

A summary of the lecture
“Soup and Snobbery: Food in the Novels of Jane Austen”
given April 8th to the Vancouver Jane Austen Society

by Tanya Lewis

Jane Austen’s correspondence indicates that she was deeply interested in food, which is not surprising as she was a woman of limited means and therefore necessarily involved in its production. What *is* surprising is that Austen’s quotidian culinary interests do not carry over into her fiction. Indeed, she appears to use her novels to escape the tedious concerns of the body, thus reinforcing the longstanding fairy tale food morality that deems those who starve virtuous and those who consume ogres.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne’s suffering is romanticized through her self-starvation while Lucy Steele greedily dreams of the cows and poultry at Delaford. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s moral delicacy is proven by her inability to eat either a “gooseberry tart” at the Park (*MP* 13), or “Rebecca’s puddings and Rebecca’s hashes” at home (*MP* 342). *Mansfield Park*’s Mrs. Norris, by contrast, is a despicable gourmand, determined to leave no crumb—of food, status, or regard—for our noble Fanny. Such food-associated characterization is perhaps most evident, however, in *Northanger Abbey*; Catherine Morland, a woman of sensibility as all of Austen’s heroines are, is indifferent to what she eats, while the General’s unattractive appetite for both food and the prestige he imagines that food gives him makes him repulsive.

In *Persuasion*, Austen uses standard food morality more subtly: the obvious divide between the heroine and her nemesis may be less blatant, but there is still the convenient fairy tale foiling of a good girl who denies herself the sensual pleasure of consumption with a less desirable character *made* less desirable by yielding to her appetites. We never see selfless Anne Eliot eat, but we do see her sister Mary eat—putting the lie to her feigned illness—and we therefore think less of her. In *Pride and Prejudice*, too, Elizabeth Bennet only eats to put others at ease, not to please herself, while her own mother serves as her food foil, bragging to Mr. Darcy about the scope of her dining acquaintance, and inadvertently serving as the greatest hindrance to Elizabeth’s and Jane’s happiness.

Indeed, the only novel in which the fairy tale divide between abstinence as good and appetite as bad is challenged is *Emma*. Emma does not eat but instead shares food with others, which should make her morally superior to her silly father, who can talk of little *other* than food, but her generosity is selfishly motivated in that it is designed to elicit admiration. She sends food to the impoverished Bates household, for example, in order to show Mr. Knightly that she is a good woman while Jane Fairfax, a truly good woman and a kind of secondary heroine in the novel, starves herself rather than consume food that she feels is morally contaminated. Austen thus subtly asserts standard food values even as she appears to undermine them. Furthermore, Austen’s slight deviation from the simple food morality we all learn in fairy tales returns to the fore by the end of *Emma*. When Emma learns at last to give selflessly rather than selfishly, her foodway is what it should be and she obtains her just reward: Mr. Knightly. Every selfless princess gets her prince.

There are, of course, other variations on fairy-tale food morality in Austen’s fiction, (Mrs. Jennings comes to mind, though she too, for all her lusty appetite, is more

selfless than selfish and therefore forgiven), but by and large Austen adheres to the kind of food associations that most readers of fiction take for granted. We have been taught from our childhoods that the heroines of fiction do not need their suppers as we do, and like us, Austen seems to have reveled in this release from real world appetites.

References:

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