

Literary Cannibalism from Seneca to the Renaissance

There is a curious thematic thread of cannibalism running through theoretical discussions from antiquity to Renaissance Europe (and beyond) concerning literary/artistic reception and *imitatio* (“imitation”) and the “nourishment” an artist receives from predecessors in the process of composition. Theorists have deployed metaphors of food and consumption to describe the process of engaging literary forebears, whereby “successful” artistic creation necessitates the proper ingestion and digestion of earlier literary sources conceived of as generative sustenance. In a famous letter to his friend Lucilius, Seneca suggests authors should draw from myriad literary sources and “blend” the choicest bits into a “single delicacy” in a way that mimics the process of digestion (*Epist.* 84.5-7). Good writers consume their sources, digest them (*concoquamus illa*), until they become an integral part of an author’s “innate talent” (*ingenium*), just as food, when properly digested, nourishes our bodies and becomes part of us. This striking imagery had a seismic impact on theorists of *imitatio* in the Classical period and through the staggered Renaissances across Europe (from Quintilian and Macrobius to Petrarch, Erasmus, Montaigne, Jonson, and others).

Scholars have scrutinized the implications of this metaphorical language for what it elucidates about various theories of *imitatio*: whether authors should imitate one or many predecessors; what elements of earlier literature are deemed fodder for imitation (vocabulary, phrasing, style, etc.); what differentiates *imitatio* and *aemulatio*, and so on (e.g. Cave 1979, Russell 1979, Pigman 1980, Greene 1982, Conte 1986, McLaughlin 1995, and the Burrow 2019). But the power of metaphor itself gets lost in these discussions. The language is repeatedly categorized as “digestive,” but let’s be clear: this is *cannibalistic* descriptive language and its inherent violence must not elude us (see, more helpfully, Kilgour 1990, Silver 1996).

This paper situates Seneca's utilization of cannibalistic metaphorical language within the larger matrix of theorizing about how artists create art as a process of competitive poetics. I suggest that the use of consumptive imagery points to a poetics of artistic engagement – what I term a “poetics of cannibalism” – that has lurked in the background of theorizing about *imitatio*. Scholars have recognized a range of deep-seated traditions going back to antiquity analogizing literature to physical bodies, literary reception to “consumption,” and the notion that competitive poetics is inherently violent. But rarely are these traditions merged in discussions of *imitatio* (Bartsch 2015 on Persius comes closest). My aim is to shed light both on the tradition of theorizing about *imitatio* and on Seneca's role in instigating it.

Bibliography

- Bartsch, S. (2015), *Persius: A Study in Food, Philosophy, and the Figural* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press).
- Burrow, C. (2019), *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press).
- Cave, T. (1979), *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press).
- Conte, G.B. (1986), *Rhetoric of Imitation* (Cornell: Cornell Univ. Press).
- Greene, T. (1982), *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press).
- Kilgour, M. (1990), *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press).
- McLaughlin, M. (1995), *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press).

Pigman, G.W. (1980), "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 33: 1-32.

Russell, D.A. (1979), "De imitatione," in *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature*, ed. David West and A. J. Woodman (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press): 1-16.

Silver, S.K. (1996), "Cannibalism and Myth in Renaissance Poetics," (PhD Diss., Tulane Univ.).