Kings, Cakes, and Carnival: The Politics of Feasting in Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine

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“[H]ere, eat sir, take it from my swords point, or Ile thrust it to thy heart,” Tamburlaine says, offering “meat” to his encaged hostage and dinner guest, Bajazeth, the just-conquered Turkish king (Tamburlaine 4.4.40–1). Tamburlaine is attempting unsuccessfully to feed the humiliated king during a two-course military banquet that stands at the center of Marlowe’s popular Tamburlaine 1 (1590). The defeated king, as one might suspect, refuses to share in the celebratory spirit of the occasion of his defeat: he takes the meat and, according to the stage directions, “stamps upon it” (42). Tamburlaine maintains his stance: “Take it up Villaine, and eat it, or I wille make thee slice the brawnes of the arms into carbonadoes, and eat them” (44–5). Bajazeth says nothing to this option of self-cannibalism and persists in not eating the meat and not drinking. Tamburlaine is eventually satisfied to watch this “goodly show” which, he tells his queen, is “better than a consort of musicke” (60–1). His captive, he decides, will starve for a time: “Faste and welcome sir, while [until] hunger make you eat” (57). With this mention of fasting, the banquet section of the play brings into spectacular conflict not only two opposing kings, but also two opposing forces: those of feasting and fasting. The conflict between a feasting king and a fasting king mirrors to some degree the popular medieval—and Renaissance—European tradition of the battle between Carnival and Lent. Likewise, the second course of this strange dinner begins with the ambiguous stage directions concerning a cake, “Enter a second course of Crownes” (107). Like the spectacle of the two opposing sovereigns, the introduction of something like “king cake” or “Twelfth Night” cake—a festive delight traditionally served in England on The Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, and commonly shaped like a king’s crown with a bean baked inside—during the banquet seems to connect the play to the common Shrovetide traditions of Elizabethan England.

Marlowe is far from alone in his use of the banquet. Scenes involving a banquet occur in several works by Shakespeare and by other Tudor and Stuart playwrights. Indeed, Chris Meads counts over ninety-five dramas from 1585 to 1642 that present banquet scenes, with fifteen featuring such scenes more than once: “the self-conscious and persistent use of the banquet device became a strong, identifiable dramatic tradition over the period” (1). The interpretation of Tamburlaine’s strange banquet, Ken Albala argues, “lies entirely in the context” of the meal, but often the “meal re-stages . . . a central human drive to dominate, to woo, to challenge. Each banquet is also a kind of play . . . a highly structured and carefully staged performance . . . a ‘dumb show’ for the real power relations that took place outside the banquet hall” (6). A type of play within a play,
the banquet in Tamburlaine, with its “course of crownes” and assault on traditional notions of courtly etiquette, is not so easy to interpret. On the one hand, the banquet is a clear expression of Tamburlaine’s attainment of the highest position in society, “that perfect blisse and sole felicite, / The sweet fruition of an earthly crowne” (2.7.28–9); on the other hand, Tamburlaine’s carefully orchestrated meal seems simultaneously to incorporate elements of a popular culture into the banquet, especially the “king cake,” and the staged opposition of feasting and fasting. As a result, Tamburlaine’s feast, like the play itself, is a mixture of the high and the low, the tragic and the comic, the elevated and the familiar; it is calibrated to appeal simultaneously to the broadest possible audience: those at the center of society and those on its periphery. In a way, as Meads argues about other plays, Tambulaine’s banquet scene does double duty as well: it “exploits the public display of order implicit in the banquet’s formality and ritual,” while at the same time “disguising moral malaise and/or incipient political schism” (70) based on social difference. To put it another way, the banquet can sometimes enact a political crisis, even as it presents itself as a signifier of stability. By showing Tamburlaine dishing out “crowns” to his loyal followers in the likeness of dessert cakes during the feast, the play is both celebrating and openly challenging traditional notions of royal superiority.

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Elizabethan England was not without social strife. The period of Tamburlaine’s highest popularity with The Lord Admiral’s Men, the years from 1585 to 1597, coincided with frequent economic troubles for average people. Some of the signs of distress are “clusters of food riots” in England: from 1585 to 1587, there were eight riots; and from 1594–8, there were nineteen (Bohstedt 30–31). “In the worst early modern crisis, the famine in 1596–8,” Bohstedt summarizes, “6 percent of the [English] population may have died” (33). The result of a host of contributing factors, the food shortages led to social unrest that spanned generations. “[T]here were at least forty and perhaps seventy incidents of food rioting between 1585 and 1660 which can be verified from the records of central and local governments,” write Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson in Order and Disorder in Early Modern England (232). They summarize the situation of the late sixteenth century:

The very bad period of starvation in northern Europe from 1595–7 brought mortality crises in north and north-western England. . . . The wage-labourers at the bottom of society saw a particularly disastrous fall in the purchasing power of their wages during the sixteenth century inflation: the wage-labourer’s wages bought him less food in 1597 than at any other point recorded between the 1260s, when the records open, and 1950. The distress was immense. (48)

To put it simply, for a significant portion of England’s subjects, the late sixteenth century brought real financial misfortune. The worst of the troubles not only claimed lives through outright starvation, but also by preventing women from giving birth: according to baptismal records