

Cordelia: So young, my lord, and true.
Lear: Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower!

This dialogue solves the riddle of the couplet John Davies wrote for Susan Vere in 1602, when she fifteen years and unmarried, and recorded by John Manningham in his diary. Truth, a pun on her family name and a reference to the motto used by her father, *vero nihil verius*, or nothing truer than truth, is the “nothing” that is at once “more then can be told” and “more precious then gold.” Poor as he was, Oxford provided his youngest daughter with a priceless dowry—his name, truth, that is the point of Davies’s couplet and the kind of Elizabethan compliment and in-joke that the Queen and courtiers at Harefield would have understood and appreciated.

Unlike Cordelia, Susan Vere did not marry in her father’s lifetime. She eventually married Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery, one of the “incomparable paire of brethren” to whom the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays was dedicated. Perhaps we only now begin to glimpse the actual value of the “nothing” Susan Vere inherited from her father, the truth contained in Shakespeare’s plays.

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Lady Macbeth's Curds and Whey

After reading Macbeth’s letter telling of his meeting with the witches, Lady Macbeth famously soliloquises:

Glamys thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promis’d: yet doe I feare thy Nature.
It is too full o’th’ Milke of humane kindnesse,
To catch the neerest way. (I.v.15-18)

“The milk of human kindness” has become proverbial, though there has been extensive discussion of just what Lady Macbeth meant by it. What has not been observed, however, is the way it suggests a pun in the following line. A straightforward paraphrase of “catch the nearest way” would read something like “take the most expedient route,” but the dense texture of Macbeth works everywhere against such reduction. If “way” puns on “whey,” as I suggest it does, the “milk” metaphor is extended, and we have a typical example of the reverberative effect of a strong metaphor.

In the late twentieth century we encounter milk on a daily basis, but have little, if anything, to do with whey. In the early seventeenth century it was almost the other way round. Dairy historian G.E. Fussell states that: “It is probably safe to say that our Tudor ancestors did not

drink much, if any, milk... The demand for liquid milk as a commodity to be purchased cannot have been very large." Milk was little known as an independent product, but was associated with butter and cheese production, whey being a by-product of the latter. Making cheese depended on the critical separation of curds and whey: "it is profitable that the whay [sic] should runne out, and separate it selfe from the curd," stated the English translation of the *Maison Rustique* in 1600. The same work recommended that the whey be used for feeding pigs (seemingly standard practice, since fifteen years later Gervase Markham made the same poem), only "in the time of dearth" for human food. The separation of the whey from the curd was attended with some violence, involving what was seen as a purging process. In his translation of Conrad Heresbach, Barnay Googe wrote:

[some] put in [with the rennet] the seede of wylde Saffron, and being so turned, the Whay [in separating from the curd] dooth greatly purge steame: others againe use the milke of the Figge tree, and then doth Whay purge both cholera and steame.

In the same translation it is emphasized that "it is very needefull you presse out the Whay with as much speede as you can, and to seuer it from the curd." Whey was naturally regarded as the inferior element, and the natural violence of its necessary separation from the valuable curd anticipated with anxiety. Thus it may be readily seen how whey can be punningly contrasted with the "milk of human kindness": milk symbolizes the natural man, whey the baser part of his character separated from the nobler. It is precisely this separation that Lady Macbeth wishes to see in her husband, but fears will not occur. Supporting the imaginative movement of this metaphoric echo, it should be noted that in her next sentence Lady Macbeth establishes a series of qualities in Macbeth that do not (in her eyes) resolve into their necessary complements.

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Notes

1. The New Variorum *Macbeth*, ed. Horace Howard Furness, rev. Horace Howard Furness, Jr. (Philadelphia, 1903) (hereafter Furness)
2. Furness, 70-2, and subsequent annotated editions.
3. *The English Dairy Farmer 1500-1900* (London, 1960), 300.
4. *Maison Rustique, or The Countrie Farme*, trans. Richard Surfleet (London, 1600), 91.
5. *Country Contentments* (London, 1615), 119.
6. *Maison Rustique*, 90.
7. *Four Bookes of Husbandry* (London, 1577), 147.
8. *Nicholas Nickleby*, chp. 38.