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Renaissance Vegetarianism: The Philosophical Afterlives of Porphyry's On Abstinence
(Cambridge: Legenda, 2020)
by Cecilia Muratori

THE METICULOUSLY RESEARCHED STUDY of the generation and Renaissance receptions of Porphyry's *On Abstinence* in Cecilia Muratori's *Renaissance Vegetarianism* is well worth attention from Romanticists, alongside the Early Modern scholars, Classicists, and Animal Studies scholars that will comprise its main audience. Although Coleridge does not receive mention within this study, Thomas Taylor the Romantic Platonist and Percy Bysshe Shelley do, albeit briefly. For the Romanticist, *Renaissance Vegetarianism* offers a valuable survey of the intellectual, philosophical, and ethical precedents of Romantic vegetarianism. Muratori's panoramic study glides from the premodern to the Early Modern world, and reminds readers of how ancient arguments for and against eating animals remain relevant in our own time by carrying across the modern term 'vegan' to designate the dietary and ethical choices of ancient and Early Modern thinkers. Muratori opens her Introduction, 'Old Battles Fought Over Again', by acknowledging that 'The word "vegetarianism" was first coined not long before the foundation of the first vegetarian society in England, in 1847', and notes that 'Renaissance philosophers often employed a very versatile term to define a meat-less diet: "abstinence" (*abstinentia*)'.[2]

However, *Renaissance Vegetarianism* pointedly informs the reader that 'what philosophers in the past termed "abstinence" is often closer to what is now called "veganism" (abstinence from all animal products) than to "vegetarianism" (abstinence from all meat)'.[3] 'In *On Abstinence*', Muratori writes, 'Renaissance philosophers found a wealth of arguments that resonated and could interact with current debates', and in offering 'for the first time' a study of 'how *On Abstinence* became a point of reference for Renaissance philosophers debating the advantages and disadvantages of choosing an abstinent, vegetable diet', Muratori draws attention to how these debates persist today, concluding that 'the vegetarian ideal still awaits realization in the future'.[4]

In clear and engaging prose divided between an Introduction, four chapters—'Sacrifice', 'Health', 'Otherness', 'Rationality'—and an Epilogue, *Renaissance Vegetarianism* offers the Romanticist insight into the ancient and

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[2] *Renaissance Vegetarianism*, p. 1. Henceforth, Muratori.

[3] Muratori, p. 1.

[4] Muratori, pp. 3 and 227.

Early Modern precedents for the ethical, philosophical, health-based lifestyle and dietary choices adopted and adapted in varying measure during the Romantic period by major literary figures including the Shelleys, Thomas Taylor, and Coleridge. *Renaissance Vegetarianism* is accessible and engaging to the non-expert, benefitting scholars and students working within disciplines beyond the ancient and Early Modern periods. Muratori's transcriptions from Latin and Italian sources are 'modernised whenever necessary to enable better understanding of the text', and this hospitable attention to the reader is extended by providing English translations along with the original Latin and Italian versions. Muratori explains: 'some of the texts translated are hardly known to Anglophone readers due to the lack of translations: by including English translations of the most significant passages, it is hoped that this will contribute to making the texts known'.[5]

Of particular interest to Romanticism's emergence from and negotiation with Enlightenment thought is Muratori's study of Descartes, and correspondences between Descartes and Henry More, on animal automatism and a plant-based diet. Significantly, '*Renaissance Vegetarianism* overturns the assumption of Cartesian uniqueness by demonstrating that the Renaissance was a rich formative period for the conceptual history of vegetarianism', 'thus fill[ing] a gap which until now has remained invisible'.[6] In approaching Renaissance receptions of Porphyry's *On Abstinence* chronologically from the mid-fifteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries, Muratori focuses upon vegetarianism and veganism as developing debates, maintaining that 'the term "vegetarianism" can and should be applied to periods before the coinage of the word in the nineteenth century'.[7] Romantic vegetarianism hovers quietly in the margins of this well-researched study, anticipating the coining of the term 'vegetarian' in the nineteenth century.

Chapter One, 'Sacrifice', opens with the question that is confronted by Porphyry in Book Two of *On Abstinence*: 'Is it legitimate for a vegetarian philosopher to sacrifice animals?',[8] and carefully traces Porphyry's disentanglement of the difference between killing animals as offerings and killing animals for food. Muratori commences her study of Porphyry's Renaissance afterlives in the fifteenth-century, where '*On Abstinence* became a point of reference within the fifteenth-century Neoplatonic revival' due to the notion of animal sacrifice as being 'integral to the fundamental question regarding the compatibility of Platonism and Christianity'.[9] Fifteenth-century navigations between paganistic Platonism, with its reverence of natural bodies, daemons, and 'fictional deities, similar to those "invented by the poets"',[10] and Christianity find a convergence in the thought of Basil Bessarion and his

[5] Muratori, p. xii.
[6] Muratori, p. 7.
[7] Muratori, p. 7.
[8] Muratori, p. 14.
[9] Muratori, p. 17.
[10] Muratori, referencing George of Trebizond's *Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*: 'Sacrificia non illis primis, sed coelo ipsi, et soli, ac lunae, his inferioribus diis […] offerenda esse censet', p. 19 n.39.

contemporary and interlocutor, Marsilio Ficino. Ficino, estimating Plato's wisdom as a gift from God, reconciles Platonism and Christianity, and his translations of Plato and Porphyry verge nearer to acts of intervention and selective interpretation. Muratori writes: 'Ficino understands translation as an occasion to reshuffle and restructure the original material, presenting to the reader not simply an abridged version, but rather a new logical sequence, an ultimately his own interpretation of Porphyry's main tenets'.[11] In a letter upon his translations of Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus, Ficino explains to Giovanni de' Medici: '"I have not translated each and every word … but have instead conveyed the meaning. […] I have been obliged occasionally to insert some words either for continuity or for clarity"'.[12] Ficino's act of translation sacrifices the original text in favour of an interpreted meaning, and, although not considered by Muratori, Romantic readers of Ficino and translators and interpreters of Plato, Plotinus, and Porphyry in their own right—such as Coleridge, Taylor, and Shelley—carry forward Ficino's interpretive art of translation.

Chapter Two, 'Health', considers the holistic health benefits of vegetarianism as they are espoused by Porphyry and his translators. For Porphyry, 'the strength provided by vegetable food makes one a better philosopher', where 'the health of a strong body is a prerequisite for performing "strong" thinking'.[13] But, for Porphyry's translators, appetite, habit, and custom frequently outweigh the benefits of the 'strong thinking' afforded by vegetarianism. Commencing with a discussion of Seneca's lapsed vegetarianism, Muratori introduces Thomas Taylor as another translator and interpreter of Porphyry who strays from abstinence. On his 1823 English translation of *On Abstinence*, Muratori writes:

> [Taylor] explains in his introduction that he himself 'found it expedient to make use of a fleshy diet' in order to engage actively in his philosophical activities. […] Speaking of himself in the third person, he explains that 'nothing but an imperious necessity, from causes which it would be superfluous to detail at present, could have induced him to adopt animal, instead of vegetable nutriment'. Ironically, in order to translate Porphyry's *On Abstinence* it seems that one requires the energy only animal food can provide.[14]

Taylor's excuses hold no weight against Muratori's close examination of Porphyry's nuanced distinctions between bodily and mental strength in *On Abstinence*, where vegetarianism is deemed 'unsuitable for people whose professions require sheer bodily strength', but is 'the diet appropriate to a philosopher'. 'Porphyry thus distinguishes between the energy needed for physical activities and the intensity of philosophical speculation, which does

[11] Muratori, p. 39.
[12] Muratori, p. 25.
[13] Muratori, p. 67.
[14] Muratori, pp. 68-69.

not count as physically strenuous in the same way. Thomas Taylor, therefore, would have had no excuse'.[15] Chapter Two also surveys post-Porphyrian exceptions to vegetarianism and differentiations between types of meat. In Erasmus's *De esu carnium*, 'Meat-eating has to be resisted, unless one's health (or rather, life) is in serious danger'.[16] Ficino, in *De vita*, prescribes a nutritional regiment for scholars that includes specific types of meat in moderation, and expresses a strong concern for reducing melancholia, which scholars are prone to. '*De vita longa* was written in the 1480s, the years during which Ficino was also engaged in translating Porphyry's *On Abstinence*', Muratori notes, and the afterlife of *On Abstinence* is extended through Ficino into a notable influence upon Romantic writers: Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Drawing upon Ficino's warning against scholars' consumption of pork for fear of aggravating their melancholic dispositions, Burton claims: "'*porke*, of all meats, is most nutritive in his owne nature, but altogether unfit for such as live at ease, are any wayes unsound of Body and minde'".[17] Although not mentioned in this study, Charles Lamb's tongue-in-cheek *Dissertation upon Roast Pig*, secretly sourced from Porphyry's *On Abstinence*,[18] offers tantalizing insight into the Romantics' digestion of Porphyry by way of his Renaissance revivers, including Burton.

Chapter Three, 'Otherness', focuses upon empire and colonialization during the Renaissance. Muratori draws careful attention to distinctions between anthropophagy and colonial constructions of identity, affirming that 'the anthropophagi of antiquity and the "new" cannibals are entirely different groups of people', and emphasises 'how the opposition between anthropophagy and vegetarianism acquired new meaning in the Renaissance'.[19] Anthropophagy and vegetarianism are both scrutinised as potentially prelapsarian conditions. Muratori discusses Porphyry's treatment of Pythagoras' turn towards vegetarianism as a direct opposition to anthropophagy, noting that 'Porphyry's own argumentation tightly links these two apparently opposite diets, showing that they are deeply intertwined in the myth of the origin'.[20] The discussions of a prelapsarian condition and utopian state in Chapter Three flow into Chapter Four, 'Rationality', which commences with Porphyry's argument in Book 3 of *On Abstinence* that animals are rational. Muratori pointedly picks up conversations between Descartes and Henry More first broached in the Introduction, where More's fear for the "'destiny of animals", if they are to be considered machines' is rebutted by Descartes' denouncement of "'Pythagorean superstition'", or the metempsychosis that would posit rational, human souls as occupying animal bodies. In tracing Descartes' argument back to Porphyry's *On Abstinence*, Muratori demonstrates how the Cartesian "'modern" approach to the human-animal distinction' is a

[15] Muratori, p. 69.
[16] Muratori, p. 73.
[17] Muratori, pp. 77 and 80.
[18] See Chris Murray, *China from the Ruins of Athens and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 99-132.
[19] Muratori, p. 121.
[20] Muratori, p. 126.

'result of overlooking the legacy of earlier philosophical traditions'.[21] Porphyry is brought to the forefront as an overlooked influence upon Cartesian modernity.

Chapter Four draws attention to discussions of Christianity and the myth of biblical vegetarianism, and in examining an exchange between religious reformers Fausto Sozzini and Francesco Pucci, Muratori refers to Shelley's *A Vindication of Natural Diet*. For Pucci, 'Adam could eat plants without letting death enter the Garden of Eden' because, in agreement with Porphyry, plants are soulless and 'undergo a transformation, rather than a proper death, as animals do'.[22] Tracing a connection between Pucci and Shelley, Muratori notes: 'Shelley will go as far as stating that meat-eating was the Fall', and quotes from the poet's *Vindication of Natural Diet*:

> I hold that the depravity of the physical and moral nature of man originated in his unnatural habits of life. […] The allegory of Adam and Eve eating of the tree of evil, and entailing upon their posterity the wrath of God, and the loss of everlasting life, admits of no other explanation, than the disease and crime that have flowed from unnatural diet.[23]

Porphyry, along with Plutarch, is an influence upon Shelley's *Queen Mab*, wherein Shelley's note on 'abstinence from animal food' parallels his *Vindication*,[24] and one wishes that Muratori had pursued this line of enquiry further. But this single reference to Shelley's *Vindication* is evidence of the profitable potential to be gained by Romanticist readers of *Renaissance Vegetarianism*, where, 'as Porphyry was perhaps the first to state in unequivocal terms', diet 'is a touchstone for testing the translation of philosophical convictions into practice'.[25] Literal and figurative translations of ethical, philosophical, and dietary ideas upon vegetarianism and veganism connect ancient and Early Modern thought in Muratori's admirable study, with glimpses of Thomas Taylor and Shelley suggesting the future of Porphyry's reception in the Romantic period.[26]

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[21] Muratori, pp. 168-69.

[22] Muratori, p. 196.

[23] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, quoted from *Selected Poetry, Prose and Letters*, ed. by A. S. B. Glover (London: Nonesuch Press, 1951), pp. 900-14 (p. 900) in Muratori, p. 197 n.180.

[24] Note to *Queen Mab* quoted in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 4 vols to date (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), ii, p. 299.

[25] Muratori, p. 226.

[26] Although undiscussed in this study, apart from noting Shelley's *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, radical Romantic vegetarian treatises such as Shelley's *On the Vegetable System of Diet*, Joseph Ritson's *Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food: As a Moral Duty*, John Frank Newton's *The Return to Nature, or, A Defence of the Vegetable Regimen; with Some Accounts of an Experiment Made During the Last Three or Four Years in the Author's Family*, and Thomas Taylor's *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* bridge Porphyry's *On Abstinence* to a future indebted to and stretching beyond its Renaissance afterlives.