lives still wasting
 In practising the Apish Art of Tasting.*

The second offers a challenge:

*Match me this Girle in London, nay the World
 For feathered Beaver, and her Haire well curld
 To none of our Viragoes shee'l give place
 For Healthing Sacke, and Smoaking with a Grace.*

These women represent taste in two 'senses'. Savouring their tobacco and wine, they embody the physical pleasures of gustatory taste. Exhibiting their stylish sartorial choices and sophisticated habits (tobacco smoking was a relatively new and modish practice in the first half of the seventeenth century), however, they also stand for the tasteful consumer. Whilst these two meanings of taste – literal and figurative, physical and commercial, appetitive and discriminative – are conceptually distinguishable, both prints also employ visual parallels to indicate their commensurability. The plumes of smoke ejected from the women's mouths, for example, correspond to the plumes of their splendid hats (in the case of Figure I.1) and elaborately curled hair (in the case of Figure I.2). Represented visually, the gustatory experience of smoking is integrated into a wider display of luxuries, implying a basic similarity between the objects of gustatory and mercantile taste.

¹⁴ Wall, *Recipes for Thought*, 21.

¹⁵ On sensory art and iconography, see Nordenfalk, 'The Five Senses'; Raylor, 'Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue'; Assaf, 'The Ambivalence of the Sense of Touch'; Sanger and Walker, eds., *Sense and the Senses*; and Quiviger, 'Art and the Senses', 170–202. Lucy Munro offers a short reading of the prints in question in 'Staging Taste', 22; the Glover print is also briefly discussed by Evelyn Welch in 'The Senses in the Marketplace', 82.



Figure I.1 Anon., etching depicting taste (Gustus); part of a series of five. London: John Garrett, 1630–40. First published by Thomas Jenner. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Figure I.2 George Glover, engraving depicting taste (Gustus); part of a series of five.
 London: William Peake, 1625–35. © The Trustees of the British Museum

How are we, as viewers, supposed to respond to this conflation of physical appetite with the acquisition of commercial goods? Both the images themselves and the accompanying verses are ambivalent, combining satirical censure with admiration. Although the verse in Figure I.2 is apparently appreciative of Gustus's expertise in matters of hats and wine-imbibing, the tone is not entirely good-humoured: the description of Gustus as a virago not only positions her as a brazen scold; it also associates her with original sin, for in the Vulgate rendering of Genesis, 'Virago' is the name given by Adam to prelapsarian Eve.¹⁶ Gustus, it seems, is a woman on the brink: it is only a matter of time before she succumbs to a terrible temptation. The verse therefore chimes with what Chapter 3 of this book will argue is an early modern tendency to accord to taste the dubious honour of being the sense that initiated the fall: both visual and literary images of taste frequently draw upon this sense's association with Eve's original sin.¹⁷ Relatedly, gustatory appetites are also associated with what Joseph Glanvill, clergyman and propagandist for the new experimental philosophy, calls 'the fond *Feminine*'.¹⁸ Writing in *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661), Glanvill complains that:

The *Woman* in us, still prosecutes a deceit, like that begun in the *Garden*: and our *Understandings* are wedded to an *Eve*, as fatal as the *Mother* of our *miseries*. And while all things are judg'd according to their suitability, or disagreement to the *Gusto* of the fond *Feminine*; we shall be as far from the *Tree of Knowledge*, as from that, which is guarded by the *Cherubin*.¹⁹

For Glanvill, the postlapsarian corruption of intellect by affect is a consequence of mankind's subjection to hungers that are gendered as distinctly female. 'Gusto' and Eve are conflated: simultaneously 'Mother' and 'wedded' bride, taste yokes the rational (and implicitly masculine)

¹⁶ As George Gascoigne notes, 'Before Eva sinned, she was called *Virago*, and after she sinned she deserved to be called *Eva*.' *Droomme of Doomes Day*, A3r.

¹⁷ The converse, as we shall see, is also true: they may also draw on taste's associations with potentially redemptive Eucharistic tasting.

¹⁸ On the association of women with the 'lower' senses (with a focus on touch, rather than taste), see Classen, *The Colour of Angels*, 1–2 and passim, and *The Deepest Sense*, chapter 4; Classen and Howes, *Ways of Sensing*, 67–68; and Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 30–36. Peter Stallybrass comments on the gendering of the mouth, and the ambivalence of alimentary consumption within Christian discourse, in 'Reading the Body', 212 and 219.

¹⁹ Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, K3v, K5v. This passage is not included in Glanvill's revised version of the text, his *Scepis Scientifica* of 1665.

intellect to the idiosyncratic and capricious preferences and aversions of the appetite.²⁰

The other print is similarly equivocal. On the one hand, Gustus's prodigious appetite proves ruinous, swallowing up the reputation, possessions, and, eventually, lives of 'whole Lordships'. The unnervingly anthropomorphic ape that lurks behind her, munching on a piece of fruit, drives the message home. As a traditional symbol, in medieval and renaissance iconography and literature, of humankind's degraded hungers and of slavish imitation, the ape represents the shadow side of Gustus's glittering display of discriminative consumption: rapacious, unrefined appetite.²¹ The presence of the monkey also emphasises the gendered terms of the print's critique of taste: as Constance Classen has commented, the pervasive notion that the ape was a kind of degenerate human echoed the ancient idea of woman as an imperfect man: 'apes were often typed as feminine'.²² Gustus emerges as corrupt and ignominious, sullied by her intimacy with iniquitous appetite and with what Richard Brathwaite calls 'apish or servile *imitation*', which 'detracts much from the worth of man'.²³ On the other hand, the atmosphere of the print seems jovial, and the image celebrates, even as it apparently condemns, the blithe, attractive figure of Gustus. Whilst tasting is undeniably 'Apish', it is also, crucially, described as an 'Art': a form of creative or imaginative skill, an embodied craft, and a mode of scholarship or learning.

The ambivalence of the prints represents a broader tension in early modern culture, which inherited from classical and medieval authors – notably Plato – a hierarchy of the senses that privileged the distal senses of vision and hearing, which work remotely from their objects, from the proximity senses of taste and touch, which depend on direct contact with their objects (smell was understood to fall somewhere between the two extremes).²⁴ In this model, taste is often associated with boorish and potentially sinful physical gratification, as opposed to the supposedly

²⁰ On the relations between reason and appetite in the new philosophy, see Shapin, 'The Philosopher and the Chicken', and Smith, 'Science and Taste'.

²¹ On the ape as a symbol of taste, see Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, 147–48, and Hoffman, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment*, 51.

²² Classen, *The Colour of Angels*, 77. ²³ Brathwaite, *The English Gentleman*, M2r.

²⁴ On the traditional sensory hierarchy, see especially Vinge, *The Five Senses*, 18 and 69; Classen, *Worlds of Sense*, 3–4; and Jütte, *A History of the Senses*, 55–71. Two detailed discussions of the place of taste, specifically, within this hierarchy are Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 11–37, and Hoffman, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment*, chapter 3. For an alternative picture, see Burnett, 'The Superiority of Taste', 230–38. On the distal and proximity senses, see Croke, *Mikrokosmographia*, Ggg3r. On the ethical potential of the proximity senses, see Dugan and Farina, 'Intimate Senses/Sensing Intimacy'.

purier, more spiritual forms of pleasure and understanding offered by sight and hearing. ‘The eyes are the discoverers of the minde’, as the physician Helkiah Crooke writes in his anatomical textbook *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), ‘and so fitted and composed to all the affections and affects of the same, that they seeme to be another Soule.’²⁵ At the same time, however, some writers and thinkers emphasise the indispensability of taste, highlighting both its crucial role in sustaining the body (as Crooke writes, along with touch, it is ‘absolutely and simply necessary to our life’) and its value as an analogy for, or even as a form of, discrimination and knowledge about the external world.²⁶ In their interest in the close relation between sensory and discriminative taste, in their suggestion that *Gustus*’ femaleness is one source of her degradation, and finally in the tension that they establish between taste’s adjacency to immoral sensual appetite and its epistemological potential as a mode of judgement, the two prints encapsulate some of the attitudes and ambiguities that are fundamental to taste, understood both as physical sensation and as a mode of knowledge production, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.

II Embodying Taste: Beyond Aesthetics

Although taste has been relatively neglected by scholars of the early modern senses, it has been extensively explored by scholars of eighteenth-century aesthetics and commerce. According to a standard narrative, taste first rose to prominence in the context of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century consumer culture and aesthetic theory, as authors including Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, Richard Steele, and Joseph Addison made a metaphor out of what had previously only been a physical sensation.²⁷ Thus detached from the vagaries of physical appetite, taste could serve as a faculty of aesthetic, social, and commercial judgement. In the words of Robert Jones, ‘taste, once it is figured as a claim to a discernment which rises beyond immediate use or gratification, could grant its user, if successful, a prestige and licence in other areas of social life’.²⁸ In this story, the early modern period rarely features: taste emerges as an aesthetic category and as a mode of discrimination in response to distinctively ‘long’ eighteenth-century phenomena

²⁵ Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, Vv5v.

²⁶ Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 11r.

²⁷ Notably, Shaftesbury championed what John Barrell has designated ‘the republic of taste’, a community of men who identified themselves as such by claiming superiority of aesthetic judgement and hence political virtue. Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting*, 1–68 and 73–81.

²⁸ Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste*, 10.