

## EATING THEIR WORDS

Alice Bach

Case Western Reserve University

*The genius of love and the genius of hunger, those twin brothers, are the two moving forces behind all living things. All living things set themselves in motion to feed and to reproduce. Love and hunger share the same purpose. Life must never cease; life must be sustained and must create.*

Turgenev, *Little poems in prose*, xxiii

*He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his courtiers. He will take a tenth part of your grain and vintage and give it to his eunuchs and courtiers.*

1 Sam 8:14–15

Lest my reader accuse me of sour grapes in judging the literary tidbits put before us in this volume, let me open with a question. What is the readerly expectation of a “response” in a volume? Is the scholarly recipe for responses to papers and articles the equivalent of a TV dinner, too processed to be truly succulent? Is the respondent an arbiter of taste, the sommelier whose duty it is to point out the best wine for those sampling the volume? One might argue that the respondent is no better than the professor or dogmatist who insists “this means this.” While a respondent may offer an alternate reading to one prepared by the author of the original paper, does the work of the respondent offer the reader different tastes or merely the respondent’s own preferences in seasoning a text? While I think the idea of respondents on the surface appears to offer multiple meanings, I suspect that the genre of response actually assumes some element of a corrective. Stashed at the end, you might answer, the dish served up by the respondent is clearly a matter of taste.

Perhaps it will help my feeling of overcooked porridge to concentrate on the food that is at the center of the volume—the main dish for which I am a final savory? I dip warm Mediterranean olive bread into a small pool of light green olive oil, I sip a robust wine, I think of the connection between food and ancient myths. Not just any food, but the trinity from ancient times until today: olive oil, grain, wine. Sacramental trinity, food of the gods, food to placate the gods, food to connect gods with humans. Demeter, the generative force of the earth, with her brother Zeus, gave birth to the beautiful flower-faced Persephone. Another myth tells of Demeter’s liaison with a Cretan hun-

ter, in a furrow of a many-times ploughed field. When Demeter bore a baby, Ploutos, the field was instantly covered with silken wheat to make the baby a gently waving cradle. From then on, Demeter was honored as goddess of corn and harvest. For the devotees of the Orphic cult, Demeter is also the mother of the god of wine and its vine, Dionysus.<sup>1</sup>

With the aroma of Demeter's bread teasing my nostril, I remind myself that I have an assignment. I am to analyze articles about olives and wine and bread. Cereals and lentils, the gifts of Demeter, were the foods that also sustained the people of early Israel. Mix the oil of the olive with Demeter's bounty and one has food to please YHWH (see esp. Leviticus 14) as well as those tempting cakes for the Queen of Heaven (esp. Jer 44:17, 19, 20), a recipe for anointing the food that sustained Elijah and the Phoenician woman who had first fed the prophet, the food that welcomed the messengers to Abraham and Sarah.

In this volume, Frank Frick provides the reader a detailed description of the cultivation of olives and the methods of oil extraction. He illustrates how archeological evidence confirms that "oil and altar belong together." While I found Frick's discussions enlightening, I found them dry. Further, a listing from the royal archives of Ugarit that details the impact of olive oil production during the era of monarchic Israel is available elsewhere. Perhaps, it is my literary nature that longs for a narrative oil that binds the olive to the text, anointing both reader and literary figure with a sense of the opulence of the subject. It is patently unfair for a respondent to react negatively to a translation of a list of oil taxes from KTU 4.132. I offer my honest reaction, not as a swipe at my colleague from Albion College, but rather to illustrate the chasm between a descriptive account such as the one he has written, undoubtedly valuable to the likes of me as an underpinning for appreciating the perfume of the text, and the imprecise poetry that celebrates the trinity of wine, grain, and olive oil. While I am curious about the details of life that give color and form to the texts of the ancient Mediterranean world, I wonder if presenting such facts without the flavor of the oil isn't more of a blueprint than prose? Thus, while I am grateful for the opportunity the article gave me to think about glossy-skinned olives turning into oil, I cannot say that the article provided much for me to savor.

Another article in this volume to which I was asked to respond raises a similar problem. Victor Matthews's article on ancient viticulture seems to

---

<sup>1</sup> In this version of the myth the father of Dionysus is Poseidon, not Zeus, and of course the mother is Demeter, rather than Semele. Other variants of the myth involve Zeus and Hades getting even with Demeter by stealing her daughter Persephone. Wailing with despair, Demeter flies over the land, searching for her daughter, turning the land rough and barren beneath her. The land did not turn green and fecund again, until Demeter was reunited with her daughter. This myth explains why the corn and fruits of nature do not appear until Persephone returns from the cold death of winter in the underworld.

span a longer distance than the Dionysian celebration of the vine from the high places of Carmel. While Matthews employs methods similar to those of Frick, Matthews carries his findings to the metaphors in Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7). Thus, it is this metaphoric discussion that I shall focus upon, since I have made clear that there is little response available to a detailing of crushing and fermenting grapes. It is the blood of grapes, to use Jack Sasson's felicitous phrase, that I find missing in Matthews's discussion.

Matthews asserts that the modern reader's lack of familiarity with viticulture often leads to a lack of appreciation of the calendar that enumerated the tasks of wine pressing as a metaphor in biblical texts. Indeed Matthews is concerned that drinking a glass of wine is not enough to appreciate the details of bringing the wine to table.<sup>2</sup> But I wonder if the details of crushing grapes and fermenting the wine produce an appreciation of the true value of the grape to a Mediterranean culture, or as an honorific libation to the gods. When old and possibly weakened El disgraces himself at the *marzēah*, it is not the economics of bringing wine to market that sheds light on the scene. Does the reader who learns of Noah's drunken sleep fumble for a detail of wine production to make sense of the scene? Clearly the biblical author has no trouble with drunkenness, but rather with the filial lack of loyalty and respect that Ham displays toward his indisposed parent.<sup>3</sup> The metaphor of wine in the New Testament also does not require an appreciation of viticulture, but rather of the excesses that wine can induce. Paul warns the Corinthians not against drinking wine, not a negative symbol but the very blood of the Lord. Rather Paul rails against the excessive drinking of the Gentiles, when they sacrifice to their gods. There are, of course, numerous biblical illustrations of the centrality of wine in the life of Mediterranean peoples. Is there a qualitative difference between these texts and the one that Matthews has included in his article, "The Song of Isaiah"? There is the obvious difference, that the Song details the moments of raising wine-worthy grapes. Clearly the reading Matthews offers is amplified by his cross-cutting of details of viticulture. Am I, a city person, like many of the readers of the Isaiah text, unable to appreciate the metaphors larded within the song? Will Isaiah's metaphors wither in the hands of a reader without viticulture?

The central question in the Song seems to rest with the puzzle of how wild grapes can suddenly appear in a tended vineyard. Rather than grapes suitable for wine, the ground yielded wild grapes, unsuitable for human

---

<sup>2</sup> Would it be too indulgent of me to point out that the writer of Prov 23:25 who warns of the effects of wine in the cup, "that it bites like a serpent and stings like a snake," has clearly not gleaned that information from studying the methods of viticulture?

<sup>3</sup> I suspect that Matthews's erudition could be of great help in explaining why wine or grapes are not specifically mentioned or used metaphorically before Noah plants the first vineyard (Gen 9:21) in the aftermath of the Flood. Was there no wine in Eden?

consumption. The metaphor might well be connected with the difference between the value of the natural and the cultivated. As Matthews suggests, one would think that the cultivated vineyard with its terraced hillsides and watchtower could not fail to produce mouth-watering grapes. But as prophets are known for emphasizing the unpredictable, the illogical, so Isaiah reminds his readers that all the cultivation methods that worked so well for the former owners of the vineyard will not work if Israel is not loyal to YHWH. The lack of value in this supposedly tempting property is underscored a couple of verses later, when Isaiah asks the reader with heavy irony what value are acres of grapes (the lot of a wealthy man) if they yield one sole bath of wine (Isa 5:10)? Even the acres of verdant vineyards become worthless, like Israel itself, when they do not produce in a manner pleasing to God. As grapes would grow naturally in a well-tended vineyard, so Israelites have an inherent ability to produce a human crop pleasing to YHWH, the vintner.

From this stalk-riddled vineyard to the lush one owned by Naboth that has caught King Ahab's eye is a short walk, from Isaiah to 1 Kings. Deborah Appler has salted her article with many images of food, and not surprisingly the juiciness of food-puns lard her prose. Using Mary Douglas's important anthropological work on the social significance of food and meals, Appler gorges on the food-driven symbols that surround the Jezebel narratives. Although she shares the socio-cultural methodology of Frick and Matthews in a general way, Appler stays closer to the narrative, and thus, provides more for a respondent to chew upon. One element of the article stuck in my throat, and that was Appler's appetite for a banquet of foody prose. Yes, it is fun, and probably as addictive as chocolate-covered adjectives, but too much of a good thing can lead to *agita*.

On a more serious note, Appler foregrounds the ironic connection between drought and the failed prayers to Baal, the Canaanite god of drenching rains and fecundity. I would add a continuing comparison between the famously fertile/sexual god Baal unable to perform for his eager devotees, and the supposedly asexual YHWH, seducing the prophets of his rival with the very rain for which Baal is known. I would also submit an alternative interpretation for the translation of Jezebel's name, particularly in light of the stories in 1 Kings. Carrying the name Jezebel, *where is Baal*, has the same irony in which the author of these stories continually delights. I hear the name as a question, one echoed whenever the Queen herself is present in the narrative. If one asks the question plaintively, a sympathetic veil envelops Jezebel. The question can also be heard as the existential cry of one faithful to her god.

Curiously in the Jezebel stories the monarchic body, that of King Ahab, is narratively absent. The intersection is consistently between the female body of the Phoenician queen and the discourse of food. Just as the other nameless Phoenician woman is connected to food (as a positive life-giving sign) through her generosity to Elijah, so the Phoenician queen becomes a negative

sign, through her connection to death. The Phoenician woman tells Elijah that she is planning to die (1 Kgs 17:12), but actually the food that she has offered to the prophet of YHWH will become through YHWH a continual source of nourishment for her and her family. Jezebel's body will itself become food for dogs. As Appler notes, the perverted sacrifice of this human female body is initiated by eunuchs and polished off by animals. Food remains a sign of life, as the queen becomes a meal of carrion, a marker of death to herself, but more important, to the prophets she represents. Her narrative continues after she herself has died. All that is left of the death-dealing queen, however, are the inedible parts, rejected even by hungry dogs.

What to say about Robert Carroll, for whom prophets and their words have been the meat and potatoes of the biblical banquet for so many years? Carroll writes as palpably of prophetic recipes as Julia Child. In his article, "YHWH Sour Grapes: Images of food and drink in the prophetic discourses of the Hebrew Bible," Carroll is as skilled, his movements as unhesitating, as Child in deboning chicken. With a total lack of sentimentality, he assesses the relationship between YHWH and Israel succinctly: "Butchery is food and drink to YHWH." Thus, Carroll's view of the deity is that of a slightly less controlled chef than the doyenne of French cooking: "If we could imagine a mad chef running amok among the kitchens of the cosmos, then we might have an adequate rendition of one of the representations of the deity in the Hebrew Bible." In Carroll's view, the deity is the raw symbol, the text the cooked. As I understand his view, the biblical prophetic community has incorporated its primitive fears of destructive desire through its vision of the divine master chef, cutting to the bone, devouring rather than nourishing the community.

I would pose a question as to the position of the cook, who is usually a mediating symbol, transforming the wild and unpalatable into the cooked, tempting meal. If the raw is the divine, and the prophetic community is presenting the divine as bloody uncooked, then who is the mediatorial figure in the biblical meta-narrative? Is it the priest, whose duty is to tempt the deity with the cooked versions of earthly bounty? The priest who uses cooking as the metaphor for culturizing the Israelite community, then, seems to function as a civilizing or taming agent of the deity. Read through such a structuralist lens, the prophet would present the raw, the natural deity, and the priest the very mediated version that is more tempting to the community. The role of the priest is clearly that of the dominant male figure of the community, the one who makes ceremony out of the ordinary items of bread and oil, and wine and flesh, the one who pleases the deity with fragrant aroma and smoke, with shewbread and wine. The prophet, on the other hand, deals with the bloody consequences of YHWH's butchery, the foul liquid pressed from sour grapes.

As I turn toward the final article of my assignment, I move more directly toward food as female symbol. In her article, Judith McKinlay deals with the

gendered connection between women and food (and choice) in three biblical narratives: Genesis 2–3, 1 Samuel 25, and Proverbs 9. I find the choice of narrative units itself interesting, having written on these texts myself. McKinlay is surely right in connecting the reader's choice of whose table he will sit at to wisdom. Sit in the "wrong" seat and temptation will be the host. The author of the Proverbs text has given his heart (and his palate one assumes) to Woman Wisdom. Is anyone surprised that it is the wise woman who sets the correct table? In contrast, one might be surprised that the man eats the fruit, after YHWH has told him to be careful about what fruit you eat in this garden laden with choices of fruit. There's already a warning that marks fruit in the narrative, and that warning the man chooses to ignore. McKinlay seems to read with the text—a poor choice was made. But those readers who find the desire for the fruit overwhelming do not see the choice as negative, or the offering of fruit as "bad." Perhaps the readerly surprise is that YHWH suggests making a choice that cannot be made. It is fruit that humans are intended to eat.

As to the food that Abigail offers to David, while her dog-husband Caleb is offstage choosing to drink himself to stone death, that is the classic trinity—oil, grain, and wine. Here the choice that David makes is to accept the food and to return the woman. That is, he does chose, as McKinlay points out, the wise woman's meal. The food in this narrative preserves the woman's body, rather than offering it to the male. In choosing the food, he chooses not to violate the woman. Of course Abigail is the *ʿešet ḥayil*, the wise woman of Proverbs. But David has two hands, one to reach for the "good woman," and one to reach for the one whose "stolen waters are sweet, and [whose] bread eaten furtively is tasty" (Prov 9:17), the too-tempting Bathsheba.

In the majority of biblical narratives dealing with food, as I read them, the food is seasoned with the sexual power of women. It is a connection of pleasure and power, a connection that too often leads to death for the man who trusts the offering. Now, the author of Proverbs reminds us that the same wine and bread can be offered by the wise woman and disaster will not ensue. But do the foods prepared and offered from the hands of the good woman seem too ordinary to tempt the eater, like the food from Abigail's well-provisioned larder? Safe food marks a safe narrative that will sustain the man and the reader, but not injure or threaten them. If one reads the three biblical narratives selected by McKinlay as a group, one might conclude that the choice to be made involves a choice of what is set before the man, as in a buffet of meats and grains, some righteous, some dangerously spicy. But Abigail offers the wine and food of the meal offered by the woman in Proverbs. Thus, the choice is even more frightening. For the food itself offers no clue to its possible danger. Like the words of a narrative, the ingredients of the meal will only defeat the one who misreads them.

Perhaps responses are an after-dinner mint, some prose to clear the palate. That's one possibility, sure. But unlikely. In spite of being the respondent in print a number of times, I suspect that it is a prose-poor role. One is confined by the articles presented; most of the connections that one is forced to make are forced, and give the reader the idea of intended coherence. I would rather see more of a collision between the authors themselves, collisions of method and theory, collisions that arise naturally from interpretations of theory and text. Finally, the genre of response gives the impression of multiple interpretations within a volume. But there is no dialogue between writer and respondent. Somewhat like the relationship between the cookbook author and the diner. Julia Child will never know whether I improved her veal cordon bleu by substituting chicken. It's no longer her recipe. It's another taste entirely.

