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SCIANCELEPORE (Antonella), « Introduction »

RÉSUMÉ – Le cannibalisme a été largement exploité dans le discours politique médiéval. Les pages qui suivent explorent les rituels cannibales qui ont joué un rôle fondamental, d'une part dans la définition de l'altérité, et d'autre part dans la construction identitaire d'une communauté. Une attention particulière est accordée aux nombreux témoignages de cannibalisme rituel que l'on peut relever dans les chroniques des villes du centre et du nord de la péninsule italienne, entre le XIV^e et le XVI^e siècle.

ABSTRACT – Anthropophagy was widely exploited in medieval political lexicon as a divide between barbarism and civilization. The following pages explore cannibalistic rituals that played a fundamental role in defining otherness and building the identity of a community. The focus of this examination will be the evidence related to Italian urban areas, given the high concentration of ritual cannibalism testimonies found in fourteenth to sixteenth-century chronicles of the cities of central and northern Italy.

INTRODUCTION

The present publication is the output of the panel with the same title I organised for the International Medieval Conference in Leeds on July 4, 2017. The papers presented on that occasion by Pantalea Mazzitello, Gabriele Sorice and Amy Suzanne Heneveld – a group later joined by Angelica Aurora Montanari – aimed at shedding new light on enigmatic medieval stories of metaphoric or literal anthropophagy performed on individuals perceived as “others”. The next pages host the results of the authors’ yearlong meditation on the subject.

I would like to thank the *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, and Silvère Menegaldo in particular, for agreeing on publishing that which – I hope – will be a compelling group of essays for the readers of this journal. I would also like to thank Mattia Cavagna (UCLouvain) and Heather Blurton (UCSB) for providing their expertise and reviewing the articles prior to publication, and Chloe McCarthy (ULB) for her precious help with the linguistic revision.

The claim that foreign populations were prone to anthropophagic practices is a trope of colonial discourse, but it was used to debase and demonise human groups perceived as ethnic, religious or political others long before it was bestowed upon the native populations of the Americas¹. Man-eating human-like creatures appear in several facets of medieval culture, such as travel writing, encyclopaedias, romance and

1 W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979. Although Arens’ dismissal of the existence of actual cannibalistic rituals has been strongly criticised by anthropologists and partially disproved by archaeologists, his consideration of cannibalism as a cultural construct rather than an actual practice has still a high hermeneutic power when used to read medieval stories of anthropophagy. For a reconsideration of cannibalism in the framework of European mapping of otherness and colonialism, see W. Arens, “Rethinking Anthropophagy”, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iversen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 39-62; G. Obeyesekere, *Cannibal Talk. The Man-Eating Myth and Human Sacrifice in the South Seas*, Berkley-London-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2005.

chansons de geste. In this context, cannibals are usually the dwellers of the far corners of the world, rival populations, ethnic or religious minorities.

However, we ought not to forget that cannibalism works both ways in medieval imagination. As Maggie Kilgour highlighted in her seminal publication on the subject, being an act of symbolic incorporation, cannibalism can simultaneously work in the texts as an exercise of control over the Other and as a projection of the desire to assimilate it². Moreover, cannibalism does not only draw a separation line between civilisation and savagery; it can also challenge and blur this line³. When they are the matter of a narrative, acts of staged or real cannibalism raise in the audience both a shiver of horror and a liberating laughter, both necessary to process collective traumas⁴. For all these reasons, episodes of “Western⁵” characters eating – literally or symbolically – other human beings have a particularly delicate role in medieval storytelling. However rare, this type of cannibalism had great emotional and conceptual power in medieval texts, where it shuffled boundaries between civilisation and savagery, and staged incorporation of and control over otherness.

What is the function of these episodes of cannibalism in the texts in which they appear? What are the consequences of these acts? And even where there is no actual cannibalism involved, how does the vocabulary and the imagery of eating and devouring intervene in articulating the discourse of otherness in the texts? These questions raised our attention on a research path waiting to be explored: although a few important studies on medieval cannibalism have been published in the last decades⁶, episodes of literal or metaphorical anthropophagy performed by allegedly civilised Western characters on individuals perceived as

2 M. Kilgour, *From communion to cannibalism. An anatomy of metaphors of incorporation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

3 K. Guest, “Introduction: cannibalism and the boundaries of identity”, *Eating their words: cannibalism and the boundaries of cultural identity*, ed. K. Guest, Albany, SUNY Press, 2001, p. 1-9.

4 On this aspect, see G. Heng, “The Romance of England: *Richard Coeur De Lyon*, Saracens, Jews, and the Politics of Race and Nation”, *The postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. J. J. Cohen, New York, Palgrave, 2000, p. 135-171.

5 Since the word “Western” in this context can be confusing, it is worth specifying that I am using this term as a somewhat inaccurate shortening to identify characters who belong – ethnically, religiously and socially – to the poetic “us” of the texts, especially when pitted against “others”.

6 See, for instance, the bibliography provided in A. A. Montanari, “What’s bubbling in the pot? The enemy’s torment”, *infra* in this volume.

“others” – especially concerning Romance texts – have been on the margins of scholarly investigations so far, certainly victims of the taboo surrounding anthropophagy in human societies.

The following four papers, therefore, aim to explore the topic across Romance storytelling, by investigating symbolic cannibalism in French *chansons de geste*, love-tinted cannibalism in French *lais*, wartime cannibalism in Latin, French and Italian Crusade accounts, ritual cannibalism in the civic riots reported by Italian chronicles. By highlighting their intersections with coeval or earlier texts and their anthropological implications, these articles reclaim the narrative significance of these episodes as ambiguous places of negotiation of the Other, in its bodily and symbolic presence.

All papers tackle the question of the rituality of cannibalism and its place in a public language of symbolic gestures. Angelica Aurora Montanari in particular, by focusing on the historical and political function of anthropophagy in late medieval Italian cities, highlights how the transformation of human beings into eatable bodies is part of a complex ritual of violence. Humiliation and inversion define an alterity of the cannibalised subject, to which the public and dramatic aspect of the process is crucial.

Cannibalism is part of a language of aggression also in the Crusade poems and chronicles, which constitute a controversial but seminal part of the corpus on European cannibalism. Jay Rubenstein once pointed out how the episodes of real or staged cannibalism on behalf of the Crusaders over the bodies of the Turkish enemies during the sieges of Ma'arra and Antioch were later interpreted by chroniclers and literary authors as a prelude to victory⁷. In this sense, as Pantalea Mazzitello discusses in her article, cannibalism in Crusade chronicles worked also as a narrative of dehumanisation and annihilation of the enemy. However, by comparing different accounts of Crusade cannibalism – and the evolution of their portrayal in the subsequent translations – we gain a sense of the sacredness of the gory feast: eating the other, we discover, functions both as a “collective catharsis⁸” and as a teachable moment.

7 J. Rubenstein, “Cannibals and Crusaders”, *French Historical Studies*, 31, 4, 2008, p. 525-552, at p. 548.

8 P. Mazzitello, “Eating enemies, eating sins. Anthropophagy in the *Eracles* Italian vulgarization”, *infra* in this volume.

In fact, the sacredness of cannibalism is central to all four papers. We might argue that this is inevitable, since an act of cannibalism lies at the core of Christian religious practice, although Eucharistic cannibalism is sanctified by an intense process of spiritual mediation⁹. Nonetheless, also other aspects gesture to the sacredness of the metaphoric association between manipulation of human bodies and food consumption. The honorific use of a skull as a cup¹⁰, although not involving an act of anthropophagy *stricto sensu*, finds its place in this dossier when it surfaces in a late-twelfth-century *chanson de geste*, because it gestures to cases of anthropophagic rituals attested since the Antiquity. As Gabriele Sorice highlights in his article, the act is interpreted by the characters featured in the episode alternatively as a sign of extreme debasement and one of highest honour. Only by delving into the ethnographic stratification of this motif we can appreciate the expressive depth of metaphoric anthropophagy, and its role in policing the ambiguous relationship with the war enemy.

In warfare and other armed conflicts, therefore, eating the other is an important instrument to express relations of power¹¹. However, not only war and political skirmish create and foster a sense of otherness: love does too. The theme of the eaten heart, a trope of courtly love storytelling, introduces us to different, subtle aspects of the anthropophagic constellation. Although all cannibalistic acts imply a certain degree of communion with the Other, paradoxically combined with the extreme debasement of the same, stories centred on the *cœur mangé* hinge predominantly on desire and incorporation. As Amy Suzanne Heneveld points out in her article, in one of such texts, object and subject of desire shift sides and become embodied. Through this embodiment, though, the

9 G. Heng, "Cannibalism, the First Crusade and the Genesis of Medieval Romance", *A journal of feminist cultural studies*, 10, 1, 1998, p. 98-174, at p. 109. On the Eucharistic cannibalism, see in particular Kilgour, *From communion to cannibalism*; P. R. Sanday, *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism As a Cultural System*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

10 The motif is still vivid in popular medievalism; see, for instance, the humoristic drawing by A. Steinberg, "Not to lecture", *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2018 (retrieved on Condé Nast website). The cartoon is all the more significant as Steinberg bestows the custom of drinking from a human skull upon a supposedly "savage", Viking-like character, a popular assumption discredited by the corpus-based evidence in G. Sorice, "The skull-cup motif in *Gerbert de Metz* between intertextuality and ethnography", *infra* in this volume.

11 See H. Blurton, *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature*, New York, Palgrave, 2007, p. 13.

reader is also called to witness a conflation of staged and private, where “all is covered and uncovered, secret and found out¹²”.

The disparate configurations of medieval stories of cannibalism tackled by the authors, the coalescence of symbolic levels in these episodes, their cultural stratification and their metatextual depth, prove anthropophagy to be a privileged angle for reading medieval culture. These articles do not claim to give a definitive answer to the questions they raise; rather, they want to prompt new interest and stimulate further investigation on the blend of incorporation and rejection, dehumanisation and agency, public and secret, ritual and textual, interwoven in the revolting but dense narratives of humans eating humans.

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12 A. S. Heneveld, “Eating your lover’s otherness: the narrative theme of the Eaten Heart in the *Lai d’Ignaure*”, *infra* in this volume.