

Gwen Hyman

MAKING A MAN: GENTLEMANLY APPETITES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Reviewed by Pamela Gilbert.

This book feeds a current hunger in Victorian studies to understand material culture and the body. Focusing primarily on the construction of masculinity and class, specifically the gentleman, through discussions of “aliment” (consumables including food, drink and drugs), Hyman provides a lively and provocative discussion of several novels and food as a gendered trope within them. As she asserts, the study of eating and the body has historically tended to focus on femininity. Although studies such as James Eli Adams’s *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995) have made us all aware how crucial ideas of asceticism and self-control were in the construction of masculinity and gentlemanliness, Victorianists have been inattentive to the rich discourse on food and drink in its relation to male characters. Like many of the best studies, Hyman’s shocks us with the centrality of a topic until now invisible in plain sight. The principal observation of the book—that the gentleman is constructed in part through his appetites for aliment, and that this is an important element not only in the narration of character in the period, but in emplotment—is made completely persuasive in Hyman’s rich prose and aptly chosen examples.

Hyman opens up an overlooked (and large) field for readers to think through and delight in, and this is one of those engaging books that keep making you think of your own favorite novels and how they relate to or contrast with Hyman’s examples (I would have dearly loved for Hyman to have written on Meredith’s *Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, a

great study of foodiness and its discontents). Her readings of the texts are bravura performances—witty, enthusiastic, and original. The book is filled with provocative, fresh observations. There are of course some flaws, discussed below, but the book taken “holus bolus” is a most agreeable mouthful. Most crucially, its flaws are not of a type or frequency to invalidate the general arc of her convincing argument.

Hyman’s brilliant reading of *Emma* exemplifies the strengths of the book.

Working through the various characters’ marked and often inappropriate attitudes toward food, she zeroes in on Mr. Knightley’s planning of a strawberry-picking party. He politely rejects Mrs. Elton’s “gypsy” pic-nic format because, he says, “My idea of the simple and natural will be to have the table spread in the dining room. The nature and simplicity of ladies and gentleman . . . is best observed by meals within doors.” Of this exchange Hyman notes, “The world that supports ladies and gentlemen, he implies, is not natural but constructed—and . . . must be carefully maintained if order and right reason are to prevail” (50). This is ultimately true for Austen as well. Mr. Elton, however, is “all about food, all the time” (44), and not only eats indiscriminately, but chooses his companions at table in the same way (45). Hyman’s elegant close reading brings to light a clear narrative of relationships to food which not only enhances characterization, but also points to a previously hidden narrative within the novel: a story about the stabilization of a dangerously out of kilter social body threatened by the unruly appetites of its principal men. This is good reading and great writing, too.

Sometimes Hyman’s exuberance crosses into overstatement. While Austen fans may relish what she writes about Mr. Woodhouse’s inappropriate consumption of gruel, they may be startled to find the mild-mannered elderly gentleman “is that which repulses, frightens and sickens . . . the walking dead . . . [who] creeps through the alimentary system

of the town, infecting it with his disease of ambivalence and liminality” (48). But at the end of this generally persuasive chapter on *Emma*, what one takes away is an enhanced appreciation of Austen’s book and a new awareness of the gentlemanly body.

Another standout chapter includes a splendid reading of *Little Dorritt*, the perfect novel for a study of gentlemanliness and eating (and a tough one to rein in, since there is so much material—Hyman handles this challenge elegantly). Unlike *Pickwick*, which might seem a more obvious choice, the tighter plotting of *Dorritt* allows Hyman to make a clearer argument about the narrative of the novel, whereas *Pickwick* might have invited more focus on characterization. Another strong chapter offers an engagement with Wilkie Collins’s [*The Law and the Lady*](#) (1875), that will immediately inspire any reader who has missed this gem to secure a copy. In the best sustained reading of this novel I have seen, Hyman reveals the aptly named Miserrimus Dexter’s relation to the fantasy and reality of gentlemanliness and the industrial age by examining both his alimentary tastes and his disabled body.

The weaknesses of the book, however, (and every book has some) emerge from the same source as some of its strengths. While a heavy concentration on one individual text per chapter gives us an immensely pleasurable reading experience as we revisit old friends, Hyman’s focus on aliment as representative of choice sometimes leads her to seem weirdly unobservant of the bodily states associated with appetite. Though she treats at length Mr. Woodhouse’s insistence on simple food and his worry about food safety, she never mentions dyspepsia or hypochondria, which are clearly indicated. Similarly, she identifies Mr. Woodhouse’s gruel as a working-class staple without noticing that it is also the food of the invalid. (Those of us who like our cream of wheat a little on the thin side will be unlikely soon to recover from Hyman’s description of gruel as “slimy,”

“repulsive,” and “disgusting,” which she seems to assume will be a universal assessment [39].)

Even more strangely, Hyman’s account of Bronte’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* construes Huntington’s drinking as a matter of choice, in terms furnished by the temperance movement, and asserts that reading him as an alcoholic is “profoundly ahistorical: our contemporary notion of alcoholism as an addiction out of control was foreign to the early Victorians” (58). This is misleading. Though the Victorians lacked today’s understanding of “alcoholism,” dipsomania had been elaborately discussed by Hufeland, who named the syndrome, in 1819, and thereafter the British were well aware of its symptoms, including the inducement of delirium tremens when alcohol is withheld from heavy drinkers. Further, Hyman ignores the Brontes’ extensive experience with Branwell’s dipsomaniac decline. Instead, she suggests that Huntington’s condition is meant to evoke gout (76). There are other odd moments—Hyman seems to suggest that a burgundy is a fortified wine, for example (130).

Hyman’s focus on masculinity perhaps explains why she neglects some of the existing work on consumption that might have helped her, especially in regard to food and class; Catherine Gallagher’s *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy* (2005) or Sander Gilman’s *Fat Boys* (2004), for example, come readily to mind. The arrangement of chapters seems to imply a historical arc as we move from Austen through Bronte, Dickens (*Little Dorrit*), Collins (*The Law and the Lady*), Stevenson (*The Curious Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) and Stoker (*Dracula*), but the book makes no historic argument. Instead it serves up a series of discrete readings. In short, the book lacks historical resonance. Those interested in masculinity and food will want to read it beside James Eli Adams’s *Dandies and Desert Saints* and Sander Gilman’s *Fat Boys*:

students of gender more broadly will see profitable connections with older work such as Helena Michie's *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (1987), Gail Turley Houston's *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (1994), Anna Krugovoy Silver's *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002), and Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran's edited collection *Scenes of the Apple* (2003). Finally, specialists in the study of "aliment" per se will profit from Andrea Broomfield's more recent *Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History* (2007) and *VLC's* 2008 special issue on *Cooking Culture: Situating Food and Drink in the Nineteenth Century*, in which an earlier version of one of Hyman's chapters first appears. Nevertheless, Hyman's book will be read with profit by anyone interested in the history of the body, material culture, gender and the Victorian novel. It will also be (that rather rarer thing) enjoyed.

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