Object Oriented Environs

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Who can be made to believe that our cultures are carnivorous because animal proteins are irreplaceable?
—Jacques Derrida

John Wecker’s *Secrets of Nature* offers a recipe for roasting a goose alive. Advising the application of a ring of fire to some “lively Creature,” the recipe includes pots of water to slake the dying goose’s thirst, while it “fl[ies] here and there” within the fire-ring. The cook should baste the goose’s head and heart so that “her inward parts” will roast before she dies: “when you see her giddy with running, and begin to stumble, her heart wants moisture: she is Rosted, take her up, and set her upon the Table to your Guests, and as you cut her up she will cry continually, that she will be almost all eaten before she be dead.” Recipes like this one have attracted only a limited range of scholarly analysis: Wecker’s recipe appears, for instance, in the introduction to Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt’s collection *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday*, where it serves as a reminder of the casual cruelty of Renaissance practices that estrange everyday early modern culture for a generation of historicist critics. Culi-

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3 The recipe appears on p. 148. Wecker’s is not precisely a cookbook, but rather a grab-bag of “secrets” in various fields, accompanied by recipes both for foods and for medicines.
nary historians might situate the recipe as an example of the new interest in food’s aesthetic complexity during the Renaissance. To animal lovers and vegetarians, the recipe would speak for itself, highlighting the intolerable suffering of living creatures rendered as mere meat for the table: animal studies scholars like Simon Estok and Erica Fudge have discussed early modern resistance to, and rare embrace of, vegetarianism based on the dehumanizing influence of meat-eating exemplified by cases of animal torture like that in Wecker’s recipe. 5

While welcome and a clear inspiration to this project, the various agendas of such recent work have tended to ignore or erase the nuanced process by which meat acquires cultural dominance as a main part of meals, and the consequent cultural negotiations of its inherent complexity as a performer at the table. In this essay, I use the work of new materialists who offer a way to talk about the metaphors mobilized by and through meats, about meat’s role as actant, and about what Jane Bennett calls its “vagabond” quality, and its vitality-in-death. 6 In what follows, I take up the question of what is at stake in the appearance of two groups of performing meats included in early modern feast and banquets: zombie or undead meats, in the vein of Wecker’s goose; and the related creation of early modern “transgenic” or “masquerading” meats, those created by engastration (the stuffing of one meat with another) and those otherwise transmogrified by culinary art. What these performing meats have in common is the multidimensionality of their required acts at table. They do not simply entertain, although certainly that is part of their purpose. Rather their performances illuminate early modern ideas and desires about the significance of turning living animals into a dietary mainstay. Early modern banquets created performed and performing meats that violated species and other categories; and that while this theater of meat announced and celebrated human exceptionalism and human control over nature by testifying to the creative and transformative power of the human cook (and host), it also revealed the limits of that power by


conceding or granting to animal flesh a type of agency in the process of making it act out a part in a meal. Ultimately, what meat performed was all the distortions, complications and ideological dimensions of its production as meat.

I. ZOMBIE MEAT

Wecker’s goose is no lonely outlier. Fumerton’s account mentions other examples of such kitchen barbarity as a pig whipped to death, or a capon “pulled” and gutted while alive as evidence that the goose’s fate is a common one in early modern cookery. A recipe in *The Vivendier* (ca. 1450) offers a comic take on the goose’s lyric performance, describing the preparation of a chicken that looks dead, but isn’t: plucked and painted with “roast meat” color, and massaged into sleep, when the chicken is about to be carved, “it will wake up and make off down the table upsetting jugs, goblets and whatnot.” What happens to the naked chicken after it amuses the guests is not reported.

Like many elaborate banquet dishes, Wecker’s goose and the *Vivendier*’s chicken accomplish a number of things at once. They confuse the distinction between living and dead, between animal and meat; they also collapse the meal’s function as sustenance with its function as entertainment. The latter is not surprising since the basic job of a banquet or feast for guests was precisely to affirm or create social ties through a ritualized communal event. Banquet courses were often interspersed with theatrical, musical or other diversions also nicely calculated to demonstrate the host’s status, authority, good taste, education and virtue. What the goose and chicken recipes do, then, is ensure that the host will be remembered for providing a miraculous performance by the entree itself. But in early modern Europe, changing habits with regard to meat-eating required the animal at the center of this performance to take on complex roles that cannot be explained only through the social.

In our own historical moment meat rules the table, unquestioned monarch of the meal, surrounded by fawning courtiers (vegetables and other side dishes), often enthroned and crowned (resting on beds of starches,

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or doused with sauces). Recent adventures in pink slime and petri dish meats have brought home how hard it is to decenter “real” meat from this sovereign position: petri dish meat in particular offends through its very status as simulacrum. But it hasn’t always been this way. Only at a fairly late date in its etymology, at the same moment Wecker’s goose and the Vivendier’s comical chicken appear, did the term “meat” begin to signify specifically the flesh of a dead animal meant for human consumption in a meal. Prior to the fifteenth century, meat or mete was almost uniformly used as a generic term for all food. The alternative to the current association of “meat” with cooked animal is the more obsolete use of the word “flesh,” but flesh referred as often to human beings as to animal bodies, and so did not restrictively designate a component of a meal. The etymologies of “meat” and “flesh” thus suggest that something was happening culturally that required the role of dead animals at the table in the period we are looking at to be recoded, to be divided off from other categories of food and bodies.

There are a number of practical reasons why such a transition might have occurred: on the one hand, the huge medieval appetite for meat was displaced during a subsequent period of agricultural change that saw food animals reduced in number, thus associating meat consumption with class and wealth. A growing role for the culinary arts in ever broader

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8 In August 2013 Mark Post, a vascular biologist, offered his lab-grown meat in a publicity stunt for which it was cooked as a hamburger by a famous chef and tasted by two food critics (see, for instance, http://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/aug/05/first-hamburger-lab-grown-meat-press-conference or http://www.thescientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/36889/title/Lab-grown-Burger-Taste-Test/ for online articles covering the event). Public reaction ran the gamut, but one constant was the momentary wince at the mere thought of consuming meat that did not have its origins in an authentic cow.

9 The oed gives initial instances from 1325 and 1475 for this more narrow usage; the Middle English Dictionary (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED27542) confirms that through the Middle Ages, meat meant “Food, nourishment, sustenance; also, digested food, chyle”—anything that could be eaten, from vegetables to sweets—rather than animal flesh. Noëllie Vialles notes that the same shift happens to the French viande, in Animal to Edible, trans. J.A. Underwood (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4. Meanwhile, “flesh” functions as a reference to the human body (as in “all flesh is weak”) in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as well as to communion bread, in addition to the muscle and other tissues of a living mammal (thus exclusive of fish or fowl).

10 See Ken Albala, The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Roy Strong, Feast: A History of
segments of society throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also focused the attention of many on feats of cookery applied to meat; meanwhile, widening popular concern for the medical role of meat in dietary regimes encouraged people to think carefully about distinctions among meats, and between meat and other foods. Whatever the economic, medical or other material-historical reasons for meat’s changing role, it was transformed into a cultural focal point through its various representations as an object, one engaged in complex interactions with human bodies, with other meats, with other “players” at the banquet table. But that new status for meat only makes more potent the problem of establishing what it is that “makes meat.” Is the living animal always already incipient meat? At what point in its metamorphosis is its meaty nature fully achieved: when slaughtered, when divided by the butcher, when cooked, when eaten? As it’s being cooked and eaten, meat acts on human senses and imagination: odor, texture, taste all simultaneously generate responses in body and brain, most not fully under the conscious control of an individual. During digestion, flesh melts into flesh, becomes categorically indivisible with its “host,” yet can generate discomfort, illness in the short term, or obesity and debility in the long term. “In the eating encounter,” remarks Bennett, “all bodies are shown to be but temporary congealments of a materiality that is a process of becoming, is hustle and flow punctuated by sedimentation and substance.”

Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 49.

The term “intra-action” belongs to Karen Barad, as does a version of the concept of “performativity.” I intend both terms to resonate throughout this essay. Barad argues for the body’s, and all matter’s, agential realism (an account of human and non-human ontology that takes seriously the idea of matter’s agency, so that rather than “words” and “things” the world consists of relationalities that are material in nature). Her neologism, “intra-action,” insists that there are no pre-existing entities before relation, that only through intra-action do the boundaries of phenomena come to exist. See “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” Signs 28:3 (2003): 801–831.
Wecker presumably describes an act of cookery that happens in a kitchen well away from the guests who will partake of the dish, yet he does so in excruciating detail, constructing a scene that resembles nothing so much as a miniature drama. Surrounded by kitchen staff, including the cook, who must bank the fires that roast her, the goose has an audience to her immediate suffering, mirrored in the reading audience of the cookbook once the recipe is printed. She is active, flying around looking for escape, periodically basted with water to encourage her further struggles. A death scene more lingering and pathetic could hardly found on the early modern stage, suggesting that what matters in this recipe is not only the eventual dish that results, but the imaginative pleasure (whatever that consists of) in vicariously witnessing this transition from “lively” animation to zombie-like living death. Wecker’s goose had, of course, already been the target of another kind of human-engendered imaginative transformation on a global scale. Domesticated millenia before, the goose is a touchstone for the entire concept and process of human improvement of, and control over nature. Before arriving at the dinner table, a goose is already a mutant, its physiology and behavior meddled with by human breeding, and so it functions as a mirror of human power over nature. 13 The goose’s performance includes the trace of her compliance in domestication, and again in her agonizing death, her gentle expiring cry the piquant sauce to her double surrender.

At the same time, however, the “cut” that should mark the goose’s flesh as object, as dead and therefore edible meat, instead disrupts any neat distinction.14 The diner carves into an animal that announces by voice and gesture that it is still animate, still conscious, still a participant in the drama of the table. The bloody theatrics usually assumed to end in the kitchen arrive at the table, and instead of passive audience or consumers, guests themselves become actors on stage, butchers, but also creators of category, settling a whole series of existential dilemmas. But as co-performers, diners simultaneously reopen exactly those dilemmas, cooking their own goose even as they dispatch this dying one.

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13 Albala observes that the predominance of domesticated over wild meats grew exponentially in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and that the preference for meats generated from human control over nature; Albala, The Banquet, 33.

14 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 815, contrasts the Cartesian “cut,” which relies on inherent differences between subject and object, to an “agential cut,” that creates a “local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy.”
II. MAKE YOUR OWN (DEAD) ANIMAL

Everywhere in the early modern kitchen, an observer could find examples of transmutation, things being turned into other things, often involving various forms of meat. “Turn your meat,” writes Lady Elinor Fettiplace in one recipe, “to pure blood.” Wendy Wall notes that cookbooks “underscore the importance of flesh mutating into flesh...everywhere hearkening toward dinner’s vitality and the precariousness of embodiment.” Food was used to create almost anything, from small objects to entire environments: Strong describes fake gardens made of sugar, vessels and instruments, statues and sculptures, even entire buildings made of food. The feast was a “game of deceit,” with edible trenchers, cups and so on—but also featuring meats layered or fused within, around and on top of other meats, meats disguised as other creatures or as their own living selves.

Meat’s “vagabond” nature in the early modern culture may be generated in part through its preparation. Whether because of sinewy animals, human dental debility, or a sheer love of complexity, nearly every period recipe requires meat to be stewed, seethed, or minced, and then mixed, stuffed or sauced with other ingredients; many meat dishes end with the resulting “paste” reconstituted through baking or incorporation into puddings, hashes, or other blended dishes. What this means is that early modern meat dishes obscure their origins: one could not necessarily perceive in the resulting food the shape or other physical attributes of the living animal. The sheer act of butchering already transformed food into something vastly different from its first incarnation, while every culinary intervention was by definition a process of transformation. At the simplest level, by creating re-formed and re-dressed dishes cooks were thus merely restoring visual cues to the animal’s identity, and a less ambiguous connection between the transformed meat and its prior condition as a live animal. Epulario or the Italian Banquet, for instance, includes a recipe for how “to dresse a Peacocke with all his feathers” that produces

17 Strong, Feast, 188–97.
18 Wall, Staging Domesticity, 335.
a dish that “seems to be alive.”\textsuperscript{19} The cook removes the bird’s feathers and skin, cooks its meat, then restuffs it with its own flesh, and re-feathers it. While this is the most frequent process cited in recipes, it turns out that the dis-integration of meat through cooking opened the door to much more inventive results. Rendering meat edible also provided an opportunity to quite literally make meats “cross-dress,” like one of Shakespeare’s boy actors done up in women’s garb. Early modern meat thus becomes the material of experiments with nature, transforming and translating what \textit{was} into what \textit{might be}. If “dressing” (meaning to form, order, arrange, straighten, or manage) referred to meat’s preparation either for cooking or for serving, then we might say that meats were also “re-dressed” in other attire for their appearance at the dinner or banquet table, re-clothed and amended in the process.

Consider the turducken—a turkey stuffed with a duck, which is in turn stuffed with a chicken—a dish now primarily served at Thanksgiving feasts in the United States. Although its name is new (dating, according to the \textit{oed}, only from the 1980s), its origins lie in the period we are discussing, in the fascination with engastration that informs many early recipe books and banquet tables. Perhaps the grandeur of the turkey has led us to overlook the smaller animals inside, but from the perspective of the chicken in a turducken the outer layers are a form of cloaking device, concealing its “nature” until the moment when the turkey is carved and reveals itself to be not a singular dead animal, but one inhabited by other creatures. It is, thus, a variation on the many surprise theatrical food-based revelations included in famous banquets like the \textit{Vivendier’s} dormant chicken, or the familiar four-and-twenty blackbirds in a pie.

The turducken is really quite a tame critter: the most extreme example of animal experimentation comes in attempts to create entirely new creatures from dead flesh. For his banquet in honor of the French King, Francis I, at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, Henry VIII’s cooks whipped up a “cockentryce,” by sewing together the head of a pig and the rear end of a chicken (Figure 1). While it might look like a bizarre violation of nature, it was not so rare a dish, having already graced the table of John Stafford, Bishop of Bath in 1425, and probably many more banquets besides.\textsuperscript{20} If Wecker’s goose and the \textit{Vivendier’s} chicken are proto-zombies, then perhaps these “redressed” meats count as early experiments

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Epulario, or the Italian Banquet} (London, 1598), Sig. Cir.
\textsuperscript{20} Harleian ms. 279 (ca. 1430), p. 62, lists a “cockyntryche” among the banquet dishes.
in transgenesis—the manipulation of animal DNA to produce new species, to recode dead flesh and give it a new “nature.”

What do engastric, cross-dressed, or amended meats in early modern cookery tell us, either about meat, or about what it represents? While the engastration of meats can be assimilated to other forms of transformation at the banquet table (like Schauessen or trionfi, confections in all sorts of shapes and forms made out of a variety of materials), making meat into a simulacrum of itself or of other meats suggests that “meat” functions as figurative and symbolic matter—it is in itself metaphor, or perhaps an example of what Ian Bogost calls “metaphorphosis” in the sense that “meat” as a descriptor of dead flesh detaches from any “natural” or confirmed “thing” in the world and instead becomes a thing in itself. Each of these masquerading dishes is an ontologically confused and confusing thing, its existence made possible precisely because of the mobile (in every sense of this word) thing-ness of a thing (dead flesh) that was once a living creature-object (the animal). The boundary-crossings of these masquerading meats can be assimilated to the same narrative as our performing

21 See Ian Bogost, Alien Phenomenology or What It’s Like to be a Thing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 66. Bogost coins the term to address how metaphor can function not merely representationally, but as a “means to apprehend reality.”
meats above. However, I think the process of creating redressed meats carries a particular cost: by provoking cooks and diners to reconsider meat’s apparently inert, passive status and the reliability of meat’s self-identity, such dishes raise questions about the dangerous potential in making an animal into meat, and so also about dangers for the body that ingests it.

Early modern dietaries and medical texts posited a humoral human body, porous and vulnerable to external influences, constantly struggling to achieve equilibrium. Geography, class status, gender, and other factors could influence an individual’s basic humoral complexion, while everything from air to food could disturb the precarious balance of that body’s internal machinery. Whole categories of meats were understood to define the bodies that ate them: pork, for instance, was a lower-class dish, suitable for crude palates and crude bodies, while tender fowl were for more refined diets. Food was never simply fuel: it was physic for a range of ailments, with effects on everything from individual morality to national identity. “All acts of ingestion and excretion,” Michael Schoenfeldt argues, were “very literal acts of self-fashioning.” If one can’t tell the identity of the meat that one ingests, however, then obviously any prescription regarding appropriate consumption of the stuff is rendered ineffectual. Moreover, if meats can be recoded, not merely as different meats (as in the case of layered and blended meats) but as completely new creatures (as in the case of the cockentryce), then the entire edifice that rests on dietary discernment falls apart. Instead of policing social, political, national and other boundaries, meat violates the whole notion of decipherable categories. Again, Bennett’s use of the term “vagabond” describes meat’s inherent variability, its itinerant nature, resistant to the kind of fixity required by dietary regimes of the period. In an accident of history and language, we might recall here that early modern stage performers, actors in the public theater, were regarded as vagabonds and “masterless men” by authorities. Like human performers, banquet meats promised a theater of order and discrimination, but in their mobility often delivered the opposite.

If transgenic meats expose meat’s susceptibility to transformation, and redressed or masquerading meats suggest the difficulty diners might

have in even recognizing the meat being served to them, then not only
does meat not enable the policing of social, moral, political and other cat-
egories as it is supposed to, but it might lead to the complete collapse of all
categories, full stop. Meat’s mobility generates anxiety—it is always in the
process of becoming something else, animal becoming flesh, flesh becom-
ing “meat,” meat being cooked, cooked meats being consumed, consumed
meats becoming (human) flesh again, and so on. At each stage, what meat
is or isn’t is uncertain; in the last stages when animal flesh is transmuted
into human flesh, meat enacts a mingling of bodies that confronts the
diner with the porousness of her body, and its essential material instabil-
ity. Matter is never itself, it is always becoming other. Engastric concoc-
tions like the turducken and cross-species confabulations like the cock-
entryce deliberately try to reproduce this indistinction as a circumscribed
byproduct of human intervention in the making of meat in order to con-
front and defang the anxieties aroused by the act of eating a dead animal.
It might be useful here to reconsider the practice of redressing meats as
the animals that the flesh originally belonged to. A peacock dressed up in
its feathers is dead meat masquerading as living animal—or, in another
formulation, an animal masquerading “as itself,” just in a more culinarily
compliant form. Such redressing attempts to introduce stability and a dif-
ferent kind of vitality to the dead, confused, and confusing object being
presented to diners. But what does it mean to say the bird is dressed as
“itself”? What “self” does the bird—dead, dismembered, mixed with
other ingredients, reassembled, shaped, and re-feathered—have? The act
of culinary re-dressing imports a fantasy of self-identity, of a prior sub-
jectivity invested in the living animal that can stabilize its meaty self and
so its meaty actions; but what is really created is matter with potential
lingering agency. Dangerous stuff, in other words.

Early modern meat had to be made, first by cultivation of living ani-
mais domesticated breeds suitable for consumption, then by flaying and
dismembering carcasses, then by transforming flesh into culinary objects.
What makes meat, however, is also its performance of itself (of a “self”) as
meat. But at the banquet table, “performance,” in its more common sense
of theatrical action, bleeds—literally—into “performativity,” the con-
struction of matter as matter, a construction that entangles human with
non-human, and suggests that the former only arises in its intra-actions
with the latter. In its tales of zombie geese and chickens, its transgenic
and cross-dressed pheasants, turkeys, and ducks, early modern culinary
practices stage the perilous cultural drama of becoming (human-animal)
meat.