Controlling Women's Appetites: Food and Femininity in Victorian Literature

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This project contributes to the growing field of feminist food studies by examining Victorian women’s relationships to food. I argue that beginning at a young age Victorian middle-class girls and women had to learn to regulate their appetites and eating as a way of performing “proper” Victorian femininity. Chapter one explains why the Victorian period, the middle-class, and women are apt subjects for a feminist food studies exploration of literature and culture. The second chapter discusses non-fiction advice literature that includes guidance about how middle-class girls and women should eat and control their bodies as part of their performance of femininity. Chapter three examines children’s literature: Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871), Juliana Horatia Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs” (1870), Christina Rossetti’s Speaking Likenesses (1874), and George MacDonald’s “The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story” (1875). The chapter highlights how Victorian children’s literature taught girls to control their appetites and monitor their bodies to appear properly feminine. Chapter four explores two of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels, Cranford (1851-3) and Wives and Daughters (1866).
Gaskell represents an important example of a Victorian author who addresses middle-class women’s education about food and eating and who depicts, and often critiques, the performance of femininity through food. Chapter five explores food and gender at the end of the Victorian period with a discussion of one of Sarah Grand’s New Woman novels, *The Beth Book* (1897), which demonstrates the continued importance of food at the end of the century to the performance of New Woman femininity. The conclusion offers a discussion of the need for further research and a review of how Victorian ideas regarding food and femininity have lasted into the twenty-first century. Overall, this project reveals how Victorian women, who wanted to demonstrate their morality, class, and angel in the house status, learned to use food as part of their performance of femininity and continually monitor and maintain this performance from childhood through adulthood.
CONTROLLING WOMEN’S APPETITES: FOOD AND FEMININITY
IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

BY
ELIZABETH MURRAY
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DEDICATION

To my parents, Linda Murray and the late Robert Murray.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. FOOD AND GENDER IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THE “VORACIOUS WOMAN”: TEACHING WOMEN TO EAT IN VICTORIAN ADVICE LITERATURE</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CONTROLLING “YOUNG GLUTTONS”: LEARNING TO EAT IN VICTORIAN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. FOOD, GENDER, AND CLASS IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S WIVES AND DAUGHTERS AND CRANFORD</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. THE NEW WOMAN’S CONTROLLED APPETITE IN SARAH GRAND’S THE BETH BOOK</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1  
FOOD AND GENDER IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

We do not like to see a young lady ignore our food, or turn from the proffered wing of chicken, albeit with an air of the prettiest disgust. That always, to us at least, engenders suspicion of previous banquets, of surreptitious luncheons, of forenoon indulgences in cakes and hot jelly, it may be with a flavour of maraschino. We see at once that there is a falsity in our sweet neighbour’s performance, that she is acting a part deliberately studied and conned.

Being caught in an act of public abstemiousness while eating heartily in secret is just one of the pitfalls Victorian middle-class women had to avoid in their efforts to eat correctly. Avoiding eating too much or too little, displaying hunger or appetite, eschewing meat and other questionable foods, and maintaining a slim figure, and especially a tiny waist, were also key components of a Victorian woman’s relationship, or lack of relationship, to food. Moreover, as “The Fair Sex and Their Diet” makes clear, for Victorian women, eating is a performance, though one that should not appear “deliberately studied,” and if a woman makes a mistake during this performance, it could have consequences for how men and other women view her character. The same article’s author also cautions women about eating too much: “what shall we say of an undisguised voracious woman? It is frightful that such a thing should be” (“The Fair Sex and their Diet” 9). Therefore, Victorian middle-class women had a narrow path to walk between eating too much or too little to appear to have an appropriately feminine relationship to food. Moreover, women used food as another means of demonstrating, and performing, their class and angel in the house status.
This project explores what Victorian representations of eating reveal about Victorian culture and femininity. Using a variety of texts, both non-fiction and fiction as well as texts written for children and adults, I argue that beginning at a young age, Victorian girls, especially those of the middle and upper classes, learned to regulate their appetites and eating as a way to control the body and adhere to Victorian norms of femininity. These lessons about food constituted an integral part of the education young women received about all aspects of femininity from clothing and manners to interactions with future spouses. Yet, food and eating elicited particular concern as improper eating could be linked to worries regarding class, character, morality, and sexuality. Therefore, middle- and upper-class girls and women had to learn to regulate themselves as a way of performing “proper” Victorian femininity. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler states, “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (523). I argue that one of these acts is eating, and that Victorian texts reveal the ways in which women learned to perform their gender while completing even the most commonplace activity of having a meal. In other words, what women eat, how women eat, and how women regulate their appetites all connect to performing “proper” femininity in Victorian Britain.

My analysis of Victorian middle-class women’s eating habits utilizes food studies, which “can be viewed as a new and emerging field of enquiry, which re-evaluates, rethinks and redisCOVERs the importance of food and eating in understanding the ways we live and communicate” (Piatti-Farnell and Brien 1). More specifically, feminist literary critics have been developing the relationship between food studies and feminism in recent years. In “The
Intersection of Gender and Food Studies,” Alice McLean explains that “[w]hile feminist scholars have been examining women’s relationship with food since women’s studies first formed into a field of its own in the 1970s, feminist food studies has only begun to cohere into a self-referential field of study within the past 15 years” (250). Feminist food studies may be its own field of study now, but as Joan Fitzpatrick states, “work remains to be done on the relationship between gender and food” (130). This study responds to Fitzpatrick’s call for further work in this area by using a feminist food studies approach to examine Victorian women’s relationships to food. Moreover, the following sections explain why the Victorian period, the middle-class, and women are apt subjects for a feminist food studies exploration of literature and culture.

The Victorians and Their Food

This project focuses on the Victorian period, a crucial era for the exploration of food and eating. Throughout the nineteenth century, food was an important topic of the day. From starvation and malnourishment to dangerously adulterated sweets, Victorians had much to be concerned about regarding their meals. The changing economic landscape, the increasing middle class, and the availability of food shipped from abroad meant that “the inhabitants of nineteenth-century Britain had access to a greater range of foodstuffs than ever before” (Boyce 201). Although an increasing variety of food proved available, that does not mean that all Victorians had equal access to this bounty. While the Victorian period is closely associated with the rise of the middle-class, “[i]n the Victorian era, three-fourths of the population was working class and well into the 1800s, three-fourths of that 75 percent earned just enough to pay rent, buy fuel, and
eat” (Broomfield 79). For many, then, starvation and malnourishment remained very real possibilities in nineteenth-century Britain. From the Irish potato famine and the hungry 40s to starvation rations in workhouses, lack of food continued to pose a serious problem for the duration of the Victorian period.

In fact, statistics from the end of the century reveal the seriousness of Britain’s problems with food. According to Andrea Broomfield, during the Boer War “[w]hen men volunteered to enlist in 1899, roughly 40 percent had to be rejected on grounds that they were physically unfit to serve. Malnourished, stunted, suffering from vitamin deficiencies, and nervous, these men alarmed authorities” (98). Broomfield also notes that this problem extended beyond the end of the Victorian period, and even before World War I, “41 percent of the 2.5 million eligible men, those theoretically in their physical prime and from all classes of society, were in poor health and unfit for service. It was evident that undernourishment was the reason in most of the cases” (99). These statistics demonstrate that even in the early twentieth century many British families could not afford a healthy diet, even for men.

Medical beliefs about the dietary needs of the poor and working class only exacerbated the poor diet of the roughly three-fourths of the population who were working class. According to Helena Michie, “Victorians inherited and enlarged upon a tradition that took for granted that bodies belonging to people of different classes were in some essential ways different from one another” (“Under Victorian Skins” 409). These supposed physical differences meant that different classes should thrive on different diets: “the ‘labouring poor’ were considered so fundamentally different from the middle classes that they were biologically dissimilar enough to consume food that their middle- and upper-class counterparts would not be able to, quite
literally, stomach” (Mauriello 201). Of course, this usually meant that a repetitive, plain, and scanty diet was considered to be perfectly fine for members of the working class but entirely unacceptable for the middle and upper classes. Food, then, became a way for the classes to distinguish themselves. For example, meat consumption represented one clear indicator of a family’s class status. Broomfield explains:

Indeed, one could gauge a Victorian family’s overall health and prosperity by observing how much meat they ate in a week. For example, if a family sat down to meat at every meal and could afford the best cuts of beef, mutton, game, as well as poultry and fresh fish, that family was undoubtedly rich. If the family could afford to sit down to meat at four to eight meals a week, with much of it coming in the form of leftovers from Sunday’s roast, the family was likely middle-class. If the family could sit down to meat less than three or four times a week, and the majority of it was bacon, offal, cheap sausages, or cured fish, then the family was likely working-class. If there was no meat or if meat were limited to rancid dripping to flavor the water in which the potatoes were boiled, the family was in poverty. (86)

Furthermore, the middle and upper classes deemed some foods “lower” class, and, therefore, foods that they would not eat. Surprisingly, for instance, “butter and vegetables were avoided by the wealthy for centuries because of its associations with farm labourers” (Mauriello 202).

Additionally, the working classes, especially in rural locations ate “[g]reens, either cooked or fresh, lots of onion, leeks and garlic, and raw and cooked fruits and vegetables” (Broomfield 83). However, those in the middle and upper classes avoided these foods.

In addition to having enough to eat, the quality of the food available posed another serious concern for Victorians. Food adulteration was a significant problem during the nineteenth century. Food adulteration refers to the process of adding substances to food products to improve or change their appearance, extend freshness, alter taste, or simply trick the consumer to increase profits. As families, especially in urban areas, began to rely on food produced outside of the home, “their risk of buying adulterated products increased” (117). A wide range of products
including “[b]eer, wine, coffee, tea, bread, pickles, spices, confectionery, and milk were routinely adulterated” with harmful substances such as lead, arsenic, copper, and brick dust (117). These adulterated foods could endanger consumers, and in 1820 Frederick Accum attempted to warn British consumers about these dangers in *Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons* (117). It took another fifty years before the Adulteration of Food, Drink, and Drugs Act of 1872 finally reduced food adulteration (118). The food adulteration problem spanned the Victorian period, and it demonstrates that eating itself could be a potentially dangerous, sometimes even fatal, activity, and Victorian consumers had to be careful about what they ate.

As these brief examples demonstrate, food was a crucial issue throughout the Victorian period, and scholars of Victorian literature and culture have started to explore this topic. According to Annette Cozzi, “the nineteenth century was preoccupied with food” and “food was a concern of the author and of interest to the reader” (4). A brief review of recent publications about food and literature illustrates this preoccupation as well as scholars’ growing interest in food during this period. Numerous scholars have addressed the issue of food in the nineteenth century, and a notable example is the 2008 issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* which highlights food studies and includes scholars discussing topics such as drinking, starvation, and tea in a variety of Victorian literary works.¹ In addition to articles, several full-length studies have been published in recent years. In *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (2009), Gwen Hyman explores the relationship between food and

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masculinity in texts including *Emma*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Dracula*. Published in 2010, Annette Cozzi’s *The Discourses of Food in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* explores the importance of food to British national identity. Cozzi states “that food is one of the most fundamental signifiers of national identity, and literary representations of food—particularly in that most English of genres, the novel—reveal how that identity is culturally constructed” (5). Michael Parrish Lee’s *The Food Plot in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (2016) argues that the British novel included both the marriage plot and what he terms the “food plot.” According to Lee, “the food plot constitutes those moments and sequences where the materiality of food, eating, and appetite garner narrative attention” (2). Lee links the development of this “food plot” to early nineteenth-century fiction (12). However, he notes that gender is not the primary topic of his study: “gendered differences in characters’ experiences of the food plot are significant and inform my analyses, but they will not be my central focus” (6). While Hyman, Cozzi, and Lee use food studies to examine Victorian texts, they do not focus exclusively on Victorian middle-class women and their experiences with food and eating. Therefore, this project aims to expand the existing scholarship on food in the Victorian period by exploring middle-class women’s relationships to food and what it says about their morality and class.

**Middle-Class Meals**

While all Victorians expressed concern about food, the poor and working classes often ate to survive and had limited choices about their diets, other than purchasing the cheapest foods
available (usually bread and potatoes). Therefore, poor and working-class women will not be the focus of this study. Poor and working-class women were concerned with extending a meagre food budget and getting the calories each member of the family needed to survive and continue to work. However, for the middle and upper classes, food represented a matter of both preference and status. When money was no longer the primary guide to the family’s diet, girls and women had more dietary choices available than poor and working-class women whose finances constrained what the family could afford to eat. Food, class, and gender are all closely connected, and it is only when families had enough money to have a bounty of food choices available that women needed to consider their choices carefully because those choices reflected their social status and morality.

Furthermore, during the Victorian period, middle-class values, to some extent, influenced both the working class and upper class. For instance, Julie E. Fromer explains that “‘middle-class’ signifies a moral system of values, rather than a strictly monetary system of class distinction—a moral middle ground that could help to unify the beliefs and identities of all the different socioeconomic classes in England” (*A Necessary Luxury* ix). Gender roles certainly constituted part of this “moral system of values” which influenced the working and upper classes. For instance, Ginger Frost reveals that middle-class families “had strict roles for husbands, wives, and children. It was a middle-class ideal, but it influenced those both above and below on the social scale” (3). Therefore, the middle class constitutes an appropriate focus for this study of food and gender as middle-class women and their eating habits also influenced other women regardless of their place on the socioeconomic ladder.
While middle-class values permeated much of Victorian society, the middle class nonetheless attempted to use food, dining, and etiquette to reinforce class boundaries. According to Andrea Broomfield, middle-class families “saw all their meals, including when, how, and what they ate, as a way to differentiate themselves from those below and above them, and perhaps inadvertently, as a way to create class-solidarity or identity. Indeed, food and values became intricately linked for many middle-class people” (26). With a strong connection between food and class, many women, especially the newly middle-class or those concerned about upward mobility, turned to cookbooks and etiquette manuals to help them manage the complex world of correct eating and dining behavior. Many of these women did not cook their families’ meals themselves, but they still needed to know how to direct their cooks, what to serve, how to serve, and how to eat and behave during meals. Julie Harper Pace notes that these cookbooks and etiquette manuals had “enormous popularity” (3). Furthermore, since class status tightly connected to the etiquette surrounding eating, women needed these books since “any kind of minimal embarrassment at the table would be a social disaster” (Pace 8). These books then provided beneficial assistance for status-conscious women who hoped to escape mistakes which could identify them as potentially working class.

With the help of cookbooks and etiquette manuals, middle-class wives and daughters learned how to supervise their servants and ensure that their meals, especially when they had guests, met all of the expectations for a properly middle-class household. Directing the cook and other servants became increasingly important to middle-class women, since during the Victorian period, the number of families who could afford servants increased significantly. According to Patricia Branca, “[i]n 1801 domestic servants totaled only 100,000; by 1851 the number was up
to 1,300,000 and by 1881 it had reached 2,000,000” (25). Middle-class women may have been freed from doing the majority of cooking for the family as the century progressed; however, women still remained intimately connected to the preparation of food, and the middle-class wife was still responsible for the success or failure of each dish and each meal. This meant that middle-class women were still expected to learn about food preparation since “she nonetheless played a fundamental role in her kitchen, knowing how food should taste and how to prepare it, no matter whether she had a staff of servants or merely her older daughters to assist her” (Broomfield 6). Additionally, a woman needed to know how to prepare food and instruct servants as each failed dish could damage her reputation: “The mistress’s performance was as much at stake as a servant’s when it came to food on the table and many authorities would have contended, more so. Bad toast equaled a bad mistress” (28). Even as middle-class women escaped actually cooking as the century progressed, they never escaped from the responsibility for feeding family and friends and doing so in a manner that met with middle-class expectations.

Performative Eating and the Angel in the House

As we have seen, while many Victorian middle-class women could leave the kitchen, even those who left remained associated with the preparation, rather than the consumption, of food. Far different, however, was the matter of middle- and upper-class Victorian men who could indulge and express their appetites without fear of the same kind of moral censure that women would receive for consuming in the same way. As Anna Krugovoy Silver explains, “[a] lusty male appetite, even when criticized, does not carry as much moral meaning as female
appetite, and is even viewed as healthy and typically masculine” (57). Additionally, Victorians often associated specific foods, such as meat, with masculinity. For instance, “[m]en and women in the nineteenth century were expected to eat differently: meat consumption, for example, was perceived as particularly ‘male,’ so that a woman slicing into several servings of roast beef would have been viewed very differently than a man doing the same thing” (Silver 15).

Brumberg, Silver, and Pace all note that the Victorians connected meat consumption to sexuality, and, as I will discuss further in chapter two, a woman who ate an abundance of meat could be read as overly sexual. In particular, Brumberg notes, “Carnality at table was avoided by many who made sexual purity an axiom. Proper women, especially sexually maturing girls, adopted this orientation with the result that meat became taboo” (174). While meat, as well as spicy or strong food, was off limits for women, tea was the drink, and meal, most often associated with women. Fromer explains, “Beginning in the eighteenth century, representations of tea often carried associations of femininity, especially as the domestic tea table was opposed to the more masculine world of the coffeehouse. In nineteenth-century England, the rituals of the tea table increasingly focused attention on the role of the middle-class woman” (A Necessary Luxury 89).

Victorian men could freely eat hearty, meat filled meals, while women must enjoy tea served with light fare.

Further, it was not just the act of eating suspect foods, such as meat, that was objectionable for women; in fact, expressions of hunger or appetite were also suspect for middle-class women. Since food and eating were so closely connected to gender, unsurprisingly “young women presented unusual eating and diminished appetite more often than any other group in the population. Apparently, it was relatively normal for a Victorian girl to develop a poor appetite
and skip her meals, ‘affect daintiness’ and eat only sweets, or express strong food preferences and dislikes” (Brumberg 170-171). In fact, picky or abstemious eating signaled appropriate Victorian middle-class femininity. The Victorian period idealized the angel in the house, a spiritual rather than physical being. This meant that “[t]he woman who put soul over body was the ideal of Victorian femininity” (79). In addition, the spiritual woman who was unconcerned with bodily hungers and appetites was ideally thin as a slender body was “[o]ne of the most convincing demonstrations of a spiritual orientation” (179).

The medical establishment encouraged the angel in the house who ate delicately and did not express hunger. Throughout the Victorian period, many doctors continued to espouse the belief that women’s appetites, and therefore diets, must be significantly different from men’s. Brumberg explains that:

Doctors believed that women were prone to gastric disorders because of the superior sensitivity of the female digestive system. Using the machine metaphor that was popular in describing bodily functions, they likened a man’s stomach to a quartz-crushing machine that required coarse, solid food. By contrast, the mechanisms of a woman’s stomach could be ruined if fed the same materials. The female digestive apparatus required foods that were soft, light, and liquid. (171)

Much as Victorians thought male and female working-class and middle-class bodies and the food they needed differed significantly, gender, like class, also dictated what they considered a medically “healthy” diet. Victorian middle-class girls and women, therefore, received persuasive messages about what to eat and how to eat from a variety of sources: “They were now taught food avoidances on two different levels: by the etiquette manuals which discouraged eating foods that might cause a humiliating experience, and by doctors who recommended avoidance for health and sexual reasons” (Pace 14).
Moreover, since doctors so closely linked a woman’s eating habits to sexuality, a woman who expressed her hunger, ate too much or the wrong things, or who was larger than the ideal could be suspected of excessive sexuality. In particular, Silver notes that waist size was of importance “because the large waist carried connotations of lack of self-control not carried by the small waist, the large, fleshy woman was more likely to be viewed as overtly sexual than the sylph-like woman, whose smallness spoke, through her body, of her lack of carnality” (40). Women unable to suppress their hunger or achieve a fashionably slim waist could even face critique for potentially being prostitutes or criminals. Silver notes that one Victorian text, *The Female Offender*, investigated the weight of female criminals and found that “‘weight appears more often equal to or above the medium in thieves and murderesses, but especially in prostitutes’” (122). Additionally, Silver explains that weight and sexuality were so habitually connected in the Victorian period that “Victorian erotic photographs often depict what we today might refer to as heavy or even overweight women” (40). For Victorian middle-class women, food, the body, and morality were all inextricably linked, and the woman who refused to conform to these norms could find herself labelled as morally deviant.

With the strongly negative connotations surrounding women’s eating and appetites, no wonder many women attempted to demonstrate their spirituality and purity by maintaining a thin, undesiring body. A Victorian woman’s desire for a body which demonstrated morality increased further simply by the fashion for being thin, often dangerously thin. The popularity of the corset throughout the century, a topic I discuss in chapter two, also indicates the importance of maintaining the right body size and shape for purposes related to both morality and fashion. As Silver notes “many nineteenth-century women pursued discipline over the body through their
eating habits and through the use of the corset” (48). The corset forced the body into the correct shape and limited how much a woman could eat when tightly laced. Moreover, at a time when marrying well was important for middle-class women who did not want to have to work to support themselves, achieving a fashionable size and shape proved important as they worked to attract an eligible spouse.

These efforts to become fashionably thin could endanger women’s health. This fashion for thinness connected to the fact that “[t]he health of young women was definitely influenced by a general female fashion for sickness and debility” (Brumberg 168), and a lack of appetite and a thin body were necessary to achieve this fashionably sickly body. Brumberg also explains that “[b]ecause the most prevalent diseases in this period were those that involved ‘wasting,’ it is no wonder that becoming thin, through noneating, became a focal symptom. Wasting was in style” (168). In other words, diseases such as tuberculosis made the starving woman into the ideal model of feminine beauty. In fact, Katherine Byrne’s *Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination* explains that “[c]onsumptive women are fashionably pale and slender, delicate and refined, because they suffer from a disease which ‘throws an ethereal character over the human form’” (34).

Since thin, sickly women were in fashion, predictably disordered eating became a norm for many Victorian middle-class women. In fact, in her important study, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg traces the origins of anorexia to the end of the nineteenth century: “Anorexia nervosa was named and identified in the 1870s, almost
simultaneously by professional medical men in England, France, and the United States” (6).  

Further, as Anna Krugovoy Silver suggests, scholars have traced anorexia back to even earlier in the century: “William Parry-Jones’s archival research suggests that anorexia nervosa existed as early as the 1820s” (2). Additionally, Helena Michie in *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* discusses Victorian women’s appetites and “Ladylike anorexia” (21). Michie notes that “Victorian heroines prepare and serve food for Victorian heroes; it may pass through women’s hands but they must not taste it” (26). Likewise, Gail Turley Houston, in *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens’s Novels* argues “that anorexia nervosa as a medically defined disease is central to much of Dickens’s fiction but also that anorexia nervosa is a deep structure or rhetoric of the Victorian period” (43).

Some of these scholars suggest that anorexia, along with other eating disorders, represent a continuum which includes the normal eating practices of women. For instance, Silver, in *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, suggests:

> Using a continuum model of eating disorders, those women in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who restrict their food intake in order to conform to feminine standards of slimness and to demonstrate their spiritual rather than carnal natures, thereby exhibit a milder form of the repression of appetite that constitutes anorexia nervosa. (11)

In other words, even women who do not exhibit the extremes of anorexia may still have engaged in disordered eating behaviors which express Victorian cultural expectations of women.

According to Silver, critics often point to culture, as opposed to physiological or psychological disease, as the cause of anorexia and other forms of disordered eating, and Victorian women, especially middle- and upper-class women, were supposed to exhibit self-control, purity,

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2 While doctors identified anorexia during the nineteenth century, other eating disorders were present but not necessarily viewed as distinct disorders. For example, Brumberg notes that “[u]ntil 1980, when it was listed in DSM-III as a separate diagnostic entity, bulimia . . . was only a symptom, not an independent disease” (14).
delicacy, and slenderness. All of these traits required Victorian women to monitor their eating, and in some women, this monitoring turned into disordered eating (Silver 9-14).

Many Victorian middle-class women, both adolescents and adults, experienced disordered eating or even anorexia, yet young girls often ate diets even more circumscribed than those of their elders. This treatment was partly caused by the Victorian belief that “feeding was seen as a method of molding the moral character of middle-class Victorian children. The suitability of certain foods for children, as well as the deprivation of food, played an important role in nineteenth-century child-rearing strategies” (Mauriello 194). Fruit provides an excellent example of the restrictions placed on the food for children of both sexes. Adults viewed fruit as a questionable food for children:

Seldom were children allowed to eat it fresh, and if they did eat it, it was either a special occasion or a sad oversight. Fresh fruit, in other words, was thought of as not only a very sweet indulgence, but it was also thought to cause flatulence, cramps, and other digestive ailments. Some stewed fruit, perhaps a small dish of stewed prunes or rhubarb topped with custard, was acceptable, as was a thin coat of fruit jam on bread, assuming the bread was not also buttered. As these rules about fruit might suggest, more than just digestion was at issue. Food was often used as a means to teach children moderation, discipline, selflessness, and virtuousness in general. (Broomfield 47)

All Victorian children commonly ate very plain meals with limited amounts of fruit, meat, and spices. However, the restrictions proved especially heavy for growing girls. Girls were also supposed to eat within a limited range of appropriately feminine foods, and these foods connected to the girls’ moral and sexual development. As discussed above, “[b]y all reports adolescent girls ate very little meat, a practice that certainly contributed to chlorosis or iron-deficiency anemia” (Brumberg 173). Clearly, at times a growing girl’s health was of secondary importance when mothers considered the morality of specific foods rather than their nutritional benefits.
Since food and the body were so closely connected to a girl’s morality, it became important for girls to receive a thorough education about food and femininity. This education often came from mothers who bore most of the responsibility for teaching their daughters appropriately feminine behavior. In *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Deborah Gorham states:

Victorian mothers, like mothers in all cultures, were expected to perform the task of differentiating between the sexes. Above all, they were expected to teach their daughters to conform to society’s definition of femininity. That the successful sex-role socialisation of daughters was considered to be an important task of the Victorian mother and one that began in early childhood, is reflected in the fact that there is considerable explicit discussion of the question in the advice literature. (66)

This job of gender socialization could begin at adolescence since “the onset of puberty was seen as the period when individuals should adopt the behaviour and physical deportment appropriate to their sex” (85). Puberty may have been the optimal time for girls to begin behaving in an appropriately feminine manner, yet, they started this education even earlier: “[g]irls, to be sure, were to be introduced to the feminine role even in early childhood – they were, for example, to be encouraged to be ‘little housewives’” (79). Therefore, even young girls were learning about what it meant to perform, as Judith Butler might say, their femininity appropriately.

Since mothers bore much of the responsibility for helping girls develop the proper relationship to food, they often turned to influential texts for guidance. Much as adult women read cookbooks and etiquette manuals to help them achieve proper middle-class meals, mothers often turned to household guides, child rearing manuals, and conduct books to help them determine what their daughters needed to know and to find answers to everything from what to feed children of various ages to remedies for illnesses. Many Victorian middle-class women used
these advice books since, as Andrea Broomfield notes, “Victorian guidebooks were numerous, and . . . they were bestsellers” (40).

Yet, as mothers turned to advice books to help them with their daughters, women and girls also read other non-fiction and fiction texts, and these texts served as another means of education about femininity and proper eating. According to Kate Flint in The Woman Reader: 1837-1914, “children’s literature, books aimed specifically at girls and young women, and women’s magazines had their content determined to a significant extent by assumptions about gender differences and role expectations, present and future” (14). In other words, the content of these publications reinforced cultural expectations about femininity, and this certainly includes female appetites and food consumption. As Flint demonstrates, it is hard to determine the exact texts girls and women of all ages read during the Victorian period, given “the extreme heterogeneity of readers and their texts throughout the period” (The Woman Reader 187). Girls and women read a wide variety of texts ranging from those written specifically for a female audience to texts written for boys and men. For example, Flint notes that “Charlotte M. Yonge went so far as to doubt that boys were in fact the major consumers of ‘boys’ books, believing them to be ‘more read by mothers, sisters, and little boys longing to be at school, than by the boys themselves’” (The Woman Reader 155). Moreover, in an 1888 survey of girls, they “rated the Girls’ Own Paper their favorite magazine, but the Boys’ Own Paper took second place” (Rose 41). Clearly, girls did not restrict their reading to books and magazines written specifically for them.

Likewise, girls and women encountered a variety of “appropriate” texts through family reading which was popular during the nineteenth century. As Flint explains, “The fact that
reading was a common sociable family activity within the middle-class home, members taking it in turn to read aloud from the current volume, set up a demand that nothing should appear in print which was not suitable for every potential listener” (“The Victorian Novel and its Readers” 24). Victorian families often read widely, and children encountered books which readers today would consider more “adult” fare. For instance, Flint notes how “Throughout the period, Shakespeare, Scott, and Dickens are cited as favourite family reading. Story-books such as The Wide Wide World, Holiday House, Misunderstood, Henry and his Bearer, and Sandford and Merton are, likewise, often mentioned” (The Woman Reader 193). Families read classics as well as children’s literature, and they read both fiction and non-fiction. Flint also explains that “Dickens facilitated a mode of publication which implicitly encouraged the reading of novels alongside other forms of writing” (“The Victorian Novel and its Readers” 23). Additionally, publications such as the Girl’s Own Paper and Boy’s Own Paper included fiction and non-fiction side-by-side for a young audience as well.

Victorian middle-class girls and women read a huge range of texts based on their personal tastes as well as their access to texts. Whether a girl read didactic children’s stories, fairy tales, or children’s magazines or whether a woman read advice books, newspapers, fashion magazines, or popular novels, the message usually remained the same: beware the appetite and control your body. While this project cannot possibly incorporate a full-range of Victorian texts which middle-class girls and women may have read, I will examine a variety of non-fiction and fiction texts to reflect the reality that girls and women received overlapping messages about food and their bodies in different genres and types of texts, and these texts reinforced lessons taught by mothers, schools, and the culture at large.
From fashionably sickly bodies to morally abstemious eating, Victorian middle-class girls and women felt pressure from multiple angles to control and reduce their appetites. Whether such eating behaviors proved healthy for them or not, cultural beliefs reinforced by doctors and popular fiction and non-fiction ensured that women restricted their food intake, and mothers taught and then enforced these same guidelines on their developing daughters. This oppressive lifelong requirement to follow guidelines regarding food and the appetite served as one part of the many restrictions middle-class Victorian women experienced. According to Susan Bordo, Victorian “femininity itself required the holding of breath, the loss of air, the choking down of anger and desire, the relinquishing of voice, the denial of appetite, the constriction of body” (50). Similarly, Silver explains, “[t]he restrictions placed on women’s food intake are akin to more general restrictions on women’s speech and manners” (50). In other words, cultural expectations that women control and restrict their appetites formed a crucial link in the general repression of Victorian women.

Exploring Performative Eating

To explore fully Victorian middle-class women’s relationships to food as well as the texts which educated them about feminine eating, four chapters will follow. The second chapter discusses non-fiction advice literature including child rearing manuals, conduct and etiquette books, women’s magazines, and publications for girls. These texts, all written for a middle-class audience, will allow me to establish the popular advice about women’s eating habits,
childrearing, and teaching girls about food. These texts show how middle-class girls and women learned to eat and control their bodies as part of their performance of femininity.

Non-fiction texts, as discussed in chapter two, shaped the ways in which girls and women developed relationships to food and their bodies; however, fictional texts also reflected and created the culture that connected gender performativity to food. Girls’ relationships with food were shaped by their parents and other role models as well as by what they read in children’s literature, particularly in didactic children’s literature. Moreover, the lessons internalized when young girls read these books continued to shape them into adulthood. Therefore, chapter three will examine children’s literature: Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), Juliana Horatia Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs” (1870), Christina Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), and George MacDonald’s “The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story” (1875). In particular, the chapter will highlight the ways in which Victorian children’s literature, much as the non-fiction advice literature, taught girls to control their appetites and monitor their bodies to appear properly feminine.

Novels written for adults also reveal the importance of food, the appetite, and education for Victorian middle-class women. Chapter four explores two of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels, *Cranford* (1851-3) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), and the emphasis on food, class, and gender performativity in these novels. Unlike the works of Dickens and the Brontës, for example, Gaskell’s novels have received little scholarly attention from a food studies perspective. Therefore, this chapter addresses this lack of criticism by illustrating that Gaskell represents an important example of a Victorian author who writes about middle-class women’s
education about food and eating and who depicts, and often critiques, the performance of femininity through food.

Chapter five explores food and gender at the end of the Victorian period with a discussion of one of Sarah Grand’s New Woman novels, *The Beth Book*. While Grand’s novel highlights women’s rights and other political topics, such as lock hospitals and vivisection, her representation of food and gender shares much with the non-fiction, children’s literature, and novels from earlier in the century. *The Beth Book*, which follows the main character through a tumultuous childhood, bad marriage, and brief period of independence, demonstrates the continued importance of food to the performance of New Woman femininity. In particular, Grand links her New Woman, Beth, to control over the appetite and to self-sacrifice.

Finally, in the brief conclusion I discuss the need for further research on food, gender, and the Victorian period. In particular, non-fiction, children’s literature, and New Woman novels should receive more scholarly attention. I also highlight how Victorian ideas regarding food and femininity remain influential and have, in fact, lasted into the twenty-first century.
[W]hat shall we say of an undisguised voracious woman? It is frightful that such a thing should be; yet, nevertheless, we lie not when we assert its existence. Gluttony is not altogether a male sin; it can be found in the female. How often have we beheld it in the Park carriages rolling by, containing enormous women, bursting with plethora, in whose rubicund countenances the awful signs of habitual hot luncheons appeared! Are they to be pitied? Yes; but their husbands are more pitiable still. For we cannot conceive of anything more wretched and deplorable than the case of a man who, after his day’s work in the City or at Chambers, returns home with a freshened appetite, and seats himself at table with a few friends whom he proposes hospitality to entertain—when, opposite him, the partner of his couch, the once slim and elegant Laura Matilda, sits in mute obesity, her perceptions dulled by satiety, and a sullen scorn upon her heavy lip. From “The Fair Sex and Their Diet.” *The Lady’s Newspaper*, 3 Jan. 1857, p. 9.

The “undisguised voracious woman” described above illustrates a few of the many concerns which Victorians had about women’s eating habits: overeating, expressing appetite, developing a large round figure, and becoming unattractive to men. “The Fair Sex and Their Diet” is just one example of the large number of Victorian non-fiction texts, such as newspaper and magazine articles, advice books, and child rearing manuals, which provided girls and women of all ages instruction in how to avoid these problems by controlling their appetites, eating properly, and regulating their bodies. The authors of these publications possessed varying levels of expertise, and they included mothers, doctors, religious figures, editors, and anonymous writers. While these publications occasionally reveal minor disagreements or debates about, for instance, how much meat women should eat or whether women should tightly lace their corsets, throughout the Victorian period the advice remains strikingly consistent. Therefore, this chapter
examines a wide range of non-fiction texts published throughout the Victorian period to reveal the frequent and overlapping messages women received about food from childhood to adulthood. The chapter is organized by age group (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) followed by a final section about the corset. Each element highlights some of the special concerns regarding food and eating related to different stages in women’s lives. Consistently, these non-fiction texts taught middle-class women that throughout their lives they had to monitor and control their relationship to food as a crucial component of performing femininity, thereby demonstrating their class and status as angels in the house.

While food and eating recur as common topics in these non-fiction texts, scholars writing about food or gender in the Victorian period have not fully explored these subjects. For example, Andrea Broomfield’s *Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History* and Emma Kay’s *Dining with the Victorians: A Delicious History* both cover a wide range of topics related to Victorian eating habits including recipes, food prices, food technology, and class issues. While both scholars discuss women’s roles as either the cook or supervisor of her family’s meals, neither examines the role of advice literature in shaping either girls’ or women’s appetites or eating habits. Similarly, historians writing about Victorian children spend little time discussing food and gender. Ginger Frost’s *Victorian Childhoods* only occasionally references food, primarily when discussing children living in poverty. In *Victorian Childhood: Themes and Variations*, Thomas E. Jordan briefly discusses nutrition and the adulteration of food which was so common in the Victorian period. Yet, neither discusses advice literature’s role in shaping children’s, especially girls’, eating habits. Scholars writing about Victorian girls and women also spend little time discussing advice literature’s emphasis on food. Lynne Vallone’s *Disciplines of*
Virtue: Girls’ Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries explores “the ‘growing’ girl and her culture’s attempts to anticipate, remark, and control that growth” (2). While Vallone includes “conduct literature, and historical and cultural practices” in her study, she does not address food and eating in conjunction with girls’ growth or culture (2). However, Deborah Gorham’s The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal briefly addresses advice literature written for mothers, and she explains some of the recommendations these publications provided about how mothers should manage their children’s diet and exercise. However, Gorham’s discussion of food and advice literature does not go beyond this topic. In “Feast of Burden: Food, Consumption and Femininity in Nineteenth-Century England,” historian Julie Harper Pace explores how dining habits changed significantly between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how these changes, and the conduct books which taught women about them, meant that many women no longer cooked or served food but became elegant hostesses with numerous rules to follow. Pace also argues that “Englishwomen retiring from the kitchen was a gradual change but reached its full expression in the early half of the nineteenth century when the separation between women and food preparation led to many other rituals of femininity, and may even have evolved into a separation between women and eating itself” (3). Lastly, while both Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Anna Krugovoy Silver address advice literature and women’s relationships to food, they do so within the context of anorexia and its nineteenth-century origin. Therefore, while food and gender during the Victorian period have interested some historians and literary scholars, advice literature’s role in instructing girls and women how to eat remains a topic which merits further study to extend and fill in gaps in the existing scholarship.
Moreover, exploring a variety of non-fiction advice literature proves important in an examination of gender and food in the Victorian period because of the widespread popularity of these texts, especially among middle-class readers. As Natalie Kapetanios Meir explains, “what makes the mid-nineteenth century unique in a broad historical context is the increasing number of works on social instruction targeted for the first time at the middle and working classes” (“A Fashionable Dinner” 36). This popularity is such that some “were bestsellers” (Broomfield 40).\(^1\) Clearly, such a wide readership increased the potential of these advice texts to influence the behaviors and beliefs of the Victorian women who read them. But did readers always obey? Kate Flint urges caution: “[i]t would be improbable to think that many nineteenth-century readers actually set about following the instructions proffered in these manuals in any systematic way” (The Woman Reader 117). Nevertheless, as Flint confirms, “their impact may be thought of as several-fold. The reiteration of the views about a woman’s proper role, and the way in which reading helps form her social function and attitudes must have served as a confirmation and consolidation of the dominant ideology of the period” (The Woman Reader 117). While Victorian women may not have followed every suggestion regarding etiquette, cooking, diet, dress, or behavior, these texts did have the power to reinforce gender norms. Additionally, as Julie Harper Pace suggests, “these works present an inestimable picture of what people valued or ought to value” (3). Thus, though these books and magazine articles may not fully reflect

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\(^1\) A few examples of these bestsellers include Eliza Warren’s “How I Managed My House on Two Hundred Pounds a Year” (which sold 36,000 copies in its first year) and How I Managed My Children From Infancy to Marriage (sold 20,000 copies),” and “Alexis Soyer’s The Modern Housewife or Menagere, which was published in 1849 and sold 30,000 by 1857” (Branca 13).
Victorian women’s actual behavior at home or during social events, they do reveal cultural or societal beliefs and assumptions about how women should perform their femininity.

These texts are also useful as a way of analyzing the cultural pressures Victorian women felt regarding their eating and bodies. Women’s small and controlled appetites were seen as a natural aspect of middle-class femininity; however, matters of food and eating required women to expend a significant amount of time and effort to meet these expectations. Gorham argues, since the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of femininity, which is based on a conception of human psychology that assumes that feminine qualities are ‘natural’, has been the major ideological agent in enforcing the subordination of women. Intimations of the concept are, to be sure, found earlier, but it is only at the end of the eighteenth century that a self-consciously constructed theory about psychological differences between males and females began to be developed. In the Victorian period, the era of the ‘Angel in the House’, the idea of femininity came to full flower. (5)

Food and the appetite formed part of this “concept of femininity” that contributed to “the subordination of women.” Moreover, these pressures could powerfully influence women, since, as Susie Orbach explains, “women are continually manipulated by images of proper womanhood, which are extremely powerful because they are presented as the only reality. To ignore them means to risk being an outcast” (9). Middle-class Victorian women certainly faced consequences for any failures to meet the general expectations about their appetites. For the Victorians “food is both a moral and a class question,” and “[t]he language of etiquette books leaps from notions of what is polite to pronouncements on what is moral” (Michie, The Flesh Made Word 18). Therefore, women exhibiting incorrect appetites or behavior during meals risked having their morality questioned and put themselves at risk of becoming social outcasts. Predictably, then, women’s eating habits are a common topic in Victorian advice literature, and adolescent girls and women often expressed their concerns and anxieties about meeting, or
failing to meet, these expectations by writing to magazines, such as *The Girl’s Own Paper* and *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*, specifically asking for advice about food and their bodies. Therefore, these non-fiction texts reveal many women’s beliefs and anxieties as well as the education they received from advice literature regarding food and the body.

Childhood

The advice non-fiction texts provide about food and eating begins with young children and guidance given to parents, and particularly mothers. Advice literature from throughout the nineteenth century makes clear that a significant part of a Victorian mother’s job constitutes teacher her children, especially her daughters, about how and what to eat. Texts providing advice about motherhood were common during this time because “[m]otherhood came to be defined as a skill that had to be learned, rather than as a behaviour that could be acquired simply by contact with other women who had been mothers” (Gorham 65). The proliferation of child rearing manuals and advice literature which discuss eating testifies to the fact that teaching children about food and through food concerns mothers and authors alike. Generally, this advice literature for mothers groups all young children, regardless of gender; however, notable exceptions existed which will be discussed at the end of this section. While, for the most part, this advice applies to boys and girls, it is still important to begin by exploring strictures on children’s diets since the diets and even bodies of adolescent girls and grown women were often thought to be naturally “childlike.” Therefore, exploring advice about feeding children also connects to how young adult and even fully adult women were supposed to eat and perform their femininity.
Furthermore, the texts discussed in this section all encouraged mothers to monitor their young children’s food and appetites vigilantly. Yet why is such careful observance required? The Victorians intimately connected food to morality, and a child’s eating habits could either encourage or forestall the development of a moral character. According to Mauriello:

\[ \text{[i]n the 1800s, children’s diet was considered not only in terms of health, but also for its moral quality. Over the course of the nineteenth century, feeding was seen as a method of molding the moral character of middle-class Victorian children. The suitability of certain foods for children, as well as the deprivation of food, played an important role in nineteenth-century child-rearing strategies.} \] (194)

One of numerous examples of this connection between morality and food comes from *The British Mothers’ Magazine* (1855), which suggests that “[i]t is always better to give rather less than they want, than more than can be eaten; as they must not be suffered to be wanton” (“On the Most Wholesome Diet for Children” 107). Other authors point to additional objectionable moral traits which a strict control of the appetite could prevent children from developing. Charlotte Yonge in *Womankind* (1877) links teaching children to control their appetites to teaching them “the spirit of self-denial” (28). Similarly, *Myra’s Journal* (1895) encourages controlling children’s appetites to teach “[s]elf-discipline” (The Old Lady 12). Likewise, “On the Home Discipline That is Requisite for Obstinate and Refractory Children” (1855) urges parents to forego the “indulgence” of their children’s appetites to “teach them the power of self-control” and to avoid causing “the ruin of his soul” (J. B. 169). *The Female Instructor; or, Young Woman’s Friend & Companion* (1845) even warns mothers not to allow “this brutal appetite [to] subdue reason” (19-20). Some authors even make a connection between controlling the appetite and the development of religious beliefs: “And yet how many mothers make their table a snare to their offspring, by pampering their appetites and loading their stomachs with improper food!
Surely they cannot lead to the life of self-denial which their Divine Master lived, as their example” (E. E. [1851] 7). All of these examples reveal the very serious nature of Victorian concerns regarding children’s appetites. Since overindulging the appetite suggests a lack of reason, self-control, self-denial, and basic morality, non-fiction texts repeatedly urge mothers to beware the possible harmful consequences of their children’s consumption. In other words, one’s diet constitutes not just a matter of health; it has serious religious and moral implications which mothers must understand. Furthermore, while mothers must monitor children of both sexes, as will be discussed later, they must particularly supervise girls, especially during the risky years of adolescence, because girls were deemed at greater risk for eroding their characters and morality through indulgence of the appetite.

To avoid the potentially corrupting influence of food, advice literature throughout the century repeatedly advocates for a plain and simple diet for young children of both sexes. According to Ward and Lock’s Home Book: A Domestic Encyclopedia (1882), “[t]he food of all children, no matter of what age they may be, should be simple” (439, emphasis in original). Likewise, in Myra’s Journal (1895), the author “The Old Lady” declares that “the first duty of every mother” is to create “[a] carefully thought out bill of fare for each day, in which every need of the child’s nature is closely studied—one which maintains the happy medium between dull monotony and injudicious variety” (12). Mothers achieved this “happy medium” with a diet primarily of bread and milk supplemented with some vegetables, meat, and fruit. For instance, one mother, Eliza Warren, writes about raising her children in the book How I Managed My Children from Infancy to Marriage (1865), and she provides the menu she uses for her own children:
Bread and butter one week formed their breakfast, with milk and water flavoured with tea; and the following they had bread and milk. I gave them no choice in the matter. For tea, milk and water only, and bread and butter, with watercresses, chives, and fruit, but not stone fruit—apples raw or roasted, but only one of these relishes of an evening; thus each came in its turn, and was eaten with appetite. There was no supper—nothing had after five o’clock. At seven the children went to bed.” (36)

Likewise, in *Elements of Health, and Principles of Female Hygiene* (1852), Dr. E.J. Tilt provides a plan similar to Warren’s for feeding children:

The classic mutton-chop, or the slice of plain boiled or roasted meat, should constitute the child’s principal meal, with bread, vegetables, and plain pudding. Bread-and-butter, with milk or milk-and-water, should form the other meals. No tea or coffee, no drink more stimulating than toast-and-water. (106)

As these examples demonstrate, a Victorian child’s diet could be quite restricted and monotonous, or as Dr. T. Herbert Barker recommends in his child rearing manual *On the Hygienic Management of Infants and Children* (1859), “simple, bland, and nutritious” (35).

In the meal plans Warren and Tilt provide, bread and milk form the staples in the children’s diets, and meat is restricted to something plain, like mutton. Meat is of serious concern to the authors of Victorian advice literature, especially for adolescent girls, but these authors also suggest that mothers limit meat for younger children regardless of gender because of its supposed negative effects. For instance, according to *Ward and Lock’s Home Book* (1882), “Veal and mutton, both well done, should be chosen; beef and pork are not so advisable, they are more exciting” (441). Dr. Gordon Stables, who uses the pseudonym Medicus for his medical columns in *The Girl’s Own Paper,* notes that “there can be no harm in reminding mothers, that in

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2 The Religious Tract Society published both *The Girl’s Own Paper* (1880-1956) and *The Boy’s Own Paper* (1879-1967). Both publications were extremely popular “with weekly sales of around 200,000 copies each; since children typically shared copies, actual readership was considerably higher” (Nelson 77). However, *The Girl’s Own Paper* actually outperformed *The Boy’s Own Paper* as “[b]y 1884, the Girl’s Own Paper, with its combination of light fiction and domestic hints, was reputed to have achieved the highest circulation of any English illustrated magazine” (Reynolds xviii). According to Reynolds, “Charles Peters (who edited the GOP from 1879-1907) described the goals of his journal in the prospectus of 1880: ‘This magazine will aim at being to the girls a Counsellor, Playmate,
allowing their children to become fat from overfeeding, especially with animal food, they are sowing the seeds of disease that can never be eradicated” (“The Little Misses Miserable” [1892] 102). In fact, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) advises mothers to “not forget that many children are reared, and reared well too, who never see or touch animal food from one year’s end to another” (102). Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) as well as Ward and Lock’s Home Book warn mothers not just about the potential health risks of eating too much meat or “animal food” but also about the possible moral dangers of meat. For many Victorians, in particular, meat proved dangerous even for young children, as they viewed meat “as a food that stimulated sexual development and activity” (Brumberg 173). Therefore, for young children of both sexes, eating an excessive amount of meat could be risky for the development of both health and morality.

In addition to the risks meat posed, fruit also posed both health and moral risks for the Victorian child. Broomfield notes that:

> the authorities divided on how much fruit was too much. Seldom were children allowed to eat it fresh, and if they did eat it, it was either a special occasion or a sad oversight. Fresh fruit, in other words, was thought of as not only a very sweet indulgence, but it was also thought to cause flatulence, cramps, and other digestive ailments. Some stewed fruit, perhaps a small dish of stewed prunes or rhubarb topped with custard, was acceptable, as was a thin coat of fruit jam on bread, assuming the bread was not also buttered. (47)

While advice literature deems stewed fruit healthy, authors frequently encourage mothers to avoid a wide range of potentially dangerous fruits. For example, Dr. Barker advises mothers that “[r]ipe fruits, such as the orange, strawberries, currants, a few grapes the skins being rejected, and roasted apples, may be allowed; but stone-fruits and nuts must be avoided, also dried fruits, with the exception of figs” ([1859] 35). In The British Mothers’ Magazine, the author of “On the

Guardian, Instructor, Companion and Friend. It will help to train them in moral and domestic virtues, preparing them for the responsibilities of womanhood and for a heavenly home”” (139-140).
Food of Children” (1849) also objects to “[s]tone fruit,” and declares “[d]ried and preserved fruits are altogether improper, and unfitted for the young and tender stomach. Figs are an exception to this remark, but raisins are objectionable” (181). While it may seem odd to restrict children’s eating of fruit, much as with meat, fruit was considered a dangerous over-indulgence with moral consequences. As Pace notes, “some foods, especially flesh foods and fruit, were sensual” (9). Therefore, advice literature teaches the prudent mother to beware some fruit for its possible health and moral consequences.

While some fruits pose dangers for the child’s digestion, health, and character, other fruits, particularly oranges, cause concern because of how children, and especially girls, might eat them. Phillis Browne, writing for The Girl’s Own Paper (1881), highlights the problems oranges pose when she declares “[r]ipe juicy oranges are always popular when they can be eaten in private,” and at a public party, children “who are specially desirous of conducting themselves with elegance and propriety” struggle to eat an orange (183). To ameliorate these problems, Browne provides a detailed explanation of how to prepare oranges to allow children to eat them carefully and neatly:

Peel off the skin of the orange, leaving only a band round the middle about an inch wide. Divide the orange into sections, but let these remain connected by the band. The strip of rind can (if liked) be divided into two, so that each child can have half an orange instead of a whole one; but in either case it will be found that the sections can be removed when wanted, and disposed of one by one, and that without any discomfort. Oranges thus prepared do not look very well, but they are most convenient for eating. (183)

Browne’s discussion of oranges illustrates the way in which food, for the Victorians, can pose concerns not just for health and moral reasons but also due to the need to maintain a genteel appearance.
Advice literature not only offers mothers guidance regarding everyday meals but also the sweet treats and indulgences which children might look forward to at parties or holidays. Dr. J. T. Conquest in his *Letters to a Mother on the Management of Herself and Children in Health and Disease* (1858) warns that “Pastry-cooks’ shops are to children a very abomination, and an intolerable nuisance. There is no method so common by which foolish parents, friends, and nursery-maids, express their attachment, feigned or real, to children, as by stuffing them with the gross and vile dainties of a confectioner or pastry-cook’s shop” (128). Later in the century, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables), in the *Girl’s Own Paper* (1894), concurs that “[p]astry and sweets are as well avoided” (“Can Girls Increase Their Strength” 533). Likewise, *The Girl’s Own Paper* includes advice about the food to provide for children at parties. Browne declares, as she describes the food to be prepared for children, “you will not be told of anything rich and savoury, but only what is suitable, plain, and good” ([1881] 183). In other words, she suggests that, even on special occasions, children should keep to the plain diet so common to Victorian childhood. Another article, “How Girls May Entertain Their Friends” (1882), even describes and praises a young girl at a party who rejects the treats which her friends offer:

‘No, thank you,’ replied on another occasion a youngster who was being pressed to take cake and sweets of various kinds at a lavishly-spread table. ‘I never get these things at home, and mamma says I am always better without them.’ And the young philosopher, trusting implicitly to the mother’s wisdom, made a hearty meal out of tea and bread-and-butter. She was one of the brightest children in the whole merry flock, and proved that her enjoyment did not depend on the eatables. (Lamb 323)

The authors who teach mothers the benefits of strictly controlling children’s food also encourage and praise moderate appetites and plain meals, not pastries, sweets, or other holiday indulgences.

In addition, food, even for young children, has implications for the class status and general character of the family. The authors of Victorian advice literature also write extensively
about children’s hunger and appetites and how mothers should bring these appetites under strict control. For example, these authors highly discourage mothers from allowing children to indulge their appetites between meals. *Ward and Lock’s Home Book* (1882) critiques mothers who allow their children to be “continually eating from morning until night” because “the maternal pockets have always in readiness a biscuit or a sugar-plum” (439). *The British Mothers’ Magazine* (1854) concurs, and, in fact, advises that when children “ask to eat between their meals, nothing but bread should be given them; this they will eat with pleasure, if hungry” (“A Few Plain Directions for Preserving the Health of Infants and Young Children” 87). Avoiding eating between meals is a way to control the appetite and ensure that children do not overeat, but eating between meals also connects to concerns about class. For instance, Tani A. Mauriello explains that “the often reiterated ‘no snacks between meals’ element of Victorian dining and feeding was largely an attempt on the part of the middle class to differentiate its children from those of the labouring poor” (202). Again, as with limiting meat, fruit, and indulgent treats, advice literature gives mothers suggestions about food that are about more than maintaining the health of their children.

In advice literature, teaching young children to eat whatever adults serve without comment or complaint forms another important aspect of controlling the appetite and forming the character. *The British Mothers’ Magazine* (1854) advises that children “should not be allowed to contract a nice and whimsical taste; they should be accustomed to take whatever is judged to be healthful for them, and known to agree with their constitutions; and they should be taught to be deliberate and decent in their manner of eating” (“A Few Plain Directions for Preserving the Health of Infants and Young Children” 87). *Myra’s Journal* provides even stricter guidelines in “My Grandmother’s Rag-Bag” (1895): “Questions concerning food should not be
discussed in the child’s presence” (The Old Lady 12). To explain this restriction, the author, The Old Lady, declares that “[t]o openly consult a child as to its likes and dislikes is to encourage gluttony, and to attach an entirely undue importance to what should be as much an incident of the day as its bath or its walk” (12). Children are directed to eat whatever is given to them, and they are expected neither to complain nor to comment on the food at all. As James Mason, an author for The Girl’s Own Paper (1881), says, “happy is that girl who acquires early the habit of eating what is set before her without raising objections or making wry faces” (819). The Young Folks Paper (1889) also advises children “[n]ever to make remarks about the food” (“Table Etiquette for Little Folks” 219). Requiring children to eat whatever an adult gives them of course links back to the many moral and character-building lessons, including the need for both self-control and self-denial, which Victorians connect to food. Interestingly, as will be discussed later in the chapter, this advice also parallels the advice given to women of all ages who must never express interest in their meals, reveal their appetites or hunger, or remark on what they are served.

From limiting meat and fruit to eating meals without complaint, advice literature encourages, or frightens, mothers to enforce many strict rules by including dire warnings about the potential consequences of parental indulgence. The Female Instructor; or, Young Woman’s Friend & Companion (1845) offers particularly extreme and colorful warnings to educate wayward mothers. Near the beginning of the book, the author warns mothers of “[h]ow many graves are filled” by children who have been allowed to “eat every thing [sic] they desire” (The Female Instructor 20). Later, the author warns mothers of what will happen if their overindulgence causes their children to become fat:

for if a child be bloated with fat, which too generally happens when it is improperly fed, the parents and their friends call it a fine child, and admire how it thrives. When, alas!
That very fat is the disease which renders its constitution thus feeble; for if the butcher did not kill lambs and calves when they become immoderately fat, they likewise would die as frequently as children. Which death may be justly attributed to the preposterous method, so generally in use, of giving them too much crude unsalutary nourishment: and not managing them in other respects as nature requires, to strengthen the body from the food received. (213)

If warnings of impending death were not enough, *The Female Instructor* also teaches mothers about the moral decay awaiting children whom parents indulge and, who, therefore become “deaf to all the rules of virtue and abstinence” (20). With extreme warnings such as these about the death or moral corruption of their children, unsurprisingly many mothers took the advice in these books quite seriously and constantly kept a watchful eye on their children’s plates.

Advice literature frighten mothers about the possible outcomes of uncontrolled childish appetites and instructs mothers to use food as a means of punishment. This could entail both restricting what kind of food children eat as well as denying food altogether. In *Cottage Comforts* (1841), for example, Esther Copley advises “[f]or daintiness or wastefulness I should think the loss of a meal a suitable punishment” (199). “On the Home Discipline that is Requisite for Obstinate and Refractory Children” (1855), published in *The British Mothers’ Magazine*, advises that “[t]he diet of such children should be very carefully regulated,” that these disobedient children should not be given “[p]astry, confectionaries, pork, veal, and salted meat,” and that “[s]upper should never be given” to them (J. B. 169). Therefore, authors teach mothers to use food to mold a child’s morality as well as to discipline and control the child who has gone astray.

From providing plain food and avoiding snacks to denying meals altogether, the advice from these non-fiction texts usually applies to children of both sexes. For example, in *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* Deborah Gorham argues:
There is little general evidence of difference in the physical treatment of boys and girls in middle-class families in infancy and early childhood. Certainly, few such differences were institutionalised or overtly acknowledged as part of general practice. This does not, of course, rule out the probability that there were unacknowledged or unrecognised differences in the way in which female and male infants and small children were fed or physically handled, but the evidence that would allow us to assert with confidence that such differences did exist is not available. (18)

While evidence may not point to strict gender divisions in the treatment of young children, advice literature still mentions, and usually critiques, mothers who differentiate based on gender. Gorham notes that “[t]he experts, indeed, believe that parents were all too prone to differentiate between the sexes unnecessarily, to the detriment of the health of their daughters” (68). One expert chastises the “deluded mothers who, by depriving girls, even when young, of food and air, and who by constantly administering physic give [girls] an aristocratic paleness of complexion, are generally grieved if their daughters do not from the earliest periods of life manifest an ardent sensibility, which they endeavor to increase by weakening the physical frame” (Tilt [1852] 156).

Similarly, a surgeon, Pye Henry Chavasse, in The Physical Training of Children (1871), writes:

I have heard a silly mother express an opinion that it is not *genteel* for a girl to eat *heartily!* Such language is perfectly absurd and cruel. How often, too, a weak mother declares that a healthy, blooming girl looks like a milkmaid! It would be well if she did! How true and sad it is, that ‘a pale, delicate face, and clear eyes, indicative of consumption, are the fashionable *desiderata* at present for complexion.’ (342)

Chavasse even advises mothers that “[a] growing girl requires *plenty of good* nourishment” and “that too many parents think more of the beauty than of the health of their girls” (342). While advice literature may warn mothers about too much differentiation, especially regarding diet and physical activity, the fact that some authors felt that they had to encourage mothers to feed children of both sexes the same diet demonstrates that this was not always happening.
Moreover, while authors such as Tilt and Chavasse urge parents to feed children the same food regardless of gender, other authors of advice literature suggest that at a certain age during childhood different diets for children of each gender are both natural and necessary. For example, Matthew Browne, writing in *Good Things: A Picturesque Magazine for Boys and Girls* (1877), declares:

It is quite true that we give young children the same kind of food whether they are boys or girls; for instance, we give them both milk; for the first year they may be said to live on milk. And it is also true that for some time after the years of infancy we make no difference in the food we place before our sons and our daughters. But that is partly because we cannot, the range of choice being very narrow, and partly because we need not, since our children can do as they like in what they eat and drink. It is understood that they are to have enough set before them; that their food should be nice and wholesome, and in *sufficient* variety. Though at first the variety cannot be great, yet even children being free agents, we shall find that the boys and girls soon begin to pick and choose; and, in fact the diet-table that a girl makes for herself is *not* exactly the diet-table that a boy makes for himself. (186)

By suggesting that girls start to differentiate their diets from boys on their own and without prompting, he suggests that dietary differences based upon gender are entirely “natural” and connect to physical differences in the body:

As girls grow older and older they of their own accord make more and more differences in what they eat, as compared to what boys eat. They have tastes and ways of their own, and they eat less than boys. Any physiologist will tell you that in respect of the carbonic acid exhaled or breathed out, women and girls are much like young children—and everybody knows it without asking the physiologist. (186)

Significantly, in discussing how appetites differ by gender, Browne resorts to linking the bodies of women and girls of all ages to children. With authors like Browne who extol the natural differences in appetite girls should exhibit, unsurprisingly “young women presented unusual eating and diminished appetite more often than any other group in the population. Apparently, a Victorian girl would normally develop poor appetite and skip her meals, ‘affect daintiness’ and
eat only sweets, or express strong food preferences and dislikes” (Brumberg 170-171). Although many authors urge parents to give young children identical food, clearly it did not always happen, and at a quite young age girls could be subjected to cultural beliefs about the appetites of women. Moreover, expressing their femininity through eating, or not eating, certainly becomes an issue as girls grow into adolescents, since, as Brumberg, aptly notes “there were, in fact, no ‘fasting boys’” (99). This means that an examination of eating practices in young children of both sexes may indicate the ways in which most Victorian children face strict guidelines about food and eating, and an understanding of how all children should eat also provides a starting point for exploring how food and eating start to differ by gender. While many mothers would serve their young boys and girls the same meals and enforce the same rules about eating, eventually, whether still in early childhood or later in adolescence, this changes, and girls encounter different expectations for their relationships to food, expectations that often link them to “childish” manners of eating.

Adolescence

While many nineteenth-century authors urged mothers to treat young children the same regardless of gender, their recommendations certainly changed once girls turned into adolescents. Adolescence was an important time of life since Victorian young women were learning more about their future responsibilities as adult women, and they were starting to define their roles in relationship to men. Gorham explains, “[i]n the early and mid-Victorian years, literature of advice directed at adolescent girls was emphatically explicit about one central
feature of this adult role; it meant accepting limits and restraints, and recognising male
superiority” (101). Adolescent girls felt pressure to conform to Victorian notions of femininity
which included not just a ladylike acceptance of “limits and restraints” and “male superiority”
but also controlling the appetite and cultivating a feminine appearance and body. So, the active
and robust young girl, who benefited from the advice literature which encouraged her mother to
let her eat, play, and learn much as her brother did, discovered as an adolescent that she needed
to meet very different expectations now that she was maturing. For instance, adolescent girls
quickly discovered that “Victorian culture was innately obsessed with woman’s flower-like
fragility, chastity and correspondingly non-consuming body. As such it became tasteful for
healthy females to acquire the frail physique that was symptomatic of the wasting diseases of the
time” (Coar 60-61). Moreover, this preference for delicate women with a thin and sickly
appearance meant that “[i]n Victorian society food and femininity were linked in such a way as
to promote restrictive eating among privileged adolescent women” (Brumberg 175). Victorian
advice literature reflected this change in expectations for an adolescent girl’s relationship to
food, appetite, and the body. Likewise, adolescent girls sought advice regarding their personal
concerns about their appetites, diets, and bodies, and popular publications, such as The Girl’s
Own Paper, provided detailed instruction in informative articles as well as in advice columns
which directly answered questions readers submitted. These non-fiction texts served as a way for
adolescent girls to learn about the crucial connection between food and performing their
femininity in culturally appropriate ways.

Most commonly, advice literature encouraged girls to moderate their eating to protect
their health, beauty, and morality (a coded term for sexuality and marital prospects). In
particular, authors express concern about over-indulgence. For example, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables), writing for The Girl’s Own Paper (1882), warns “a person who eats fast is in great danger of eating more than is good for her, and there are no end to the evil consequences that may follow over-eating” (“A Few Facts About Food and Digestion” 566). Similarly, Matilda Marian Pullan, in Maternal Counsels to a Daughter (1855), explains:

the more moderately she eats, the better her health is likely to be, and the less her mind will be dulled by the influence of the body. Over-eating is more common than we are apt to imagine; perhaps ninety-nine out of every hundred eat more than they can digest, and consequently more than they want. No wonder so many medical men are needed; half our illnesses occur from causes which we can ourselves prevent, and at least a quarter from over-eating. (111)

In addition to eating too much, authors warn adolescent girls to avoid snacks as “[e]ating between meals is a grievous mistake” (Medicus, “A Few Facts About Food and Digestion,” [1882] 566). Warnings about over-eating appear in advice literature about young children too, but for adolescent girls this advice acquires much greater significance as displaying too much appetite by over-eating or snacking can signify inappropriate sexuality and a lack of morals, both of which can harm their chances of attracting an eligible husband. For instance, as Brumberg notes, “Because appetite was regarded as a barometer of sexuality, both mothers and daughters were concerned about its expression and its control. It was incumbent upon the mother to train the appetite of the daughter so that it represented only the highest moral and aesthetic sensibilities” (172). With so much being read into how moderately adolescent girls ate, it is no wonder that so many sought counsel from advice literature about managing and moderating their appetites.

In addition to controlling and reducing their appetites, adolescent girls also had to avoid arousing suspicions of secret eating. Mothers and advice literature instructed young women to
eat moderately at dinner parties and other social occasions, since “eating a great deal is deemed
indelicate in a lady; (for her character should be rather divine than sensual)” (Trusler [1791] 7).
However, eating delicately also must be carefully balanced with concerns that she might be
secretly eating when not observed by the company or her family. “The Fair Sex and Their Diet”
(1857), published in *The Lady’s Newspaper & Pictorial Times*, states:

> We do not like to see a young lady ignore our food, or turn from the proffered wing of
> chicken, albeit with an air of the prettiest disgust. That always, to us at least, engenders
> suspicion of previous banquets, of surreptitious luncheons, of forenoon indulgences in
> cakes and hot jelly, it may be with a flavor of maraschino. We see at once that there is a
> falsity in our sweet neighbour’s performance, that she is acting a part deliberately studied
> and conned. (9)

In other words, young women must learn to regulate their eating carefully not to appear either
indelicate by eating too much or secretive by eating too little. Moreover, the author of “The Fair
Sex and Their Diet” (1857) suggests that the young woman who eats secretly indulges in
inappropriate foods, such as cake, which they know they should not be consuming voraciously in
public. The author also addresses the performative aspect of women’s eating. Whether she eats
too much or too little or she eats secretly or in public, her eating is always a performance which
must never be revealed as a performance. Instead, her moderate eating and small appetite should
always appear to be natural rather than “a part deliberately studied and conned.” In other words,
women have to walk a careful line between these two extremes to maintain the illusion,
especially in front of men, that women’s eating behaviors are innate and natural rather than
learned or forced.

Another interesting example of this concern for young women eating in secret comes
from *Hearth & Home* (1894):
A charming and refined girl of our acquaintance, musical, literary, open and above board to a degree, was on one occasion observed to steal forth from the parental home in a most sly and sinister manner, much as a man might go forth to commit a murder. She was followed, and was seen to creep to the neighbouring town, where, in a lonely confectioner’s shop situate [sic] in a dingy by-lane, she was observed to buy a quantity of sticky brandy balls and white peppermint sticks threaded with unwholesome pink. These she hid beneath her cloak, and so stole home with glittering eyes to the privacy of her bedroom, where she doubtless fed in secret during the long and silent hours of the night. Brandy balls were her vice, as brandy is the vice of many of those who come to the gutter. Parents should study the characters of their children, and then they will know what is mere greediness and what is legitimate longing. (“Food and Feeding” 611)

While this story serves as a warning to parents, it also illustrates particular concern with young women eating secretly. Again, the food which the “charming and refined girl” in the story consumes would be frowned upon in a public or familial setting. Likewise, this example connects this secret eating not just to a young woman’s femininity but also to her moral character. In this case, secretly buying and eating food makes her “sly and sinister.” In addition to indicating moral character flaws which no angel in the house should possess, secret eating also undermines the Victorian belief that women have naturally tiny appetites and reveals that a woman might be hypocritically performing her small appetite in front of others. By eating heartily in private, she can maintain the illusion of a femininely delicate appetite when under the judgmental gaze of family and friends. Therefore, when discovered, secret eating could expose the fact that women naturally experience hunger, have appetites, and enjoy eating, all of which the Victorians often classified as unfeminine and inappropriate in a middle-class angel in the house.

In addition to general advice about moderation in both public and private consumption, adolescent girls’ consumption of meat is even more concerning than young children’s consumption of meat. As with hearty appetites, Victorians connect meat eating to both morality
and sexuality. Brumberg notes, “No food (other than alcohol) caused Victorian women and girls greater moral anxiety than meat. The flesh of animals was considered a heat-producing food that stimulated the production of blood and fat as well as passion. Doctors and patients shared a common conception of meat as a food that stimulated sexual development and activity” (173). In advice literature, authors often subtly hint at the dangers of meat, and they often advise adolescent girls to beware meat and reduce or limit their consumption of meat. Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables), when describing a healthy diet for young women, states “[m]eat and bread deserve first place. Too much of the former is eaten, and too little of the latter” (“A Few Facts about Food and Digestion” [1882] 566). Additionally, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) writes, “Meat once a day is enough. Say for dinner” (“Can Girls Increase Their Strength” [1894] 533). He even provides a number of reasons why adolescent girls should eat meat sparingly: “Too much meat is stimulating, and renders the body hot and uncomfortable, puts too great a strain on the powers of digestion, produces sleepless nights, and induces decay of the nervous system” (445). Another doctor writing for The Girl’s Own Paper (1899) warns that “excessive meat-eating brings many diseases in its train” (The New Doctor 681). These negative views of meat meant that adolescent girls avoided meat, or were encouraged to avoid meat, even when it caused health consequences. For instance, Brumberg explains that Victorian girls ate so little meat that it “certainly contributed to chlorosis or iron-deficiency anemia” (173). With the negative connotations surrounding meat which frequently appear in advice literature, predictably many adolescent girls, and adult women, limited their meat consumption, even to the detriment of their health, to appear properly feminine.
While meat receives much discussion in advice literature for adolescent girls, other types of food and drink also elicit concern. Rice, vegetables, tea, and bread all provoke warnings from authors. *The Girl’s Own Paper* cautions one girl, “Hopeful,” who wrote in for advice about rice that “[r]ice is a thoroughly bad food for stout persons” (“Answers to Correspondents” [6 Jan. 1900] 223). Vegetables pose a concern as “[m]any vegetables are used as condiments, and aids to digestion; but we should be careful how we indulge in these, for the very nature of condiments is to give a temporary zest to the appetite, and they may therefore lead us to eat to [*sic*] much” (Medicus, “A Plea for Vegetables v. Drugs” [1883] 445). Adolescent girls even receive warnings about drinking that most Victorian of beverages, tea. Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) explains “that over-indulgence in tea drinking is most injurious both to the muscular and nervous system. It spoils the nerves and weakens the body” (“Tea in Health and Sickness” [1882] 7). Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) also warns girls “who are inclined to *embonpoint*”\(^3\) to avoid bread (“Health All the Year Round [1884] 166). What these examples reveal is that a wide range of food can cause concern, and that authors encourage adolescent girls to monitor their consumption of everything carefully including seemingly innocuous food such as vegetables.

In addition to an abundance of guidance about foods to avoid or restrict for the development of both morality and health, advice literature frequently provides instruction for adolescent girls about using their diet to maintain and improve their appearance. While this advice often includes the authors’ practical suggestions, authors also include admonishments about the importance of a woman’s appearance. In one of his medical columns, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) declares that “[t]o look her best is the desire of every young girl, but I will even

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\(^3\) Plumpness.
go a little farther and say that not only is it her desire, but it is also her duty, for the sake of those around her” (“How Can I Look My Best” [1880] 180). Furthermore, authors connect this “duty” to appear beautiful to a girl’s food and eating. For example, Brumberg explains that “[f]ood was to be feared because it was connected to gluttony and to physical ugliness,” and “[c]areful, abstemious eating was presented as insurance against ugliness and loss of love” (176). Lola Montez’s The Arts of Beauty; or, Secrets of a Lady’s Toilet (1858) teaches readers about the importance of beauty and a girl’s responsibility to cultivate her appearance. Montez declares “that the girl should understand, as soon as she comes to the years of discretion, or as soon as she is old enough to realize the importance of beauty to a woman, that she has, to a certain extent, the management of her own form within her power” (26). Moreover, Montez particularly connects food to the complexion since “[a] stomach frequently crowded with greasy food, or with artificial stimulants of any kind, will in a short time spoil the brightest complexion. All excesses tend to do the same thing” (39). A few decades later, The Girl’s Own Paper published many articles about beauty with similar advice. Medical articles by Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) include an abundance of advice about the relationship between beauty and eating. Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) explains that “[f]ew girls, indeed, have the slightest notion of how intimate is the connection between personal appearance and a good digestion. The errors in diet I refer to are more particularly intemperance in eating, eating between meals, eating too freely of fruits, pastry, and sweets” (“How Can I Look My Best” [1880] 180). Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) even connects aging to diet: “If you wish then to retain your youth and beauty, be most careful how you eat and drink, for there is nothing that will age one sooner than errors in diet” (180). Significantly, these publications teach adolescent girls that beauty is within their control if they
simply follow a prescribed set of rules about their eating. Conversely, girls who are not beautiful are to blame for not following these same rules about diet.

*The Girl’s Own Paper* also includes advice for many young women who wrote to the magazine asking questions about food and how to improve their appearance. One, “Kitty,” writing to the publication for guidance about her complexion, receives the following suggestions:

> Eruptions on the face arise from various causes. A bad digestion, unwholesome food, swallowing food too quickly before half masticated, employing the brain too soon after meals (which should never be set at work while the stomach is engaged), stooping the head at any employment after meals, poorness of blood from insufficient or low diet, eating too many sweet things (causing acidity), intemperance, or, lastly not using good soap, once a day, in washing the face. ("Answers to Correspondents" [14 Feb. 1880] 111)

Even in matters of appearance or beauty, the advice given often comments on matters of food and eating. “Iris” asked for advice for her red nose, and she is told to “[g]ive up tea and every other indigestible food. Your nose will cease to trouble you if you are careful of your digestion” ("Answers to Correspondents" [16 July 1898] 672). Rather than giving her advice about avoiding the sun or heat during the summer, the response directs “Iris” to change her diet. “Anxious One” asked for help to get rid of her double chin, and she is told:

> [t]he treatment of obesity we have over and over again described. The chief points to attend to are to reduce the amounts of starchy or sugary food taken; to take liquids only in great moderation; to forego alcohol in any form, and to take plenty of exercise daily. Tight lacing and wearing tight collars are also said to produce double chins. ("Answers to Correspondents" [7 Jan. 1899] 239)

These represent a few examples of the numerous responses *The Girl’s Own Paper* published in reply to questions about beauty and diet. Clearly, adolescent girls who read the paper had concerns about improving their appearance, and many of the girls connected these concerns to diet and sought advice about how to change their diet to improve their beauty. Likewise, even
when the questions focused solely on improving the appearance, the response brought in suggestions regarding food.

Seeking advice about a double chin is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to advice literature’s discussion of weight and weight loss. Dieting and weight loss discussions appear frequently in many of these non-fiction publications. Furthermore, the regularity of the discussions about dieting and weight loss reinforce the connection Victorians made between femininity and maintaining a slim body. The desire for a small and beautiful body led many adolescent girls to seek radical solutions. For example, “Miss Murfin” wrote to *The Ladies’ Treasury* (1859) seeking advice because “though in her teens, she is growing very unbecomingly stout,” and she has already attempted several solutions: “drinking vinegar, eating as little as possible, tight lacing, which makes her very red, has tried quantities of medicine, but that, in spite of all these remedies, the evil increases” (“Answers to Correspondents” 319). Over and over again, adolescent girls like “Miss Murfin” ask for help to control their weight and their figures, and many admit to trying extreme treatments before writing to a publication for guidance.

Radical remedies, such as drinking vinegar, appear in *The Girl’s Own Paper* quite often as well. Young women could write to *The Girl’s Own Paper* with a request for advice, and the editor answered many questions in each “Answers to Correspondents” column. Although “Answers to Correspondents” addresses many questions on topics ranging from recipes and sewing to seeking employment, food, losing weight, and improving the appearance are very common topics in these columns. Moreover, girls often ask for advice about drinking vinegar to lose weight, and while *The Girl’s Own Paper* always advises against it, the frequency of the
questions in columns year after year indicates that it was a common weight loss strategy. For example, in 1880 the editor tells “Ross,” “[y]our suggestion respecting the applicability of vinegar quite shocks us. You little know how ill you soon would be” (“Answers to Correspondents” [24 Apr. 1880] 272). Nine years later, the editor warns “Violet” that she “seems to be very young and foolish. She drinks vinegar, and writes love poems . . . To take much vinegar means to destroy her digestion and deteriorate the blood, and she will cease to be a worthy object of love if she fall into ill-health through her own folly” (“Answers to Correspondents” [29 June 1889] 624). Then, again in 1894, “Max Tresham” learns that a “plan for reducing her stoutness, by drinking vinegar and wearing tight stays,” is a most ignorant and injurious one” (“Answers to Correspondents” [24 Feb. 1894] 334). The response to “Lover of ‘G.O.P.’” is even more emphatic: “What rubbish, in the shape of ‘several books’ have you read, recommending the drinking of vinegar to reduce obesity? ‘A wineglassful every day for a week!’ It is quite shocking. You may possibly reduce wholesome flesh to a condition of disease, to end in dropsy, as one very tempting result” (“Answers to Correspondents” [15 Dec. 1894] 176).

In addition to repeated warnings about drinking vinegar, the “Answers to Correspondents” also warns readers about other fad or extreme diets. “Gertrude Adair” receives an admonishment about her unusual diet: “[y]our question is a strange one. We cannot understand your dieting yourself on either eggs or figs. We ‘would not give a fig’ for such a diet!” (“Answers to Correspondents” [14 Mar. 1885] 383). Figs might be an acceptable fruit for children, but the editor, clearly, does not approve of sticking to figs for dieting young women. The “Answers to Correspondents” column in The Girl’s Own Paper admirably rejects and

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4 Victorians often called their corsets “stays.”
critiques extreme diets, such as drinking vinegar, yet other articles in the paper, many of them by Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables), contradict this advice and still emphasize the unattractiveness of being over-weight or possessing a large body or waist and highlight the desirability of achieving the slim and beautiful body associated with Victorian femininity.

Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) often connects health and beauty, but he also teaches girls about the link between beauty and body size. For instance, he warns readers that “on the figure depends, to a great extent, beauty. No matter how charming a face a girl may be, if she is what her enemies would call dumpy, she—how shall I put it? Oh, I have it—she does not appear to advantage when walking on ahead” (Medicus, “Health and the Toilet” [1890] 12). Furthermore, he advises young women to strive for the proper size and figure, and he explains “[i]n very plain English, she ought neither to be stout nor scraggy” (12). In another column, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) states, “I should earnestly advise girls who cannot wear a medium-sized corset without discomfort, to put themselves forthwith under the guidance of some medical man” (“Myra and Kate: The Lesson Their Story Teaches” [1892] 6). Additionally, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) dramatically warns young readers that “You must look upon this growing trouble as the greatest foe to your health, to your happiness, to your prospects in life, and to length of life itself; for I do assure you, obesity shortens one’s days. Besides, the longer one delays to make an attack on the stronghold of the enemy, the more strength will that enemy gain, and the more difficult will he be to root out” (6). Interestingly, in this column he connects weight to a young woman’s happiness and prospects by suggesting that if girls are too fat they will harm their chances of making a good marriage. So, while “Answers to Correspondents” in The Girl’s Own Paper chastises girls for taking extreme and dangerous measures to lose weight, many of
the “answers” teach those same girls that their future is at risk if they fail to control their sizes and figures. The contradictory advice The Girl’s Own Paper presented must have made the situation even more confusing for the adolescent girls who already struggled with their appetites and body image.

In light of the concerns about dieting and controlling their weight, unsurprisingly advice publications for adolescent girls also discuss how to eat properly. Adolescent girls had to eat the right food in the right quantities, maintain a slim figure, and beware of their manner of eating since “how one ate spoke to issues of basic character” (Brumberg 174). Furthermore, much as eating meat could be read as a marker of sexuality, “appetite was a key emblem of sexual desire, [and] even something as seemingly simple and innocent as biting into fruit indicated the physical act of consumption and so became the focus of behavioral management” (Silver 46). Articles by Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) frequently advise young women to eat both moderately and slowly: “Eat slowly—very slowly—and swallow as little fluid of any kind as possible. No heavy suppers; very little meat at any time; plenty of vegetables, including bread. Of this last those who are inclined to embonpoint should eat but very little” (“Health All the Year Round” [1884] 166). Often, he connects this advice about how to eat to controlling the appetite: “Never eat to repletion. If you eat slowly you will not do so” (Medicus, “Words to the Wise or Otherwise” [1898] 103). Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) even links eating slowly back to questions of morality and sinfulness since “[t]he sin of over-eating is a very grievous and painful one, but while we converse you eat slowly; thus, you are not likely to commit said sin” (“How About the Diet, Sir?” [1887] 214). In addition to eating properly, authors advise adolescent girls, much like young children, to “never ask for a second help from the same dish” (Caulfeild [1881],
“Dinners in Society” 314). According to The Girl’s Own Paper, carefully regulating her manner of eating is just one more important rule adolescent girls had to learn and employ to appear appropriately feminine and to retain their reputations and social status.

In addition to The Girl’s Own Paper, other publications also offered advice about how young women should eat. Reverend Harvey Newcomb, in Home and Its Associations: A Book for Young Ladies (1850), warns adolescent girls about how “your behaviour at table should always be regulated by the rules of propriety. If you acquire vulgar habits here, or practise rudeness, you will find it difficult to overcome them; and they will make you appear to great disadvantage” (70). In addition to also encouraging girls to eat slowly to not “appear voracious,” Newcomb also advises girls that “[t]o be very particular in the choice of food is not agreeable to good breeding. Never ask for what is not on the table. Do not make remarks respecting the food; and avoid expressing your likes and dislikes of particular articles. One of your age should not appear to be an epicure” (72). Newcomb’s advice echoes the advice authors gave mothers about teaching their young children to eat whatever is placed before them without comment or complaint. Also, The New Female Instructor; or, Young Woman’s Guide to Domestic Happiness (1836) warns young women that it is improper “to talk of her great appetite” as mentioning these kinds of topics “will lessen her in the opinion of gentlemen, who wish the female sex to be all attraction” (14). Much as Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) warns girls about the harm which will come to their future prospects if they are overweight, other authors also emphasize that how a girl eats can also have consequences for both her social reputation and ability to attract a suitable husband.
Advice literature also educates adolescent girls about how to eat particularly concerning or difficult foods. Peas and oranges, which also feature in advice for children, recur regularly in advice literature written for adolescent girls. For example, S. F. A. Caulfeild, in “Dinners in Society” (1881) published by The Girl’s Own Paper, tells readers “[n]ever eat peas with a spoon. You may change the fork into your right hand and use it as one, or you may press the peas with it—still in the right hand—making them adhere conveniently together” (314). Caulfeild also discusses oranges and declares, “Half-bred people may be seen inserting pieces of orange into their mouths and drawing out the peel again, showing the remains of the pulp on their plates” (“Dinners in Society” 314). Another publication, The Etiquette of Love, Courtship, and Marriage (1859), encourages men to prepare oranges for ladies: “oranges should be peeled, and then cut in slices extremely thin, and powdered over with white sugar. It is impossible for a lady to eat an orange in any other way without stretching her mouth,—spiriting the juice over her dress and into other people’s eyes,—and staining her delicate skin the colour of a frog’s!” (140). Of course, the advice here is to allow a man, who does not have to worry getting juice on his clothes or staining his skin, to handle and prepare the oranges for a delicate and more appearance-conscious young woman. Furthermore, while Victorian men also needed to know how to eat difficult foods and follow the rules of polite dining, a woman who committed an error while dining experienced a “tragedy” (Pace 8). In fact, as Pace explains, the “new ideal of femininity that linked consumption with morality created a situation in which any kind of minimal embarrassment at the table would be a social disaster” (8). For young women, a mistake while eating an orange could have social consequences and could indicate a lack of femininity or morality, thereby risking her image as a future angel in the house.
From how to eat oranges to limiting meat, the advice publications geared toward adolescent girls provide a range of very specific lessons regarding food and the body. Moreover, aside from a few contradictions, the lessons in advice literature remain remarkably consistent throughout the Victorian period. These lessons address more than just physical health, and they often connect food to issues of great importance to adolescent girls and their mothers: beauty, morality, social status, and attractiveness to men. In fact, these topics were often conflated, since, as Brumberg explains, “The thin body not only implied asexuality and an elevated social address, it was also an expression of intelligence, sensitivity, and morality. Through control of appetite Victorian girls found a way of expressing a complex of emotional, aesthetic, and class sensibilities” (184). With so much dependent on what adolescent girls ate, authors frequently advised girls about food and eating and the possible consequences of even the smallest error.

Adulthood

Just as non-fiction texts place a strong emphasis on the need for adolescent girls to control their appetites and figures, they do not excuse older or already married women from their advice and criticism. In fact, many publications offer adult women fashion and dietary advice as well as admonishments for any among them who have let their figures go. *Hearth & Home* provided this variety of content. Amaranth, the author of “Stout Figures” (1892), criticizes the “many fat unwieldy folks”; the article also provides fashion advice for the “stout” women, for example, experiencing “despair at seeing nothing in all the many fashion papers but lovely wasp-waisted creatures in frocks calculated to draw attention to the figure rather than a veil over it”
Such advice resonates with similar suggestions that they wear an outfit “carried out in all black” (493). In *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture* (1892), Steele and Adams advise the fat woman to “[r]educe an [sic] conceal it; do not force it upon public notice in a conventional gown” (34). In *Hearth & Home* (1895), Primrose warns women that “[r]ebellious fat must be kept under, or delicate features will be coarsened and fine outlines obliterated. Premature stoutness is of all things most to be dreaded, for it gives an appearance of age which is disastrous” (60). Writers even criticize mothers for their poor eating habits and weight gain. For example, the author of *The English Matron* (1846) states:

Yes! we are a self-indulgent race, this present generation of English mothers. Witness our easily excited feelings; witness our late hours of rising, our sofas and easy chairs, our useless days and dissipated nights! Witness our pallid faces, our forms, sometimes attenuated and repulsive while yet in early life, age marching, not creeping, on before his time; or witness our over-fed and over expanded forms, enfeebled by indolence, and suffering the worst species of debility—the debility of fat. (134)

Clearly, the authors of these publications still expect adult women to control their eating and bodies as much as the younger women.

To avoid the dreaded consequences of “premature stoutness” or “the debility of fat,” these texts offer adult women dietary guidelines very similar to those prescribed for children and adolescent girls: learn to control your appetite and carefully monitor what you eat. In “A Grievous Burden” (1870), E. W. F. warns women that “once fat sets in it is an impossibility to stop it without rigorous self-denial, attention to a particular regimen, and a general watchfulness over minor matters” (15). E. W. F. also gives women weight loss advice: “[t]he only certain remedy to diminish superfluous fat is to give up entirely farinaceous food. No bread, potatoes, peas, or beans; no rice, corn-flour, tapioca, sago, or macaroni; no pastry, cakes, or sugar; no beer or sweet wines, and no spirits; and to abstain as little as possible from drink of all kinds, whether
tea or coffee” (16). Furthermore, E. W. F. even warns women that “[g]reat water-drinkers are often obese” (15).

Moreover, much as would adolescent girls reading regular installments of The Girl’s Own Paper, women turning to non-fiction texts for advice about their size would often encounter contradictory recommendations. For instance, in a reply to a correspondent concerned about her weight, The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine renews her that “Fat women are generally light and beautiful dancers” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 Mar. 1862] 240). Yet, if that woman also turned to The Ladies’ Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature (1870) for advice a few years later, she would have read, “[w]hen fat people dance as a remedy for fat they render themselves simply ridiculous” (E.W.F. 18). The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine also gives women often contradictory, or even mocking, advice about weight loss. In 1864, in response to many requests for advice about losing weight, the editor informs readers: “Our opinion is that it is far better to laugh and grow fat than be languid and become lean” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 Nov. 1864] 336). Yet, a year later the correspondent “Annie Josephine” is told to do “whatever Mr. Banting may advise” and not resort to “the rude remedy of vinegar” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 Feb. 1865] 64). William Banting popularized an early version of the low carb diet, and clearly The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine supports this strict diet. Interestingly, the Banting diet encourages dieters to eat a lot of meat instead of starchy foods. This certainly provides another contradiction for Victorian women who were also encouraged, as girls and adolescents, to avoid

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5 Much as The Girl’s Own Paper, The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine was another extremely popular publication “which achieved circulation of 50,000 per month” (Auerbach 122).
meat as much as possible. Another woman also asking for weight loss advice earns a disdainful response from the editor who appears to have become exasperated by the number of women asking for help with their weight:

Lastly, S.S.B. (Brompton) asks for a recipe to reduce her fair proportions. She is ‘too stout,’ and has ‘too much colour.’ Nothing can be easier. Give up dinners; accept the situation of governess in a large family, or lady companion to an invalid; select a mistress warranted ‘nagging;’ if the children be spoilt, so much the better. The recipe is infallible. (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 June 1863] 96)

These examples, whether mocking, critical, or generally helpful, demonstrate that concerns about food, eating, and body size transcended adolescent girls seeking a husband. Even adult and married women experienced an abundance of both criticism and advice, well-meaning or not, about how to control their appetites and their figures. For Victorian women, then, concerns about eating and weight followed them from early childhood to mature adulthood.

The Corset

As concerns about eating and weight occupied Victorian girls and women, they utilized strategies to reduce their appetites and achieve an ideal appearance. Despite potentially harmful consequences, corsets served as an important method for controlling the appetite and achieving Victorian beauty standards. While fashions changed throughout the nineteenth century, a small, corseted waist, often called the “wasp-waist,” was a staple for women of all ages during the Victorian period. According to Silver, “[o]ne can safely argue that the Victorians were already beginning to be preoccupied with slimness on a broad cultural scale by the 1840s, a concern that was almost wholly focused upon the slender waist” (26). As Leigh Summers, in Bound to
Please: A History of The Victorian Corset, explains, this focus on the small waist means that throughout the Victorian period “[t]he corset was (for many women) a lifetime companion, fitted in early childhood and worn until death” (4-5). Women wanted to achieve a fashionably tiny waist, and the corset allowed them to do so even though it could seriously damage their health for the rest of their lives. For example, Katherine Byrne, in Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination, links the prevalence of the corset and tiny waist to the popularity of a consumptive appearance. Byrne explains that “[c]onsumptive women are fashionably pale and slender, delicate and refined,” and wearing a tight corset was a way for robust women to appear elegantly ill (34). Furthermore, taking on the appearance of a consumptive aligns with women’s performance of proper Victorian femininity. Byrne notes “[c]orsetry was therefore a means by which women could signal their passive, chaste and self-sacrificial femininity through delicate health, as well as by a slender body” (118). In addition to helping women achieve a fashionable consumptive appearance, “[a]ctual illnesses related to the wearing of corsetry ranged from minor but never the less unpleasant ailments, such as nausea and constipation, to more dangerous eating disorders, and to morbid conditions of uterine displacement” (Summers 111). Summers even suggests that many of the feminine ailments common to the Victorian period are, in fact, side effects of corsets (7). The corset, which caused a wide variety of health problems, became a virtual necessity for Victorian women of all ages who wanted to appear appropriately feminine by shaping their bodies, reducing their appetites, and attracting men.

Much as with the regulation of the diet and the controlling of the appetite, corset wearing was common for adolescent girls, but some mothers even had their very young daughters begin wearing corsets. According to Summers, “[a]fter the 1860s there appeared a specific range of
children’s corsetry that was designed and implemented less to ‘support’ the body of the growing child than to prevent its expansion at the waist” (211). Moreover, Summers’s analysis of corset advertisements shows that manufacturers made and marketed corsets for girls as young as two (65). *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* provides additional evidence about when girls first started to wear corsets. One writer named H.W. suggests that girls “wear, between the age of ten and seventeen, an elastic and accurately-fitting corset (those with the usual lacing at the back are the best). By this means, when the young lady has done growing, the inconvenient tight-lacing will be unnecessary, as her waist will be several inches smaller than its natural size” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 May 1867] 276). While mothers or governesses required some young girls to wear corsets at a very young age, other girls first experienced tight corsets when as adolescents they attended boarding school. Another woman, Nora, writes to *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* explaining her experience with corsets:

I was placed at the age of fifteen at a fashionable school in London, and there it was the custom for the waists of the pupils to be reduced one inch per month until they were what the lady principal considered small enough. When I left school at seventeen, my waist measured only thirteen inches, it having been formerly twenty-three inches in circumference. Every morning one of the maids used to come to assist us to dress, and a governess superintended, to see that our corsets were drawn as tight as possible. After the first few minutes every morning I felt no pain, and the only ill effects apparently were occasional headaches and loss of appetite. (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 May 1867] 276)

While the age for first wearing a corset may have varied depending on a girl’s family or school, “most women complied with societal dictates to corset themselves and their female children,” and both “[w]omen from working and middle classes wore corsetry” (Summers 8, 9).

However, one area which Summers does not fully explore in her discussion of corsets is how for many Victorian adolescent girls and adult women alike, the corset served as an
important tool for shaping both their bodies and their appetites. The corset may initially appear to have nothing to do with women’s appetites and eating and instead simply serves as a fashion choice for reducing the waist. However, wearing a corset, and especially the trend for lacing it tightly, connects intimately to how adolescent girls and adult women control their appetites. Physically, wearing a corset constricts the stomach and simply will not allow women to eat much, even if they desire to do so. Moreover, the appetite shrinks even more when women decide to lace tighter and tighter to meet the demand for an extremely tiny waist. As Summers explains, “[w]hile the fashionable ideal determined a waist size of between seventeen and twenty inches, it was an ideal rarely realized, though according to abundant newspaper, journal and medical accounts many women aspired to these prescriptions” (88). It may have been rare for women to achieve the ideal waist size, yet non-fiction texts suggest that some women took tight lacing even further to achieve waist sizes as tiny as thirteen inches.  

To provide some contemporary context to illustrate how truly tiny the Victorians’ fashionable ideal is, in current American sizing for women, a waist on the larger size of the fashionable Victorian ideal of around twenty inches is still smaller than a contemporary XS or size 0. Therefore, to achieve this incredibly small waist, women naturally had to reduce how much they ate in addition to lacing their corsets tightly.

Furthermore, some Victorian women explicitly explain that controlling the appetite constituted an important reason why they first adopted, or were forced to adopt, the corset or tight lacing. Some of the correspondents who write to *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* to share their thoughts on the tight-lacing controversy list appetite as part of their motivation. For

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6 See the following advice column: “The Englishwoman's Conversazione” [1 May 1867] p. 276.
example, one correspondent declares: “I was falling into corpulence and indigestion when I was happily directed to your columns by a derisive notice of them in *Punch*, and the consequence is that I now enjoy being laced up every morning into nine inches less than my former natural circumference, with a corresponding reduction in weight and improvement in health” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 May 1872] 318). Another writer approves of the way “[t]ight-lacing also checks the tendency to eat and drink too much” (318). Other women who write to share their experiences and often their warnings about tight lacing also share the opinion that controlling the appetite represents a motivating factor in the decision to tight lace. A young woman declares that she “did not wear them [corsets] *voluntarily*” and “[i]n my case I can only say that I suffered sometimes perfect torture from my stays, especially after dinner, not that I ate heartily, for that I found impossible, even if we had been allowed to do so by our schoolmistress, who considered it unladylike” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 June 1867] 332). In this case, the young woman herself did not decide to use tight lacing to control her appetite; rather her teacher did so, and many other women share similar stories about an authority figure requiring them to lace tightly.

During the Victorian period, regardless of whether a young woman chose or was required to tightly lace her corset, the corset functioned as a tool to mold (literally) women’s bodies and appetites. “The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” columns from *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* demonstrate that the corset, and especially when tightly laced, was openly understood and acknowledged as a method of controlling women’s hunger and appetites. Another example comes from a young woman, who appropriately chooses to write under the name “A Victim”:

> You must know that, from some cause or other, my figure has lately shown a decided tendency to *embonpoint*, in spite of my mamma’s care and attention; and such is
mamma’s dread of my having a thick waist, that she had a long consultation with several lady friends as to what could be done to keep my figure slender. One of these kind-hearted and obliging friends actually proposed that I should wear my corsets constantly—that is, to sleep in them—and assured my mamma that she had known it done with excellent effect in several instances. (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 Nov. 1863] 48)

“A Victim” does not discuss her eating habits, but she indicates that worries about her growing figure precipitated the consideration of extreme measures to keep her thin. Moreover, some writers even acknowledge that “tight-lacing has a moral as well as a physical effect” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 May 1872] 318). Of course, part of the “moral” in these cases is to control women by keeping them small, physically debilitated, malnourished, and ill. In other words, imposing the corset and tight-lacing on women of all ages reinforces their physical performance of femininity by molding the shape of their bodies, limiting the food they can eat, and restricting the activities they can do. Furthermore, this tight lacing and subsequent reduction in eating further reinforces the common assumption that women naturally have very tiny appetites. Moreover, this assumption that women naturally have these tiny appetites then leads more women to adopt the corset expressly as a way to limit or eliminate their own appetites. The corset then becomes an integral component of a vicious cycle that reinforces cultural beliefs in women’s naturally limited appetites and tiny waists.

While wearing a corset to reduce the appetite and shape the body was practically mandatory for working-class and middle-class Victorian women, some doctors as well as non-fiction authors spoke out about the dangers of the practice. In particular, they deride the practice of tight lacing. For example, in *Letters to a Mother on the Management of Herself and Children in Health and Disease* (1858), Dr. J. T. Conquest strongly critiques mothers who force their young daughters to wear corsets:
We deprecate the folly, and abhor the cruelty and unnatural practice of the Chinese, who press the feet of their female children into the smallest attainable size, and render them cripples for their lives,--and of Indians, who squeeze the head into all manner of terrific shapes, but the pressure made use of by the English nurses and mothers, by stays, tight shoes, fillets, etc., is equally preposterous, equally cruel, barbarous, and reprehensible.\(^7\)

Conquest particularly critiques the mothers who insist upon their young daughters wearing corsets as “[s]carcely has the tender babe seen a few moons pass by, ere a piece of dress is affixed round its chest,—harmless, it is true, at first, but dangerous as the type of what is to come. By degrees, this simple piece of clothing assumes the form of ‘stays,’ and gradually does the vicious system of compression go on, as an instrument of folly, of deformity, and of torture” (194). Conquest boldly suggests that the mothers of young daughters “become accessory to their destruction,” and “[t]hese unnatural practices, even at a very early age, have hurried many a lovely child into a premature grave” (198). Lastly, Conquest links the damage done by the corset to the desire to be fashionable and “‘lady-like’” (198). In other words, Conquest links the desire to appear appropriately feminine to the destruction of the health of very young girls by their own mothers.

Conquest is not the only author who urges mothers to stop forcing their daughters to tightly lace their corsets. For instance, in response to a letter sent to the magazine by a reader, *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* states “[o]ur correspondent calls particular attention to the fact that girls themselves are not so much to blame in this frightful system as are those who

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\(^7\) Critics of the corset often make the comparison between Chinese foot binding practices and corseting. A correspondent in *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* declared: “As to tight-lacing, I do not think enough could be said against so barbarous a practice. The Chinese feet-squeezing is pardonable in comparison” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 May 1875] 278). Similarly, *A Few Suggestions to Mothers on the Management of Their Children* (1884) states “But still misguided people undergo themselves, and, sometimes make their children undergo, as much discomfort in their efforts to attain a small waist, as the Chinese do to produce small feet, the helplessness produced by which is only equalled by their ridiculousness” (139).
have them under their control” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 Nov. 1863] 48).

Moreover, another woman relates the story of a friend who died because she laced so tightly she could not eat:

"I knew a young lady who was a comfortable-looking, plump little thing, with an ordinary-sized waist (for her figure). About two or three years ago she married, and got a notion she would like to reduce her waist, and the next time I saw her, after her marriage, she had reduced her waist to sixteen inches! and the sequel is (be warned, dear tight-lacers) she died shortly after from no disease exactly, but she pined away, wouldn’t eat (how could she?) and so on. (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 May 1875] 278)

As these examples demonstrate, non-fiction texts did include critiques of the corset as well as of tight lacing; yet these warnings, especially when juxtaposed with the many articles and advertisements praising the corset, did little to reduce the appeal of the tiny waist for fashionable girls, ambitious mothers, and status conscious adult women.

Moreover, these behaviors were certainly influenced by men and what men found attractive during the Victorian period, and advice literature often taught that women should both control their appetites and wear corsets to please or attract men. Men also wrote to The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine to give their thoughts about the tight-lacing debate. For the most part, male correspondents praise tiny waists and tight lacing. “La Gene,” praising the tight corset, writes, “I will even go so far as to say that if a young lady has a pretty face and figure, there is no excess of tight-lacing in which she may please herself to indulge that is not an increase to her beauty” (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 Sept. 1868] 165). Similarly, the “Gownsman” declares that “As a gentleman I admire exceedingly not only a small but a well-laced-in waist in a lady, and I believe nine out of ten of us do the same. Permit me to assure my fair countrywomen that, numerous as are their attractions, none are so charming in our eyes as a
slight and elegant waist” (165). One man, who identifies himself as “Alured,” even connects the discomfort of tight-lacing with male admiration:

I have not hesitation in saying that I am a great admirer of a slender waist, and I admire it the more that I know it to be the result of tight-lacing. There is something to me extraordinarily fascinating in the thought that a young girl has for many years been subjected to the strictest discipline of the corset. If she has suffered, as I have no doubt she has, great pain, or at any rate inconvenience, from their extreme pressure, it must be quite made up to her by the admiration her figure excites. (“The Englishwoman’s Conversazione” [1 Jan. 1871] 61)

The letters these men sent to The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine simply reinforced the message women learned from a variety of publications as well as their mothers and teachers: wear a tight corset to shape the body, reduce the appetite, and attract men.

Women internalized these lessons about the corset and tight-lacing even though some authors did object. For example, The Ladies’ Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature (1869) states:

We presume that girls make fools of themselves in this way in order to convey to others the notion that they are peculiarly sylphlike and graceful. They wish to appear in the eyes of their male admirers as light, ethereal, angelic creatures, who are scarcely subject to the vulgar necessities of hunger. Unfortunately, the impression conveyed is exactly the reverse. The lover cannot look at his mistress’s eyes for thinking of her waist, and wondering how she can smile under her tightly-clasping bars of cane. In spite of himself, he becomes an anatomist. He mentally dissects her. He cannot help thinking of those plates in books of physiology, showing the position of the ribs anterior and posterior to the practice of tight-lacing. (“The Wasp Waist” 70)

The Ladies’ Treasury attempts to convince women to avoid the corset by undermining its potential appeal to men. However, other authors, such as Eliza Ware Farrar in The Young Lady’s Friend (1837), argue that men’s approval of the tiny waist perpetuates tight lacing:

A great deal has been said and written, by medical men, against the unhealthy practice of tight lacing; but, it is to be feared, with very little effect. So long as gentlemen admire small waists, and praise those figures the most which approached the nearest to the shape of a wasp, or an hour-glass, it is in vain to tell young ladies that the practice is destructive
of health, and that there is no real beauty in the small dimensions at which they are aiming. The taste of the lords of creation must be rectified, and then the evil will correct itself. Let medical men, let painters and sculptors, teach young men that all such unnatural compression of the body is deformity. (129)

While Farrar published her objections to the corset during the first year of Victoria’s reign, the fad for tight lacing did not end as, even with mounting medical evidence about the serious consequences of corsets and tight-lacing, men continued to approve of corseted women, and mothers, teachers, and advice literature still taught young women to wear corsets.

Even near the end of the century as the New Woman gained in popularity and the dress reform movement gained supporters, corsets remained a staple for most women. Moreover, for the New Woman, in particular, cultivating a beautiful appearance and figure became part of her strategy in forwarding her message, recruiting new supporters, and combating her critics. As the New Woman experienced increasing criticism, especially for being unattractive or appearing or behaving masculine, one of the strategies adopted by many was “to stress the New Woman’s femininity, her domestic qualities and traditional values” (Heilmann, New Woman Fiction 23). This focus on the New Woman’s femininity included both her appearance and eating habits. Yet, at the same time, many New Women advocated for changes to traditional Victorian attire. For instance, Summers states, “New Women frequently eschewed the frilly extremes of fashionable frocks, favouring and appropriating the less cluttered lines and less oppressive suits promoted by dress reformers” (168). Many in the dress reform movement warned about the dangers of restrictive corsets and tight lacing, and Sarah Grand, a New Woman novelist, non-fiction writer, and orator, “was at the forefront of writers who exposed the corset as a straitjacket of the mind” (Heilmann, New Woman Fiction 122). While Grand disapproved of tight corsets, in her non-fiction, she still stressed the importance of the New Woman’s appearance. For instance, in her
article “The Morals of Manner and Appearance” (1893), Grand explains “a woman, actuated by noble purpose, who selected a costume which shall help her to please by her appearance those whom she hopes to convince by her argument, and so, to begin with, inclines them to listen favourably to what she has to say, is worthy of admiration” (24-25). For Grand, while changes in women’s clothing were needed, the New Woman must still appear beautiful, feminine, and well-dressed to make her message more palatable.

For those, such as Grand, who supported dress reform and warned against tight-lacing, advocating for changes in women’s attire did not mean rejecting feminine clothes or abandoning the corset entirely. Instead, many of the women involved in the dress reform movement “advocated ‘hygienic’ or ‘reform-style’ corsets: boneless or simply less stiff, these softer corsets nevertheless fit tightly” (Kortsch 79). While these corsets could be purchased at the end of the nineteenth century, Kortsch notes that “relatively few women wore them” (69). Moreover, Sarah Grand and the other advocates for dress reform were not successful in encouraging the adoption of these new corsets as “in the early Edwardian period, after years of dress reform, suffrage agitation, and advocacy for women’s rights, women engaged in the most extreme corsetry of the Victorian period” (71). Kortsch even notes that for many in the women’s movement “the more radical their message, the more feminine their clothing” (91). Although Farrar, New Woman writers, dress reformers, and some doctors, such as J. T. Conquest, advised against corsets, or at least tight-lacing, these critics were certainly in the minority, and “in the life of the middle-class Victorian woman the corset was a ‘universal’” (Summers 209). In fact, it was only “[a]fter 1910, the corset’s popularity receded” (Kortsch 101).
Therefore, non-fiction texts reveal that the corset functioned as one more tool to teach women to control their appetites and their bodies so that they could perform Victorian femininity. Even with some outspoken women writers and doctors as critics, women of all ages adopted the corset as an important part of their performance of femininity. Much as the advice about moderating their consumption, limiting meat, or dieting provided in these non-fiction texts, guidance about the corset and tight-lacing reinforced lessons young women learned about the necessity of the small waist and its correspondingly small appetite, and adult women continued to follow the advice that they first received as young girls. Moreover, as women grew up and had their own daughters, they often imposed the corset on their daughters to help them meet the demands of fashionable femininity and demonstrate their class, morality, and angel in the house status. The necessity of the corset throughout the Victorian period “oppressed women, physically and emotionally” (Summers 5). Summers also explains, “corsetry was a powerful coercive apparatus in the control of Victorian women, and that it was subsequently instrumental, indeed crucial, in the maintenance of Victorian hetero-patriarchal dominance” (Summers 8). The corset, much as the small and controlled appetite, served as another oppressive and inescapable requirement of performing Victorian femininity from adolescence to the grave.

Conclusion

For Victorian girls and women of all ages, food and eating prove crucial to their performance of femininity, effecting controlling of the appetite, class, morality, and even marital prospects. While the authors of advice literature encourage mothers to treat girls and boys
equally during early childhood, an examination of advice literature, which so often criticizes mothers who do not do so, demonstrates that in some households the diets of even young children might differ. Moreover, the non-fiction agrees that by early adolescence the diet should naturally begin to diverge based on gender. Likewise, these publications highlight the connections between eating and character with which Victorian women must wrestle. For many Victorians, sexuality and morality closely aligned with eating habits; therefore, adolescent girls had to learn to place tight strictures on their appetites and bodies to catch an eligible husband and to demonstrate that they have good characters. When a woman’s slightest error at the table could have significant social consequences, mothers needed to educate their daughters effectively to prevent these errors, and non-fiction literature certainly played an important part in helping mothers inform themselves and their daughters, in reinforcing the lessons girls had to master, and in exhorting adult women to uphold the rules for proper eating and conduct.

Likewise, much of the advice literature suggests that gendered differences in eating and appetite were innate. According to these texts, girls and women displayed less appetite and ate differently from men because due to their biological differences. However, the simple fact that so much education was necessary to teach girls to eat as society expected and that so much advice literature was published to encourage adult women to eat a certain way too demonstrates that these eating habits were not natural to middle-class Victorian women. Instead, girls had to learn these cultural norms, and punishments for the smallest deviation continued to reinforce the necessity of abiding by these cultural norms as well as reinforcing the supposed naturalness of these behaviors. Moreover, learning and abiding by these food related behaviors extended to adult women who expressed dissatisfaction with their figures and faced criticism for mistakes
with their appetites, leading them to wear corsets that functioned as a way to create the desirable “wasp-waist” and to reduce the appetite. The frequency of the advice given about weight loss, reducing the waist by tight lacing, and eating appropriate food demonstrates that these were life-long concerns for middle-class Victorian women. Furthermore, the fact that these lessons had to be taught and re-taught in a wide variety of non-fiction publications establishes both that these behaviors were artificial and that they were crucial to the general performance of Victorian femininity.

Additionally, reviewing these non-fictions texts does more than highlight the surprising challenges middle-class Victorian girls and women faced when having a meal. These texts reveal the amount of time and effort women spent on learning and maintaining these eating related scripts as part of their performance of femininity. In *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, Susie Orbach explains, “The driven, induced need to be slim diverts us from concerns that are more truly central to our experience of life. It absorbs an energy that could help us change the world, not just our bodies” (197). Even the New Woman at the end of the century, who was trying to change the world by advocating for women’s rights, still concerned herself with controlling her appetite and maintaining a fashionable body and appearance. The time and effort that New Women could have expended forwarding their cause focused instead on matters of food and appearance. Moreover, Naomi Wolf argues, “The stronger women were becoming politically, the heavier the ideals of beauty would bear down upon them, mostly in order to distract their energy and undermine their progress” (3). Not surprisingly, as New Women and suffragettes more fervently advocated for their cause, traditional culture imposed fashion standards, particularly corsets, that became increasingly severe and restrictive. Wolf also notes, “A cultural fixation on
female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience” (187). The food related behaviors discussed in this chapter reveal this “obsession about female obedience” especially as minor transgressions could still undermine a woman’s morality or social status. These detailed rules then served as a way to both consume women’s time and force their obedience. Moreover, obedience to these rules and the required “persistent self-monitoring has been shown in the psychological literature to be associated with severe psychopathological conditions, such as major depression, self-harm and various eating disorders” (Jovanovski 144). These conditions, of course, would serve as another means of controlling women and distracting them from more productive pursuits, such as education or advocating for suffrage. These non-fiction publications are significant as they demonstrate the common advice and expectations girls and women learned about regarding food and their bodies, and they show how much of a distraction abiding by these rules would be. Rules about food and eating serve as another means of keeping women in their inferior social position.

While, as Kate Flint explains in The Woman Reader, non-fiction advice literature may not entirely reflect actual behavior, it certainly reveals patterns in what Victorian culture both valued and idealized. Moreover, advice literature merits further study, and this chapter expands on existing scholarship regarding advice literature and its role in shaping Victorian women’s relationships to food. Yet, advice literature is certainly not the only genre which addresses food and gender. Victorian literature for children and adults often illustrates many of the same topics and concerns regarding food, eating, and the body which the authors of advice literature express so often. In fact, female readers moving from non-fiction to fiction would receive similar lessons or advice from publications in both genres. As we will see in the next chapter, popular children’s
authors ranging from Lewis Carroll to Christina Rossetti certainly reinforce many of the lessons which circulate in Victorian advice literature.
CHAPTER 3

CONTROLLING “YOUNG GLUTTONS”: LEARNING TO EAT IN VICTORIAN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

How many graves are filled, and funeral vaults crowded with little carcases [sic] which have been brought to untimely death by the foolish fondness of a parent or a nurse, giving the young creatures leave to eat every thing [sic] they desire! or if they happen by strength of constitution to survive this pestilence, how often do they grow up young gluttons, and place their happiness in the satisfaction of taste! They are deaf to all the rules of virtue and abstinence all their lives, because they were never taught to deny themselves when they were young.”

- From *The Female Instructor; or, Young Woman’s Friend & Companion*. 1845. p. 20.

Victorian non-fiction publications for girls and women frequently mention the dangers of gluttony for young and old alike, and children’s fiction also reveals great concern with teaching girls to control their appetites and practice self-denial. Even children’s fiction which emphasizes entertainment over didacticism still teaches girls about the importance of what they eat. Building on the previous chapter’s exploration of food and gender in non-fiction texts, I suggest that Victorian children’s fairy tales and fantasies provide a similar education about performing femininity through food. Victorians monitored and disciplined the eating habits of both boys and girls; however, girls experienced even more guidance, control, and criticism because excessive or unseemly eating had more negative connotations for girls than for boys.¹ The girls who read popular magazines and advice books as well as popular children’s literature encountered overlapping messages about the need to control their appetites and monitor their bodies to

¹ See chapters one and two.
perform their roles as perfectly feminine angels in the house. Moreover, girls learned that out-of-control eating or out-of-control bodies equated to failures of character and morality. If they wanted to become “proper” women, they must learn these essential lessons and apply them to their lives.

While non-fiction advice literature and children’s fantasy stories appear as extreme opposites, the connection proves stronger than may at first seem obvious. For both girls and boys, these two kinds of literature provide overlapping messages. Elaine Ostry suggests:

[t]wo genres, conduct books and fantasies, seem diametrically opposed. However, I suggest that they intersect in the treatment of maturity. For the Victorians, moral growth was as important as, if not more so than, physical growth. As the child grew, his or her moral development was as regulated as diet. In works of fantasy, magical physical growth can be a way of exploring the topic of moral maturity: it is a metaphor for the invisible side of growing up. Physical growth is related to power and independence, and the child must negotiate this power by exercising moral qualities. (27)

To explore the relationship between food and gender in Victorian fairy tale and fantasy children’s literature, I will focus on four popular authors: Lewis Carroll, Juliana Horatia Ewing, George MacDonald, and Christina Rossetti. These authors’ works teach girls that they must control their appetites, eating, and bodies as part of their performance of proper Victorian femininity.

The non-fiction texts explored in the last chapter illustrate this connection between morality and eating, and that connection continues in the children’s literature. In fact, Victorian children’s literature works to teach girls how to perform their femininity, maintain their class status, and signal their morality through controlling their appetites. Moreover, as Ostry notes, morality and food are linked for both girls and boys, but for girls eating improperly could result in more serious questions about her morality and, especially, improper sexuality. Ewing,
MacDonald, and Rossetti all write stories which clearly connect a girl’s diet, physical growth, and moral development. Additionally, Ostry suggests that the authors of children’s fairy tales and fantasies borrow the language of non-fiction advice literature. She writes “they appropriate the language of these books: the instructional dialogue, the use of the moral guide or mentor(ia), and the emphasis on wonder and growth” (27). While Ostry notes that this occurs in children’s stories meant for all young readers, not just girls, the “language of non-fiction advice literature” becomes particularly apparent when exploring how children’s authors write about girls’ eating and appetites. Authors such as Ewing, MacDonald, and Rossetti exemplify how authors of fairy tale and fantasy stories used and adapted similar messages, language, and techniques as the authors of advice literature. Likewise, while Lewis Carroll may mock didactic literature, even his stories provide readers with lessons about a girl’s appetite and self-control.

Additionally, the popularity of fairy tale and fantasy literature grew exponentially during the nineteenth century which makes them crucial texts to study in an exploration of food and gender during the Victorian period. In *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves*, Jack Zipes explains that “[i]n contrast to France and Germany, England did not experience the flowering of the literary fairy tale for children until the middle of the nineteenth century” (“Introduction” xiii). In fact, prior to the Victorian period, many in Britain thought that fairy tales and fantasies were “useless and dangerous for the moral education of young and old alike” (xvi). Yet, in the nineteenth century, this distrust of fairy tales and fantasies started to change, and these stories turned into a “craze” (Manlove 17). Furthermore, an exploration of food and gender in the nineteenth century would be incomplete without addressing children’s fiction. After all, the Victorian period is also the “Golden Age of children’s literature” which runs “from 1840 to
1910” (Honig 1). This Golden Age, with its roots in the early Victorian period, encompasses many of the most celebrated works of children’s literature from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland to Peter Pan.

This new “craze” and subsequent golden age for fairy tales and fantasies means that more children and families were reading these stories and learning from their messages. Moreover, authors geared these stories towards a middle-class audience, which is the primary focus of this study, and as Manlove explains “[c]hildren’s fantasy is for most of its history a middle-class literature, written with a strong sense of family and education values” (12). Moreover, during the nineteenth century, families often read books together, and their selections included books we would now classify as both children’s and adults’ literature (Flint, The Woman Reader 193). In fact, U.C. Knoepflmacher suggests that “[t]he notion that ‘adult’ and ‘juvenile’ texts should be kept apart did not become prevalent until the end of the nineteenth century” (xiii). Therefore, it is imperative to examine children’s literature, as many girls and adult women would have encountered children’s literature through family reading.

The “education values” of fairy tales and fantasies also make them crucial texts to explore because they teach readers about social and cultural beliefs in entertaining but still educational ways. Therefore, these stories could influence readers young and old and female and male. Zipes notes that “[t]he Victorian fairy-tale writers always had two ideal audiences in mind when they composed their tales—young middle-class readers whose minds and morals they wanted to influence, and adult middle-class readers whose ideas they wanted to challenge and reform” (“Preface” xi). In fact, Edith Honig argues that these books are so important to young readers because “[f]ine fantasies that are popular as well are obviously among the most
influential works a child will ever read” (2). Part of the educational and moral message of fairy tales and fantasies regarded appropriate female and male gender roles. Honig also suggests that “[t]he notions of femaleness that Victorian children acquired from their fantastic readings would affect their life view and that of all whom they touched” (2). Gorham goes as far as to state that “Victorian children’s literature emphasised sex differences, and should be seen as one of the period’s main agencies for inculcating sex role differentiation” (18). Therefore, while girls, boys, and adults read Victorian fairy tales and fantasies, this literature, with its focus on “sex role differentiation,” provides an opportunity to learn about how these works taught girls to perform their femininity.

Not coincidentally, part of the gender roles and “femaleness” that these stories imparted to readers included how girls should regulate their eating and their bodies. Much as the non-fiction publications geared towards girls and women, these stories reinforce cultural norms about food and the female body. According to Silver, works of Victorian children’s literature “often underpin a culture of anorexia, in which control over the body and its desires are enacted through the control of food intake” (52). Children’s literature, particularly the literature written about or for girls, remains of interest because it often “praises girls for denying their appetites and limiting their consumption of food, often connecting that denial to femininity” (52). Furthermore, these children’s texts link both eating and body size to morality as Victorian culture linked eating “especially for girls, with traits such as greed, lust, and aggression” (54). For both adult women and young girls, fictional representations of eating also exemplified the physical characteristics and personal morality the ideal angel in the house should possess. The four authors (Carroll, Ewing, MacDonald, and Rossetti) under discussion in this chapter all
illustrate this connection between controlling the appetite and eating and displaying appropriate femininity.

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

In his biography of Lewis Carroll, Morton N. Cohen describes Carroll’s peculiarities related to food. According to Cohen, Carroll “survived on simple food and small portions” (291). Carroll also “‘always [declined] luncheons’” and expressed a “‘dislike for sitting to watch others eat and drink’” (291). Furthermore, Carroll’s concerns about the appetite extended beyond his own plate to those of his child friends. According to Carroll’s nephew, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood:

\[\text{[a]t meals he was very abstemious always, while he took nothing in the middle of the day except a glass of wine and a biscuit. Under these circumstances it is not very surprising that the healthy appetites of his little friends filled him with wonder, and even with alarm. When he took a certain one of them out with him to a friend’s house to dinner, he used to give the host or hostess a gentle warning, to the mixed amazement and indignation of the child, ‘Please be careful, because she eats a good deal too much.’}\]

(390)

Carroll not only worried about how much these girls ate when out dining with him. Carina Garland notes that “Carroll once sent a small knife to Kathleen Tidy, a child friend, as a birthday present . . . and instructed her to use it to cut her dinner as ‘this way you will be safe from eating too much, and so making yourself ill. If you find that when the others have finished you have only had one mouthful, do not be vexed about it’” (26). This focus on food and eating also extended to Carroll’s novels as concern for the food girls consumed clearly appears in both *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found*
There (1871). In both texts, Carroll continually describes food and eating. From cakes that make Alice smaller to puddings who get angry when sliced, Alice must constantly negotiate her relationship to food. In fact, in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Alice’s body size changes curiously twelve times, and ten of the changes occur because of the consumption of food or drinks. It would not be a stretch then to say that the novels create a clear connection between eating and drinking, on the one hand, and controlling the body, on the other. Much as do the non-fiction texts discussed in the previous chapter, the Alice books provide an education in how girls control their hunger and regulate their bodies as part of their performance of Victorian femininity.

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There include many examples of food and eating which critics have explained and interpreted in diverse ways. First, critics have connected food and Alice’s size changes to childhood or the development of the child into an adult. For Robert Hemmings, food in Wonderland connects to nostalgia for childhood and the foods consumed during childhood. Elaine Ostry argues that Alice’s experiences of growth and of being large are “Carroll’s comment on how destructive adults are. Being big does not equal being better” (38). On the other hand, Goldie Morgentaler argues that Alice’s “abrupt changes in size seem to undermine the definition of childhood as a state of littleness, at the same time as they blur the demarcation line between childhood and adulthood as two distinct times of life” (92). Additionally, writing about Looking-Glass, Jennifer Geer suggests that the novel is “more determined to idealize the child Alice and more pessimistic about her growth than Wonderland is" (13).
Critics also frequently associate food and Alice’s consumption with desire, female sexuality, and the biblical fall. For instance, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas connects Wonderland to other Victorian texts where “food always acted as a veiled metaphor for sexuality, most improper in the respectable Victorian woman” (54). Likewise, Carina Garland suggests that both novels reflect “the anxieties Carroll has surrounding female sexuality and agency” and that these anxieties “are expressed via representations of food and appetite within the text and the relationship of these to the feminine” (22). In The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies, Helena Michie associates Alice’s consumption with Eve and the fall. According to Michie, “[f]allen women can also disguise themselves as little girls. Alice in Wonderland’s fall through the rabbit hole propels her into an orgy of eating and drinking. Eating, even little girls’ eating, is identified with the Fall” (27). Anna Krugovoy Silver connects both novels to sexuality and anorexia: “[b]y linking a disdain for sexual maturation with the consumption of food, Carroll’s writing shares qualities with the logic of anorexia nervosa” (71).

Finally, critics often link Alice’s consumption and continually changing size to issues of power. For some, Alice’s changing size mirrors her developing or increasing power. Morgentaler argues that when Alice outgrows the White Rabbit’s house she is “on the one hand, subverting Victorian notions that a woman’s place is in the home, and on the other depicting female domestic power as potentially monstrous, the obverse side of the angel in the house” (90). Mervyn Nicholson also connects food to power when he argues that food “enables Alice to gain her own power, her own independent identity” (54). Ostry believes that “Alice’s growth is associated with power and control” and that controlling and changing her size allows Alice to “[develop] greater independence of thought” (35). While these critics connect food and growth to
Alice’s increasing power, for Talairach-Vielmas, Alice’s growing and shrinking body illustrates her lack of power. Talairach-Vielmas argues that “Alice’s changes in size always signal some external control over her body. Whenever she shrinks or grows up, Alice feels powerless and alienated” (57). Additionally, two critics, Carolyn Daniel and Michael Parrish Lee, discuss how the novels link eating to concerns about power and more specifically who eats whom. Daniel, noting Carroll’s anti-vivisection stance, suggests that *Looking-Glass*, in particular, reveals “[t]he arbitrary distinction between the eaters and the eaten” (32). Lee also explores what can and cannot be eaten. According to Lee, in the novels, “Carroll presents a world that is both fully social and thoroughly objectified, where humans, animals, and objects trade, share, and fight for positions in a net-work of edible things” (485). Additionally, he argues that “[f]or Carroll, consumption is haunted by animals and the violence done or always on the verge of being done to animals” (495). Clearly, food has been a productive topic for Carroll’s critics to explore, but I contend that they should pay more attention to how the novel reinforces Victorian non-fiction texts and their advice to girls and women about food and eating.

Much as the non-fiction texts discussed in the previous chapter, both novels provide Alice with an education in controlling her consumption and her body. Through her experiences in *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice learns what to eat, how to eat, and the consequences of expressing her hunger. As the books educate Alice about how to control her appetite, and therefore her body, they also reinforce lessons girls learned from parents, teachers, non-fiction texts, and Victorian culture at large. Didactic children’s literature was popular during the Victorian period; however, many readers and scholars alike have noted the “antididacticism of the Alice books” (Nelson 75). Yet, while the *Alice* books are far from the overtly didactic
literature many Victorian children read, that does not mean that the novels fail to teach their readers. In fact, Carolyn Daniel notes:

Carroll’s story is an enjoyable fantasy and must have been a welcome break from the openly didactic oppressiveness of Victorian children’s usual reading fare, but ultimately, because of the narrative’s subtextual adherence to social manners and mores, it still contains implicit messages advocating and reinforcing compliance to the social order. (53)

Food and eating are therefore part of the novels’ message which supports the social and gender norms of Victorian culture.

**Wonderland** includes numerous scenes where Alice eats or drinks. Yet, I argue, Alice’s consumption is never connected to her hunger or appetite. Some critics have called Alice hungry or greedy; for example, Talairach-Vielmas declares that “Carroll’s heroine is, indeed, a greedy little girl who tastes drinks and cakes as soon as she falls into Wonderland” (49). Likewise, Silver writes that “Alice’s enormous appetite clearly and hilariously subverts the conventional Victorian heroine’s lack of hunger” (71). However, during the course of the novel, Alice receives an education in regulating her eating and controlling her body. In fact, each time Alice eats she does so to manipulate her body, not to satisfy greed or hunger. For instance, Alice does not consume the cake with the words “‘EAT ME’” written in currants because she is hungry, but because she wants to alter her size: “‘if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door: so either way I’ll get into the garden, and I don’t care which happens’” (Carroll 18). Alice, therefore, ties eating to bodily changes instead of to hunger. Alice does not eat food to fulfill a need for it but to control and manipulate her body. The Mad Hatter’s perpetual tea party also demonstrates this notion of food as distanced from hunger, desire, or need. Tea does not continue because the Hatter, March Hare, or Dormouse are
hungry or thirsty but simply because it is the time for tea. As with Alice, in this scene, the text disrupts the connection between food and hunger, and instead, the characters eat simply because it is the appropriate time.

Since food is not connected to her hunger but to controlling her body size, Alice must learn to regulate her size through regulated consumption. When Alice first begins to manipulate her size through what she eats, her body goes from one extreme to the other. She “open[s] out like the largest telescope that ever was,” growing so large that she cannot leave the White Rabbit’s house; indeed, she grows above the treetops where the Pigeon mistakes her for a serpent (20, 39, 54). Likewise, when she wants to reduce her size, she “[shuts] up like a telescope” and becomes so small that her head strikes her feet (17, 53). Alice can neither regulate her size nor her consumption when she first arrives in Wonderland. After she has grown so large that she cannot leave the White Rabbit’s house, Alice regrets consuming too much: “‘[t]hat’s quite enough—I hope I sha’n’t grow any more—As it is, I ca’n’t get out at the door—I do wish I hadn’t drunk quite so much!’” (39). These early Wonderland experiences teach Alice the necessity of limiting how much she eats or drinks to avoid extreme changes in her body size. Additionally, these experiences link Alice to the Victorian girls who were warned to eat moderately and limit certain foods to either avoid gaining weight or to reduce the size of their bodies. For example, the Girls’ Own Paper suggests that girls “[a]void too much sugar and pastry, especially if you have a slight leaning towards embonpoint” (Medicus, “Words to the Wise or Otherwise” 103). Alice also learns to regulate the type of food she consumes. After encountering the huge puppy, Alice notes that “she could not see anything that looked like the right thing to eat or drink under the circumstances” (Carroll 46). As Alice experiments with
various foods and beverages in Wonderland, she learns that she must eat the correct portions as well as the right kind of food, or her body will shrink away or grow to monstrous proportions.

After encountering the Caterpillar, Alice quickly learns to regulate her size by consuming the right things, the sides of the mushroom, in the right amounts. Through experimentation, Alice learns how to eat properly to make her body either smaller or larger depending on the dimensions of the environment she encounters. This new ability to control her changing size accurately links to her ability to limit her consumption. In fact, Carroll changes the terms used to describe Alice’s consumption once she learns how to regulate her eating. Alice “finished off” both the potion labeled “‘DRINK ME’” and the entire currant cake (16, 18). However, after she meets the Caterpillar, she always “nibbles” her food. When she wants to become smaller after her encounter with the Pigeon, Alice “set to work very carefully, nibbling first at one and then at the other” side of the mushroom (56). Likewise, “she began nibbling at the right-hand bit” of the mushroom when she wanted to be the right size to visit the Duchess’s house (56). When she sees the March Hare’s large house “she did not like to go nearer till she had nibbled some more of the left-hand bit of mushroom, and raised herself to about two feet high” (67). Finally, before Alice can enter the garden after the tea party, she must again “set to work nibbling at the mushroom (she had kept a piece of it in her pocket) till she was about a foot high” (78). In other words, Alice learns to take very small, regulated, and dainty portions to better control the size of her body and adapt it to the requirements of the environment. This lesson closely reflects Victorian advice literature which often tells parents to “[a]ccustom the child to eat its food slowly” (Barker 34). Likewise, while advice literature encouraged both boys and girls to eat slowly, some texts particularly urge girls to eat delicately and sedately as a means of preventing over indulgence as
“a person who eats fast is in great danger of eating more than is good for her” (Medicus, “A Few Facts about Food and Digestion” 566). After learning from her experiences of growing too large or too small, Alice has learned to eat in a moderate and controlled manner. She does not quickly “finish off” the entire mushroom, as she did with the potion and cake, but, instead, slowly and deliberately eats only what is absolutely necessary. She eats in tiny, delicate, and controlled amounts, as the proper Victorian woman would, and her new ability to control her consumption means that she can both perform her femininity, demonstrating her class, morality, and angel in the house status, and control and manipulate her body.

Furthermore, for Alice, regulating both what she consumes and the amount she consumes becomes an exercise in feminine self-discipline. Alice clearly displays her propensity for self-discipline. For instance, when Alice discovers that she is too big to reach the garden, she begins to cry. However, she quickly chastises herself for the tears:

‘[c]ome, there’s no use in crying like that!’ said Alice to herself rather sharply. ‘I advise you to leave off this minute!’ She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself. (Carroll 18)

This self-punishment continues when she grows too large to enter the tiny door to the garden, and she tells herself that “‘[y]ou ought to be ashamed of yourself. . . a great girl like you . . . to go on crying in this way! Stop this moment, I tell you!’” (21). Finally, after falling into a pool of her own tears, she even imagines her punishment for crying: “‘I wish I hadn’t cried so much!’ said Alice, as she swam about, trying to find her way out. ‘I shall be punished for it now, I suppose, by being drowned in my own tears!’” (25). In fact, Talairach-Vielmas suggests that “Alice’s crying is, indeed, always associated with self-discipline” (57). Alice clearly has the
ability to discipline herself, and in Wonderland, she learns to apply that same disciplining
impulse to her consumption to regulate her body size. According to nineteenth-century advice
literature, it was essential for children to learn self-discipline, and food was a perfect way to do
so. For example, one can imagine Carroll agreeing with the article in *Myra’s Journal* which
advises mothers that “[s]elf-discipline should be taught it, certainly, in the matter of quantity,
which must necessarily be, in the case of greedy children, limited” (The Old Lady 2). Alice’s
discomfort as her body grows and shrinks excessively teaches her to exercise her self-discipline
especially “in the matter of quantity.”

Until the end of the novel, Alice’s education in self-discipline and controlling her body
and appetites through highly regulated eating seems to have been successful. However, this
control briefly disappears during the Knave of Hearts’s trial. As the trial is about to begin, Alice
notices “a table, with a large dish of tarts upon it: they looked so good, that it made Alice quite
hungry to look at them—‘I wish they’d get the trial done,’ she thought, ‘and hand round the
refreshments!’” (Carroll 110). While Alice only thinks about the tarts, this proves her first and
only expression of hunger, either spoken or merely thought. Shortly after Alice thinks about
eating these tarts, she “felt a very curious sensation, which puzzled her a good deal until she
made out what it was: she was beginning to grow larger” (113). After her encounter with the
Caterpillar, she grows bigger or smaller through careful and controlled “nibbling” of the right
things in the right amounts; however, during the trial, her growth increases without eating the
mushroom or using another visible trigger (such as the fan). Some scholars have connected
Alice’s unexpected growth at the end of the novel to her increasing power. For instance, Ostry
explains that Alice’s rapid growth during the trial reflects her increasing courage, and the growth
also makes her “become rebellious and independent in both thought and action” (40). Similarly, Honig argues that during the trial scene Alice’s “physical growth is apparently symbolic of her personality growth, her growth in confidence, assertiveness, and courage” (84). While Alice’s growth during the trial might connect to the strengthening of her character, another possible explanation is that food, and in this case her desire to consume the tarts, once again triggers her changing size, and Alice faces expulsion from Wonderland as punishment for her appetite.

With this reading, Alice’s uncontrollable growth does not signal her courage, independence, or confidence, but instead it indicates that her craving for the tarts violates Victorian rules of decorum: do not desire or ask for food (especially between meals) and do not indulge your appetite. Moreover, since Alice simply thinks about her desire prior to her growth, this moment suggests that even thoughts about the appetite or eating can be inappropriate for a “proper” Victorian girl. Also, even by merely thinking about her desire for the tarts, Alice cannot receive them since it would violate the advice frequently given in non-fiction advice literature. For instance, *The British Mothers’ Magazine* warns that mothers should not give children “everything they fancy” (“Household Habits of Young Children” 254). Similarly, Charlotte Yonge, like Carroll, would probably refuse to give Alice a taste of the tarts; Yonge says, “I can only say that I have been thankful all my life for the habits given to me of being able to see food without expecting it” (29). Unlike Yonge, directly after seeing the tarts, Alice hopes to receive them, and their delectable appearance overthrows Alice’s education in feminine behavior and controlling her consumption. In consequence, Carroll, who was always worried that his young female friends would eat too much, expels Alice from Wonderland after she thinks about her appetite for food.
Moreover, the Victorians discouraged eating snacks between meals, and upon waking, Alice’s sister encourages her to “‘run in to your tea’” (Carroll 125). According to Broomfield, “Primarily a woman’s pastime, afternoon tea was to be in all things feminine” (66). Additionally, Fromer notes, “[i]n nineteenth-century England, the rituals of the tea table increasingly focused attention on the role of the middle-class woman” (A Necessary Luxury 89). Alice may go on an exciting adventure in Wonderland, but, after desiring a snack, she returns home to the feminine tea table at the end of the story. Consequently, diverting Alice from a pre-meal snack and later, at the appropriate time for the meal, sending Alice off for her tea reasserts her position as a proper, middle-class girl and future angel in the house. With each of these Wonderland adventures, Alice learns how to succeed within Victorian culture by properly performing femininity through manipulating her eating and her size. Through her experiences, Alice is conditioned to “[submit] her physical appetites . . . to her will” (Silver 27) as her expression of hunger during the trial goes unfulfilled and all of the episodes of eating are related to changing the body instead of satisfying her appetite. Alice’s time in Wonderland acts as a means of introducing her to both the self-denial and dismissal of appetite that Victorians expected of a proper woman as well as the consequences, including uncontrollable growth and expulsion from Wonderland, that could be expected for violating these codes of decorum.

Much as Alice’s hunger is denied during the trial in Wonderland, in Through the Looking-Glass, Alice repeatedly encounters food, but her appetite goes unfulfilled. In fact, Alice’s encounters with food in the novel reflect the Victorian parenting technique of using food as a means of disciplining, controlling, and teaching children. Even before Alice steps through the mirror, she associates food with punishment. As she chastises her kitten, she muses:
‘[t]hat’s three faults, Kitty, and you’ve not been punished for any of them yet. You know I’m saving up all your punishments for Wednesday week—Suppose they had saved up all my punishments?’ she went on, talking more to herself than the kitten. “What would they do at the end of a year? I should be sent to prison, I suppose, when the day came. Or—let me see—suppose each punishment was to be going without a dinner: then, when the miserable day came, I should have to go without fifty dinners at once! Well, I shouldn’t mind that much! I’d far rather go without them than eat them!’ (Carroll 140)

This moment reflects two common nineteenth-century attitudes about food. First, Carroll reflects the common Victorian parenting strategy of denying meals as punishment for misdeeds. For instance, Brumberg explains that “[i]n the middle-class home of late-nineteenth-century Britain, for example, food was the ‘favorite method’ of punishment ‘other than beating’” (136). Moreover, she notes that “[t]his was particularly true in the treatment of young children, who were routinely sent to bed without supper or refused a special sweet because they had been ‘bad’” (136). Alice’s thoughts about going without dinner as a punishment then accurately reflect a common disciplinary practice Victorian children would have encountered. Second, Alice’s assertion that she does not like eating dinner anyway asserts her feminine lack of appetite. Throughout the novel, Alice experiences food denial as a means of punishment, and, as in *Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass* teaches girls about the need to control and suppress the appetite.

During the trial scene at the end of *Wonderland*, Alice’s feels a desire to eat the tarts, but she cannot eat them, and her hunger goes unfulfilled. Likewise, in her first encounter with food in *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice’s desire must once again go unsatisfied. After meeting the Red Queen, Alice voices her thirst: “‘I am so hot and thirsty!’” (Carroll 165). This unladylike expression of desire must be denied and punished, so the Queen presents Alice with the one thing she least desires, a dry biscuit. While Alice does not want to eat it, she “thought it would
not be civil to say ‘No,’ though it wasn’t at all what she wanted. So she took it, and ate it as well as she could: and it was very dry: and she thought she had never been so nearly choked in all her life” (165). This encounter, much as the trial scene, teaches Alice the dangers of her desire for food or drink. Only in this case, her thirst is denied and becomes much worse by eating the biscuit. Alice’s desire thwarted, and, surprisingly, this scene also reflects Victorian advice literature, such as the *Girl’s Own Paper*, which advises limiting how much girls drink. For instance, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables), who wrote numerous medical columns in the *Girl’s Own Paper*, advises girls to “swallow as little fluid of any kind as possible” (“Health All the Year Round” 166). In another article, Medicus (Dr. Gordon Stables) also chastises girls who drink too much as “far too much fluid is drunk with meals” (“Are We Leading Natural Lives” 612). From the very beginning of her time behind the looking-glass, Alice learns the necessity of suppressing her appetites in an appropriately feminine manner. Moreover, at the end of their encounter, the Red Queen declares “‘in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it’s all feasting and fun!’” (Carroll 166). Yet, the episode with the dry biscuit presages the feast where Alice will get to eat nothing at all.

Next, Alice’s encounter with the White Queen represents another exercise in the denial of appetite. After Alice deftly helps the White Queen tidy her clothing, the queen offers her the job of lady’s maid at “[t]wopence a week, and jam every other day” (196). Alice rejects this offer, and she states “‘I don’t want you to hire me—and I don’t care for jam’” (196). The White Queen then proceeds to elaborate on this offer of jam: “‘[y]ou couldn’t have it if you did want it,’ the Queen said. ‘The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday—but never jam to-day’” (196). As with the Red Queen who offers a dry biscuit to a very thirsty Alice, the White Queen also denies
the appetite by offering as a reward a food that can never be tasted. Moreover, this episode links to Victorian views about fruit and jam for children. According to Broomfield, fruit was an occasional, and potentially dangerous, treat for Victorian children:

> some stewed fruit, perhaps a small dish of stewed prunes or rhubarb topped with custard, was acceptable, as was a thin coat of fruit jam on bread, assuming the bread was not also buttered. As these rules about fruit might suggest, more than just digestion was at issue. Food was often used as a means to teach children moderation, discipline, selflessness, and virtuousness in general. (47)

The White Queen, then, reflects Victorian concerns about the potential moral dangers of too much fruit and jam.

During her time with the White Queen, Alice also discusses punishments with her. Alice does not consider it right to punish people before they have done something wrong. The White Queen, however, disagrees and suggests that preemptive punishment will be better as it will prevent people from doing something wrong in the first place: “'But if you hadn’t done them,' the Queen said, ‘that would have been better still; better, and better, and better!’” than doing something wrong (Carroll 197). The White Queen here reflects Victorian child rearing practices. Discipline and punishment were necessary as a means both of correcting faults and of preventing the development of a bad character. For example, Victorian parents used food discipline, such as denying children jam or other treats, as a means of “correcting” children’s errors before they even committed them. *The British Mothers’ Magazine* tells mothers:

> any children are injured in their health, and yet more in their character, by false indulgence. Luxurious tastes and wasteful habits are formed in the nursery, and many seeming trifles go to form them. Children should not be encouraged in daintiness, or greediness, by allowing them to have everything they fancy, or to eat more than is proper for them of what they esteem a delicacy; or to leave one thing for the sake of getting something they like better; or to waste their food in any way. In all these, and many such matters, a judicious mother will keep in view, not merely the avoiding unnecessary
present expense, but also the yet more important object of training her children to habits of propriety and moderation. (“Household Habits of Young Children” 254)

In other words, controlling children’s eating was a way of forming and controlling the character to prevent the development of bad habits and, thusly, bad traits. The White Queen’s explanation of punishment coming before the crime seems just as absurd as offering a treat of jam yesterday and tomorrow but never today, yet this strategy fits with Victorian uses of food to form the character of children.

In her next encounter with food, Alice must again learn to control and deny her appetite as food she purchases is “alive.” When Alice arrives in the Sheep’s shop, the Sheep asks her to buy something, and Alice chooses an egg. It is cheaper to buy two eggs, but the Sheep states “[o]nly you must eat them both, if you buy two” (Carroll 205). Alice decides to pay a higher price to get just one egg; however, she never gets to eat this egg as “[t]he egg seems to get further away the more I walk towards it” (206). Again, Alice encounters food and has her appetites stirred only to have it finally denied. Moreover, as the egg turns into Humpty Dumpty, this moment previews the feast at the end of the novel. Alice anticipates the food, but the food is “alive,” and, therefore, Alice cannot eat it.

While Alice eats neither the egg nor jam, during the fight between the lion and the unicorn, Alice eats for the second and last time in the novel. As with the dry biscuit she eats previously, her food is once again plain and unappetizing: “Haigha and Hatta set to work at once, carrying round trays of white and brown bread. Alice took a piece to taste, but it was very dry” (227). Shortly after, when Alice encounters more desirable food, she does not get to eat a single bite. After the fight between the Lion and the Unicorn concludes, the Lion tells Alice to distribute plum cake, but “[s]he’s kept none for herself, anyhow,’ said the Lion” (231). Of
course, the cake slices itself, and Alice cannot take a slice. Furthermore, Alice does not even have the chance to answer the Lion’s question: “‘[d]o you like plum-cake, Monster?’” (231).

Once again, Alice’s appetite for sweets goes unsatisfied. She gets only a piece of dry bread, she must watch others eating while not partaking herself, and she is even denied a chance to express her preference for a food. Again, Alice’s encounter with food reflects Victorian childrearing practices. Alice does not enjoy the dry bread, but it is part of the dietary training encouraged by Victorian advice literature. Dry bread prevents overindulgence and should replace sweets as “a luxury.” According to Pye Henry Chavasse’s *Advice to a Mother on the Management of Her Children*, “[i]f a child be never allowed to eat cakes and sweetmeats, he will consider a piece of dry bread a luxury, and will eat it with the greatest relish” (148). Likewise, *The British Mothers’ Journal* offers mothers a test to use to find out about their children’s appetites: “[o]lder children, if at any time suspected of wishing to eat too much, or of letting the pleasures of the palate carry them over the boundaries of veritable appetite, may be offered the plainest food, even dry bread, as a test; and, if they eat it, they are tolerably sure not to take more than is for their good” (Carter 135). As Alice travels through the novel with only a dry biscuit and dry bread to eat, the denial of her appetite even when faced with desirable treats operates as another means of teaching her the control of her appetite that would be expected of her as a proper Victorian angel in the house.

Even during the feast at the end of the novel, Alice cannot eat. After the Red Queen’s declaration that “‘in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it’s all feasting and fun,’” Alice becomes a queen and makes it to the feast (Carroll 166). Yet, once again, Alice does not get to enjoy the promised meal. She arrives after the feast has started, and she “‘missed the soup and fish’” (261). Then each dish placed before her can speak and is introduced. After being
introduced to the leg of mutton, the queen tells Alice “‘it isn’t etiquette to cut any one you’ve been introduced to. Remove the joint’” (262). Here, Carroll jokes about “cutting” an acquaintance in a social encounter, but this scene also denies Alice food once again. The same thing happens again with dessert. Alice tries to avoid meeting the food, “‘I won’t be introduced to the pudding, please,’ Alice said rather hastily, ‘or we shall get no dinner at all’” (262). However, Alice meets the pudding, and she decides to make an attempt to eat it anyway, but Pudding will have none of it: “‘[w]hat impertinence!’ said the Pudding. ‘I wonder how you’d like it, if I were to cut a slice out of you, you creature!’” (263). The Pudding signals the end of the feast, and once again, Alice has encountered appetizing food and been unable to eat it. After the feast, Alice awakens back at home, and during her entire adventure in *Through the Looking-Glass*, she has only eaten a dry biscuit and dry bread.

Therefore, in both novels, Alice cannot indulge her appetite. Moreover, both novels demonstrate particular concern about the dangers of sweets. At the end of both books, a desire for sweets, tarts in *Wonderland* and pudding in *Looking-Glass*, propel Alice out of the fantasy and back into the real world. Alice visits fantasy worlds where so much has exceeded the normal bounds of Victorian life and society, yet food and eating remain controlled, restricted, or denied. Alice discovers that while she might have an appetite for delicious food, as a Victorian girl and future angel in the house, she should not consume it. Moreover, when she does eat, it must be either very plain food or tiny, nibbled portions necessary for altering her body size. Through these restrictions on her consumption, Alice learns about the self-control that is essential to her performance of femininity. Alice may have two adventures, but she cannot move beyond the strict rules governing the way well-behaved and moral Victorian girls and women must eat or
express hunger. While Carroll may have been comfortable sending his heroine on two adventures, he was not comfortable in creating moments where she could indulge her hunger. Instead, he forces his heroine to control her appetite in the ways that would be expected of a proper Victorian girl. In fact, the fictional Alice reflects Carroll’s real-world concerns about girls’ eating. Unsurprisingly, then, that the man who encouraged Kathleen Tidy to use her knife to “‘be safe from eating too much’” (Garland 26) created a heroine whose eating is strictly controlled and primarily limited to nibbling a mushroom and eating dry bread and a biscuit. Both novels, therefore, present female readers with another example of how controlling their appetites and bodies are essential components of the performance of femininity.

Juliana Horatia Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs”

While Lewis Carroll is the most well-known children’s author under discussion in this chapter, Juliana Horatia Ewing was also a respected and popular writer. In fact, “[i]n the 1870s and 1880s, Ewing was among Britain’s most popular children’s writers, and her works were praised by Tennyson, Ruskin, and Ingelow” (Talairach-Vielmas 67). Furthermore, U.C. Knoepflmacher states that Ewing was “a highly gifted writer of children’s stories which had sold 200,000 copies by the early twentieth century” (379). With high sales figures and with works published in periodical and book form, Ewing’s writings had the potential to reach many female readers of all ages. Moreover, Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs” (1870) provides a message for both mothers and daughters about performing proper femininity. At the beginning of the story, Amelia is a disobedient girl who breaks things, is a picky eater, and torments her mother and
nurse. Her ineffective mother cannot control her, and breaking with the suggestions in advice books, she allows Amelia’s unruly and unfeminine behavior to continue unpunished. One evening, Amelia goes outside even after her parents forbid her to leave the house. In a field full of haystacks, Amelia encounters a dwarf who knows of her bad behavior, and he forces her underground to correct her mistakes. During her time imprisoned underground with the dwarfs, Amelia receives an education in feminine domestic skills, controlling her appetite, and performing her femininity. Through this experience, Amelia receives an initiation into adult femininity, and she discovers the potential power of performing her role as a proper Victorian woman.

Ewing’s story has been discussed by only a handful of critics. Carolyn Sigler identifies “Amelia and the Dwarfs” as one of many “Alice ‘imitations’” written by women after the publication of Carroll’s book (353). Sigler argues that the story “uses the representation of a mirror-image double to critique conventional standards of female behavior” (355). Knoepflmacher also draws a connection to Carroll by calling Amelia an “anti-Alice” (32). Knoepflmacher suggests that Amelia’s “venture into fantasyland allows her to remake herself into a responsible adult” (33). Talairach-Vielmas suggests that Amelia’s experiences with the dwarfs “confirm that achieving ideal femininity implies denying one’s desires and appearing as good as gold” (67). Yet, the lessons she learns from the dwarfs “teach her how to turn domestication to her advantage” (72). Lastly, in his brief discussion of “Amelia and the Dwarfs,” Lewis C. Roberts explains “that Amelia has not been tamed by her experience, but perhaps has learned to better conceal her strength from the adults around her” (360). While all of these critics
address gender and the domestication of Amelia, they do not explore the role of food in Amelia’s transformation.

At the beginning of the story, Amelia’s behavior is certainly out of control. Amelia “was an only child . . . her parents spoiled her,” and when she misbehaves, her mother does no more than exclaim “‘[m]y dear Amelia, you must not’” (Ewing 106). Her mother takes her on visits to friends, and Amelia fails to act as a proper young girl should. In fact, Amelia does exactly what advice literature warns mothers against. For instance, the Girl’s Own Paper advises mothers: “[i]f you have little children, be very careful that they do not prove tiresome to your guests. Never allow them to hang about and lean upon them; nor to fiddle with their watch-chains and other jewellery [sic], opening lockets and asking undesirable questions, such as, whose hair or likeness you wear, or teasing you to ‘tell them stories’” (Caulfeild, “Good Breeding” 262).

Amelia, in fact, does all of this. During a dinner party, she would approach a guest “and either lean heavily against him or her, or climb on to his or her knee, without being invited” (Ewing 107). Amelia also breaks valuable objects belonging to her mother’s friends, including a bracelet which she had “broken open by force” (107). She also interrupts adult conversations to utter rude remarks such as “‘[t]hat’s not a real ottoman in the corner. It’s a box covered with chintz’” and “‘[y]ou two want to talk secrets, I know. I can hear what you say. I’m going to listen, I am. And I shall tell, too’” (106-107). Amelia’s public behavior exceeds the bounds of politeness and correct feminine behavior, and with her outspokenness she “uncovers appearances in a world where feminine propriety is made up of layers of costumes and codes” (Talairach-Vielmas 70). Amelia has “read” the adults around her, and she takes full advantage of the fact that the polite women she torments will not complain to her mother, and even if they did, her mother would probably
do nothing to stop her. Amelia knows how to use the proper Victorian femininity of these women as a shield for her to do as she likes and get away with it.

At home, her behavior proves equally problematic. For example, she talks to her nurse in an “insolent and unladylike fashion” and torments her through the “wilful destruction” of her clothes (Ewing 109). Amelia’s mother has clearly not followed the advice of the British Mothers’ Magazine which advises that “children may, and ought to be trained to habits of care of clothes, books, playthings, and pocket-money. They should be taught to know the value of things, and the uses to which they may be applied” (“Household Habits of Young Children” 254). By spoiling her, failing to teach her appropriate feminine behavior, and refusing to punish her when necessary, Amelia’s mother fails to teach her daughter the behavior expected of a future angel in the house. Instead, after her acts of destruction, Amelia creates extra work for her nurse, who attempts to scold her by stating “‘[y]ou seem to think things clean and mend themselves’” (Ewing 110). The nurse’s attempt to rein her in utterly fails when Amelia retorts “‘I think you do them; what are you here for?’” (110). Amelia knows that she will not be punished when she disobeys her mother and nurse, and she willfully disrespects and creates more work and trouble for others.

Furthermore, Amelia’s rebellious behavior connects to food as she is both greedy and wasteful. Her greed is evident as she torments dogs by offering them food and then refusing to give it to them. In one encounter with the family’s bulldog, Amelia “held out a bun towards him, and just as he was about to take it, she snatched it away and kicked him instead” (108). In addition to taunting dogs with food, “Amelia’s meals were another source of trouble” (110). Instead of eating whatever her mother gives her, “she fancied one thing and then another; she did
not like this or that; she wanted a bit cut here and there” (110). Amelia’s rejection of some foods and demands for others goes against the typical Victorian regulation of children’s meals. In addition to punishing bad children by withholding food, meals were a way to mold the character of a child:

for children of the upper and middle classes, particularly in England, the diet was also monotonous, not from necessity as it was for the poor, but on principle. Eating all that they were apportioned, often separately from their parents and on a very rigid schedule, these children were having instilled in them along with their food those qualities considered important to their society: frugality in the management of economic resources, asceticism in the husbanding of the body’s resources, discipline and thrift in the use of time. (Gelpi 12)

The meals in Amelia’s family do not follow this norm for children to have a simple and plain diet, and this lack of dietary control means Amelia’s moral and character flaws result from the indulgence of her appetites which her parents allow. By failing to strictly adhere to a plain diet for their daughter, Amelia’s parents do not teach her the self-control, self-denial, abstinence, frugality, obedience, and other lessons Victorian parents taught their children through food and food denial.

Furthermore, the foods offered to and demanded by Amelia far exceed the plain and monotonous diet which Victorians considered physically and morally healthy for children. For example, Amelia’s parents give her “cutlet and tomato sauce,” “roast beef,” “mashed potato,” “plum tart and custard,” “Stilton cheese and celery,” and “dessert dishes” (Ewing 110). Moreover, even with all of these indulgent foods in front of her, Amelia wastes most of her meal. Her mother tells her “you must not be so wasteful,” but she continues to indulge Amelia during meals, and “Amelia’s mamma allowed her to send away on her plates what would have fed another child, day after day” (110-111). Again, Amelia’s behavior violates all of the advice
offered to mothers about their children’s appetites. For example, the *British Mothers’ Magazine* warns mothers not to allow children to get all the food they desire or to “waste their food in any way” (“Household Habits of Young Children” 254). Through her defiance of the mealtime rules Victorians expected young girls to uphold, Amelia certainly does not behave like a Victorian angel in the house who can properly control her behavior, appetites, and body.

While Amelia’s troublesome meals gain her special treatment from her mother, she eventually faces discipline for her failure to perform proper feminine behavior. For her final rebellious act, Amelia ventures outside alone to play in a field after dark. So, in addition to her failures in other areas of conduct, she also flees her home at night while alone, something a true angel in the house would absolutely avoid. Amelia has clearly not learned self-control, and Knoepflmacher, discussing the parents in several of Ewing’s stories, notes that “[t]he parenting of permissive middle-class adults is so deficient that their children need to be abducted and taken directly into a more ruthless primal world in order to be re-educated” (396). Amelia’s act of defiance leads to her encounter with the dwarfs who take her captive and send her underground to discover “‘what the trouble is you impose on other people’” (Ewing 115). To replace the missing Amelia, the dwarfs leave a “stock,” which takes on Amelia’s appearance, for her parents to find (114). The stock replaces the apparently ill Amelia and remains in Amelia’s bed under a doctor’s care. Sigler notes that this “stock” “is not a caricature of unruly Amelia but of the passive ideal of femininity for which her parents had longed” (355). Amelia, of course, is far from the quiet and demure ideal of the Victorian girl, and only Amelia’s supposedly severe illness explains why her parents unquestioningly accept a passive stock as a replacement for their usually unruly daughter.
While the stock takes Amelia’s place at home and must consume “‘the pills, the powders, the draughts’” prepared by the doctor (Ewing 124), the dwarfs take Amelia underground and her captivity with them serves as an in-depth education in the performance of proper feminine behavior, including appropriate eating. The dwarfs force Amelia to cook and eat the food she wasted, wash and sew all of the clothes she destroyed, and repair all of the items she damaged. In other words, the dwarfs force Amelia to learn the feminine skills and behaviors which she failed to master and exhibit at home. In particular, the dwarfs correct Amelia’s out-of-control eating. The girl who rejected food, demanded other dishes, and wasted vast quantities must first learn to eat whatever she can find. When Amelia first asks for food, a dwarf directs her to a spot “covered with plates of broken meats; all the bits of good meat, pie, pudding, bread and butter, &c., that Amelia had wasted before-time” (116). At first, she refuses to eat her leftovers, but when she is hungry enough, she eats the food happily and “was surprised herself at the good things she had rejected” (116). After learning to eat whatever she is given, she then learns to cook it herself, and she “became quite expert in cooking up the scraps” (116). Being forced to eat all of the previously rejected food teaches Amelia that good children “[eat] all that they were apportioned” (Gelpi 12). Moreover, this experience has corrected her greedy, demanding, and wasteful eating habits, and, as with the other domestic tasks she learns, she acquires the eating habits expected of a good and feminine Victorian girl.

A human woman, a servant for the dwarfs, also aids in Amelia’s transformation. This woman teaches Amelia the lessons she failed to learn at home, and she also corrects Amelia’s attitude as “whilst Amelia was sulky, the woman of the heath was sharp and cross; but when Amelia became willing and obedient, she was good-natured, and even helped her” (Ewing 116).
This servant replaces Amelia’s mother, who has failed in controlling and educating her daughter, and teaches Amelia about domestic skills as well as the potential power of her femininity and sexuality, when deployed in the correct way. According to Talairach-Vielmas, “[t]rained by a real woman, one of the dwarfs’ servants, Amelia learns about woman’s servitude and self-abnegation” (70). In particular, the woman warns Amelia that her change in attitude and increasingly feminine behavior has made her appealing to the dwarfs: “[b]ut now you are such a willing, handy, and civil little thing, and so pretty and graceful withal, that I think it is very likely that they will want to keep you altogether’” (Ewing 118). Now that Amelia has mastered domestic skills along with the performance of feminine behavior, she has become an attractive commodity to the male dwarfs. Amelia, of course, wants to go home, so the woman offers her advice. If Amelia dances prettily for the dwarfs, they may take her above ground to dance with them, and if she finds a four-leaf clover on one of these trips, she will be able to wish herself back home. Essentially, the woman teaches Amelia to use her beauty and burgeoning sex appeal to entice the dwarfs. As Talairach-Vielmas declares “domestication not only breeds deceit but turns the female body into a weapon to ensnare male partners” (71). While the adoption of proper femininity has put her at risk of losing her family and freedom forever, she also learns that proper femininity can empower her with the ability to manipulate and deceive.

With this new ability to use her performance of femininity to deceive, Amelia plots how to use her new skills to escape the dwarfs. After completing all of her assigned tasks, Amelia has mastered the skills of the angel in the house: “Amelia often cooked for them, and she danced and played with them, and never showed a sign of discontent” (Ewing 122). Amelia quickly discovers that the dwarfs are intrigued by her dancing, and, in particular, one “very smutty, and
old, and weazened” dwarf enjoys dancing with “his arm round Amelia’s waist” (121). This dance partner even suggests that he wants to marry Amelia and keep her captive underground forever: “‘[w]e are partners in the dance, and I think we will be partners for life’” (123). Amelia, however, wants to go home as “her heart ached for home, and when she was alone she would bury her face in the flowers and cry for her mother” (122). Eventually, Amelia’s dancing skills convince the dwarfs to take her above ground to dance in the moonlight. Amelia then locates a four-leaf clover and returns home. Not only, then, does Amelia learn the properly feminine skills of sewing, washing, cooking, and controlling her eating, but she also learns how to please men through dancing. While all of these skills are traditionally feminine skills, Amelia learns how to use them to grant her the power to escape her captivity.

Once she returns home, Amelia’s transformation into a proper Victorian woman is completed enabling her to displace the “stock,” who has been very ill and in bed the entire time Amelia was away. Although she gained momentary power to regain her freedom, she returns to an environment designed to imprison her. Amelia no longer behaves as an out-of-control child; instead, she “looked wonderfully well” although she appeared to be “older and thinner and rather pale” (125). As thin and pale, even sickly, women were the height of beauty and fashion, Amelia’s ordeal underground with the dwarfs has helped her develop feminine skills as well as a feminine figure and appearance. This transformation also extends to her eating habits as she is no longer the greedy girl who demands indulgent foods only to waste them. Instead, she obediently follows the “light nourishing diet” the doctor prescribed (126). Of course, this light diet reflects the same kind of diet the authors of advice literature usually suggested for Victorian girls and women. For instance, *Maternal Counsels to a Daughter* connects eating lightly to healthiness:
“the more moderately she eats, the better her health is likely to be, and the less her mind will be dulled by the influence of the body” (Pullan 111). The formerly greedy Amelia even willing shares her food by allowing her dog to “take a snack himself” from her plate (Ewing 127).

In her time with the dwarfs, Amelia receives a thorough education in how to perform her femininity, adhere to Victorian expectations for the angel in the house, and bring her eating under strict control. For instance, Amelia exhibits this transformation in her behavior when visiting with her mother’s friends. Rather than hating her visits, “[s]he became so popular with her mother’s acquaintances” (127). Yet, this transformation of Amelia into an angel in the house who is “good and gentle, unselfish and considerate for others” still leaves her “unusually clever” (127). The story teaches readers about the necessity for being “good” little girls and about the potential power of this performance. If the performance of these feminine traits can be mastered, the story suggests, then, girls will have the ability to influence men, use their skills to further their own ends, and even to deceive others. However, the success of this performance also requires girls to repress parts of their behavior or personalities that could be deemed improper or unfeminine. To gain this power, girls like Amelia must learn to conform to cultural expectations about proper femininity.

George MacDonald’s “The Wise Woman”

George MacDonald’s “The Wise Woman, or the Lost Princess: A Double Story” (1874-5), includes many elements similar to those I discussed in Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs.” MacDonald’s fantasy story includes two sets of ineffective parents from the upper and working
classes, a king and queen and a shepherd and shepherdess, who are raising two morally flawed girls, Rosamond and Agnes. A magical wise woman visits both sets of parents, abducts the girls, attempts to re-educate them by instilling middle-class values about performing femininity, and, at the end of the story, punishes the bad parents. Further, as with Ewing’s story, “The Wise Woman” includes a didactic message for adults and children clothed in a fantasy story façade. In the story, both girls learn feminine tasks and virtues, and food is both part of the problem and part of the cure. The wise woman uses food, much like other Victorians, as a tool for the teaching of feminine and moral behavior. Throughout the story, MacDonald clearly links food to the proper performance of femininity for Victorian girls.

Even more so than “Amelia and the Dwarfs,” “The Wise Woman” has received very little critical attention, and most of the scholarship on the story is both brief and negative. For example, C. N. Manlove calls the story “heavily didactic” and declares that “the supernatural wise woman and her magic cottage are not interesting in and for themselves” (82). Roderick McGillis states that “The Wise Woman” is a “relentlessly pointless book” (21). Humphrey Carpenter concurs when he calls the story “a very unpleasant book” (83). Elaine Ostry only briefly mentions the story’s use of a moral guide figure (46-47). Osama Jarrar and Melba N. Battin offer two longer analyses of the story. First, Jarrar’s “The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story: A Critique of Victorian Parenting” connects the story to MacDonald’s beliefs about parenting and, in particular, faulty parenting. Jarrar argues that the story “expresses MacDonald’s distaste for Victorian norms of child raising, with [MacDonald’s] vision grounded on ‘gentleness’ and ‘punishment’ as means of social reform” (62). Second, Battin explores the story as a religious parable and suggests that it “clarifies some of the steps necessary for spiritual
growth” (216). While only a few scholars have written about this story and some of those scholars have been quite negative about it, MacDonald’s tale offers a good example of how many Victorian authors combined fantasy and moral lesson. Moreover, MacDonald provides a useful illustration of the way in which many Victorians connected food, morality, and femininity. Proper femininity requires an education in domestic tasks as well as control of the body and its appetites, and the MacDonald’s wise woman uses food as one of her tools in creating proper Victorian young women. MacDonald makes food a crucial part of the girls’ education as Victorian angels in the house.

MacDonald begins by introducing Princess Rosamond and her ineffective parents. Rosamond is a spoiled child “wanting every thing [sic] she could and every thing [sic] she couldn’t have” (MacDonald 227). She breaks things, abuses animals, and “nearly killed her nurse” (229). Her parents do not correct Rosamond’s violent behavior and “as she grew, she grew worse; for she never tried to grow better” (229). The king and queen finally call on a wise woman for help with their daughter, who quickly identifies the problem: bad parenting. According to Jarrar, MacDonald was very concerned about the important role parents play in educating their children. Jarrar explains:

MacDonald therefore emphasized in his sermons and adult fiction, and especially in his children’s literature, the responsibility of parents to instill moral values of trust, love and honesty in their children by cultivating their inner goodness. Parents’ failure to fulfill such a responsibility, according to MacDonald, will harm the moral and emotional being of their children. (61)

The wise woman quickly identifies the fact that by spoiling their daughter the king and queen have failed to instill these “moral values” which are so important, especially in girls. The wise woman, therefore, chastises the parents and tells them “[h]ow very badly you have treated her!”
(MacDonald 230). After being insulted by the parents, who cannot understand their own complicity in their daughter’s behavior, the wise woman kidnaps Rosamond by hiding her in her cloak. From the moment of her capture, Rosamond’s re-education begins.

The wise woman, similar to the dwarfs and servant woman in “Amelia and the Dwarfs,” replaces Rosamond’s parents in providing discipline and training. The wise woman serves as what Elaine Ostry calls a moral guide. Ostry explains that these figures “are strict and uncompromising, and believe, as do the writers of the conduct books, in discipline and punishment. They demand obedience and honesty from the children. The lesson to be taught is selflessness, which will make the body beautiful and whole both inside and out” (45). As Rosamond’s moral guide, the wise woman teaches her lessons about femininity. Food is part of this education from the very beginning. On the journey to the wise woman’s cottage, Rosamond fears that the wise woman will kill her; “[a]ll she knew of the world being derived from nursery-tales, she concluded that the wise woman was an ogress, carrying her home to eat her” (MacDonald 232). Part of Rosamond’s reformation includes learning how to manage food and her appetite, and the fear of becoming food herself “was a sign she was a low creature” (232). In other words, Rosamond’s fear of being consumed signals her moral failings or her lowness as “she did not know a good woman when she saw her” (236). Not recognizing a “good woman” suggests that Rosamond is morally flawed and lacking in a clear understanding of proper femininity and the traits associated with it.

At the cottage, the wise woman begins teaching Rosamond about her feminine domestic duties with a series of challenges. First, she tells Rosamond that she is leaving, and “‘[y]ou must keep the cottage tidy while I am out. When I come back, I must see the fire bright, the hearth
swept, and the kettle boiling; no dust on the table or chairs, the windows clear, the floor clean, and the heather in blossom—which last comes of sprinkling it with water three times a day’” (244). All of these tasks are household chores which an angel in the house would have been expected either to do herself or to supervise her servants in completing correctly. Rosamond resists these domestic tasks because “‘I am a princess,’ she said, ‘and it is very improper to ask me to do such a thing’” (244). Yet, this argument garners no sympathy from the wise woman. Even a princess must perform feminine household duties. Moreover, Rosamond cannot run away from the cottage as wolves and hyenas surround it, and, as the wise woman says, “‘[d]angers lie all around this cottage of mine; but inside, it is the safest place’” (244). Unsurprisingly, part of Rosamond’s education as an angel in the house requires her to eschew the dangers of the outside world and be content with staying within the safe confines of the home.

Rosamond’s feminine education also includes learning to control her appetite and eating. After assigning Rosamond her household tasks, the wise woman tells her “‘[w]hen you are hungry, put your hand into that hole in the wall, and you will find a meal’” (244). Yet, Rosamond does not follow these directions to the letter:

[b]ly and by, merely for want of something to do, she would see what the old woman had left for her in the hole of the wall. But when she put in her hand she found nothing there, except dust which she ought by this time to have wiped away. Never reflecting that the wise woman had told her she would find food there when she was hungry, she flew into one of her furies, calling her a cheat, and a thief, and a liar, and an ugly old witch, and an ogress, and I do not know how many wicked names besides. She raged until she was quite exhausted, and then fell fast asleep on her chair. When she awoke the fire was out. (45)

Later on, when Rosamond is actually hungry, a plain and simple meal of bread and milk magically appears in the hole in the wall. The lesson here is that Rosamond should eat only when she is truly hungry and not out of boredom or greed.
Yet, eating only when genuinely hungry is not the only lesson Rosamond must learn about regulating her appetite. After returning to the cottage and discovering that Rosamond has not completed any of the domestic tasks assigned to her, the wise woman tells her that until she cleans “‘[y]ou shall have no morsel to eat. You may drink of the well, but nothing else you shall have. When the work I set you is done, you will find food in the same place as before’” (248-249). Rosamond half-heartedly begins to do some dusting, and then looks for food. However, she quickly discovers that “it was only to become more and more certain that work she must if she would eat” (249). Eventually, Rosamond completes the housework, she is rewarded with bread and milk, and “[n]ever had she eaten any thing [sic] with half the relish!” (250). The second lesson Rosamond learns, then, is the connection between food and work. The wise woman will not tolerate idleness, and if Rosamond wants to appease her appetite, she must work first.

Additionally, after the wise woman teaches Rosamond to work before eating and to eat only when truly hungry, the wise woman gives Rosamond the plain and monotonous food that Victorians believed constituted the best diet for childhood. Each time the wise woman gives Rosamond food she gives her “bread and milk” (242, 246, 250, 283). She feeds her the usual plain diet of childhood, not indulgent meals that a rich, spoiled princess would expect. This plain diet was considered healthy and was also connected to instilling moral values in children, especially girls. As Brumberg notes, “[i]t was incumbent upon the mother to train the appetite of the daughter so that it represented only the highest moral and aesthetic sensibilities” (172). Additionally, Tani A. Mauriello explains that “[i]n the 1800s, children’s diet was considered not only in terms of health, but also for its moral quality. Over the course of the nineteenth century, feeding was seen as a method of molding the moral character of middle-class Victorian children”
Furthermore, “parents and educators used food as a means to first create humbleness, obedience, dependence and piety” (204). The wise woman tries to instill many of these qualities in Rosamond by denying even bread and milk until Rosamond has humbly obeyed her orders. The wise woman, therefore, steps in when Rosamond’s mother fails to “train the appetite” of her daughter, and the wise woman also follows accepted Victorian childrearing methods as she attempts to reform Rosamond’s unruly appetites.

In addition to enforcing connections among morality and eating, the wise woman also teaches Rosamond about maintaining a beautiful, feminine appearance. After Rosamond’s first time alone in the cottage, when Rosamond refuses to do any work, the wise woman has her look in a mirror and see how she has become “a child with dirty fat cheeks, greedy mouth, cowardly eyes . . . stooping shoulders, tangled hair, tattered clothes, and smears and stains everywhere” (MacDonald 248). Later, a servant at the palace declares that Rosamond has the “‘biggest, ugliest mouth you ever saw’” (276). The story suggests that the outward appearance reflects hidden appetites and an unreformed character and lack of morality also contribute to this appearance. This assumption also reflects common Victorian notions about how a woman’s appearance directly connects to food and eating. Brumberg suggests that “[f]ood was to be feared because it was connected to gluttony and to physical ugliness” and “[c]areful, abstemious eating was presented as insurance against ugliness and loss of love” (176). With this close connection between appetite and beauty, predictably, MacDonald describes the appearance of a girl unable to control her appetites in quite negative terms.

Before completing her re-education with the wise woman, Rosamond flees, but her education continues as withholding food as discipline continues in her new home. Rosamond
escapes the wise woman’s cottage through a magical picture which takes her to the countryside, where a shepherd and shepherdess, Agnes’s parents, take her to live with them. However, they expect Rosamond to work, and “[t]he idea of doing any thing [sic] in return for shelter and food and clothes, did not, however, even cross [Rosamond’s] mind” (MacDonald 266). The shepherdess orders Rosamond to sweep the floor, clean the shepherd’s boots, and peel potatoes. Rosamond still resists completing household chores, but when the shepherdess threatens her with hunger (“we shall soon see how you like to go without when dinner-time comes”), Rosamond eventually complies: “she had begun to be hungry already” (270). Rosamond continues to resist doing her assigned chores, but “a few dinnerless afternoons entirely opened her eyes to the necessity of working in order to eat” (270). Much as in her time with the wise woman, food becomes a means of discipline. Only when Rosamond has obeyed and completed her assigned tasks does the shepherdess allow her to fulfill her appetite. Again, this form of disciplining children was common in the Victorian period, and parents, nurses, governesses, and teachers regularly denied meals as a way of either punishing children for misdeeds or encouraging their compliance.

After her time with the wise woman and the shepherd and shepherdess, Rosamond begins reforming in earnest. Once Rosamond’s passions and appetites are under control, her appearance begins to change too:

[a] noticeable change had by this time passed also on her countenance. Her coarse shapeless mouth had begun to show a glimmer of lines and curves about it, and the fat had not returned with the roses to her cheeks, so that her eyes looked larger than before; while more noteworthy still, the bridge of her nose had grown higher, so that it was less of the impudent, insignificant thing inherited from a certain great-great-great-grandmother, who had little else to leave her. (272)
Internal and external improvements were certainly both part of the wise woman’s plan as she tells Rosamond that she wants her to become both “‘good and lovely’” (282). Much as Ewing’s Amelia, whose appearance improves after her re-education, Rosamond’s physical appearance becomes more feminine and beautiful to reflect her improved character, and she has developed self-control.

Ultimately, the wise woman and shepherdess successfully re-educate Rosamond. Rosamond completes her household chores, learns to manage her appetite and work before eating, and improves her appearance to reflect a higher moral state. However, the wise woman’s educational efforts are not successful in reforming Agnes. Agnes’s parents, the shepherd and shepherdess, may not be aristocratic, but, like the king and queen, they have also spoiled their daughter and failed to instill the middle-class values MacDonald favors in the story. They praise her to excess, and “she [becomes] most immoderately conceited” (254). They also fail to discipline her: “[f]ather nor mother had ever by wise punishment helped her to gain a victory over herself” (258). The family’s food and possessions having been moderate, Agnes does not complain about her plain diet; she “was not by nature a greedy girl” (255). However, when the wise woman visits Agnes’s home and asks for water, Agnes displays her selfishness. The shepherdess gives the wise woman some milk, and when Agnes sees it “a cloud [comes] upon her forehead, and a double vertical wrinkle [settles] over her nose” (256). The wise woman, of course, sees this, and she tests Agnes by offering her the milk:

Agnes looked at it, did not want it, was inclined to refuse it from a beggar, but thinking it would show her consequence to assert her rights, took it and drank it up. For whoever is possessed by a devil, judges with the mind of that devil; and hence Agnes was guilty of such a meanness as many who are themselves capable of something just as bad will consider incredible. (255-256)
By drinking the milk, Agnes exhibits an out-of-control appetite, since she consumes something she really does not need or want, and she behaves in an unfeminine and rude manner to the guest. Both actions defy social norms for proper feminine behavior, even of working-class girls.

After Agnes’s misbehavior, the wise woman hides her in her cloak and heads back to the cottage once more. At the cottage, the wise woman places Agnes in a sphere which reflects her appearance. Agnes sees her own reflection and notes “[h]ow ugly she is!” (260). However, this vision of her true appearance fails to reform Agnes, and she eventually flees the cottage for the palace, where she becomes a servant in the kitchen. At the end of the story, after Rosamond has reformed and Agnes has not, the wise woman punishes both sets of parents. As Jarrar explains, “MacDonald shuns Victorian parenting practices that fostered selfishness, vanity and disobedience in children” (65). To that end, the wise woman punishes the king and queen with blindness. When they finally reunite with Rosamond, they fail to recognize her because “she was so altered—so lovelily altered” (MacDonald 300). Moreover, the queen discovers with horror that the wise woman forced her daughter to learn domestic tasks, and she calls Rosamond her “‘ruined baby’” (299). The king and queen’s reactions reinforce the earlier assessment that their parenting is at fault for the moral flaws of their daughter. Therefore, they must be punished as their daughter was. Although the shepherd and shepherdess assisted with Rosamond’s transformation, the wise woman does not exempt them from her punishment. The wise woman sends the shepherdess home with the un-reformed Agnes, of whom the wise woman says, she “‘is your crime and your punishment’” (302). The shepherd, however, recognizes his errors, and he goes with the wise woman to begin his own re-education process.
Ultimately, MacDonald provides an educational message in middle-class values for parents and children from the working to upper classes. Much as the non-fiction advice literature explored in chapter two, the story tells parents of their responsibilities, the consequences of failing to teach and discipline their daughters, and of the punishments they deserve for dereliction of their duties. Moreover, girls learn the importance of obedience, domestic skills, and self-control, especially regarding the appetite. Additionally, the story highlights middle-class values, particularly surrounding food, while critiquing the flawed parenting of both upper-class and working-class parents. As discussed in chapter one, middle-class Victorians used food and dining etiquette as one way to reinforce class boundaries. Andrea Broomfield explains that middle-class families “saw all their meals, including when, how, and what they ate, as a way to differentiate themselves from those below and above them, and perhaps inadvertently, as a way to create class-solidarity or identity. Indeed, food and values became intricately linked for many middle-class people” (26). The wise woman certainly links “food and values” as she attempts to re-educate one upper-class and one working-class girl. As the wise woman attempts to teach the wealthy and spoiled Rosamond, for example, about completing household work before eating, she reinforces middle-class beliefs about the work an angel in the house should perform within the home, and the queen’s objection to this kind of domestic work, which she views as being beneath her daughter’s position, marks the queen as in need of punishment and re-education herself. MacDonald, then, highlights both the importance of teaching girls to perform their femininity appropriately through their behavior and appetites and to abide by middle-class norms, regardless of the family’s actual class status, concerning parenting, gender, and food.
Christina Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses*

In a letter to her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti describes *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) as a “‘Christmas trifle, would-be in the Alice style’” (quoted in Knoepflmacher 302). While Rossetti connects her work to Carroll’s, *Speaking Likenesses* did not gain either the popularity or praise that *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* did. Instead, the text has been “[s]eldom discussed and uniformly belittled whenever mentioned” (310). For instance, when “surveying a recently published batch of Christmas books for children, [John] Ruskin chose to keep ‘all but one,’ including the item he had found to be the most offensive of the lot. ‘The worst’ he pronounced emphatically, ‘I consider Christina Rossetti’s. I’ve kept that for the mere wonder of it: how could she or Arthur Hughes sink so low after their pretty nursery rhymes?’” (310). *Speaking Likenesses* may have displeased Ruskin, but, as with the other works discussed in this chapter, the story reflects Victorian values of femininity. In the three stories which comprise *Speaking Likenesses*, Rossetti demonstrates that girls must control their hunger and appetites, and she suggests that the young girl needs to learn to replicate the self-control of the mature woman.

While it has not garnered the same critical attention as “Goblin Market,” quite a few critics have written about *Speaking Likenesses*. In their introduction to *Speaking Likenesses* in *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*, Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepflmacher call the stories “antifantasies” which are both “brilliant” and “unsettling” (317). They note that “Rossetti’s punishments fit no crimes. Perpetuated on unhappy children, they are detonations from an angry world” (317). Lynne Vallone briefly discusses
*Speaking Likenesses* and connects the story to Maria Edgeworth’s “The Birthday Present,” which is a didactic story about a spoiled girl’s birthday party. Vallone argues that “Rossetti uses the flexibility of fantasy to comment on the necessary acculturation that little girls must undergo as they mature” (“What is the Meaning” 49). Carolyn Daniel also makes a connection between Edgeworth and Rossetti, whose “work communicates rationalist moral principles similar to Edgeworth’s, and she also explicitly condemns her female protagonists’ sensual appetites” (43). For Daniel, *Speaking Likenesses* “reinforces the imperative that little girls’ desires must be denied” (46). Anna Krugovoy Silver explores the story in connection to Rossetti’s religious beliefs:

> *Speaking Likenesses* portrays appetite and eating as monstrous signifiers of sexual promiscuity, implicitly debasing the body that experiences hunger by figuring both male and female sexual desire as unmitigatedly abusive and predatory. Contextualized within Rossetti’s devotional writing, *Speaking Likenesses* is a tale of spiritual progress in which three children’s rejection of gluttony symbolizes their assumption of progressively more moral qualities: the most virtuous of the three steadfastly denies her corporeal desires in the course of the story. (159)

In *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity*, Knoepflmacher argues that “*Speaking Likenesses* derives its prime energy from the author’s relentless assault on what she regarded as an unhealthy obsession with girlhood” (373). Lastly, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas suggests that *Speaking Likenesses* is “an educational tale training little girls into accepting their lot” (73); “femininity appears as a training in self-denial” (86). While these scholars discuss Rossetti’s story as an extreme example of Victorian repression, I see the story as aligned with many of the lessons presented in Victorian advice literature and children’s literature. In fact, while *Speaking Likenesses* may have terrifying elements for children, the messages of the three stories are not at all extreme for the Victorian period.
Speaking Likenesses is a frame tale composed of three stories which an aunt tells her nieces while they sew and paint. The three tales all deal with hunger and the necessity to control and repress the appetite. When comparing the first and last tales, readers can see a progression in the heroines’ abilities to control hunger. Whereas Flora in the first tale faces punishment for her greedy appetite by dreaming of a feast in which she cannot participate, Maggie in the final story willingly controls her appetite for the chocolate she is delivering. Furthermore, Maggie’s behavior mirrors that of her grandmother; both are self-denying, being more interested in helping others than indulging themselves. Much like her grandmother, Maggie ends the story by feeding others, three animals she has rescued, and not just herself. Rossetti thus moves from a greedy heroine with little capacity for either control or self-denial to a heroine who faces a series of tempting trials and resists them all. With these stories, Rossetti represents girls’ appetites as in need of discipline and control, and, thereby, she upholds aspects of the Victorian performance of femininity: self-control and denial of hunger. Shuttleworth has contended that Victorian “[w]omen were expected to be more controlled than men, but were also presumed to be physiologically incapable of imposing control . . . they are helpless prisoners of their own bodies” (60). Rossetti, as we will see, argues against this assumption that women cannot control their bodies by suggesting that grown women, and well-trained little girls, are indeed capable of control and self-denial. Moreover, for Rossetti, young girls must learn control from the example of a grown woman who serves as a model of self-denial. Therefore, only the girl who most closely resembles a grown woman with a restrained appetite earns a modest reward in her tale.

In the first story, a birthday party gone wrong sets the stage for Flora’s education in how to perform femininity. Flora celebrates her eighth birthday with several friends. The children get
into a fight, and separated from the other children, Flora ends up in the “Land of Nowhere,” where she must attend a horrifying birthday party for another girl (Rossetti 338). Both portions of the story, Flora’s actual party and the dream party, feature scenes with food and eating. An initial conflict among the children occurs when they fight over a box of sugar plums Flora received for her birthday. The children accuse each other of taking the biggest one and of not leaving enough for everyone else. This conflict leads to a disappointing dinner during which “[e]ach dish in turn was only fit to be found fault with” (327). Rather than gratefully and quietly accepting the food, Flora and the other children fight and complain. While all of the boys and girls at the party behave badly, Rossetti only depicts Flora’s punishment for her misbehavior at her own party. These initial encounters with food prepare Flora for the horrifying dream that functions as a punishment or corrective for her greed and appetite during her birthday celebration. According to Brumberg, food restriction was a common punishment for Victorian children, and children “were routinely sent to bed without supper or refused a special sweet because they had been ‘bad.’ Denial of food was an easy, accessible parental weapon against the misbehaving child” (136). Flora’s terrifying dream, and the denial of food it includes, acts as her punishment for displaying an unfeminine appetite and lack of self-control during her own birthday celebration.

When Flora arrives at the dream birthday party, she immediately confronts tempting food, but, as with Alice during the feast at the end of Through the Looking-Glass, her appetite goes unsatisfied. A table (the furniture can move itself in the story) approaches Flora and provides her with tea and strawberries and cream. However, before Flora can take a single bite, the “birthday Queen” tells her that she cannot eat because “it’s my birthday, and everything is
mine’” (Rossetti 333). The Queen, who reflects Flora’s own selfish and greedy behavior during her birthday party, forces Flora to watch all of the children finish the meal without allowing her to enjoy a single bite. Near the end of the party, the children have another meal. During this second feast, the Queen again prevents Flora from satisfying her appetite, and Flora “was reduced to look[ing] hungrily on while the rest of the company feasted, and while successive dainties placed themselves before her and retired untasted” (339). Furthermore, Flora witnesses the children eating vast quantities of unusual delicacies including “[c]old turkey, lobster salad, stewed mushrooms, raspberry tart, cream cheese, a bumper of champagne, a meringue, a strawberry ice, sugared pine apple, [and] some greengages” (339). These foods are certainly out of the ordinary for middle-class children raised primarily on a plain diet of bread, milk, and mutton, and the Queen and luxurious meal serve as a critique of overindulgent upper-class appetites. This extravagant meal also goes against Victorian advice about what to feed children at birthday parties. For example, the Girls’ Own Paper provides the following suggestions:

I believe in children being treated as children, and fed on simple wholesome diet. I should be very sorry to ask any of my young friends to spend an evening with me, and then arrange matters so that they should be in the hands of the doctor for two or three weeks after they have left me. Therefore, I warn you that if you admit me into consultation you will not be told of anything rich and savoury, but only what is suitable, plain, and good. (Browne, “How to Provide” 183)

Therefore, this dream meal which the “birthday Queen” denies to Flora proves even more extraordinary considering the general advice parents received about children’s parties. Both of these extraordinary meals in the “Land of Nowhere” punish Flora for her own expression of appetite and failure to share graciously with her guests by forcing her to witness a magically extravagant meal which she cannot enjoy.
In addition to abstaining from the meal, Flora must also watch as the others indulge their out-of-control appetites with all of the delicacies. However, these children do not just eat; they “stuffed quite greedily” and were “stuffing without limit” (Rossetti 334 and 339). Flora is denied the opportunity to satisfy her appetite, and she must observe how disgusting and unappealing it is when others eat without some moderation of their appetites. This observation becomes part of Flora’s education as she sees how unfeminine it is to “stuff” as the birthday Queen does: “one quart of strawberry ice, three pine apples, two melons, a score of meringues, and about four dozen sticks of angelica” (339). The Queen’s gender is important here as well since:

[t]he lessons/morals being taught differ according to gender. On the one hand, while the boys are framed as monstrous, they “think nothing” of consuming a whole turkey. Thus, it seems, their monstrosity is negated or dismissed and they are given license and autonomy to act greedily because they are boys. On the other hand, the “Queen” of the nightmare birthday party is intrinsically condemned. (Daniel 44)

In other words, while Flora observes male and female children “stuffing,” the female consumption she observes appears particularly objectionable. This, of course, reinforces the gendered norms surrounding food and eating present in the non-fiction as well as in Victorian culture at large. Watching the Queen’s consumption helps Flora realize the errors of her appetite and out-of-control behavior, and “if she lives to be nine years old and give another birthday party, she is likely on that occasion to be even less like the birthday Queen of her troubled dream” (Rossetti 342).

Between the two excessive, and instructive, meals, the children in the dream play two games: Hunt the Pincushion and Self Help. Both games are violent and act as a punishment for girls, and especially girls with “abnormal” bodies. First, during Hunt the Pincushion, the children “[s]elect the smallest and weakest player (if possible let her be fat: a hump is best of all), chase
her round the room, overtaking her at short intervals, and sticking pins into her here or there as it happens” (336). While boys and girls can “pin,” girls are the only ones who act as the pincushion. Flora serves as the pincushion during the first game, and while she tries to avoid the other children, it is a “vain effort to escape her tormentors” (336). This game serves as a physical punishment for her out-of-control behavior at her own party. The second game, Self Help, also pits boys against helpless girls. During this game “[t]he boys were players, the girls were played” (338). As in the first game, the other children, particularly the boys, torture Flora. While the two meals punish Flora by denying her food and forcing her to witness her own greedy appetite exhibited in a more extreme form, the games function as a physical punishment for Flora’s expression of appetite during her birthday party. Clearly, then, the dreaming Flora experiences several extreme punishments all of which teach her the necessity of feminine self-control of both the appetite and behavior.

The second story, the shortest of the three and the least “fantastic,” continues the theme of denying the appetite through repeated images of Edith’s frustrated desires. Edith hopes to indulge her appetite and begin her family’s preparations for a “gipsy tea” party early; however, these attempts to fulfill her appetite before the appointed time violate Victorian norms and, therefore, are denied (342). First, on her way to the site of the planned gipsy tea, Edith encounters a grape vine, and “she longed for a cluster of those purple grapes which, hanging high above her head, swung to and fro . . . but never within reach” (345). She does not pause for long as she contemplates the unreachable grapes, but, similar to Flora, her appetite for an early snack is denied. Additionally, Edith’s attempts to boil the kettle before the tea-party begins are futile, her nurse catches her and sends her back home, and the story ends before she satisfies her
appetite. Edith’s attempts to help prepare for her family’s outdoor event fail entirely; it is the
adult women, the nurse and cook, who are the ones who successfully prepare for the event.
Likewise, Edith’s story “creates desire in its promise of a substantial feast, which is then
frustrated” (Daniel 46). This frustrated desire provides additional education for the female reader
who must learn to control and deny the appetite even when faced with delicious food. Edith may
try to begin the tea early, but she must delay her gratification. In Rossetti’s trio of stories, Edith’s
tale seems to be uneventful and unimportant, yet, when compared to Flora’s story, it
demonstrates some progression in controlling the appetite. In Edith’s case, the heroine does not
need to be punished as she does not over-indulge her appetite. Yet, Edith still expresses the
desire to do so, and this unfeminine expression of appetite, while not worthy of extreme
punishment, must still be denied.

The final story, the only story to take place at Christmas in this “Christmas trifle,”
exemplifies how to deny hunger and feed the self properly. While Flora experiences punishment
for her greedy appetites and Edith never fulfills her appetites, Maggie fully controls her
appetites. In the story, Maggie, an orphan who lives with her grandmother, Dame Margaret,
delivers a few Christmas items that a family left behind in Dame Margaret’s shop. During her
delivery, her appetite is tested by these treats, and ultimately, she resists giving in to her hunger.
While Dame Margaret runs a shop that sells “burnt almonds, chocolate, and ‘sweeties’ of every
flavour, all done up in elegant fancy boxes,” Maggie and Dame Margaret do not consume these
items (Rossetti 351). Instead, the community knows Dame Margaret for “her plain clothes and
plain table” which allow her to have the money to do “good deeds,” including that of adopting
her granddaughter (351). From the beginning, then, Maggie and Margaret parallel each other and
display moderation as opposed to the initial indulgences of both Flora and Edith who are preparing to give in to their appetites at upcoming events, the birthday party and gipsy tea. On her way to deliver a basket which shoppers had left in the store, Maggie encounters several temptations which could prevent her from completing her task. For instance, after seeing a couple of hungry birds Maggie grows “hungry from sympathy” (355). She even peeks into the basket to discover that “[o]nly there lay the chocolate, sweet and tempting, looking most delicious through a hole in its gilt paper” (355). Shortly after acknowledging her own hunger, Maggie encounters a boy who “had indeed arms, legs, a head, like ordinary people: but his face exhibited only one feature, and that was a wide mouth” (355). This boy personifies Maggie’s own hunger by both exhibiting and vocalizing the hunger Maggie has begun to feel after her encounter with the birds. Significantly, this expression of Maggie’s own hunger is male, not female, which further suggests that expressions of hunger are not feminine. The boy demands the chocolate, but Maggie resists; she links eating the chocolate to stealing. After braving this encounter, she successfully delivers the basket, and she hopes for an invitation to be “warmed by a fire, regaled with something nice, and indulged with a glimpse of the Christmas tree” (358). However, the family does not invite her in, and she must suppress her appetite for “something nice.” On the way back home, Maggie collects the homeless animals she encounters: a bird, cat, and dog. Once home, she “drank tea, and ate buttered toast” with her grandmother, and fed all three animals with bits of her tea and toast (360).

Significantly, Rossetti casts Maggie as the only one of the three girls who ends the story with a satisfied appetite. Yet, Maggie does not end up consuming chocolate, the extravagant delicacies Flora cannot eat at the party, or even the tempting grapes Edith fails to reach. Instead,
after completing her work, Maggie consumes modest and plain fare, and she does not consume to excess. The authors of Victorian advice literature would certainly have approved of this plain dinner. Through these actions, Maggie mirrors her grandmother’s maternal denial of appetite and feeding of others. Maggie then demonstrates that “[f]eeding brings more pleasure than eating. Food, then, becomes a vehicle, when given away rather than eaten, for generosity and charity. True pleasure comes both from feeding others and denying one’s own appetite” (Silver 55). Maggie then eats at just the right moment, when she can share her food with others rather than selfishly indulging in an extravagant delicacy. Maggie’s reward comes from emulating the self-control of a mature woman, her grandmother, Margaret. Through the completion of her work, suppression of her hunger, her self-control when confronted with challenges, and her abstemious meal shared with others, Maggie has performed appropriate Victorian femininity.

Carolyn Daniel argues that “‘Speaking Likenesses’ serves to reveal the unrelenting mean-spiritedness of the adult world’s expectations of girls’ behavior and the lack of hope and absence of pleasure that the world holds for them” (47). However, Maggie’s story does contain both hope and pleasure, although of a modest kind. She returns to a happy home with three new pets, and she gets to share a meal with them and with her grandmother. Her modest expectations are met, and it is the extravagance which is removed. Therefore, Rossetti advocates for moderation and control, which aligns with Victorian non-fiction texts. Rather than lacking all expectations for hope or pleasure, Rossetti suggests that girls need to control and moderate their appetites. Rather than expecting to indulge in a perfect and extravagant treat, as Flora does, or expecting to get a jump start in indulging in a tea party, as Edith does, Maggie becomes the ideal example of
feminine appetite. She resists extravagance, in this case chocolate, to have a satisfying, albeit plain, meal in the company of family.

Lastly, the frame of these three tales also reinforces the lessons included in the stories themselves. The aunt, much as the wise woman in MacDonald’s story, teaches her nieces that they must do their work before the appetite, in this case the appetite for a story, can be indulged. The aunt orders the girls to work prior to telling each story: “[p]ut away your pout and pull out your needle” and “[s]ilence! Attention! All eyes on occupations” (Rossetti 325). In fact, before she tells the second story, she says the girls must help her work since “no help no story” (343). The aunt also interrupts the stories frequently to answer questions or to issue commands such as “Jane and Laura, don’t quite forget the pocket-handkerchiefs you sat down to hem. See how hard Ella works at her fern leaves, and what pains she is taking to paint them nicely. Yes, Maude, that darn will do: now your task is ended, but if I were you I would help Clara with hers” (333).

While the frame does not discuss food or eating at all, it does reinforce the idea that all appetites must be controlled and denied. Likewise, with the second story, the aunt subverts the girls’ expectations for another exciting tale. The nieces beg for the story, and the aunt complies with a short and rather boring tale which is “a marvel scarcely worth mentioning” (343). The aunt purposefully devises a boring story to deny the girls what they want and to punish them for being overly demanding. Much as advice literature warns about giving in to children’s desires for special food, the aunt moderates their desires with a dull story. The aunt, whom Auerbach and Knoepflmacher call a “despot” (319), provides the storytelling equivalent of the plain and moderate diet prescribed for children.
Taken as a whole, *Speaking Likenesses* presents a progression of responses to the appetite. First, Flora indulges and exhibits greed when confronted with tasty food. Second, Edith’s anxious preparations for the gipsy tea and disobedience for taking the tea kettle backfire, and her hunger, particularly when confronted by the grapes, goes unsatisfied. Finally, Maggie’s ability to resist hunger, obey her grandmother, and complete her assigned task demonstrates that she is worthy of a reward, a modest meal. Furthermore, the focus on appetite and greed in *Speaking Likenesses* is clearly gendered and linked to the Victorian feminine ideal: “the perfect woman is the one who submits her physical appetites . . . to her will” (Silver 27). While Flora and Edith fail in their performances of proper adult femininity because of their lack of control over their appetites, Maggie serves as the “proper” example of feminine behavior and consumption in the text and exhibits the proper performance of Victorian femininity. She feeds others while refusing to give in to her appetite.

Conclusion

Carroll, Ewing, MacDonald, and Rossetti include food and eating as crucial components in their fantasy stories. Moreover, advocating both the need to develop a small, lady-like appetite and the need to control the body, these fantasies reinforce the messages about food and eating which girls and women received from non-fiction literature as well as Victorian culture at large. These authors also demonstrate that food and eating are critical to gender performativity. In fact, in each story, girls whose eating goes beyond cultural expectations for women face critique and punishment. Readers glean a similar message from the experiences of each heroine: Abide by
cultural norms or face punishment. Victorian girls may not have been expelled from Wonderland or been taken captive by magical beings for re-education, but, as the non-fiction demonstrates, the possibilities for judgment, physical punishment, and condemnation for any failure to perform properly were certainly present. Even when reading fantasies purely for pleasure, girls and women would have encountered these same gendered expectations regarding controlling their appetites and bodies as a means of demonstrating their morality and femininity.

While this chapter discusses only four authors and five texts, other children’s literature throughout the nineteenth century contained similar messages about food and femininity. Maria Edgeworth’s “The Birthday Present” (1796), “The Little Glutton” from The Illustrated Girls' Own Story-Book (1861), Frances Hodgson Burnett’s A Little Princess (serialized in 1887 and published in 1905), and J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan (1904) are just a few additional children’s texts which illustrate a connection between food and gender. In other words, while this chapter explores several Victorian children’s stories, authors include these same themes in children’s literature spanning the entirety of the nineteenth century. Food and gender, then, are abiding concerns which Victorian readers encounter over and over again in children’s literature throughout the century and, as will be discussed next, in fiction written for adult audiences, too.
When the Dessert appears, you should make an offer to the lady of the various kinds of fruit. You should crack the nuts for her, and deposit the kernels on her plate; apples should be peeled and cut in four parts; oranges should be peeled, and then cut in slices extremely thin, and powdered over with white sugar. It is impossible for a lady to eat an orange in any other way without stretching her mouth, --spiriting the juice over her dress and into other people’s eyes, --and staining her delicate skin the colour of a frog’s!

- From *The Etiquette of Love, Courtship, and Marriage*, 1859, p. 140.

Eat peas with your fork: it is quite easy to push them on it with the knife, or you may take your fork in your right hand to eat them; but that is not so convenient for a lady.

- From *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*, 1876, p. 35.

Ladies scarcely ever eat cheese after dinner.

- From *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*, 1876, p. 35.

The authors of children’s fantasy stories were certainly not the only ones to depict food and gender performativity in their texts. Victorian novels written primarily for adults contain examples of women eating and, often significantly, not eating. From Dickens and Thackeray to Eliot and the Brontës, mid-nineteenth-century authors connected food, gender, and class in their works. In fact, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, and the Brontës have elicited several critical responses to their representations of food and eating. A few notable books include: Gail Turley Houston’s *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens’s Novels*, which provides an in-depth study of food in Dickens’s writing; Anna Krugovoy Silver’s *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, which has a lengthy discussion of the Brontës; Annette Cozzi’s *The Discourses*
of *Food in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, which discusses Dickens, Thackeray, and the Brontës; Michael Parrish Lee’s *The Food Plot in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, which examines Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot; and Gwen Hyman’s *Making a Man*, which includes the Brontës and Dickens. However, while critics such as Houston, Silver, Cozzi, Lee, and Hyman have started exploring these authors’ uses of food, Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels have not received as much attention. Yet, her novels repeatedly include instances related to food, and often these moments prove pivotal to character development. This chapter expands this criticism by exploring Gaskell’s depiction of food, gender, and class in two of her novels which focus on middle-class life: *Cranford* (1851-3) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866). From the challenges of eating oranges and peas in *Cranford* to the class connotations of consuming cheese in *Wives and Daughters*, both of Gaskell’s middle-class novels depict the performance of gender, and more specifically, genteel femininity, and this performance of genteel femininity seizes upon food and eating as an essential part of its display.

In addition to their focus on middle-class, and occasionally upper-class, women, *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* are important novels to consider in an exploration of food and femininity because of the surprising frequency of food references in both novels. Victorian advice literature often instructs women to avoid direct discussions of food or their appetites.¹ Furthermore, Helena Michie notes how often Victorian literature fails to represent women eating at all:

> conspicuously absent, however, in novels and conduct books that deal so closely with dinners, tea, and other social gatherings is any mention of the heroine eating. Although a Trollope hero can discuss the relative merits of several after-dinner ports for pages, and

1 One example of this comes from *The New Female Instructor*: “However valuable may be the blessings of health, it is indelicate in a lady to boast of it; to talk of her great appetite or her strength; to say she eats heartily, can walk several miles, or can bear a good deal of fatigue” (14). See chapter two for additional examples.
although we may follow him to his club to watch him eat his daily chop or his souffle, the Trollope heroine, like her sisters in other texts of the period, laughs, flirts, and presides over presumably empty plates. *(The Flesh Made Word 12)*

Yet, in *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell defies this norm and includes numerous depictions of women eating or conversing about food. Consequently, these frequent references to food and Gaskell’s focus on middle-class femininity make both of these novels important in a study of food and gender in Victorian literature.

Surprisingly, while both *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* have received significant critical attention, scholars frequently gloss over the importance of food in both novels. Critics often briefly reference the secretive eating of oranges in *Cranford* or Mrs. Gibson’s illicit consumption of Molly’s lunch at the beginning of *Wives and Daughters*, yet even when critics discuss these moments as more than humorous interludes, they rarely explore them in the context of food studies. By either ignoring food or viewing it as merely comical, critics miss how crucial food is in Gaskell’s depiction of gender and class. Only one unpublished book-length study exists about Gaskell and food. The dissertation completed in 2012 by Prijo Koivuvaara from the University of Tempere in Finland is titled *Hunger, Consumption, and Identify in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Novels*; Koivuvaara includes chapters discussing food in five of Gaskell’s novels including *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*. Koivuvaara suggests that “[i]n *Cranford*, both hunger and food consumption are expressions of identity, of belonging to a social group; they are intertwined with and affected by the economics of a group of female characters governed by the blanket rule of elegant economy” (181). Koivuvaara argues that in *Wives and Daughters* “meals, food, and drink are consciously and unconsciously used to draw social boundaries and to construct and reconstruct social identities and social images” (24). While Koivuvaara mentions
gender in this discussion of identity and the social aspects of food in Gaskell’s novels, she does not make gender the primary focus of the study. Instead, Koivuvaara explores how “individual, social and cultural identities are constructed and reconstructed through the media of hunger, food, and drink” and how “representations of food and foodways express a sense of community and communality and sometimes even a nostalgic longing for the past” (11). Other book-length studies of food in Victorian literature only briefly address Gaskell’s novels. For example, Lee briefly discusses the absence of a marriage plot in Cranford and suggests that “much of Cranford’s apparent plotlessness and often-noted eccentricity is achieved through the tendency of food plots to replace more conventional narratives of courtship and reproduction” (63). Similarly, Silver only includes a couple of brief references to Gaskell, and Cozzi discusses just Mary Barton.

While book-length studies of food in Victorian literature spend insufficient time analyzing Gaskell’s novels, articles also pay little serious attention to Gaskell’s use of food. Again, many articles briefly reference instances of eating in the novels, yet most do not fully analyze these moments, particularly within the context of food studies. One notable exception is Natalie Kapetanios Meir’s “’Household Forms and Ceremonies’: Narrating Routines in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford,” which compares Cranford to “the social instruction handbook” and suggests that the novel displays “functional and methodological overlap with works on dining manners” (1). Aside from these few examples, this lack of critical attention is surprising since both Cranford and Wives and Daughters include numerous moments which highlight the connections among food, gender, and class and which can reveal much about the Victorian connection between gender performativity and eating.

Furthermore, as Meir suggests, Gaskell’s works provide interesting connections to Victorian non-fiction texts such as those I discuss in chapter two. These non-fiction advice and
conduct books “were bestsellers” during the Victorian period (Broomfield 40). Additionally, Flint explains, these texts “must have served as a confirmation and consolidation of the dominant ideology of the period” (*The Woman Reader* 117). The non-fiction texts reflected and shaped the rules middle-class Victorian women followed when serving, eating, or discussing food, and even women who did not actively read these texts would have encountered many of the rules described since they reflected the culture and the practices of polite society. Additionally, Gaskell may not depict characters in either novel reading these texts, yet the characters’ behaviors and discussions repeatedly abide by the guidelines explained in advice literature. Thus, the reader can infer that the women in *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* either read this kind of literature or developed a familiarity with its guidelines in other ways. These links to Victorian advice literature also make both novels important to include in this study. Therefore, this chapter aims to address the general lack of criticism about Gaskell and food by demonstrating how Gaskell addresses women’s education about food and eating and depicts the performance of femininity through food.

*Cranford*

In *Cranford* (1851-3), Gaskell presents a society “in possession of the Amazons,” where women dominate the polite society of the local community (Gaskell, *Cranford* 39). The women of Cranford follow strict guidelines for both feminine and aristocratic behavior. These women are, for the most part, older women not trying to attract well-to-do husbands or improve their social standing within the local community. Instead, the women belong to a well-established
female community that has created its own rules and rituals about performing their gender and class through ways of eating. This performance is so ingrained in their lives and everyday activities that the women maintain their stringent guidelines about food without the necessity of doing so to advance their positions. These guidelines encompass everything from fashion and visiting times to the food which the women serve at parties. While not rich, the Cranford women use these rules to support their performances of genteel femininity and to assert their differences from all of the men in Cranford and from the working-class women. Moreover, Gaskell highlights the fact that these guidelines are not “natural” feminine behavior but the result of educating newcomers into the ways of the aristocratic local women: “[t]hen there were rules and regulations for visiting and calls; and they were announced to any young people who might be staying in the town, with all the solemnity with which the old Manx laws were read once a year on the Tinwald Mount” (40). In other words, the women of Cranford provide clear instruction regarding the guidelines genteel young women must follow while in the town. Natalie Kapetanios Meir explains that “Cranford does not contain a book that the women of Cranford consult for their dinner parties and visiting calls. Instead, at times the novel itself resembles a handbook” (“Household Forms” 3). While Cranford may serve as a handbook to the manners expected in this community, the instruction presented in popular Victorian advice literature certainly influenced the women’s behavior. The women do not read these books in the novel, yet they regularly follow the rules presented in this literature. In fact, the small community of Cranford mirrors Victorian society at large, where female manners and dining behaviors are represented as being naturally different from those of both men and the working-class yet which require specific education for those entering the community.
For the women, these guidelines for correct behavior represent both proper feminine behavior and expectations based on class. Interestingly, the local women are, for the most part, not particularly well-to-do, yet they still embrace upper-class expectations for women’s behavior. For instance, Mary Smith, the narrator of Cranford, explains that “though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic” (Gaskell, Cranford 41). This small community of women ties class not to possessing material wealth but instead to following the rules for the performance of femininity. In fact, to accommodate their general lack of wealth, the women establish rules that connect gentility to frugality: “[t]here, economy was always ‘elegant’, and money-spending always ‘vulgar and ostentatious’” (42). Similarly, Smith explains:

[w]e had tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished. If we walked to or from a party, it was because the night was so fine, or the air so refreshing, not because sedan-chairs were expensive. If we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material; and so on, till we blinded ourselves to the vulgar fact that we were, all of us, people of very moderate means. (42)

Both of these examples illustrate the importance of performativity to this community of women. They all know the truth about their lack of wealth, yet rather than admit their financial limitations, they have found ways to perform their genteel definition of femininity; they connect their frugality to aristocratic behavior and misrepresent it as a matter of choice. Following these rules both empowers these women in the face of their financial limitations while simultaneously restricting their choices and perpetuating the negative connotations of women’s eating. Therefore, in Cranford, the women fully engage in performing their femininity, frequently through food, by maintaining an agreed upon illusion of aristocracy and by ensuring that each newcomer receives an education into the ways of the community.
In addition to establishing rules for performing both their gender and class, the women of Cranford also firmly tie those rules to food and eating. In fact, Gaskell includes numerous scenes which illustrate the ways in which the women use food as an integral part of their performance of aristocratic femininity. First, when Mrs. Forrester hosts a party for the local women, she only has one servant to assist, yet she aims to maintain the illusion of a more aristocratic home:

> when Mrs. Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world, and talked on about household forms and ceremonies as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants’ hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up. (41)

Both the hostess and guests subtly maintain the performance of gentility while each still understands that “though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes” (41). Clearly, everyone present understands that this party is all about performance, yet they persist in sustaining the illusion to maintain their shared sense of well-to-do femininity.

Similarly, the other women also use food in their performances of genteel femininity. In particular, Mary Smith explains that “it was considered ‘vulgar’ (a tremendous word in Cranford) to give anything expensive, in the way of eatable or drinkable, at the evening entertainments” (42). For example, Mrs. Jameison only served “[w]after bread-and-butter and sponge-biscuits” while Miss Jenkyns’s “eatables were of the slightest description” (42, 45). According to Koivuvaara, “[t]he characters seek to preserve the coherence of their society and hide financial limitations by adhering to rules of food consumption which restrict the amount of
food served when entertaining guests” (215). In other words, to accommodate their small incomes, the women have quietly agreed that serving very little actually signals their aristocratic femininity. Furthermore, by serving their guests plain food in small quantities, the women follow advice literature and its insistence on women’s, even rich women’s, tiny, delicate appetites. While the Cranford women typically display the expected food related behaviors and adhere to the recommendations of advice literature, Gaskell repeatedly highlights the performative nature of the women’s relationships to food.

One humorous example occurs when the women attend a party at Miss Barker’s home, and they attempt to maintain their performance of aristocratic femininity even when confronted with a tea-tray which was “vulgarly heaped up” (Gaskell, Cranford 111). Mrs. Jamieson, who provides only meagre refreshments for her own guests, “was kindly indulgent to Miss Barker’s want of knowledge of the customs of high life; and, to spare her feelings, ate three large pieces of seed cake, with a placid, ruminating expression of countenance, not unlike a cow’s” (111). After providing an abundance of vulgar seed cake, Miss Barker’s excess continues when she presents a supper tray with “scalloped oysters, potted lobsters, jelly, [and] a dish called ‘little Cupids’” (113). While the ladies consider suppers vulgar, as Mary Smith explains “we thought it better to submit graciously, even at the cost of our gentility – which never ate suppers in general, but which, like most non-supper-eaters, was particularly hungry on all special occasions” (113). Miss Barker even convinces the women to drink “cherry-brandy” although they at first “rather shrank back when she proffered it” (113). These women, normally too aristocratic and feminine to eat large suppers, devour all of the food and drink that they would otherwise eschew at home and never serve their own guests. Miss Barker, who is not entirely familiar with the frugal
elegance of the Cranford women, thinks that her indulgent treats will help to establish her equality with the women in the community. However, the women connect their consumption of this unusual abundance of delicacies to Miss Barker’s inexperience with aristocratic, feminine entertainment, and Mary Smith even displays their knowledge of Miss Barker’s work as a lady’s maid and owner of a millinery shop by mentioning her “former sphere” (113). This contradiction further reinforces the performative nature of the women’s relationships to food. They regularly deny their own appetites and desires simply to maintain the appearance of genteel femininity which the social rules established by the Cranford women requires. Yet, when given the opportunity to eat their fill while kindly and genteelly overlooking Miss Barker’s working-class errors, they all enjoy indulging their appetites with unexpected delicacies and satiating their hunger, which normally goes unsatisfied at these gatherings.

The orange eating episode, the most frequently noted example of women’s eating in Cranford, provides another example of the rules these women follow. Mary Smith describes the unusual method Miss Jenkyns and Miss Matty employ for eating oranges:

[w]hen oranges came in, a curious proceeding was gone through. Miss Jenkyns did not like to cut the fruit; for, as she observed, the juice all ran out nobody knew where; sucking (only I think she used some more recondite word) was in fact the only way of enjoying oranges; but then there was the unpleasant association with a ceremony frequently gone through by little babies; and so, after dessert, in orange season, Miss Jenkyns and Miss Matty used to rise up, possess themselves each of an orange in silence, and withdraw to the privacy of their own rooms to indulge in sucking oranges. (66).

Smith notes that on a few occasions she convinced Miss Matty to remain in the dining room with her, and Smith “held up a screen, and did not look, and, as she said, she [Miss Matty] tried not to make the noise very offensive” (66). Yet, Miss Matty returns to consuming her oranges in the bedroom, which was her sister’s preference, after her sister dies. While many critics mention this
scene in their discussions of *Cranford*, they usually discuss it as a humorous moment which reveals more about the idiosyncrasies of the women in Cranford. However, as quirky as this behavior seems to modern readers, the sisters’ worries about how to eat oranges reflect Victorian advice literature’s frequent discussion of how women can eat oranges appropriately. As discussed in chapter two, oranges receive special attention in advice literature. These authors provide guidance about how women can safely eat messy oranges and maintain their feminine delicacy. Much as with Miss Jenkyns and Miss Matty, the juice especially concerned these authors. While none of the authors of advice literature suggest the “sucking” method employed by the sisters, advice literature provides frequent suggestions about how women can eat oranges without embarrassing or disgracing themselves. In fact, Phillis Browne, writing for the *Girls Own Paper*, mentions “the two old ladies in Cranford” when providing suggestions about how to cut and serve oranges for a child’s party (183). *The Etiquette of Love* gives men directions for how to prepare oranges for ladies: “oranges should be peeled, and then cut in slices extremely thin, and powdered over with white sugar. It is impossible for a lady to eat an orange in any other way without stretching her mouth” (140). Other publications, rather than providing advice about how to eat oranges successfully, provide warnings about how not to eat oranges. For example, Caulfield notes how “[h]alf-bred people may be seen inserting pieces of orange into their mouths

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2 In fact, the sisters’ orange eating is reminiscent of the dangers of fruit in Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and particularly how Laura “sucked and sucked and sucked the more / Fruits which that unknown orchard bore; / She sucked until her lips were sore” (lines 134-136).

3 “The usual way of preparing oranges is to cut them in half, but a half orange is almost as difficult to manage as a whole one; far better adopt the following plan, which comes to us, I believe, from America. Peel off the skin of the orange, leaving only a bad round the middle about an inch wide. Divide the orange into sections, but let these remain connected by the band. The strip of rind can (if liked) be divided into two, so that each child can have half an orange instead of a whole one; but in either case it will be found that the sections can be removed when wanted, and disposed of one by one, and that without any discomfort. Oranges thus prepared do not look very well, but they are most convenient for eating” (Browne, “How to Provide” 183).
and drawing out the peel again, showing the remains of the pulp on their plates” (“Dinners in Society” 314). Just these few examples from the advice literature demonstrate that oranges are a particularly challenging food for elegant women, and Gaskell’s two sisters reflect typical concerns about how to eat the fruit femininely and politely. Indeed, given how challenging oranges are to eat, unsurprisingly the sisters decide to eat them in their bedrooms beyond anyone’s observation and judgment. The eating of fruit, which for many Victorians had sensual and thus dangerous connotations, is restricted not just to a private room but a bedroom.

Another example of the Cranford women’s constrained eating habits occurs when Miss Matty, Mary Smith, and Miss Pole dine with Mr. Holbrook. During this meal, Mr. Holbrook challenges the women and their elegant manners with a dish of peas. As with oranges, peas are another often discussed food in the advice literature. According to Pace, “[p]eas, like fruit with stones, were difficult to eat not only for practical reasons but because they might be eaten the wrong way and thus force a woman to display unfeminine behavior” (10). Since peas can be difficult to eat, advice literature provides suggestions about which utensils women should use to correctly and elegantly eat them; yet, the advice literature is frequently contradictory which would only add more difficulty for the elegant woman faced with a dish of peas. Pace notes that “eating peas with a knife was strictly forbidden” and “spoons were to be used for peas, tarts, and puddings” (10). However, The Girl’s Own Paper warns girls to “[n]ever eat peas with a spoon. You may change the fork into your right hand and use it as one, or you may press the peas with it—still in the right hand—making them adhere conveniently together” (Caulfield, “Dinners in Society” 314). Thus, depending on the advice literature a woman consults, she might discover
that forks, spoons, and knives all remain off-limits for eating peas. The Cranford women struggle to determine the correct utensil for eating the peas that Mr. Holbrook serves:

[wh]en the ducks and green peas came, we looked at each other in dismay; we had only two-pronged, black-handled forks. It is true the steel was as bright as silver; but what were we to do? Miss Matty picked up her peas, one by one, on the point of the prongs, much as Amine ate her grains of rice after her previous feast with the Ghoul. Miss Pole sighed over her delicate young peas as she left them on one side of her plate untasted, for they would drop between the prongs. I looked at my host; the peas were going wholesale into his capacious mouth, shoveled up by his large round-ended knife. I saw, I imitated, I survived! My friends, in spite of my precedent, could not muster up courage enough to do an ungenteel thing; and, if Mr Holbrook had not been so heartily hungry, he would probably have seen that the good peas went away almost untouched. (Gaskell, Cranford 74-75)

This meal highlights both the performative and gendered elements of dining for Victorian women. While Mr. Holbrook contentedly eats his peas without a worry about etiquette, the three women want to eat the peas but are flummoxed about how to eat them while maintaining their elegant femininity. Each woman attempts a different solution to the conundrum. Miss Matty follows the advice in the Girls Own Paper and eats the peas with the fork. Conversely, Miss Pole is unable to use the fork, though she would probably prefer a spoon, and she gives up. Mary, on the other hand, defies the advice and uses her knife. While Mary has the courage to follow Mr. Holbrook’s example, Miss Matty and Miss Pole want to maintain their gentility and appear properly feminine. Mr. Holbrook will clearly not judge the women for briefly violating the rules of elegant dining, as he is doing, yet they refuse to cease their performance of femininity even for food they clearly want to eat. Miss Matty’s statement about the meal reinforces her concern about rules and manners: “‘[i]t is very pleasant dining with a bachelor . . . I only hope it is not improper; so many pleasant things are!’” (75). Their concerns about performing genteel
femininity entail that only Mary Smith, who defies the usual rules of decorum, can eat and enjoy the peas, and once again, performing femininity gets in the way of satisfying the appetite.

While Cranford might be a town with few men, at least few men of the same class as the aristocratic ladies, the women still feel the need to perform their femininity in approved ways. In fact, while advice literature often encourages women to control their appetites to please and attract men, the Cranford women monitor, discuss, and judge each other and their performances. From Mrs. Jamieson’s “little minnikin pieces” of sugar to Miss Matty’s worries about green tea, the women in Cranford repeatedly focus on food and eating as demonstrable ways to exhibit their gender and class to each other as well as the larger community (124, 202). Throughout Cranford, Gaskell frequently draws attention to the performative nature of femininity. With humorous events related to meals, Gaskell shows how women closely shape their appetites and behaviors to meet the demands of Victorian culture, advice literature, and other women. Their relationships to food are all mediated through the two most important factors of Cranford society, gender and class. Gaskell reveals that their behavior, while often conforming to many of the strictures laid out in advice literature, is, in fact, unnatural. The women have fully embraced the performative by restricting their behavior and appetites to appear to be aristocratic ladies. Their demonstrations are not naturally feminine, as some authors of advice literature suggest, but the result of conditioning, education, and peer pressure which ensure that each woman follows the rules.
Wives and Daughters (1866), Elizabeth Gaskell’s final, and unfinished, novel, frequently overlaps with the issues and concerns discussed in children’s literature, the focus of the previous chapter. In fact, critics have discussed the fairy tale or fantasy elements present in the novel. For example, Carrie Wasinger argues that “Gaskell’s fiction repeatedly used the familiar significations of fairytale to characterize marriage, reproduction, and middle-class achievement. A discussion of Wives and Daughters should embrace the novel’s allusions to fantasy as willingly as the author did” (269). Moreover, as Wasinger suggests, the novel “follows the trajectory of a Cinderella story” (272). Indeed, the connections to Cinderella appear even in the following very brief overview. Molly Gibson, whose mother died when she was young, experiences much turmoil when her father decides to re-marry and introduces a step-mother and step-sister into their home. This new step-mother has worked as both a governess for a rich, aristocratic family and as a teacher at her own small school, and education, particularly female education, is an important topic in the novel. In particular, Gaskell focuses on Molly’s growth and development, and her introduction of Mrs. Gibson into the household means that Molly’s education shifts from self-directed reading as Mrs. Gibson attempts to teach Molly about genteel femininity. Likewise, as in the fantasy literature discussed in the previous chapter, food is a frequent focus of female education, and Mrs. Gibson and her daughter, Cynthia, use food as part of their performances of class and gender. Yet Mrs. Gibson attempts, rather unsuccessfully, to teach Molly to do the same. In frequently humorous moments, Gaskell depicts Mrs. Gibson’s behavior regarding food and class as a performance reminiscent of advice literature and not as a
“natural” marker of her refined class or femininity. Yet, while the non-fiction texts and children’s literature discussed in the previous chapters provide a similar education about performing femininity through food, Gaskell’s novels demonstrate the outcome of this kind of education for adult women. Therefore, Gaskell frequently reveals the performative nature of many Victorian women’s relationships to food and underscores the damage done by following advice literature’s instruction about food and eating.

In the novel, both Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia, her daughter, behave in ways that indicate their “‘feminine’ subtleties are the result of nurture not nature” (Morris xix). In other words, although Gaskell never describes the two women as reading advice literature or conduct manuals, the women learned how to eat, dress, and behave in ways that are consistent with these books. In “Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Wollstonecraft and the Conduct Books: Mrs. Gibson as the Product of a Conventional Education in ‘Wives and Daughters,’” Mary Waters argues that in the novel Gaskell tries “to criticize conventional views on education for girls” (13). Furthermore, Waters connects the novel to Mary Wollstonecraft’s concerns about the shallow education many girls received, and she suggests “that some of Mrs Gibson’s most unflattering qualities reflect the outcome Wollstonecraft predicts from the education the conduct books advocated” (15). While Waters highlights Mrs. Gibson’s “superficial accomplishments, including pleasant manners, music, needlework, and a correct French accent,” she does not include eating as part of this conduct book education. Yet, what Waters misses in her discussion of Gaskell’s critique of conduct book education is the crucial role that food and eating play both in this kind of education and in Gaskell’s condemnation of it. As chapter two demonstrates, Victorian conduct books and advice literature discuss food as an important aspect of Victorian femininity which women of all
ages need to learn. Similarly, echoing the authors of conduct books, Gaskell’s Mrs. Gibson and
Cynthia demonstrate a similar preoccupation with the importance of food in their performances
of genteel femininity. Therefore, Gaskell both depicts and critiques the performative nature of
many women’s eating and behavior while also showing the outcome of conduct book and advice
literature education.

The future Mrs. Gibson first appears as the widowed Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick who
discovers the distressed young Molly asleep in the garden during Lady Cumnor’s party. After
waking up, Molly tells Mrs. Kirkpatrick that she missed lunch, and Mrs. Kirkpatrick brings her a
variety of items including “some bread, and some cold chicken, and some jelly, and a glass of
wine, and a bottle of sparkling water, and a bunch of grapes” (Gaskell, Wives 17). Molly, feeling
ill, drinks only the water and eats just a few grapes while Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who also missed
lunch, decides to eat the rest of Molly’s food. While Molly eats the grapes, she observes

   the good appetite with which the lady ate up the chicken and jelly, and drank the glass of
   wine. She was so pretty and so graceful in her deep mourning, that even her hurry in
eating, as if she was afraid of some one coming to surprise her in the act, did not keep her
little observer from admiring her in all she did. (17)

This moment in the second chapter sets the stage for everything the reader learns about Mrs.
Kirkpatrick’s behavior and character both before and after her marriage to Molly’s father, Mr.
Gibson. First, she is clearly hungry, and she devours all of the food which Molly was supposed
to eat. Yet, she behaves “as if she was afraid” of someone seeing her eating, and she wants her
meal to remain a secret as she both consumes food which is not hers and does so voraciously
(17). In fact, this scene parallels the secret eating and “surreptitious luncheons” which The
Lady’s Newspaper warns women about ("The Fair Sex and their Diet” 9). Here, Mrs. Kirkpatrick engages in secret eating which many Victorians viewed as suspect, and she reveals in this moment that she does, in fact, have a hearty appetite, which genteel women supposedly lack. Moreover, her fear of observation reveals her supreme concern with appearances, and she makes sure her personal indulgences are unobserved, except by a child with little power to judge her or publicize the eating she witnesses. This first encounter with the future Mrs. Gibson reveals her preoccupation with performance, particularly with maintaining an appearance of genteel femininity when those who matter, such as the Cumnor family, may observe her behavior.

After Molly begins to recover after getting lost and Mrs. Kirkpatrick finishes the meal, they return to the house with the empty dishes. Lady Cuxhaven enquires after Molly, and “then glancing at the plates and glasses, she added, — ‘Come I think there can’t be much amiss!’” (Gaskell, Wives 18). Of course, Lady Cuxhaven believes that Molly has greedily eaten all of the food, and “Molly could not help wishing that her pretty companion would have told Lady Cuxhaven that she herself had helped to finish up the ample luncheon; but no such idea seemed to come into her mind” (18). Moreover, Molly overhears Lady Cuxhaven and Mrs. Kirkpatrick speaking, and she “could not keep from tormenting herself by fancying that the words spoken sounded wonderfully like ‘Over-eaten herself, I suspect’” (18). Mrs. Kirkpatrick quite willingly implies that Molly consumed all of the food herself to conceal her own hearty consumption.

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4 Here is the full quotation, which is also discussed in chapter one: “[w]e do not like to see a young lady ignore our food, or turn from the proffered wing chicken, albeit with an air of the prettiest disgust. That always, to us at least, engenders suspicion of previous banquets, of surreptitious luncheons, of forenoon indulgences in cakes and hot jelly, it may be with a flavor of maraschino. We see at once that there is a falsity in our sweet neighbour’s performance, that she is acting a part deliberately studied and conned, and we remember, with a shudder, the story, in the ‘Arabian Nights,’ of the lady who restricted herself to a few grains of rice at regulated mealtimes, in order that she might be properly appetised for her hideous supper with the Ghouls” (“The Fair Sex and their Diet” 9).
When discussing this moment in the novel, Karen Boiko, who, as with Wasinger, notes the fairy tale elements in the novel, states:

Gaskell builds on a common trope of fairy tales and novels, the misguided equation of beauty with goodness. This familiar theme percolates quietly through *Wives and Daughters*: at first sight, as noted above, Molly thinks Clare the most beautiful person she has seen. She is disabused that same day of any notion that Clare’s character matches her appearance, but it takes her father rather longer to do so. (97)

However, authors do not solely equate beauty and goodness in fairy tales and novels. Victorian advice literature frequently makes this connection too, and, as Boiko explains, Gaskell quickly reveals that Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s beautiful and feminine appearance constitutes part of her performance rather than an accurate illustration of her goodness. Furthermore, Koivuvaara notes that when Mrs. Kirkpatrick is “hiding her appetite from public scrutiny” she highlights “[t]he difference between her public and private consumption, and thus also her hypocrisy” (240). So, Mrs. Kirkpatrick desires to conceal her own appetite to maintain the impression that she has small and aristocratic tastes and to maintain the illusion of her own genteel femininity and goodness. This moment links Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s femininity and appetite to issues regarding class and, particularly, her desire to fit in with the upper-class Lady Cuxhaven. Her small deceit about the meal, along with the beautiful appearance she cultivates, forms part of her performance of proper Victorian femininity and reveals the deceitful elements in her character.

Years later, as Mr. Gibson informs Molly of his plan to marry Mrs. Kirkpatrick, he reminds Molly of her first encounter with her future step-mother at this garden party. Molly, upset by the news, does not want her father to marry because she fears that it will alter their relationship and household, as it of course does. However, Mr. Gibson decides to marry for two

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5 George MacDonald’s “The Wise Woman” makes this connection between beauty and goodness. See chapter three.
reasons. First, he wants Molly to have a female role model and protector within their home. After one of his medical pupils falls in love with Molly, Mr. Gibson realizes “[i]t was very awkward . . . to have a motherless girl growing up into womanhood in the same house with two young men, even if she only met them at meal-times” (Gaskell, *Wives* 50). Yet, Gaskell makes it quite clear that concern for Molly is not the only reason which incites Mr. Gibson to take this step. Food serves as the second motivating factor for his decision because Mr. Gibson discovers that he needs a wife who can manage the household and organize his meals. In particular, during one embarrassing episode, Lord Hollingford comes to visit Mr. Gibson, and they share a meal:

> [s]o, though Mr Gibson knew well that bread-and-cheese, cold beef, or the simplest food available, would have been welcome to the hungry lord, he could not get either these things for luncheon, or even the family dinner, at anything like the proper time, in spite of all his ringing, and as much anger as he liked to show, for fear of making Lord Hollingford uncomfortable. At last dinner was ready, but the poor host saw the want of nicety – almost the want of cleanliness, in all its accompaniment – dingy plate, dull-looking glass, a tablecloth that, if not absolutely dirty, was anything but fresh in its splashed and rumpled condition, and compared it in his own mind with the dainty delicacy with which even a loaf of brown bread was served up at his guest’s home. (101)

After this disagreeable meal, Lord Hollingford advises Mr. Gibson about finding a wife: “‘if you found a sensible agreeable woman of thirty or so, I really think you couldn’t do better than take her to manage your home and so save you either discomfort or worry; and, besides, she would be able to give your daughter that kind of tender supervision which, I fancy, all girls of that age require’” (101). The new Mrs. Gibson certainly does take control of both the household and Molly but to a greater extent than Mr. Gibson anticipates. He may desire simple food served on time in clean surroundings along with a female role model for Molly, but that does not satisfy the future Mrs. Gibson who wants to use her new position as a way of improving the family’s class status by following the model of the aristocratic Cumnor family.
Indeed, Mr. Gibson’s plan to marry a role model for his daughter and manager for his home backfires as both he and Molly become better acquainted with Mrs. Kirkpatrick and her character. Prior to their marriage, Gaskell begins to reveal more about the disconnect between Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s public display and private behavior through references to food. For instance, during a visit with Lady Cumnor, Mrs. Kirkpatrick notices “the contrast between the dinners which she had to share with her scholars at Ashcombe – rounds of beef, legs of mutton, great dishes of potatoes, and large, batter-puddings, with the tiny meal of exquisitely cooked delicacies, sent up on old Chelsea china, that was served every day to the earl and countess and herself at the Towers” (98). Mrs. Kirkpatrick, of course, enjoys the more expensive, elegant, and delicious meals on offer when she visits her friends at the Towers, yet she has other means of satisfying her appetites at her school. For example, when Lady Cumnor tries to convince Mrs. Kirkpatrick to invite Molly to stay at the school before the marriage, Mrs. Kirkpatrick resists the visit because:

[i]f Molly came to be an inmate of her house, farewell to many little background economies, and a still more serious farewell to many little indulgences, that were innocent enough in themselves, but which Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s former life had caused her to look upon as sins to be concealed: the dirty dog’s-eared delightful novel from the Ashcombe circulating library, the leaves of which she turned over with a pair of scissors; the lounging-chair which she had for use at her own home, straight and upright as she sat now in Lady Cumnor’s presence; the dainty morsel, savoury and small, to which she treated herself for her own solitary supper, -- all these and many other similarly pleasant things would have to be foregone if Molly came to be her pupil, parlour-boarder, or visitor, as Lady Cumnor was planning. (130)

Mrs. Kirkpatrick hopes to continue the secret treats she indulges in within her own home. Much as with her concealed eating of the good food which was supposed to go to Molly at the beginning of the novel, this scene reveals Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s appetite for indulgences and her desire to hide these treats from others, especially her future husband and aristocratic friends. As
with the secret eating, which Victorian advice literature disparaged, Mrs. Kirkpatrick hopes to conceal her own behavior behind a more genteel and respectably feminine façade. Again, for Mrs. Kirkpatrick, maintaining her performance remains of the utmost importance, and anything that threatens to reveal her performance as such must be avoided at all costs.

Performance remains on Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s mind as she plans her marriage to Mr. Gibson. From the clothing she chooses to the food that she will serve at her new home, she considers how they will appear to others and represent her own femininity and class position. When Mr. Gibson and Lord Cumnor give her money to help her with wedding purchases and preparations, after paying off her debts, she decides that “[w]hat new articles she bought for herself, were all such as would make a show, and an impression upon the ladies of Hollingford. She argued with herself that linen, and all underclothing, would never be seen; while she knew that every gown she had, would give rise to much discussion and would be counted up in the little town” (140). In other words, she deems unimportant anything that would remain invisible to the local women and, therefore, would not enhance her reputation or status. In addition to wanting to impress the local community, Mrs. Kirkpatrick also worries that her daughter, Cynthia, might upstage her at the wedding. While Mr. Gibson wants Cynthia to attend, Mrs. Kirkpatrick “felt how disagreeable it would be to her to have her young daughter flashing out her beauty by the side of the faded bride, her mother” (122). For a woman unduly obsessed with class and gender, unsurprisingly she wants to maintain and enhance her appearance by preventing her own daughter from attending. From her secret eating to her personal appearance, Mrs. Kirkpatrick worries about the image she projects and how others will judge her femininity and class status.
Furthermore, Mrs. Kirkpatrick plans to use food as a marker of the family’s class status after she marries Mr. Gibson and assumes the supervision of the household. Mrs. Kirkpatrick, in particular, worries about what her future husband eats and the image this food projects. Prior to marrying Mr. Gibson, Mrs. Kirkpatrick learns that the doctor frequently eats bread and cheese. Molly tells her “I’ve known him eat toasted cheese when he has been too tired to fancy anything else” (128). Mrs. Kirkpatrick particularly objects to cheese as “a strong-smelling, coarse kind of thing,” and she suggests that instead she will “get him a cook who can toss him up an omelette, or something elegant. Cheese is only fit for the kitchen” (128). When Molly continues to express her father’s preference for cheese, Mrs. Kirkpatrick exclaims “we will cure him of that. I couldn’t bear the smell of cheese; and I’m sure he would be very sorry to annoy me” (128). Yet Mr. Gibson does insist when he tells her that “bread and cheese is the chief of my diet,” and when his wife says cheese must stay in the kitchen, he declares “[t]hen I’ll eat it there” (177, 178). While her husband may love cheese and continues eating it, Mrs. Gibson objects to his cheese eating primarily because of the lower- and working-class associations of the food. According to Judith Flanders, since “bread and cheese was a staple of the working classes, eating cheese might compromise one’s standing,” and “because cheese was both inexpensive and filling, a person of standing could not eat it in any quantity: that was what laborers were forced to do from hunger, and the middle classes did not want to be seen eating simply to quell their appetites” (288). Understanding the class connotations of cheese, Mrs. Gibson views it as a food associated with servants dining in the kitchen rather than their employers who should eat more

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6 Isabelle Beeton makes a similar point in *The Book of Household Management* (1861) when she declares “cheese, in its commonest shape, is only fit for sedentary people, as an after-dinner stimulant, and in very small quantity. Bread and cheese, as a meal, is only fit for soldiers on march or labourers in the open air, who like it because it ‘holds the stomach a long time’” (817).
elegant meals full of French dishes which would enhance the family’s class status. Furthermore, publications such as *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentleman* advise that “Ladies scarcely ever eat cheese after dinner” meaning that cheese is not a feminine food (35). However, Mrs. Gibson both objects to eating cheese herself and to her husband eating it in her presence. Mrs. Gibson even tells her husband “it is astonishing to compare your appearance and manners with your tastes. You look such a gentleman” (Gaskell, *Wives* 178). In other words, she wants her husband to perform his middle-class status just as she does. This brief exchange about one simple food reveals Mrs. Gibson’s focus on food as the locus of performing her femininity along with her, and the entire family’s, upward mobility and class status.

Mrs. Gibson does not just worry about the class connotations or smell of cheese when she takes over managing the house after her marriage. She also worries that “it was awkward to be carrying hot, savoury-smelling dishes from the kitchen to the dining-room at the very time when high-born ladies, with noses of aristocratic refinement, might be calling” (177). To impress these female visitors and avoid permeating the house with the smell of food during visiting hours, Mrs. Gibson institutes a later dinner time:

> [t]he luncheons for the young men, as she observed to her husband, might be sent into the surgery. A few elegant cold trifles for herself and Molly would not scent the house, and she would always take care to have some little dainty ready for him. He acceded, but unwillingly, for it was an innovation on the habits of a lifetime, and he felt as if he should never be able to arrange his rounds aright with this new-fangled notion of a six o’clock dinner. (177)

During the Victorian period, when a family eats dinner indicates their class status. In *Food and Cooking in Victorian England*, Andrea Broomfield explains the class laden terminology used to define mealtimes:
Unlike ladies and gentlemen, younger children (no matter what their class), servants in well-to-do homes, and the working classes in general continued for several decades longer to call their midday meal dinner—not lunch or luncheon. Even if at noon the mistress ate the same foods as the servants and her children, she likely referred to her meal as ‘luncheon’ and her children’s and servants’ meal as ‘dinner.’ (46)

Mr. Gibson and Molly are accustomed to an earlier dinner more in line with working-class habits and with the demands of Mr. Gibson’s medical practice. However, Mrs. Gibson, unconcerned by the inconvenience a late dinner poses to her husband’s work, quickly establishes a more genteel afternoon luncheon followed by an evening dinner hour which more closely aligns with the habits of her aristocratic role models who must not work for a living.

In addition to changing the family’s meal times, Mrs. Gibson also insists that their cook uses “new receipts for French dishes” (Gaskell, Wives 178). After demanding changes to both mealtimes and cuisine, the cook quits, and “Mr Gibson had to satisfy his healthy English appetite on badly made omelettes, rissoles, vol-au-vents, croquettes, and timbales; never being exactly sure what he was eating” (178). Clearly, her husband objects to these changes, yet Mrs. Gibson insists on these alterations to the household’s schedule and menus to enhance their class status and establish herself and Molly as elegant ladies. While during the Victorian period a wife’s “duties revolved around her husband’s happiness and well-being,” Mrs. Gibson willingly dismisses her husband’s desire for plain English fare to elevate the class status of the entire family (Broomfield 39). Mr. Gibson may marry, in part, to have a wife who can manage his meals, yet he gets more than he bargained for as Mrs. Gibson’s efforts go beyond the plain food, timely meals, and tidy dining room he desired. Mrs. Gibson chooses food as her primary tool by means of which to perform both her class status and femininity, so she is certainly not satisfied with the modest changes her husband hoped for before their marriage.
While Mrs. Gibson alters the family’s usual mealtimes to align with the habits of the aristocracy, real members of the aristocracy perceive the Gibson family differently and expect the family to adhere to the traditional early dinner of the working-class. For example, when Mrs. Gibson eats lunch with the Cumnors at the Tower, “Mrs. Gibson was secretly hurt by my lord’s supposing it to be her dinner, and calling out his urgent hospitality from the very bottom of the table, giving as a reason for it, that she must remember it was her dinner” (Gaskell, *Wives* 275-6). Mrs. Gibson is, of course, upset by Lord Cumnor’s assumption as it clearly indicates that she comes from a lower class than her hosts. Therefore, she quickly objects and corrects him: “[o]h, my lord! I never eat meat in the middle of the day; I can hardly eat anything at lunch” (275-6). Here, Mrs. Gibson indicates that she eats lunch, not dinner, in the afternoon, and by declaring that she does not eat meat at lunch, she reinforces the claim to delicacy and femininity of appetite. Yet, Lord Cumnor does not hear her correction, and to demonstrate her class status and femininity further, Mrs. Gibson decides on “sending away her plate of untasted food – food that she longed to eat, for she was really desperately hungry” (275-276). While the Cumnor’s may not read Mrs. Gibson’s behavior at lunch as she wishes them to, she once again tries to display her adherence to advice literature femininity by denying hunger that she truly feels simply for the sake of fashion and of making sure that she performs her genteel femininity even while having a meal with old friends.

Mrs. Gibson also extends her denial of appetite to her home, especially when they have guests for lunch. For instance, during Dr. Nicholls’s visit with her husband, Mrs. Gibson, who was trying to train her midday appetite into the genteelest of all ways, [. . .] thought (falsely enough) that Dr Nicholls was a good person to practice the semblance of ill-health upon, and that he would give her the proper civil amount of commiseration for her ailments, which every guest ought to bestow upon a hostess who complains of her
delicacy of health. The old doctor was too cunning a man to fall into this trap. He would keep recommending her to try the coarsest viands on the table; and, at last, he told her if she could not fancy the cold beef to try a little with pickled onions. There was a twinkle in his eye as he said this, that would have betrayed his humour to any observer; but Mr Gibson, Cynthia, and Molly were all attacking Osborne on the subject of some literary preference he had expressed, and Dr Nicholls had Mrs Gibson quite at his mercy. She was not sorry when luncheon was over to leave the room to the three gentlemen; and ever afterwards she spoke of Dr Nicholls as ‘that bear.’ (325)

Mrs. Gibson clearly tries to perform her aristocratic femininity here by demonstrating a small appetite and by pretending to be ill. Mrs. Gibson’s aristocratic friend Lady Cumnor often feels ill; Mrs. Gibson probably attempts to model Lady Cumnor’s behavior so as to signify her own social status. Moreover, this exemplifies the Victorian propensity for associating middle- and upper-class femininity with delicacy and illness. According to Coar, “it became tasteful for healthy females to acquire the frail physique that was symptomatic of the wasting diseases of the time” (60-61). Therefore, Mrs. Gibson, both healthy and hungry, pretends during lunch as another way of performing her social status and feminine charms for her guest. Yet, quite humorously, Dr. Nicholls quickly spots her falsity and draws attention to her performance, so much so that Mrs. Gibson does not like him simply because he fails to fall for her charms.

Mrs. Gibson tries to impress other guests, not just Dr. Nicholls, with the class status of her family’s meals. When Mrs. Gibson anticipates a lunchtime visit from Lady Harriet, a former pupil and member of the Cumnor family, she instructs her daughter, Cynthia, to stay in the dining room and wait for a signal indicating that Lady Harriet will indeed join them for lunch. Once she hears the signal, Cynthia must “put out the best service, and arrange some flowers, and ask cook what there is for dinner that she could send us for lunch, and make it all look pretty, impromptu, and natural’” (Gaskell, *Wives* 356). Of course, Mrs. Gibson’s “natural” and elegant

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7 See chapters one and two for further discussion of how appearing ill was fashionable for Victorian women.
meal requires secret planning. Yet, this impromptu lunch represents one more orchestrated performance which Mrs. Gibson directs to bolster her class status. Mrs. Gibson’s “[s]imple elegance,” which is reminiscent of the “elegant economy” on display in Cranford, is just another marker of how she uses food and eating to perform both her class status and gender (356). Mrs. Gibson masterfully continues her performance when Lady Harriet does ask to stay for lunch. First, she lowers Lady Harriet’s expectations by informing her “‘we are very simple in our habits’” (359). Lady Harriet states that she only wants a modest meal of “‘a little bread and butter, and perhaps a slice of cold meat’” (359); she also suggests that while it will be her lunch it might be the Gibson’s dinner. Of course, Lady Harriet offends Mrs. Gibson with the class connotations of this comment, and Mrs. Gibson reassures Lady Harriet that her family has dinner later (359-360). While Mrs. Gibson lowers Lady Harriet’s expectations for the meal, Cynthia beautifully arranges everything according to their prearranged plans, and Lady Harriet “‘could not but think her hostess’s apologies had been quite unnecessary; and be more convinced that Clare had done very well for herself’” (360). Of course, Mrs. Gibson hopes to create exactly this impression as she plots the meal with Cynthia, and through this lunchtime performance, she successfully elevates her class status and femininity, as the hostess of such an elegant meal.

Mrs. Gibson tries to emulate the kind of femininity she associates with the aristocracy and engages in the kind of performance recommended by advice literature. From her appearance and manners to the food that she serves and eats, she tries to perform advice book femininity. Yet, the novel repeatedly draws attention to the performative nature of her behavior, and Gaskell frequently reminds the reader that Mrs. Gibson’s outward behavior does not truly reflect her inner desires or character. Mrs. Gibson may be ravenous, but she knows that women should have
delicate appetites, so she pretends to have a delicate appetite. Additionally, Mrs. Gibson’s
daughter, Cynthia, has clearly learned these lessons, too, and she can quickly create an elegant
meal to impress the neighbors. Much as her mother does, Cynthia employs food to demonstrate
her feminine charms and allurements. For example, at a party, Cynthia exhibits her small, dainty,
and feminine appetite by refusing the treats on offer. This refusal leads Roger, who is quickly
falling in love with her, to use “playful entreaties urging her to take something from him” (242). Of
course, her continued reluctance to eat spurs on his attention even as it draws the notice of
“the whole room” (242). Eventually, Cynthia relents “rather more because she was weary of
being entreated, than because it was his wish, Cynthia took a macaroon, and Roger seemed as
happy as though she had crowned him with flowers” (242). Cynthia, here, perfectly performs the
small appetite expected from a genteel and delicate young woman, and she uses her initial
reluctance to eat anything to capture and hold Roger’s attention. Similarly, her ultimate
acceptance of a single macaroon further captivates and rewards him. In her discussion of this
moment, Pam Morris notes how “[a]lthough [Cynthia] is represented as a consummate performer
of the kind of lovely and submissive womanliness that men desire in their heroines, she is
equally represented as being aware that this is a performance” (xxiii). While Morris quite rightly
points out the self-consciously performative nature of this moment, crucially Cynthia employs
food as part of this performance, and she successfully uses Victorian expectations regarding an
elegant young woman’s appetite, or lack of appetite, to maintain Roger’s attention and increase
her allure. Furthermore, Cynthia’s behavior at this party illustrates how much she has learned
from her mother as well as from the Victorian advice literature which so often warns women that
any display of hunger or appetite will disgust men. Cynthia’s use of food here certainly mimics her mother’s use of food as part of her performance of femininity.

While during the party Cynthia successfully demonstrates her femininity through her rejection and then consumption of food, in private, much like her mother, Cynthia’s appetites prove more voracious. After agreeing to marry Roger, knowing that he will leave on a two-year scientific expedition, Cynthia demonstrates the superficiality of her feelings for him as she eats blackberries. As Cynthia talks to Molly about Roger, she starts to “feed herself daintily, touching them lightly with the ends of her taper fingers, and dropping each ripe berry into her open mouth” (Gaskell, Wives 378). As she continues eating, Cynthia states:

‘I think the chances are equal – the chances for and against our marriage, I mean. Two years! it’s a long time; he may change his mind, or I may; or some one else may turn up, and say I’m engaged to him: what should you think of that, Molly? I’m putting such a gloomy thing as death quite on one side, you see; yet in two years how much may happen.’ (378)

Unsurprisingly, while Cynthia rather heartlessly suggests that her marriage to Roger may never occur because she might become engaged to someone else or he might die, she is eating fruit. Fruit, of course, is suspect for many Victorians as it has sensual connotations (Pace 9). Much as in Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” fruit here connects to questionable behavior, particularly sensuality. As Cynthia contemplates being unfaithful to her fiancé by becoming engaged to someone else, her devouring of the blackberries expresses her inconstancy and sexuality. Furthermore, Cynthia’s consumption of the blackberries also exemplifies the secret eating which Victorian advice literature censured. Much Mrs. Gibson does at the beginning of the novel, Cynthia does not worry about violating the rules in advice literature by displaying her appetite in front of Molly and in Molly’s bedroom. She voraciously eats blackberries in front of Molly because she
knows that Molly, as her step-sister and confidant, will not critique her elegance or femininity because of this act of consumption.

While Gaskell does not show Cynthia and Mrs. Gibson reading conduct books or advice literature, both women demonstrate what happens when the guidance from these books forms a large part of a woman’s education. Following the example of this kind of education, they try to follow the “rules,” perform their femininity, and improve their class status through both marriage and behavior. While both women abide by these rules publicly, they consciously rebel by breaking the rules and engaging in things such as secret eating when nobody, other than Molly, observes them. Gaskell critiques this behavior and the shallow advice literature education that leads to the performative nature of their behavior. This critique becomes more evident when comparing both women to Molly. Mr. Gibson, of course, married because he wanted both a manager of his meals and household and an adult woman in the home who could look after and guide Molly. As a former governess for an aristocratic family and as a mistress of her own school, Mrs. Kirkpatrick seems to be an excellent choice as a guide for Molly. Yet, her ideas about educating girls differ significantly from both Mr. Gibson’s and Molly’s. Early in the novel, Mr. Gibson tells Molly’s governess, Miss Eyre:

‘[d]on’t teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I’ll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I am not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it’s rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy, but, however we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read.’ (Gaskell, Wives 34)

Mr. Gibson may suggest that Molly needs very little education, but he gives her a strong education centered in serious reading rather than in conduct books and feminine accomplishments. For instance, while she does have the French, drawing, and dancing lessons
expected for a middle-class Victorian girl, she also “read every book that came in her way, almost with as much delight as if it had been forbidden. For his station in life, Mr. Gibson had an unusually good library; the medical portion of it was inaccessible to Molly, being kept in the surgery, but every other book she had either read, or tried to read” (34). In particular, Molly’s reading gives her a more in-depth understanding of topics, particularly related to science, than most Victorian girls would have acquired as students.

In fact, Molly’s voracious reading, especially of scientific non-fiction books instead of novels, poetry, and advice books, sets her apart from both Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia. Mrs. Gibson prefers reading either poetry or a “delightful novel from the Ashcombe circulating library,” and one of the few books she takes with her when she moves into the Gibson household is a copy of the peerage⁸ (130). Moreover, her limited reading means that Mrs. Gibson is:

so ready to talk, when a little trickle of conversation was required; so willing to listen, and to listen with tolerable intelligence, if the subjects spoken about did not refer to serious solid literature, or science, or politics, or social economy. About novels and poetry, travels and gossip, personal details, or anecdotes of any kind, she always made exactly the remarks which are expected from an agreeable listener; and she had sense enough to confine herself to those short expressions of wonder, admiration, and astonishment, which may mean anything, when more recondite things were talked about. (97)

In other words, Mrs. Gibson’s reading and education mean that she struggles to participate meaningfully in more serious conversations. Furthermore, she critiques Molly’s reading habits by declaring “‘she reads such deep books – all about facts and figures: she’ll be quite a blue-stocking by and by’” (267). While Mrs. Gibson means to criticize Molly for her serious reading, others look more favorably upon Molly and her education. For instance, Lord Hollingford, a member of the aristocratic Cumnor family so admired by Mrs. Gibson, appreciates Molly’s

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⁸ The peerage outlines the ancestry of aristocratic British families.
knowledge of science, and he tells Mr. Gibson: “‘What a charming little lady that daughter of yours is! Most girls of her age are so difficult to talk to; but she is intelligent and full of interest in all sorts of sensible things; well read, too – she was up in *Le Regne Animal* – and very pretty’” (297). Unlike either Mrs. Gibson or Cynthia, Molly elicits the notice and admiration of the local aristocracy through her intelligent conversation and knowledge of books and science, rather than just her appearance or elegant manners during dinner. In fact, Lord Hollingworth seems to tack on the phrase, “‘and very pretty,’” as a conventional compliment for a woman after his praise for her mind and learning. While Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia hope to earn praise and attention from the aristocracy through their performances of genteel femininity centered around food and clothing, Molly earns the praise they desire from these same aristocrats by “consuming” and sharing the knowledge she gains from books.

That much of Molly’s praiseworthy education is self-directed does not prevent Mrs. Gibson, once she arrives, from trying to influence Molly, chiefly by modeling the behavior she hopes Molly will emulate. Mr. Gibson married to have just this kind of feminine guidance for his seventeen-year-old daughter. Mrs. Gibson is not, of course, satisfied by maintaining her own performance of femininity and class or by maintaining a genteel standard for her household. She also wants both Molly and Cynthia to follow her lead and engage in the same kind of performance. She certainly wants her daughters to enhance the family’s class status, and she wants others to view them as elegant and proper young women because it would reflect well on her. Yet, this woman who serves as a role model for Molly and Cynthia only really tries to teach them how to perform or, more cynically, how to hide the truth behind a properly feminine façade. While Mrs. Gibson claims that “‘[t]he truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,’
has always seemed to me such a fine passage,”” she stretches the truth to aid her performance (359). Moreover, after her marriage to the doctor, Mrs. Gibson both watches Molly and attempts to mold and improve her appearance and eating. For example, Mrs. Gibson “had already fidgeted Molly into a new amount of care about the manner in which she put on her clothes, arranged her hair, and was gloved and shod. Mrs Gibson had tried to put her through a course of rosemary washes and creams in order to improve her tanned complexion” (180). As her new family reflects her own class status and femininity, Mrs. Gibson feels the need to educate her new step-daughter about the importance of cultivating a beautiful and fashionable appearance. Similarly, Mrs. Gibson determines that her daughters will even join the local gentry through their entry into fashionable society: “aping the manners of the aristocracy as far as she knew them, she intended to ‘bring out’ Molly and Cynthia on this occasion, which she regarded in something of the light of a presentation at Court” (236). While Molly is content with the humbler society she enjoyed before her father’s marriage, Mrs. Gibson certainly has grander ambitions, and improving Molly’s appearance and manners forms part of her plan.

Crucially, these values of proper femininity which Mrs. Gibson tries to instill in Molly also link to food. Before her father’s marriage, Molly happily participated in Hollingford society, but Mrs. Gibson’s alterations to the family’s mealtimes interfere with the regular time of these parties and the invitations sent to the family decrease since “[h]ow ask people to tea at six, who dined at that hour? How, when they refused cake and sandwiches at half-past eight, how induce other people who were really hungry to commit a vulgarity before those calm and scornful eyes?” (440). Mrs. Gibson’s introduction of a late dinner hour conflicts with the usual habits of Hollingford society, and Mrs. Gibson’s “scornful eyes” clearly judge the families who maintain
earlier, ungenteel hours. Molly, then, cannot attend these tea parties and evenings with company as she did before Mrs. Gibson joined the family. Furthermore, Molly and Mrs. Gibson have very different responses to their exclusion. While Molly “missed the kind homeliness of the parties to which she had gone from time to time as long as she could remember,” Mrs. Gibson is unconcerned as her “object was to squeeze herself into ‘county society,’” which, of course, consists of the wealthier families (440). By enforcing new mealtimes for the family, the social-climbing Mrs. Gibson tries to force Molly into a higher level of society, and, for Molly, this means she misses her former social activities and has fewer opportunities to spend time with old friends.

In another similar example, when Mrs. Gibson and Molly dine alone, Mrs. Gibson insists that they “have every ceremonial gone through in the same stately manner for two as for twenty. So, although Molly knew full well, and her stepmother knew full well, and Maria knew full well, that neither Mrs Gibson nor Molly touched dessert, it was set on the table” (497-8). Since neither Molly nor Mrs. Gibson like dessert, it is completely unnecessary for Maria to serve it when they are the only diners. However, Mrs. Gibson insists upon it for two reasons: “[i]t’s no extravagance, for we need not eat it – I never do. But it looks well, and makes Maria understand what is required in the daily life of every family of position” (498). In other words, serving dessert to two women who will not eat it is all about reinforcing the family’s status to themselves and to the servant. They may not eat the dessert, but the simple fact that Maria serves it demonstrates their elegance along with the family’s class status and ability to pay for the delicacies. Therefore, for the appearance-conscious Mrs. Gibson, dessert constitutes an absolutely necessary component of the family’s meal even when not eating sweets.
Yet, for all Mrs. Gibson attempts to shape Molly’s behavior in moments such as this one, Molly rebels against these constraints, and she particularly looks forward to their relaxation during her stepmother’s trip to London. Once the educational influence of Mrs. Gibson is gone, Molly plans to revert back to her old casual manners with her father. Of course, most of these plans revolve around the restrictions about mealtimes and food which Mrs. Gibson imposes and which Molly plans to defy as soon as Mrs. Gibson leaves. Molly looks forward to the possibility of “meals without perpetual fidgetiness after details of ceremony and correctness of attendance” (437). In fact, Molly plans exactly what she wants to do for their meals when she is in charge of the household: “[w]e’ll have bread and cheese for dinner, and eat it on our knees; we’ll make up for having had to eat sloppy puddings with a fork instead of a spoon all this time, by putting our knives in our mouths till we cut ourselves. Papa shall pour his tea into his saucer if he is in a hurry; and if I’m thirsty, I’ll take the slop-basin’” (437). Molly even tells her father that while her stepmother is away they will do “‘everything that is unrefined and ungenteel’” (439). This even includes consuming food that has been banished to the kitchen: “[w]e’ll have bread and cheese for lunch this very day’” (439). Molly feels hopeful and elated at the prospect of returning to the unrefined and relaxed meals that she had with her father before his marriage. Their meals will no longer represent an uncomfortable performance focused on upholding advice literature’s rules about eating. Instead, Molly sees this as an opportunity to finally be her true, unconstrained self again.

For Molly, comfortable and humble meals with her father prove more enjoyable and natural than the performance-laden meals the family endures while Mrs. Gibson is home. However, for Mrs. Gibson, who follows the rules in advice literature, which I discuss in chapter
two, meals serve as an opportunity to perform her femininity and class. Through Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia, Gaskell demonstrates the consequences of educating women in accomplishments and genteel manners rather than more serious subjects. Waters argues:

Gaskell’s depiction of Mrs Gibson delineates exactly what Wollstonecraft sees as the inevitable outcome of the conventional education of women, based on the precepts of such books as that of Dr Gregory. In portraying Mrs Gibson as growing gradually more repugnant, she shows the course of deterioration produced by an education designed only to make women superficially pleasing rather than to strengthen their minds. During the reign of Queen Victoria, an icon of domestic convention, a writer would have had to avoid openly advocating even a moderate feminism. In this one important character, Gaskell implicitly demonstrates her agreement with the tenets of the most radical feminist to date, meanwhile conceiving her greatest fictional creation. (18)

Food certainly functions as a crucial part of the critique of female education which Waters describes. Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia’s relationships to food mark both their inferior education and of their concern with performing class and gender rather than developing their minds as Molly does. Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia are products of Victorian advice literature as well as examples of what happens when girls learn and strictly follow these lessons.

Conclusion

In Cranford and Wives and Daughters, Gaskell depicts the outcome when a woman’s education consists of advice literature and the development of accomplishments. Advice literature, along with children’s literature, teaches female readers that they need to control their appetites, eating, and bodies as part of their performance of proper Victorian femininity. In both novels, women fervently adhere to rules regarding food and eating, and their adherence to the rules often makes them look absurd or silly. The Cranford women, so bogged down by their
efforts to maintain their performances of genteel femininity, restrain their own social lives and relationships, and Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia focus on appearances rather than truth or serious learning. Yet, even though Gaskell criticizes advice literature and its influence on women, she does not advocate for radical changes to women’s relationships to food. Mary Smith and Molly are certainly willing to transgress some of the instruction provided in these books, but neither of them strays far enough from advice literature’s guidelines about eating that their reputations or social positions are at risk. Mary Smith may defy the rules when she eats her peas with a knife or stays at the table when they eat oranges, but these are relatively minor rebellions which take place in front of only a few people, and the strict women in Cranford never question her place in their feminine, aristocratic community. Similarly, Molly may eat bread and cheese or use the wrong utensil when dining with her father, but she follows the rules in public and does not exhibit any excessive appetite which others would condemn. Thus, while Gaskell critiques advice literature education which focuses on both a rigid adherence to elegant manners and a femininity based on performance, she does not entirely condemn or dismantle the niceties of dining. Instead, Gaskell draws attention to the absurdity of paying too much attention to performing femininity through food and an overly prescriptive adherence to advice literature’s rules.
CHAPTER 5

THE NEW WOMAN’S CONTROLLED APPETITE IN SARAH GRAND’S THE BETH BOOK

To succeed all round, you must invite the eye, you must charm the ear, you must excite an appetite for the pleasure of knowing you and hearing you by acquiring that delicate aroma, the reputation of being a pleasing person, and then you will be well on the way to satisfy the palates of those who test the quality of your opinions.

- From Sarah Grand, “The Morals and Manners of Appearance,” 1893, p. 25

Children’s literature and novels from the middle of the nineteenth century, discussed in the previous chapters, are certainly not the only Victorian texts which highlight food as an integral part of the performance of femininity. Literature from throughout the century repeatedly reinforces the message that women must use self-restraint with their appetites and their behavior during meals to appear to be proper middle-class women. Even New Woman literature published at the end of the Victorian period inextricably links food and the performance of gender. This is particularly the case in The Beth Book (1897), a New Woman novel by Sarah Grand (1854-1943). Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke McFall, who adopted the name Sarah Grand after starting her writing career and leaving her husband, wrote extremely popular New Woman novels that frankly addressed a wide range of controversial issues including the Contagious Disease Act, education for girls, marriage, and vivisection. While her novels tackle both women’s rights and political topics, Grand is not as progressive when it comes to food and femininity. The Beth Book demonstrates continuity with earlier texts in its representations of food as part of the performance of femininity. Grand’s novel expresses a message similar to that
of the non-fiction texts, children’s literature, and adult novels discussed in the previous chapters. In particular, *The Beth Book* depicts how food was an essential part of the education women received about other aspects of femininity, and even in a novel from the end of the century about a New Woman who in so many ways rebelled against the restraints she faced in Victorian Britain, food is one area that continues to require specifically gendered behavior.

Sarah Grand was instrumental in naming the New Woman in 1894 as “Grand’s use of the term *new woman* and Ouida’s diatribe against Grand and ‘New Women’ in a later issue of the *North American Review* propelled the term into general usage” (Mangum 2-3). Popular with readers in the final decades of the nineteenth century, New Woman writers aimed to “fight for women’s rights by creating representations of women that confronted the self-abnegating, submissive, housebound image of middle-class Ideal Womanhood” (2). Furthermore, according to Sally Mitchell:

> [t]he idealized New Woman was single; well-educated (probably at a University); worked for pay whether or not it was economically necessary; lived separately from her family in rooms, chambers or a shared flat; travelled by public transport, ate in restaurants, and went to concerts or the theatre without masculine escort or a chaperone; read and discussed any and all topics; and exhibited her robust physical health in bicycling, swimming and holiday walking tours. She was, in other words, the antithesis of almost everything we think of as stereotypically ‘Victorian’ – and she aroused, as one would expect, intense opposition as a threat to marriage, a danger to the future of the race, an unfair competitor who undercut men’s wages and took their jobs. (vii)

Additionally, Mitchell notes that the New Woman “was a class-based phenomenon” (vi). New Women were generally middle-class women, and Gail Cunningham explains “[t]he problems of working-class women were entirely different from those of the middle classes, and received very little attention from writers on the New Woman” (11).
Sarah Grand and other New Woman novelists were both popular and notorious in the final years of the Victorian period. According to Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, “between 1883 and 1900 over a hundred novels were written about the New Woman” (1). In The “Improper” Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing, Lyn Pykett connects the popularity of New Woman novels to the sensation novels which were bestsellers earlier in the century. As Pykett explains, “[a] number of individual novels from each group enjoyed the brief but intense notoriety of a succès de scandale. Both kinds of fiction were also sensationally successful with readers” (6). Similarly, Ann Heilmann states “New Woman fiction established a tradition of feminist political literature written for and consumed by a female mass market” (New Woman Strategies 2). Sarah Grand certainly experienced great success with her New Woman novels:

[h]er first novel, *Ideala* (1888), was privately printed because she could not find a publisher, but by 1899 it had gone through seven editions in both Britain and the United States. Her most commercially successful work, *The Heavenly Twins* (1892), was reprinted six times within four years. Heinemann claimed thirty-five thousand sales of the book in just over a year. (Doughty 187)

Furthermore, “[b]y 1897, the year of *The Beth Book*, ‘Sarah Grand’ had become a brand name, signifying a specific type of literature on women’s issues” (187). In addition to the popularity of her New Woman novels, Grand also lectured and wrote about the New Woman for periodicals, and she was “popular among girl readers and within girls’ magazines” (Rodgers 184).¹

New Woman novels by Grand and others might have been very popular with readers, but their widespread popularity meant that New Woman novels “were further tainted by their reputation as bestsellers” (Pykett 200). Moreover, critics questioned the artistry of New Woman

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¹ See chapter two for a discussion of one of Grand’s magazine articles about the New Woman.
writers because of the didactic nature of their novels. New Woman writers used their novels to educate readers, and this fiction “constituted, and conceived itself as, an agent of social and political transformation” (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction* 4). While these New Woman writers embraced fiction as a means of educating readers, “[t]his propagandistic element does not seem to have had any detrimental effect on the popularity of feminist writers” (70). Furthermore, with both their popularity and educational messages, these texts were “bringing debates on femininity to a wider audience” (Richardson and Willis 24).

Grand’s novels are certainly didactic, and in her foreword to the 1923 edition of *The Heavenly Twins*, Grand clearly indicates the educational motivation behind her writing. She explains that she wanted to “compound an allopathic pill” for her audience, and to make her educational message more palatable, she wanted to “gild it so that it would be mistaken for a bonbon and swallowed without a suspicion of its medicinal properties” (Grand, “Foreword” 404). According to Bonnell, Grand did not support the Art for Art’s Sake movement, which was prominent at the time, as her “morality of caring forced her categorically to reject the solely aesthetic purpose of literature and to embrace instead literature as an instrument of social concern” (124). Thus, much as did the children’s literature discussed in chapter three, Grand’s writing combined entertainment with education. In particular, Grand aimed to use literature as “an important ‘sanitary’ tool in the Herculean task of cleansing modern society” (Sutton-Ramspeck 199). Gorsky notes that Grand “was a propagandist. Her novels are political, both in source and in purpose, and they assert relatively advanced beliefs about the roles of men and women and the relations between the sexes. They are occasionally strident, proselytizing, preachy” (291).
The popularity and “preachy” nature of the novels by Sarah Grand and other New Woman writers meant that these publications often faced significant criticism from those who wanted women to remain angels in the house. Kate Flint, for instance, highlights the content of New Woman fiction which aroused such intense critique:

[s]uch elements include protests against the restrictive upbringing of girls and the inadequacies of their education; the challenging of the assumptions that woman’s best possible future lay in marriage, that the only place to bear and bring up children was within such a marriage, and that, indeed all women possessed a ‘maternal instinct’; the importance placed upon women’s struggles and achievements in their working lives, whether as journalist or doctor, teacher, or musician; and the questioning of double sexual standards. (The Woman Reader 294)

This kind of message, which questioned women’s limited roles, provoked critics who “attacked the new fiction from a largely sociological perspective, believing that such writing would cause women to question marital and family values, and hence would damage society’s necessary structures” (294). Additionally, some of these attacks linked the New Woman to both masculinity and out-of-control consumption. According to Heather Evans, some publications warned that the New Woman:

would leave her post by the stove, and rampaging out of the kitchen, would devour Man’s wardrobe, bicycles, jobs and money; and storming into his clubs and restaurants, she would swill his wine, smoke his cigarettes, and gobble his exquisite dinners. By her zealous craving to satisfy her desires, the New Woman would abandon her children to starve while she feasted on Man. (“‘Nor Shall I’” 137)

Critics feared the New Woman would pose a challenge to women’s traditional roles as wife and mother within the home, and they also feared that she would encroach on the traditionally masculine sphere, even to the point of consuming masculine food and drink.

While critics condemned the New Woman and warned about the dangers she posed to Victorian society and traditional gender roles, many self-identified New Women took action to
counteract these attacks and attract new supporters. According to Heilmann, “[a]s a result of the anti-feminist onslaught, feminists began to stress the New Woman’s femininity, her domestic qualities and traditional values” (*New Woman Fiction* 23). New Woman writers “emphasized [the New Woman’s] femininity, her ladylike appearance and manners, her sex appeal in order to ‘seduce’ (and convert to feminism) fictional characters and real-life readers alike” (41). In other words, these writers created characters who held radical views even as they performed traditional Victorian femininity, and the writers hoped to use these feminine, New Woman characters to disarm critics and appeal to potential supporters. Sarah Grand certainly used these techniques in both her life and her fiction. Sarah Grand, who according to her biographer Gillian Kersley “cared inordinately about clothes” and was known for being stylish, wrote about the importance of a New Woman’s appearance in “The Morals of Manners and Appearance” (1893) (24). In the article, Grand tells women that “[t]o succeed all round, you must invite the eye, you must charm the ear, you must excite an appetite for the pleasure of knowing you and hearing you by acquiring that delicate aroma, the reputation of being a pleasing person, and then you will be well on the way to satisfy the palates of those who test the quality of your opinions” (“The Morals” 25). In other words, the New Woman must use her appearance and manners to entice the public. Furthermore, Grand links these qualities to the achievement of women’s rights when she declares that “[w]e women would have had the suffrage long ago had not, unfortunately, some of the first fighters for it—some of the strong ones—been unprepossessing women” (26).

According to Heilmann, Grand’s “articles thus served a doubly didactive purpose, in that they were aimed at seducing female middle-class readers to feminist ideas (however diluted), while offering an object lesson to feminists on how best to market the cause” (*New Woman Strategies*
To achieve both of these aims, Grand’s fiction and non-fiction urged the New Woman to be careful to perform femininity to further their feminist cause.

For Grand, femininity was a performance, and while she expressed “relatively advanced beliefs about the roles of men and women,” paradoxically, she also “constructed femininity at one and the same time as an innate quality and a performative act” (19). Furthermore, as Grand, like other New Woman writers, emphasized the importance of feminine dress and manners to garner support and undermine detractors, food served as another tool to further their cause. Critics tried to connect the New Woman to excessive masculine appetites, but Grand’s novels undermine this attack by linking the proper performance of New Woman femininity to self-denial, self-control, and feeding others. In The Beth Book, Grand contrasts the New Woman’s control of her appetite with the out-of-control appetites of voracious men and masculine women. The novel operates as an educational guide for the aspiring New Woman who needs to learn how she should manage her appetite to appear feminine and unthreatening. Grand shows readers that the New Woman is not, or should not be, a creature of unrestrained, masculine appetite that critics warned about. Rather, the New Woman’s is a performer of femininity, and one who shows as much concern about and control of her appetite as the traditional Victorian angel in the house.

Sarah Grand’s The Beth Book: Being a Study from the Life of Elizabeth Caldwell Maclure, a Woman of Genius follows Beth from her birth through her adult success as a New Woman writer and lecturer on women’s rights. The novel, which has many similarities to Sarah Grand’s own life, was quite popular, and Mitchell declares it “is the most interesting of the New Woman novels created in the decade of ferment at the end of the nineteenth century” (v). One reason the novel interests readers and scholars alike is that as it follows Beth’s growth and
development as a woman and a writer it introduces a wide range of issues from the Victorian period. For instance, Grand highlights topics such as the poor education of many middle-class women, the pressure to marry young, the injustice of lock hospitals, the horrors of vivisection, and divorce. As she incorporates her stance on political topics in the novel, Grand also works both to educate potential New Women and to combat attacks on the New Woman as radical, voracious, and, ultimately, unfeminine. To do so, Grand contrasts the appetites of men and women to demonstrate that men, not New Women, have out-of-control appetites. In other words, in *The Beth Book*, Grand connects masculinity to a voracious appetite, a lack of self-control, and an inordinate interest in feeding the self and not others, while she connects New Woman femininity to self-denial, self-control, and feeding others rather than the self.

While Grand’s novels, and New Woman fiction in general, were sensationa[lly popular and widely debated during the end of the Victorian period, questions about the literary quality of these texts written by women meant that in the early twentieth century this fiction fell from popularity and no longer generated heated debate. According to Doughty, “[t]he New Woman is a well-known figure from the 1890s, but only as male authors constructed her. Most studies of New Woman fiction focus upon male writers, especially Hardy and Gissing” (185). However, after falling into obscurity for decades, “[s]ince its rediscovery during the heyday of the second women’s movement in the 1970s, the fiction of the New Woman has received increasing scholarly attention” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 3). *The Beth Book* is no exception as in recent years scholars have written about a wide range of topics, including Grand’s depiction of

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2 In Victorian lock hospitals, “suspected prostitutes could be forcibly detained and physically examined under the Contagious Diseases Acts” (Taylor 9-10).
childhood, the controversial ending of the novel, and even the novel’s links to Darwin and eugenics.3

Additionally, a few scholars have explored Grand’s representation of food and gender in The Beth Book, and these scholars hold conflicting views on the topic. In her dissertation on four of Sarah Grand’s novels, including The Beth Book, Heather Evans suggests the novels demonstrate “the imperative that feminine appetites be recognized and validated, and of the necessity for the modern woman to claim authority over her own appetites and relationships with food as part of the larger enterprise of emancipating women from social and legal strictures which denied them self-governance over their bodies, activities, and property” (The New Woman’s New Appetite 2). Conversely, two scholars link The Beth Book to anorexia and wasting instead of a woman’s “authority over her own appetites.” For instance, Boyce declares that “The Beth Book is governed by an ‘anorexic logic’” (236). Similarly, Abigail Dennis suggests “Beth becomes another example of the wasting heroine—a popular nineteenth century trope that was often mobilised in opposition to, or as a reaction against, the widespread equation of female fleshliness with inappropriate or dangerous sexuality” (19). While Beth Sutton-Ramspeck’s Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman does not discuss anorexia, she also disagrees with Evans’s assessment. In her discussion of cooking in Grand’s novels, including The Beth Book, she argues that Grand “deprecated taking pleasure in food purely for pleasure’s sake rather than eating for health’s sake. Grand’s portrayals of eating convey an ambivalent attitude toward the pleasures of eating”

3 For example, see Beth B. Rodgers’s Adolescent Girlhood and Literary Culture at the Fin de Siècle, Terri Doughty’s “Sarah Grand’s The Beth Book: The New Woman and the Ideology of the Romance Ending,” Patricia Murphy’s “Reevaluating Female ‘Inferiority’: Sarah Grand Versus Charles Darwin,” and Angelique Richardson’s “The Eugenization of Love: Sarah Grand and the Morality of Genealogy.”
Like Boyce, Dennis, and Sutton-Ramspeck, I too disagree with Evan’s assessment of eating in Grand’s novels. While I do not explore anorexia in this chapter, I do argue that the novel emphasizes the necessity for the New Woman to know how to control her appetite and deny her hunger.

Furthermore, *The Beth Book* illustrates the control a New Woman should have over her appetite and contrasts the New Woman’s eating with that of men. During the nineteenth century, “Victorians organized gender difference horizontally, where men and women were seen, not as part of a continuum, but as polar opposites where everything that was defined as not masculine was by definition feminine, and vice versa” (Michie, “Under Victorian Skins” 409). This, of course, includes their relationships to food, and Brumberg notes that doctors “likened a man’s stomach to a quartz-crushing machine that required coarse, solid food. By contrast, the mechanisms of a woman’s stomach could be ruined if fed the same materials. The female digestive apparatus required foods that were soft, light, and liquid” (171). Men’s and women’s digestion were completely opposite, and men had more freedom to consume and indulge without risking severe criticism. For women, any excess consumption or errors in their manners while at the table could mark them as unfeminine or of a lower class; however, as Silver explains, “[a] lusty male appetite, even when criticized, does not carry as much moral meaning as female appetite, and is even viewed as healthy and typically masculine” (57). So, when critics condemned the New Woman as unfeminine for having “[a] lusty male appetite,” Grand responded by demonstrating the exact opposite. While Grand’s male characters in *The Beth Book*, in fact, have voracious appetites, her New Woman, Beth, does not. By repeatedly emphasizing throughout the novel Beth’s traditionally feminine control over her appetite, Grand
refutes the critics who associate the New Woman with masculine consumption. Yet, by doing so, Grand also reinforces the Victorian view of gender differences and the association of proper femininity with a small appetite.

This comparison of masculine and feminine appetites occurs even in the first chapter of the novel. The Caldwell family lives in Ireland where Mr. Caldwell works as an officer in the coastguard. Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell already have six children and are struggling to maintain the middle-class lifestyle Mrs. Caldwell grew up with and still desires. In the hours before giving birth to Beth, her seventh child, Mrs. Caldwell must cook dinner for the family on her own since her servant is out. Mrs. Caldwell, whose “whole air betokened gentle birth and breeding,” struggles with cooking and housekeeping as “she was not made for labour, but for luxury” (Grand 27). The heavily pregnant Mrs. Caldwell decides to cook “a hash, which Mrs. Caldwell had made because her husband had liked it so much the last time they had had it” (29). Yet, this time, Mr. Caldwell rejects the meal by “blaming the food for his own want of appetite” (29). After rejecting the pudding, too, Mr. Caldwell chastises his wife: “[o]h, a pudding!’ he exclaimed. ‘I know what our puddings are. Why aren’t women taught something sensible? What’s the use of all your accomplishments if you can’t cook the simplest dish? What a difference it would have made to my life if you had been able to make pastry even’” (29). Mrs. Caldwell’s appetite or enjoyment of the meal does not matter as “[i]n the discourse of bad cookery, women’s own appetites are rendered invisible, but the role of women in thwarting legitimate masculine appetites is underscored” (Bhattacharya 8). Mrs. Caldwell, who focused on accomplishments, such as playing the piano, instead of cooking and housekeeping, received an
education appropriate to her class; however, after marrying, her social status has fallen, and she now lacks the skills needed to provide the delicious meals her husband demands.

Moreover, this unsatisfactory meal reflects Victorian beliefs about a wife’s role within the home. According to Broomfield:

[t]he mistress’s duties revolved around her husband’s happiness and well-being. She was to accept her husband’s blame and criticism and learn eagerly from it, just as she was to gracefully accept his praise and nobly suffer his indifference. She was to do all in her power to show herself serene and unruffled, moving through her day like a virtuoso violinist, handling everything that was thrown at her with expertise and wisdom, and never revealing the true difficulty of her role. Even if she had just one maid, several small children to tend to, accounts to keep, obligatory calls to make and receive, numerous household tasks (including routine drudge work), and of course her husband’s own well-being to worry about, she was not to crack, and certainly not to show anger or strain under this pressure. (39)

While Mrs. Caldwell does not “crack” while experiencing her husband’s anger, after he leaves home for the evening, probably to visit his mistress Bessie, “[t]he torment of her mind was awful” (Grand 32). This exchange between husband and wife sets the stage for the connections between food and gender which appear throughout the novel. As in this moment, women in the novel always control their hunger and appetites while the voracious men around them either greedily indulge themselves or complain about the food. As Beth, who is born a few hours after this contentious meal, grows up, she absorbs these lessons from her mother and other female relatives even as she develops more radical feminist views.

While Beth is still quite young, her father dies, and the family, which had already struggled to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, now faces even more financial trouble. The family must leave Ireland and travel to Yorkshire to be near Mrs. Caldwell’s wealthy family. Mrs. Caldwell hopes that her brother James will assist them, especially since he does not have children and Mrs. Caldwell’s son will inherit James’s estate. While James invites them to stay in
his home for a while and provides the family with a small house, he does so grudgingly, and he
particularly dislikes Beth. The conflict that develops between Beth and her Uncle James often
centers around food, and it provides another glimpse of the gendered expectations regarding food
that Beth learns in early childhood. Uncle James is a large man with a voracious appetite who
exerts strict control over the food cooked, served, and eaten in his household. The Caldwell
children quickly learn about his control and stinginess during the first meal they share:

[t]hen Uncle James cut the cake, and gave each of the children a very small slice. Beth
held hers suspended half-way to her mouth, and gazed at her uncle. ‘What is that child
staring at?’ he asked her mother at last. ‘I think she is admiring you,’ was Mrs.
Caldwell’s happy rejoinder. ‘No, mamma, I am not,’ Beth contradicted. ‘I was just
thinking I had never seen anything so big in my life.’ ‘Anything!’ Uncle James protested.
‘What does she mean, Caroline?’ ‘I don’t mean this slice of cake,’ Beth chuckled. (114)

After insulting her uncle and laughing at his small portions, Beth gives her sister her small slice
of cake and declares “‘[h]ere, Bernadine; you’d better have my slice. You’ll howl if you don’t
get enough. Cakes are scarce and dear here, I suppose’” (114). Here Beth insults her uncle again
and gives up her food to satisfy her younger sister. According to Dennis, this exchange
demonstrates that “Beth is a far cry from the model Victorian girl—or woman-in-training—for
whom the injunction to be seen and not heard was in fact a preparation for an adult life of
serving, and not eating” (21). Yet, while Beth violates Victorian norms by always jumping in
with opinions and sly insults, when it comes to food, as we will see, she often gives it away to
others rather than eating it. Her forthrightness and frequent feeding of others rather than herself
are both traits that Beth carries into adulthood.

After their first meal together, Beth learns more about her uncle’s extreme oversight of
the family’s meals. Beth goes with her uncle to visit the kitchen, and she witnesses how
‘yesterday’s dinner, cold roast beef, tongue, chicken, and plum-pudding, were spread out on the
table. Uncle James inspected everything” (Grand 119). After carefully reviewing the leftover food, Uncle James gives the cook very specific orders:

‘[f]or luncheon,’ he said, ‘the beef can remain cold on the sideboard, also the tongue. The chicken you will grill for one hot dish, and do not forget to garnish with rolls of bacon. The pudding you can cut into slices, fry, and sprinkle with a little sifted sugar. Mind, I say a little; for, as the pudding is sweet enough already, the sugar is merely an ornament to make it agreeable to the eye. For the rest, as usual.’ (119)

Uncle James even “consulted a huge cookery-book which lay on a shelf in the window. ‘We shall require another cake for tea,’ he said, and then proceeded to read the recipe aloud, keeping an observant eye upon the cook as she weighed out the various ingredients” (119). During the Victorian period, women were generally in charge of the household’s meals and the staff in the kitchen, but Uncle James will not allow his wife to have any kind of authority over these elements of housekeeping. He even monitors what the servants eat at their own meals. When the cook informs him that there is very little meat available for the staff, he declares “‘[y]ou must make it do. People are much healthier and happier when they do not eat too much’” (120). Uncle James, of course, is a large man with a rapacious appetite, so while it is fine for him, as the master of the household, to eat as much as he desires, for everyone else, and they are mostly women, much less must suffice. During this visit to the kitchen, Beth observes Uncle James’s extreme control and stinginess as well as his refusal to allow the women to manage these household affairs. Beth then uses this information to antagonize her uncle further during their future meals together. While the adult women, whom Uncle James supports, never protest at losing their control over the household’s meals, Beth, as a child unconcerned about financial dependence on her uncle, does not fear defying him.
Mealtime conflicts between Beth and her uncle continue as they spend more time together and get to know each other better. Beth seems to take particular delight in annoying her uncle by expressing her opinions and using bad manners during their meals together. For example, Uncle James notes ‘‘I observe that she joins in the conversation always, with great intelligence and her mouth full. It might be better, perhaps, if she emptied her mouth. However, I suppose it would be impossible to teach her’’ (126). After offending her uncle by talking with her mouth full, Beth upsets him again by ‘‘gobbling her pudding’’ (127). Then Beth ‘‘dropped her spoon on her plate with a clatter, leant back in her chair, and sighed with satisfaction. She possessed a horrid fascination for Uncle James. Almost everything she did was an offence to him, yet he could not keep his eyes off her or let her alone’’ (127). Uncle James declares ‘‘I hope her voracity is satisfied. I should say that it resembles the voracity of the caterpillar’’ (127). At another meal, Uncle James takes pleasure in serving Beth food she does not want: ‘‘Beth was eating cold beef stolidly, but without much appetite because of her cold, and also because there was hot chicken, and Uncle James had not given her her choice’’ (133). In this instance, Uncle James follows Victorian advice literature’s dictates to require children to eat whatever adults serve them without complaining, a topic discussed in chapter two.

Uncle James wants Beth and her siblings to be perfect Victorian children: they should be silent, they should eat whatever he gives them without comment, and they should not exhibit greediness. Yet, Beth’s rebellion is not just about satisfying her appetite for the best dishes. Beth quickly learns about her uncle’s character as a controlling and greedy man, and she purposefully annoys him by defying the dining conventions she knows will upset him the most, such as voraciousness and excessive talking during the meal. Furthermore, Beth notices the emotions of
the adult women who subtly approve of Beth’s defiance. For instance, Aunt Victoria, who observes Beth’s antagonism of her uncle during a meal, demonstrates her approval of this defiance when she declares, “I like that child” (114). When Beth provokes her uncle again, Aunt Victoria once more expresses quiet approval of Beth’s behavior when “a faint smile flickered over her wrinkled roseleaf cheek” after Beth particularly annoyed Uncle James (127). Additionally, Beth’s mother, who usually quickly chastises and even beats Beth for even minor errors, does not punish her for antagonizing her uncle during these meals. This lack of punishment from Mrs. Caldwell, much as Aunt Victoria’s reaction, suggests Mrs. Caldwell’s quiet approval of Beth’s defiance of her uncle. Beth, who is not as intimidated by her uncle and his power over their finances as the adult women are, expresses and acts on what the older women must either suppress or only reveal through a subtle smile. Moreover, these contentious meals represent the last time in the novel that Beth exhibits any greediness or poor manners while dining. These moments of conflict between Uncle James and Beth also highlight Grand’s alignment of Victorian men, not the New Woman, with greedy appetites.

Beth’s defiant behavior around her uncle breaks Victorian norms regarding children’s meals and behavior; however, after the family relocates to their new, small home, Beth quickly adopts more feminine modes of consumption. The family has very little money, and Mrs. Caldwell decides to spend most of it on her sons and their education. However, this means that Mrs. Caldwell, Aunt Victoria (who Uncle James has forced out of his house), Bernadine, and Beth must starve. After her husband’s death:

Mrs. Caldwell had determined to give her boys a good start in life. In order to do this on her very limited income, she was obliged to exercise the utmost self-denial, and even with that, there would be little or nothing left to spend on the girls. This, however, did not seem to Mrs. Caldwell to be a matter of much importance. It is customary to sacrifice the
girls of a family to the boys; to give them no educational advantages, and then to jeer at them for their ignorance and silliness. (138)

Mrs. Caldwell deprives the girls of a decent education to support the boys, and Mrs. Caldwell, Aunt Victoria, Beth, and Bernadine all reduce their meals and go hungry. To save money, the women eat breakfast and “have dinner at four o’clock, but no luncheon” (141). Moreover, the two meals the women permit themselves to eat are quite modest, and they rarely have enough for all of them. This experience teaches Beth to deny her hunger and to control her appetite to aid the family. For example, on one occasion Bernadine receives bread to assuage her hunger between breakfast and dinner,⁴ and “Beth was hungry too, but she would not confess it. What she had heard of their poverty had made a deep impression on her and she was determined to eat as little as possible” (141). The women’s hunger is not short-lived, and “[t]his was Beth’s first exercise in self-denial, but she had plenty of practice, for the scene was repeated day after day” (141). Once Beth understands their financial problems, she begins to control her appetite and eating carefully to reserve as much food as possible for her mother, aunt, and sister. Although she is only a child, Beth, even more so than the other women in the family, willingly denies her appetite. Beth repeatedly either does not eat at all or greatly reduces and controls her eating to leave more for everyone else. For example, one morning the family runs short of bread, and Harriet, the servant, warns Beth that “‘there won’t be enough for breakfast if you eat any,’” and Beth replies “‘[a]ll right, then; I haven’t any appetite’” (181). Of course, Beth is just as hungry as the other women in the family, but she has become skilled in denying her own appetite so that others can eat. On another occasion, Beth is hungry before dinner, and she convinces Harriet to

⁴ Feeding a child bread between meals follows the advice of *The British Mothers’ Magazine* (1854), which explains that if children “ask to eat between their meals, nothing but bread should be given them; this they will eat with pleasure, if hungry” (“A Few Plain Directions for Preserving the Health of Infants and Young Children” 87).
feed her early. However, as the women are only “‘entitled to meat once a day,’” eating early means that she will have to give up her portion of meat at dinner to make sure there is enough. Harriet warns Beth that she will “‘be ‘ungry by dinner-time,’” but Beth uses her capacity for self-control, and “[w]hen dinner-time came Beth was ravenous again, but she was faithful to her vow, and ate no meat” (188). On another occasion, “[w]hen Beth went down to breakfast, she was very hungry, but there was only one little bloater, which must be left for mamma to divide with Bernadine. There was not much butter either, so Beth took her toast nearly dry, and her thin coffee with very little milk and no sugar in it, also for economical reasons; but the coffee was hot, and she was happy” (253). By repeatedly ignoring her own hunger to leave enough food for the other women, Beth becomes adept at extreme self-denial and control over her appetite, and she also learns the lesson that women of all ages must be willing to ignore their own hunger for the benefit of others.

As the women’s hunger continues, they all start to feel the health consequences of never having enough to eat. Beth, in particular, suffers from the lack of food;

Beth, who was growing rapidly, became torpid from excessive self-denial; she tried to do without enough, to make it as if there were one mouth less to feed, and the privation told upon her; her energy flagged; when she went out, she found it difficult to drag herself home, and the exuberant spirit of daring which found expression in naughty enterprises, suddenly subsided. (237)

While the growing-Beth experiences low energy from the lack of food, everyone in the family experiences illness: “every one in the house, including Beth, was more or less ill from colds and coughs, and Aunt Victoria suffered especially; but none of them complained, not even to themselves; they just endured” (237). The women at home must endure hunger and illness without complaint while all of the family’s money goes to support the boys. Uncle James, who
lives nearby, does not notice, or does not care, about the women’s suffering, and he never sends them either food or money; he does not invite them to share his family’s meals, either.

Furthermore, the women will not stoop to asking Uncle James for food or financial assistance even though they know he has plenty to share. They try to keep up the appearance of a middle-class home and make do with the little that they do have.

The women go without food to provide the boys with an education and even excessive masculine luxuries. For example, Mrs. Caldwell gives the boys money for unnecessary indulgences when the women are in desperate need of funds. Mrs. Caldwell’s:

sons were growing up, and beginning to clamour for pocket-money. Their mother considered it right that they should have it too, and so the tender, delicate, sensitive little girl [Beth] had to go dirty and ashamed in order that her brothers might have the wherewithal to swing a cane, smoke, drink beer, play billiards, and do all else that makes boys men in their own estimation at an early age. (144).

While the women starve, the boys engage in the activities that the New Woman’s critics feared women would indulge. Yet, the Caldwell women have the capacity for self-denial and self-control that the boys lack as the latter perform their masculinity through excessive consumption.

Even when the boys come home to visit and can see how the women live, they continue to demand money and even complain and insult the women. During one visit home, Jim pressures his mother to give him more money so that he can go to the local pub to enjoy “playing billiards, drinking beer, and smoking pipes” (178). Jim asks for more money at the breakfast table, and Mrs. Caldwell “found it a relief to expend some of her irritation on Beth,” when she asks questions (178). Ordering Beth out of the room, Mrs. Caldwell declares that she “shall have nothing but bread and water for the rest of the day” (178). Mrs. Caldwell employs the typical Victorian punishment of denying food for a child’s transgressions. Additionally, when Mrs.
Caldwell gives Jim extra money, it means that all of the women, Beth included, will have even less to eat themselves. Jim gets the money from his mother and returns home later “the worse for beer,” “complain[ing] of the poor dinner, the cooking, and Beth’s shabby appearance” (179). Of course, all three directly result from the want of money, the same money he regularly receives for his education and entertainment. Jim is completely uninterested in the women’s near starvation and lack of money for clothing and other necessities, and he willingly gets Beth in trouble for even asking questions about how he spends the family’s money. Likewise, as Boyce notes, Beth’s “stoical abstemiousness is neither acknowledged nor appreciated by her immediate family” (236). As Beth deprives herself more than any of the other women, her mother never praises her for her sacrifices, and, in fact, she often bears the brunt of her mother’s anger and frustration. Moreover, all of the women’s sacrifices go to support insatiable, ungrateful, and wasteful boys who have little to show for the money that has been spent on them. Ultimately, Mrs. Caldwell:

had starved herself and her daughters in mind and body in order to scrape together the wherewithal to send her sons out into the world, . . . all her privation had been worse than vain, it had been mischievous; for the boys, unaided by any scheme or comprehensive view of life, any knowledge of the meaning of it to show them what was worth aiming at, and also unprotected by positive principles, had drifted along the commonest course of self-seeking and self-indulgence, and were neither a comfort nor a credit to her. (Grand 300)

While this female self-sacrifice does not ultimately improve the boys’ or the family’s situation, it does develop Beth’s capacity for self-denial. Through her decision to focus all of the family’s resources on her sons, Mrs. Caldwell teaches her daughters that women must be willing to sacrifice themselves for the men in their lives, and this is a lesson that Beth learns and then associates with the proper performance of New Woman femininity at the end of the novel. These
moments with her brothers also reinforce the lesson Beth learned from her Uncle James, that men are not interested in controlling their appetites or even allowing the women around them to enjoy equally.

Since Mrs. Caldwell cannot deny anything to her sons even as the women’s hunger becomes worse and the boys demand more and more money, Beth decides to act to save the women from starvation. She cannot deny herself any more than she already has, so she determines to provide food for the family by poaching and fishing. Beth turns to poaching and on Uncle James’s estate to try to supplement the women’s inadequate supply of food:

[s]he succeeded in killing a rabbit with a stone, to her own surprise and delight, and carried it off home, where it formed a welcome addition to the meagre fare. She skinned and cleaned it herself, boiled it, carved it carefully so that it might not look like a cat on the dish, covered it with good onion-sauce, and garnished it with little rolls of fried bacon, and sent it to table, where the only other dish was cold beef-bones with very little meat on them. (179-180).

Beth develops the skills to catch and kill a rabbit, to cook it, and to make it appetizing to her family. In particular, the fact that her mother “ate the rabbit with appetite,” encourages Beth to continue supporting the family by poaching (180). Moreover, the idea of poaching appeals to her as “Beth would not have touched a penny of Uncle James’s, but from that time forward she did not scruple to poach on his estate” (180). Beth works out exactly how to catch the game and bring it home at night without running into trouble:

[w]hen the larder was empty, she became Loyal Heart the Trapper, and would wander off to Fairholm to set snares or catapult anything she could get near. The gun she had found impracticable, because she was certain to have been seen out with it; her snares, if they were found, were supposed to have been set by poachers. She herself was known to every one on the estate, and was therefore sure of respect. (197)

In addition to poaching from her uncle’s estate, Beth also learns how to fish: “[s]he would sit at the end of the pier in fine weather, baiting her hooks with great fat lob-worms she had dug up out
of the sands at low tide, and watching her lines all by herself” (198). She becomes quite skilled. One day “[s]he caught two big dabs, four whitings, a small plaice, and a fine fat sole. The sole was a prize, indeed, and mamma and Aunt Victoria should have it for dinner” (199). Of course, Beth plans to give the best part of her catch to her family rather than saving it for herself, and the food she provides helps the women survive since “the family would have pretty nearly starved that winter, because of Jim, who had contracted debts like a man, which his mother had to pay” (197). Beth’s ingenuity with her poaching and fishing saves the women from even greater hardships since Jim’s behavior “like a man” requires them to give him even more of their money.

As Beth continues to support the women by providing food, she keeps her poaching and fishing a secret, and she allows her mother to assume it secretly comes from Uncle James’s wife, Aunt Grace Mary (197).

While poaching and fishing are certainly not normal activities for a Victorian girl, Beth’s willingness to take on this work saves her mother, aunt, and sister from possible starvation. None of the women is willing to ask Uncle James for help or even to stop sending money to the boys, and the boys are certainly not willing to change their behavior to help these starving women. Beth steps up to save the family during very dire circumstances. While this might be unusual behavior for a Victorian girl, “there is no doubt Grand wants readers to admire Beth’s ability to step into the male role of family provider, and even valorizes the theft as divinely approved” (Sutton-Ramspeck 142). Moreover, according to Evans, “Beth’s cookery and desire to feed other people particularly functions as a palliative against the popular charge that the New Woman was an unsexed and unsympathetic creature bereft of the womanly impulse to nurture” (Evans, The New Woman’s New Appetite 194). By hunting and cooking, Beth performs her femininity by
feeding others and putting her own appetite second. She may step beyond normal bounds by killing and cooking her own food, but she primarily does so for others rather than herself, and Beth gets pleasure from seeing her mother, in particular, enjoy the food she has worked so hard to provide. Beth’s desire to feed others provides a direct contrast to the greedy men in the family who will neither share their bounty nor reduce their consumption, and as Evans notes, Beth’s efforts to feed the family show that the New Woman still values caring for and supporting her family.

Additionally, Beth enjoys caring for and learning from her Aunt Victoria. Before the Caldwells moved to Yorkshire, Aunt Victoria lived in relative luxury with her nephew, Beth’s Uncle James. However, when Aunt Victoria’s investments lose money, he forces her out of his house and moves her into the Caldwells’ small home. The Caldwells’ lack of food and other necessities becomes especially difficult for Aunt Victoria to cope with after losing her comfortable lifestyle. Beth notices how difficult these changes are for Aunt Victoria, and unlike the other women in the family, she sympathizes with Aunt Victoria’s plight and brings her food between meals when she especially seems to need it. On one occasion, Beth, not taking anything for herself, tells Aunt Victoria “‘You must take it all,’ said Beth. ‘I made it for you. I do like doing things for you, Aunt Victoria. It makes me feel nice all over’” (Grand 212). In secretly providing this extra food and in hunting and cooking, Beth enjoys the opportunity to nurture someone else instead of herself. Beth’s interactions with Aunt Victorian are also notable as “[a]lthough Beth is rarely described sharing peaceful meals with male characters in the novel, her relationships with girls and woman are typically forged and cemented with delicious comestibles” (Evans, The New Woman’s New Appetite 192). This is certainly the case with the
relationship between Aunt Victoria and Beth as their connection deepens after Beth provides her hungry aunt with food.

Additionally, Aunt Victoria has a better understanding of Beth and her potential than Mrs. Caldwell does, and Beth quickly absorbs Aunt Victoria’s lessons regarding housekeeping, beauty, and self-control. Aunt Victoria takes Beth with her on a trip, and Beth learns from the experience as Beth “took charge of the housekeeping as soon as they arrived, made tea, arranged the groceries in the cupboard, and put the key in her pocket” (Grand 218). Aunt Victoria also teaches Beth about maintaining her appearance: “Aunt Victoria attributed her own slender, youthful figure and the delicate texture of her skin to this discipline. She said she had preserved her figure by never relaxing into languid attitudes, and her complexion by washing her face in hot water with fine white soap every night, and in cold water without soap every morning” (219). Aunt Victoria also never “lost her self control for more than a moment whatever happened” (219). Beth learns these lessons about performing femininity by caring for the home, controlling herself, and taking care of her appearance, and “as she grew older, that these and that elevated attitude of mind which is religion, whatever the form preferred to express it, are essential parts of the discipline necessary for the preservation of beauty” (219). Beth also adopts “Aunt Victoria’s dainty fastidious ways, which were the ways of a gentlewoman, at once and without effort; and ever afterwards was only happy in her domestic life when she could live by the same rule in an atmosphere of equal refinement—an honest atmosphere where everything was done thoroughly, and every word spoken was perfectly sincere” (225). Through her relationship with Aunt Victoria, Beth learns more about the performance of femininity through discipline, self-denial, and control. Aunt Victoria, who is certainly more of an angel in the house than a New Woman,
becomes a model of proper womanhood whom Beth tries to emulate in adulthood while she
eschews her mother’s example. As she grows up, Beth may become a New Woman who
supports herself through writing and speaking about women’s rights, but these early lessons she
learns from Aunt Victoria about traditional, Victorian femininity stick with her and influence her
future behavior.

Aunt Victoria and Mrs. Caldwell both try to maintain a middle-class lifestyle on their
limited budget, and they try to teach Beth to do the same. Much like her Aunt and mother, Beth
worries about maintaining a middle-class and feminine appearance, and even when given food,
she makes sure that she controls her eating and does not appear greedy or voracious and,
therefore, unfeminine. For instance, Beth befriends Charlotte, the local doctor’s daughter, and
Charlotte provides a meal while Beth visits her. Beth, who is still starving at home, is of course
very hungry when Charlotte

returned with chicken and ham, cold apple-tart and cream, and a little jug of cider. Poor
Beth, accustomed to the most uninteresting food, and not enough of that, was so
exhausted by her long fast and arduous labours, that she found it difficult to restrain her
tears at the sight of such good things. She ate and drank with seemly self-restraint,
however, it would have lowered her much in her own estimation if she had showed any
signs of the voracity she felt. (288-9)

Beth comes close to tears, yet she controls herself and does not reveal her extreme hunger to her
friend. According to Dennis, this meal with Charlotte “is a pivotal moment in the awakening of
her feminine subjectivity and her transformation from voracious, appetitive child to etherealised
and food-denying woman” (Dennis 25). While this moment does indicate that Beth is no longer
the girl who greedily eats pudding to annoy her Uncle James, clearly she has been a “food-
denying woman” for quite a while, readily feeding others instead of herself as well as exhibiting
the self-control required of the proper Victorian woman. Moreover, this moment cements that
outside of the family circle Beth has learned the necessity of performing her femininity and demonstrating her sexual propriety by controlling her appetite.

While Beth learns about the feminine need to control her appetite and appear feminine, the rest of her education is entirely lacking. Mrs. Caldwell deprives the women of the family to send her sons to school and figuratively starves her daughters of an education. Beth, who is bright and extremely capable, does not get to attend school; her brothers, on the other hand,

were sent to school as soon as they were old enough, and so had the advantage of regular routine and strict discipline from the first; but a couple of hours a day for lessons was considered enough for the little girls; and, for the rest of the time, so long as they were on the premises and not naughty, that is to say, gave no trouble, it was taken for granted that they were safe, morally and physically. (Grand 67)

The girls’ lessons are minimal when compared to the boys, and their mother even fails to teach them the basics of housekeeping and cooking which they need in their impoverished home with few servants to assist them. Beth receives most of her practical lessons from the servant, Harriet, who teaches her “not only of the house-work, but of the cooking, from cleaning a fish and trussing a fowl to making barley-broth and puff pastry” (147). Initially, Mrs. Caldwell “had forbidden Beth to do servant’s work, and objected most strongly to her cooking, until she found how good it was, and even then she thought it due to her position only to countenance it under protest” (197). Beth also learns how to clean from Harriet, and, in fact, “Harriet would sit in an arm-chair if they were in the drawing-room, and resign the duster—or the dishcloth, if they were in the kitchen—and continue the recital, while Beth showed her appreciation, and encouraged her to proceed, by doing the greater part of her work for her” (146). While Beth is clearly very intelligent and learns quickly from Harriet, Mrs. Caldwell offers her very little in the way of formal, organized education, and she “salved her own conscience on the subject by arguing that
it is not wise to teach a girl too much when she is growing so fast” (269). Instead, she agreed with her friend, Lady Benyon, who “had no patience with people who over-educate girls—with boys it was different; but let a girl grow up strong and healthy, and get her married as soon as possible, was what she advised” (269). Beth reaches her adolescence with very little formal education, especially when compared to her brothers.

However, this lack of formal education eventually changes after Aunt Victoria’s death. Aunt Victoria, who has recognized Beth’s intelligence and academic potential, leaves Beth a small amount of money specifically for her education. Yet, Mrs. Caldwell initially wants that money to go to her sons too. Mrs. Caldwell tells Beth:

‘[t]he money is of no use to you just now, and it would have made all the difference to Jim. He ought to be making friends now who will last him his life and help him on in his career; but he can do nothing without an allowance, and I cannot make him one. There is no hurry for your education. In fact, I think it would be better for your health if you were not taught too much at present.’ (245)

To persuade Beth, Mrs. Caldwell explains that spending the money on Jim “‘instead of on yourself would really be a fine, unselfish thing to do’” (245). For Beth, who is so accustomed to sacrificing herself for others, this argument is persuasive. Furthermore, Mrs. Caldwell even entices Beth by saying she will buy her new items of clothing to enhance her appearance, including shoes, gloves, a parasol, and even a corset: “‘I don’t know what your waist is going to be, but you shall have some good stays. A fine shape goes a long way. With your prospects you really ought to make a good match, so do not slouch about any more as if you had no self-respect at all. You can really do a great deal to make yourself attractive in appearance’” (246). Much as Aunt Victoria teaches Beth about beauty and self-control, Beth’s mother educates her about her figure and clothing, and she tries to offer these elements of beauty in exchange for more money
for the boys. In other words, as Heilmann explains, “[i]n exchange for an education, Beth is to be rewarded with the paraphernalia of femininity” (*New Woman Strategies* 86). While Mrs. Caldwell may not be thinking about her daughter’s future position as a New Woman, she gives her the lessons she needs to disarm the New Woman’s critics. As Grand explains in her article “The Moral of Manners and Appearance,”

> it is difficult to conceive anything more disastrously foolish for women, at this critical period of their progress, to endanger their chances of success by being careless of the effect of their personal appearance, or by neglecting the cultivation of charms of manner, when the use of these two powerful auxiliaries is beyond question a good use. (24)

For Grand, cultivating an attractive and feminine appearance is an essential part of a New Woman’s performance of femininity as it will allow her to disarm critics. As Grand claims “once it is acknowledged that we have the power to attract, we shall have silenced one of our most inveterate opponents” (27). Beth’s experiences growing up teach her to suppress her own hunger and feed others to appear feminine and to focus on clothing as part of her performance of New Woman femininity.

While this offer of new clothing works for a time and Beth’s money continues to support her brothers, eventually Mrs. Caldwell decides to send Beth to school because Beth had been getting into mischief at home. Yet Beth, as she prepares to leave for school, “had been made to feel that she was robbing Jim, and that her mother was treating her better than she deserved, and the feeling depressed her, so that the much-longed-for chance, when it came, found her with less spirit than she had ever had to take advantage of it” (Grand 301). Beth has become so used to self-denial regarding food, clothing, and her own education that even the prospect of going to school for the first time at age fourteen seems like taking resources away from her brothers.
While at school, Beth’s education about food and femininity continues. She quickly learns that the school has strict rules to follow regarding food, and the girls themselves critique those who deviate from the rules. The food served at the school conforms to Victorian norms for food served to children; bread, butter, and tea are the primary foods served. After arriving, Beth quickly learns the rules the girls have established. For example, when drinking tea, “[t]he first cup was not so bad, but the second nothing but hot water poured through the teapot. It was not etiquette to take more than two” (307). In particular, breaking the rules when dining marks a girl as coming from a lower-class family: “[i]f a new girl drank with her mouth full, ate audibly, took things from the end instead of the side of a spoon, or bit her bread instead of breaking it at dinner, she was set down as nothing much at home, which meant that her people were socially of no importance, not to say common” (312). According to Dennis, at the school, “the acquisition of a gendered subjectivity turns on the negative figuration of characteristics collectively agreed on as unladylike. Primary among these is appetency. A feminine etiquette of eating is practised” (25). Like the ladies in Gaskell’s Cranford, these girls develop rules regarding eating, and they connect following these rules to both femininity and class status.

The girls also apply these same rules to the teachers and harshly critique the one teacher who fails to conform to them. The music teacher faces widespread condemnation among the girls for her eating habits. The girls call her a “great fat old thing” and give her the nickname “Old Tom” (Grand 308). The students particularly critique “Old Tom” because she enjoys her meals: “‘[s]he is a greedy old cat! She likes eating! You can see it by the way she gloats over things, and she’s quite put out if she doesn’t get exactly what she wants. Fancy caring! It’s just like a man; and that’s why she’s called Old Tom’” (308). For these girls, enjoying food and desiring
specific dishes are both associated with masculinity. Their teacher receives a masculine name because her visible hunger and enjoyment of food mean she is failing in her performance of proper Victorian femininity.

Beth’s experience with the strict dining rules of these girls is relatively brief, but when she continues her education at another school, she continues to learn about the connection between food and gender. After getting in trouble for sneaking out of the school at night, she leaves and goes to a finishing school to complete her education. As with her first school, Beth learns more from her classmates about the importance of food and femininity. On her first day there, a student, Geraldine, asks Beth about her waist size and explains:

‘[m]ine is only seventeen inches; but I laced till I got shingles to reduce it to that. I know a doctor who says small waists are neither healthy nor beautiful; but then they’re the fashion, and men are such awful fools about fashion. They sneer at a healthy figure, and saddle themselves every day with ailing wives, all deformed, because they’re accustomed to see women so; and then they call us silly! My husband won’t think me silly once I get command of his money, whatever else he may think me. Till then--!’ she made a pretty gesture with her hands and laughed. (336)

The finishing school certainly reinforces Victorian dictates about women’s appetites and bodies. The students know that they need to maintain small waists and stay thin to attract men and marry. While Beth prefers this school and receives more of an education in “[m]usic, singing, drawing, dancing, French, German, [and] Italian,” she only stays a few months (338). Mrs. Caldwell decides to bring her home abruptly after Beth’s sister Mildred dies. After less than two years of formal education, Beth’s school days are over, her brief educational experiences at both schools having reinforced her prior lessons about the connection between food and gender. She sees how the girls mock a teacher with a healthy appetite and connect that teacher to masculinity. Moreover, the students connect the performance of femininity to a lack of hunger, following
rules while dining, and maintaining a feminine appearance with a small waist. These episodes further emphasize the lessons Beth has already learned at home.

Now that she has received the typical “education” for a middle-class Victorian young woman, the next step, especially according to Mrs. Caldwell, is for Beth to get married. As soon as Beth returns home, her mother begins plotting to get her married to Dr. Dan Maclure. Beth is only sixteen years old, but her mother wants her off of her hands as quickly as possible, and while Beth does not want to get married, her mother’s pressure succeeds. However, Beth still offers some resistance when she “decided to keep her surname for her father’s sake” (355). After she gets married and moves to a new town with her husband, Beth wants to take control over the management of the household. When she arrives at her new home, “Beth was delighted with it all, and took possession of her keys with pride. She was determined to be a good manager, and make her housekeeping money go a long way” (358). Beth is quite capable of managing the house as she did a lot of work at home and when staying with her Aunt Victoria. Yet, her husband is unwilling to allow her to manage the money she needs to superintend the meals and the running of the household. Instead, he wants to control the finances while leaving her to supervise the meals and housekeeping:

[but the system did not answer. Beth had no idea what she ought to be spending, and either the bills were too high or the diet was too low, and Dan grumbled perpetually. If the housekeeping were at all frugal, he was anything but cheery during meals; but if she ordered him all he wanted, there were sure to be scenes on the day of reckoning. He blamed her bad management, and she said nothing; but she knew she could have managed on any reasonable sum to which he might have limited her. She had too much self-respect to ask for money, however, if he did not choose to give it to her. (359)

Of course, Beth had planned to take on the role of a Victorian angel in the house and manage the household, including the budget for running the house. However, much as Uncle James’s control
of his household excluded the women from this job, Dr. Maclure undermines Beth’s ability to keep the house and then blames her for the problems this situation causes.

Managing the household budget is not the only problem Beth runs into with her new husband since he has strict expectations for his meals. Much like her own mother at the beginning of the novel, Beth experiences her husband’s anger regarding meals that do not meet his expectations. Dr. Maclure is picky about his food, and “[i]t surprised her to find that what he had to eat was a matter of great importance to him. He fairly gloated over things he liked” (359). With lots of experience of carefully managing her own appetites, Beth “in order to indulge him, and keep the bills down besides, [. . .] went without herself; and he never noticed her self-denial” (359). Similar to her experiences as a child, Beth’s self-control and willingness to go hungry to help others go unappreciated. Furthermore, Beth associates her husband’s love of food and propensity to overeat with his gender since “[s]he did not set them down to his personal discredit; however, but to the discredit of his sex at large. She had always heard that men were self-indulgent, and Dan was a man” (359). It is no surprise that Beth connects her husband’s excessive interest in food and his other indulgences to his masculinity as she has seen the same behavior in Uncle James and her brothers. Overall, Beth’s experiences with her husband’s meals reinforces the idea that men, not self-denying New Woman, possess voracious appetites.

While Dr. Maclure complains about their meals, Beth strives to be a proper angel in the house who is always prepared to feed her husband. For example,

[i]f her husband were called out at night professionally, it was a pleasure to her to lie awake so that she might be ready to rise the moment he had returned, and get him anything he wanted. On those occasions she always had a tray ready for him, with soup to be heated, or coffee to be made over a spirit-lamp, and any little dainty she thought would refresh him. (399)
While Beth tries to be ready with food he will enjoy, it is not enough to meet her husband’s high expectations. In particular, if the potatoes were boiled when he wanted them mashed or baked, it made a serious difference to him, and he would grow red in the face and shout at the servants if his eggs for breakfast were done a moment more or less than he liked” (496). When he actually enjoys his meal, Beth notes his “sad . . . sensual satisfaction” with the food (496). Whether he complains about the food or enjoys it, Beth views Dr. Maclure’s appetite with “irritation” and as “the greed of a hungry child” (496). Dr. Maclure’s demands regarding food reinforce what Beth has already learned about male appetites. Moreover, by contrasting Dr. Maclure’s greedy appetite with Beth’s self-denial, Grand suggests that proper New Women, like Beth, can control their eating and appetites while men, and masculine women, frequently exhibit hunger and are voracious eaters.

As her marriage continues, Beth’s self-denial persists to the point that she loses weight. While she and her husband have enough money to provide plenty of food, Beth still controls and even reduces her eating. In fact, after less than two years of marriage, “[s]he had also become much thinner, which made her figure childishly young; but in the face she looked old for her age—five-and-twenty at least—although she was not yet eighteen” (372). While Beth eats less and becomes thinner, “[i]t seems that Dan, like Beth’s brother Jim, is destined to follow Uncle James’s example in becoming a repulsive physical manifestation of the excessive indulgence of appetite” (Dennis 26). As with the other men in the novel, Beth’s father, uncle, and brothers, Beth’s husband enjoys eating and creates another link in the novel between masculinity and indulging the appetite. Moreover, Dr. Maclure’s interest in meals contrasts with Beth’s moderation and self-control, which continues unabated after her marriage.
While the novel links femininity to controlling the appetite, women who do not control their appetites are associated with masculine traits. Just as the girls at school called the teacher with an appetite “Old Tom,” Beth associates one of Dr. Maclure’s female patients, who Beth soon discovers is also his mistress, with masculine traits because of her eating habits. Bertha, who comes to live with Beth and her husband for a short time, “was a dark girl, good looking in a common kind of way, with a masculine stride in her walk, a deep mannish voice; and not at all intellectual, but very practical: what some people consider a fine girl and others a coarse one, according to their taste” (Grand 413). Grand describes Bertha in masculine terms, and her expensive appetites are also the subject of conversation between Beth and Dr. Maclure. Dr. Maclure is happy when he finds a check upon opening Beth’s mail, a practice Beth loathes throughout their marriage, and he says, “‘I haven’t been able to sleep for nights thinking of the butcher’s bill’” (423). The butcher’s bill has of course increased because of the amount of meat Bertha has been eating during her stay. After Bertha has finally gone home, Beth gives her husband the bills noting that “the butcher’s bill for the last month, and the baker’s, the milk, the wine, the groceries, all nearly doubled on Bertha’s account”’ (438). Adding just one more person to the household doubles the amount of food consumed, which, of course, should not have happened if Bertha possessed the small and delicate appetite expected of a “proper” Victorian woman. Dennis, discussing Bertha’s appetite as well as her role as Dr. Maclure’s mistress, mentions “Charlotte Brontë’s sexualised madwoman”; “[w]hether or not a reference . . . was intended, it is clear that Grand’s Bertha is a woman of highly dubious morality. . . [whose] wantonness is evidenced by her love of meat” (27). While Grand may be referencing Brontë’s Bertha, she also uses the character once again to associate femininity with a well-controlled
appetite and masculinity with excessive indulgence. Furthermore, while the students masculinize “Old Tom” for her appetites as well, Bertha faces an even greater critique because her hunger reflects her sexuality. Victorian advice literature often warns girls and women about the dangers of meat as “[d]octors and patients shared a common conception of meat as a food that stimulated sexual development and activity” (Brumberg 173). Therefore, coupled with the fact that Bertha is Dr. Maclure’s mistress, this meat consumption is symptomatic of Bertha’s lack of proper femininity and morality.

Eventually, Beth discovers their affair when looking out of an attic window and watching her husband and Bertha in the garden. She sees her husband kiss Bertha and give her a bracelet (Grand 420). Bertha goes back home, and the relationship between Beth and Dr. Maclure degrades even further, allowing Beth to consider completely adopting the life of a New Woman by moving to London and supporting herself through her writing. When Beth leaves her husband, she becomes

>[t]he idealized New Woman [who] was single; well-educated (probably at a University); worked for pay whether or not it was economically necessary; lived separately from her family in rooms, chambers or a shared flat; travelled by public transport, ate in restaurants, and went to concerts or the theatre without masculine escort. (Mitchell vii)

After leaving her husband, Beth, who during her marriage has already undertaken a course of study on her own, rather than at a university, moves to her own lodgings in London, establishes a paid career as a writer and speaker, and creates her own life based on her interests and friendships. Additionally, once she arrives in London, she continues the abstemious ways she developed while growing up. Beth rents a room, and she no longer has a large kitchen or servants to help her. So, she relies on simple foods and an occasional meal out:
[s]he lived principally on bread and butter, eggs, sardines, salad, and slices of various meats bought at a cook shop and carried home in a paper. Sometimes, when she felt she could afford it, she had a hot meal at an eating-house for the good of her health; but she scarcely required it, for she never felt stronger in her life, and so long as she could get good coffee for her breakfast and tea for her evening meal, she missed none of the other things to which she had been accustomed. She made delicious coffee in a tin coffee-pot, and brewed the best tea she had ever drunk in a brown earthenware, which Ethel Maud Mary considered the best thing going for tea. (Grand 507)

Even after establishing a new, independent life, Beth continues to control her appetite and eat very moderate meals. Even when she does seem to indulge, she does so for her health rather than to satisfy her appetite. She does not want the extravagant fare that her husband, uncle, or brothers demanded. By maintaining her self-control, Beth performs New Woman femininity and counters the critics who align the New Woman with voracious and masculine appetites.

In addition to her abstemious regular meals, when Beth does have an occasional treat, she does so with a friend. Sharing a very moderate meal in these instances indicates female friendship and camaraderie rather than the selfish and greedy meals consumed by the men in Beth’s life. In particular, Beth shares an occasional meal with Ethel Maud Mary, the landlady, who

would uncover something she held in her hand, which would prove to be cakes, or hot buttered toast and watercresses, or a bag of shrimps and some thin bread and butter; and Beth, sparkling at the kindness, would exclaim, ‘I never was so m in my life!’ to which Ethel Maud Mary would rejoin, ‘There’ll not be much to boast about between two of us.’ (507)

While the women share a treat, it is always just a small portion for each of them, and they never overindulge. In the novel, when women share food in a kind and sociable atmosphere, it is acceptable as long as the women use moderation as their guide. Moreover, these meals shared between women provide a direct contrast to the overindulgent meals Uncle James and Dr. Maclure enjoy. The men focus solely on satisfying their appetites and any shortcomings in the
dishes set before them, but for the women, eating is a communal rather than self-centered activity. They care less about the exquisite quality of the meal and more about the feminine camaraderie and conversation that occurs when they can share a small meal with each other. For the women, unlike the men, the food is secondary to the relationship they build through sharing a small meal.

While Beth does well for a time with her moderate meals and occasional snacks shared with Ethel Maud Mary, the female camaraderie they established is interrupted when a man, Arthur Brock, requires Beth’s constant care and attention. Arthur Brock, Beth’s friend and neighbor, becomes ill, and Beth, who barely has enough money to survive, cares for Arthur and spends her own money to buy him food. In doing so, Beth follows her mother’s example by putting a man and his needs before her own, even if it means going hungry herself. Moreover, by devoting all of her time to caring for him, she does not have time to write and earn more money. So, she eventually sells her best dresses and her hair to get more money to support them both (521 and 529). While she spends money on food for Arthur, “Beth suffered a great deal herself from exposure and cold and privations of all kinds. She used to be so hungry sometimes that she hurried past the provision shops when she had to go out, lest she should not be able to resist the temptation to go in and buy good food for herself” (521). The hunger and self-denial that Beth became so accustomed to as a child returns as she once again faces starvation to feed a man. In fact, Beth’s powers of self-denial prove extreme:

[s]he had to pass an Italian eating-house where she used to go sometimes, before she had any one depending on her, to have a two-shilling dinner—a good meal, decently served. Now, when she was always hungry, this was one of the places she had to hurry past; but even when she did not look at it, she thought about it, and was tormented by the desire to go in and eat enough just for once. Visions of thick soup, and fired fish with potatoes, and roast beef with salad, whetted an appetite that needed no whetting, and made her suffer
an ache of craving scarcely to be controlled. That day had been a particularly hungry one. The coffee was done, every precious tea-leaf she had to husband for Arthur, and the butter had also to be carefully economized because a good deal was required for his crisp toast, which was unpalatable without it. (522)

Beth’s hunger might be “scarcely to be controlled,” but she does control it, and she does not go into the restaurant to satisfy her desperate hunger. Instead, she “lived principally on the crusts she cut off the toast. When they were very stale, she steeped them in hot water, and sweetened them with brown sugar” (522). Beth, who learned self-sacrifice when she fed others instead of herself as a child, willingly sacrifices her own appetites and health to care for a man she does not know very well. This self-sacrifice continues as the situation degrades further, and she even “turned against her crusts, even with sugar, and had felt no hunger until she got out into the air” (522). As soon as she feels this hunger after not even eating Arthur’s scraps, “she recovered her self-possession,” and does not buy herself anything to eat because “[s]he would die of hunger rather than spend two precious shillings on herself while there was that poor boy at home” (522).

While Beth’s care for Arthur is admirable, she does not even ask her friend Ethel Maud Mary for help. Ethel Maud Mary would certainly have shared at least a small amount of food with her, but Beth does not ask for food or assistance of any kind. Likewise, Beth never informs Arthur of the dire straits she is in even as she continues to bring him food while doing without herself. This experience with Arthur replicates what Beth experienced as a child. She, much like her mother, spends all of her funds to support a man while leaving herself nothing on which to live. She became used to hunger as a child, and she uses that experience to help her survive this time too.

By bringing Beth to the brink of death through her self-sacrifice, Grand shows critics that the New Woman still possessed the control and self-denial of traditional Victorian femininity. When a friend takes Arthur away to recover in the country, Beth breaks down completely.
Eventually, one of Beth’s friends spots her “‘looking like death,’” collapsed on the floor of her room (528). The friend brings a doctor who “said it was just exhaustion from fatigue and starvation” (530). Beth’s care for Arthur brings her to the brink of death. Moreover, Ethel Maud Mary notes how well Beth concealed her situation: “‘I saw her every day, and never suspected she was denying herself everything, she was always so much the same—happy, you know in her quiet way’” (530). More surprisingly, Arthur, who Beth feeds and nurses every day, does not notice that Beth stops eating to give him more food. As with Uncle James earlier in the novel, men seem unaware of female suffering, and none of them takes action to provide any kind of assistance. While she was a child, the women in Beth’s family never asked for help even as they came close to starving, and Beth continues this tradition of women sacrificing themselves for men as she cares for Arthur to her own detriment. Beth might be a self-supporting New Woman willing to leave her husband and begin a new life, but when it comes to caring for a man through her own self-sacrifice, Beth is more than willing to revert to a more traditional female role.

Grand’s desire to align the New Woman with some aspects of traditional femininity continues at the very end of the novel. Eventually, Beth recovers her health with the help of some friends, and these friends also help her move to a cottage in the country within sight of the ocean (536). The novel then ends abruptly after Beth sees a man approaching her cottage on horseback, and it is “the Knight of her long winter vigil—Arthur Brock” (542). This romance ending “troubles nearly all of Grand’s critics” (Mangum 189). For Mangum, “[i]n many ways this part of the plot seems to be offered as proof that the New Woman retains the qualities of womanhood her critics feared she had lost, the abilities to nurture others and to sacrifice herself to others’ needs” (189). Similarly, Heilmann explains that with this ending Grand is “[w]ishing
to appeal to the conventional woman as well as her more progressive sister” (*New Woman Strategies* 83). Additionally, Norma Clarke notes that

>[i]t may be argued that the feminist message is ultimately subverted by the conventions of popular fiction which demanded a romantic lover as the heroine’s ultimate and truly significant destiny, but I don’t think this is so. Enough has been said and illustrated along the way in these novels about how men use their sexual power over women, to fix the romantic lover firmly in the regions of remote and idealized fantasy. (104)

Quite rightly, critics have differing views of the novel’s final chapter as Grand’s ambiguous ending leaves the reader to wonder if Beth will continue her public speaking and work as an advocate for women’s rights, or if, as she did when Arthur was ill, she will set aside her work as a New Woman and care for him as an ideal angel in the house would. Ultimately, the ending of the novel reflects the larger contradictions in the novel between traditional Victorian femininity, including women’s relationships to food, and the role of the New Woman.

Ultimately, the ending of the novel is not the only thing that undermines a strong feminist message for readers. According to Showalter, Grand “has little patience with the rhetoric of feminine self-sacrifice.” Similarly, Evans argues that the novel shows “the imperative that feminine appetites be recognized and validated, and of the necessity for the modern woman to claim authority over her own appetites and relationships with food” (*The New Woman’s New Appetite* 2). However, a close examination of the gender differences in the novel related to food and eating demonstrates that Showalter’s and Evans’s claims are incorrect. Grand wrote her novels, including *The Beth Book*, with two clear purposes in mind. She wanted her heroines to educate and to encourage future New Women and to prove to critics that the New Woman was not the destructive figure they so often made her out to be. Yet, by repeatedly contrasting men’s and women’s eating throughout *The Beth Book*, Grand undermines the feminist potential of the
n
ovel. Rather than validating women’s hunger, as Evans suggests she does, Grand repeatedly describes women’s hunger in negative terms. In fact, Grand critiques the two women in the novel with hearty appetites, Old Tom and Bertha, and aligns them with masculinity rather than femininity and the New Woman. Additionally, despite what Showalter suggests, Grand repeatedly links her ideal New Woman, Beth, to self-sacrifice and self-denial, qualities frequently associated with the angel in the house. Jovanovski argues, “femininities that appear to be outwardly resistant are not always subversive” (190). Beth might become a potentially subversive New Woman writer and orator who leaves her husband to follow her own path, yet Grand undermines and contradicts these progressive actions as Beth is also a woman who since childhood has sacrificed her appetites and desires for others, even when it risks her own well-being and happiness.

For Grand, Beth’s controlled appetite is a crucial part of her performance of New Woman femininity, and it is a message she wants her readers to learn to further the New Woman’s political cause. While Grand links a femininely restrained appetite to the success of the New Woman’s aims, The Beth Book also shows continuity with earlier Victorian texts in its depiction of food and gender. The novel might be quite different from the children’s stories discussed in chapter three or Gaskell’s novels discussed in chapter four; however, these very different texts all present the message that women of all ages need to suppress their appetites and restrict their eating if they want to be “proper” women. Grand might encourage the New Woman to control her eating to make progress with her political cause, but this message still has consequences for the women who read her novel and feel the need to follow her guidelines to advance the cause. Ultimately then, while Grand’s use of food and gender has a different purpose than the literature
discussed in previous chapters, to disarm the New Woman’s critics and further her social and political agenda, it is still harmful for the women who are internalizing and implementing this kind of message.
CONCLUSION

CONTROLLING WOMEN’S APPETITES

Food is the primal symbol of social worth. Whom a society values, it feeds well. The piled plate, the choicest cut, say: We think you’re worth this much of the tribe’s resources.

As *The Beth Book* demonstrates, food was a significant issue for the New Woman at the end of the nineteenth century. Whether she hoped to forward the cause of women’s rights or maintain or improve her social position, a woman living during the final years of the Victorian period would have been just as concerned about regulating her eating as her mother and grandmother had been in previous decades. As the selection of texts in this project demonstrates, concerns regarding food and femininity span the entirety of the Victorian period, and both non-fiction and fiction texts illustrate the complex relationship Victorian women had with food. Throughout the nineteenth century, women were expected to eat delicately, prefer specifically feminine food, deny their appetites, and moderate their eating to control their weight and bodies. Moreover, while these behaviors formed part of the education girls received from mothers, teachers, and the culture at large, texts demonstrate that these behaviors were often discussed as if they were entirely natural and innate. In other words, restricting eating and controlling the appetite were naturally feminine, and a proper angel in the house engaged in these behaviors effortlessly.
Yet, while some Victorian writers insist on the naturalness of gender differences in eating, the fact that authors wrote thousands of pages to teach girls, adolescents, and adult women how and what to eat offers proof that these behaviors were not, of course, natural to women but instead behaviors that they had to learn, practice, and maintain over time. These eating behaviors are part of a performance of femininity rather than natural or biological, and for women, there were significant social consequences for any failures in their performances. Additionally, while a few writers, including the subject of chapter four, Elizabeth Gaskell, may have critiqued women who took their food related performances of femininity to extremes, these critics do not support behavior that strays too far beyond conventional expectations. Victorian women, then, who wanted to demonstrate their morality and angel in the house status, had to learn to use food as part of their performance of femininity and continually monitor and maintain this performance from childhood through adulthood.

With significant potential consequences for errors while eating, unsurprisingly women turned to a variety of texts for guidance. Literature from throughout the period clearly highlights concerns regarding food and femininity, yet much scholarly work remains if we are to explore food and gender in the Victorian period. My aim with this project has been to begin filling a gap in the food studies literature about the nineteenth century. While I explore a variety of non-fiction and fiction texts, only a small number could be fully studied here, and much research still needs to be done. For example, while I address a number of non-fiction books and magazines in chapter two, the scope of the chapter meant many publications, especially magazines, could not be included. In particular, an exploration of additional publications for children is needed. For example, according to Jonathan Rose, an “1888 survey of the reading habits of 790 boys and just
over 1,000 girls, all aged 11 to 19 and mainly middle-class” reveals that “girls in the survey rated the *Girls’ Own Paper* their favorite magazine, but the *Boys’ Own Paper* took second place” (41). An analysis of how the *Boy’s Own Paper* depicts food and gender would be one good place to continue expanding this research in order to examine how the representation of food and eating differed in non-fiction texts depending on the gender of the intended audience. Similarly, Victorian children’s literature is another area that is only starting to be explored from a food studies perspective. While a number of scholars have written about food in the *Alice* books, a huge number of other texts from this “golden age” of children’s literature have not been investigated from a food studies perspective. New Woman fiction and non-fiction also need further study to uncover more about these women’s relationships to food and the role eating played in the New Woman’s political aspirations. These three examples of areas for future research show that there is still a great need for additional scholarly attention to a wide variety of texts which could provide a greater understanding of food and gender during the Victorian period.

Moreover, both this research project and any future research on this topic gain in importance because of the connections between Victorian beliefs about food and gender and our own. Victorian perspectives on food and gender have influenced and informed our contemporary culture to the point that some scholars claim that elements of our culture are Victorian. According to Silver, “[a]lthough we as a culture consider ourselves enlightened and tolerant, our attitudes toward the body are still fundamentally ‘Victorian’” (175). I agree with Silver’s claim, and much of the literature discussed in this project resonates with the concerns and cultural pressures contemporary women still experience regarding food. We may believe that our modern
culture has more informed and educated beliefs regarding food, health, and the body, yet contemporary female readers, much as their Victorian ancestors, consume huge numbers of texts about beauty, exercise, weight loss, and controlling the appetite. We may even believe that the days of corsets and tight lacing are long gone by, yet the recent popularity of “waist training” is a modern resurgence of a centuries old fashion staple. Even some of the more absurd facets of Victorian food beliefs are still with us today. For example, the Victorians classified different types of food as masculine or feminine, and today some still see meat as masculine and lighter, healthier fare as feminine.

Likewise, scholars, including Silver and Brumberg, argue that the Victorian period marks the beginning of an explosion in eating disorders, and with all of the guidelines women were supposed to follow regarding their eating and bodies, it is no wonder that for some Victorian women, restricted eating was taken too far. Yet, of course, disordered eating remains a serious, widespread issue in the modern world. According to Susan Bordo, “Most women in our culture, then, are ‘disordered’ when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies; eating disorders, far from being ‘bizarre’ and anomalous, are utterly continuous with a dominant element of the experience of being female in this culture” (57). Research studies support Bordo’s conclusions about the continued prevalence of disordered eating in our culture. According to a study conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Self Magazine, “75 percent of women reported disordered eating behaviors or

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1 See Emine Saner’s “What a Waist: Why the Corset has Made a Regrettable Return” and Angela Haupt’s “Waist Trainers: A Waste of Money and Potentially Harmful.”

symptoms consistent with eating disorders" (“Survey Finds”). While this study found high rates of disordered eating in adult women, other research notes that even young girls feel the need to control their eating. A study by Common Sense Media discovered that “80% of 10-year-old girls have been on a diet” (Miller). Furthermore, “[a]ccording to studies cited by the National Eating Disorders Association, 42 percent of girls in first through third grade want to be thinner, 81 percent of 10-year-olds are afraid of being fat, and 51 percent of 9- and 10-year-old girls feel better about themselves if they are on a diet” (Kelley). As did their Victorian counterparts, today’s young girls learn of the need to monitor and restrict their eating to perform femininity and meet cultural expectations about girls’ eating habits, bodies, and weight.

With all of the parallels between food and femininity in the Victorian period and our own, clearly many Victorian norms regarding eating still inform women’s lives today. Contemporary women have yet to escape the use of food as a crucial component of the performance of femininity. This performance harms women’s mental and physical health, and it undermines women’s positions in society. According to Naomi Wolf,

now that all women’s eating is a public issue, our portions testify to and reinforce our sense of social inferiority. If women cannot eat the same food as men, we cannot experience equal status in the community. As long as women are asked to bring a self-denying mentality to the communal table, it will never be round, men and women seated together; but the same traditional hierarchical dais, with a folding table for women at the foot. (189-190)

Natalie Jovanovski makes a similar point when she states that “[f]eminist writers have long associated women’s body-policing practices as evidence of their subordinated social status and endemic victimisation” (180). In other words, both Wolf and Jovanovski suggest that inequality regarding food and eating reflects inequality in the culture at large. Additionally, as Susie Orbach explains, “The driven, induced need to be slim diverts us from concerns that are more truly
central to our experience of life. It absorbs an energy that could help us change the world, not just our bodies” (197). Food might seem to be a mundane topic with little connection to larger issues such as feminism, gender roles, and politics. Yet, a study of food and femininity in the Victorian period reveals how significant proper eating was to middle-class women and how the legacy of Victorian women’s use of food to perform their femininity is still with us today.
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