It’s no secret that the language of food and the language of sex often tangle and interpenetrate, like the tongues of kissing cousins. More surprising, perhaps, is that often the offspring of the two is cannibalism. Sometimes that cannibalism is metaphorical and affectionate: “I could just eat you up!” squeals a smitten lover, flinging her arms around a sweetheart’s neck. Sometimes it’s sinister and allegorical: “The better to eat you with,” cries the Big Bad Wolf, jumping out of the bedclothes and onto a red-hooded girl. And sometimes it’s all too literal and horrifying: “I send you half the kidney I took from one woman,” writes Jack the Ripper about his prostitute victim. “T’other piece I fried and ate.”

Medieval theologians linked food and sex by stressing that their corresponding sins, gluttony and lechery, are both sins of excess, of concupiscence. Even today we acknowledge that connection through words that apply equally to food and sex: “appetite,” “craving,” “hunger.” Likewise, Freud noted that food and sex are linked in the parallel taboos of cannibalism and incest: both activities involve a forbidden communion of flesh.

Freud also remarked upon the *vagina dentata* or “toothed vagina,” a cross-cultural archetype that implies a different sort of cannibalism. In visual representations of the *vagina dentata*, a yonic orifice is encircled with jagged teeth, the implication being that female genitalia is dangerous, that a woman will swallow a man, consume him, devour him. As the lyrics of a song by Hall and Oates so quaintly put it, “Watch out boys, she’ll chew you up…She’s a man-eater.” (Or, if you prefer the lyrics of Bob Dylan, “She’s a man-eater, meat-grinder, bad loser.”)

In literature, the cannibalistic menace of the *vagina dentata* appears in works such as Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, where a pit that engulfs three young men—one dead, and the other two doomed—is described as a “swallowing womb.” Later on in the same play, the lustful Tamora is tricked into eating a pie made from the flesh of her own sons, or, as Titus puts it, she is made to “swallow her own increase.” Linguistically, the notion of a cannibalizing *vagina dentata* can even be seen in many slang epithets for the female pudendum. The word “snatch,” for example, implies the *vagina dentata*, as do derogatory idioms such as “nether mouth,” “box with teeth,” “snapper,” “penis fly trap,” “organ grinder,” and “mangle,” the latter of which dates back to the nineteenth century.

In folklore, cannibalism often takes the form of a vampire, a being who is sustained not by the flesh, but the blood, of a victim. Here, too, the cannibalism is often sexualized, as can be seen in this passage from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*:

With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension. His right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare chest which was shown by his torn-open dress.

In the early twentieth century, this erotic mystique inspired the clipped form “vamp,” a name for a seductress who feeds not on the cardiovascular system, but the bank account, of her victim.

Paralleling the vamp in ancient times was the lamia, a being whose name derives from a Greek source meaning “gluttonous.” The lamia killed children by sucking their blood, thus inverting the image of an infant sucking life-giving milk from its mother. In the seventeenth century, the English poet Richard Crashaw likewise inverted (and eroticized) that anthropophagous relationship of mother and child when he wrote, “The mother then must suck the son”—that is, Mary, who nursed the infant Jesus, must now take spiritual nourishment from her divine offspring.

Though few people nowadays have sat down to a steaming bowl of what, in Melanesia, was once called “long pig” (a human carcass dressed for the table), cannibalism at some level is hardly uncommon. Most of us, in moments of stress or worry, have engaged in onychophagia, the chewing of our own fingernails. More metaphorically, we sometimes have to “eat our own words,” and certain emotional states are sometimes construed as a kind of self-devouring. Envy, for example, was often figured in the sixteenth century as consuming itself—“inwardly he chawed his owne maw” is how Edmund Spenser describes that sin in *The Faerie Queene*. Even today, this notion is embodied in the motto of envy, “to eat your heart out.”
At the political level, the industrialized world continues to gorge on developing nations, much as the citizens of England once devoured the resources of Ireland. Jonathan Swift satirized that situation in the eighteenth century by proposing that the English should begin to do gastronomically what they had long been doing economically, that is, cannibalize the Irish:

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragout.

Cannibalism of a different sort is at the heart of Christianity’s holy communion, an imitation of the Last Supper, observed by millions of believers: “Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body.” Here the sexuality is muted but present nonetheless: the Church and its members have long been construed as the “bride” of Christ, and communion—which etymologically is a “together union”—is a symbolic act of taking the flesh of God into one’s body.

More overtly sexual is the folk tradition of eating foods shaped like human genitalia in order to promote fertility. The ancient Romans had a bread known as *priapus siligineus*—meaning “phallus of wheat”—and in France a tasty cake resembling the male organ was known as a *miche*. That name probably arose as a shortened form of *godemiche*, which denoted a device known to Anglophones as a dildo. *Godemiche*, in turn, arose in the sixteenth century as a corruption of the Latin phrase *gaude mihi*, meaning “please me.” In Germany, the name for fertility foods was even more explicit: there, a certain cream-filled pastry was called *Liebesknochen*, meaning “bone of love.” Bear these traditions in mind the next time you sink your teeth into a gingerbread man.