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A Domesticated Idea: British Women Writers and the Victorian Recipe, 1845-1910

Helana E. Brigman
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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A DOMESTICATED IDEA:
BRITISH WOMEN WRITERS AND THE VICTORIAN RECIPE, 1845-1910

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by
Helana E. Brigman
B.A., Columbia College, 2008
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2010
August 2015
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This dissertation is dedicated to

Linda, who made the best cookies,
Lise, who made the best grilled cheese,
and of course, to my mother,
in loving memory.
“I kept on buying all the cookery books that promised to be of use. Gradually they spread out into an imposing row on my desk; they overflowed to the bookshelves; they piled themselves up in odd corners; they penetrated into the linen closet, —the last place, I admit, the neat housekeeper should look for them.”

—Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *My Cookery Books* (1903)

“A man and a woman lie in bed at night in the short hour between kid sleep and parent sleep, turning down page corners as they read. She is leafing through a fashion magazine, he through a cookbook. Why they read these things mystifies even the readers. The closet and the cupboard are both about as full as they’re going to get, and though we can credit the magazine reader with at least wanting to know what is in fashion when she sees it, what can the recipe reader possibly be reading for? The shelf of cookbooks has long overflowed.

Yet the new cookbooks continue to show up in bed, and the corners still go down.”

—Adam Gopnik, “What’s the Recipe?” (2011)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to the many people who read or heard portions of this dissertation, generously providing me with feedback on my work. I am indebted, especially, to my chair, Dr. Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, whose impeccable advice and thoughtful notes helped shape this project. I am grateful to have had an advisor who not only had a careful eye, but who was also regularly available and always made time for me.

This dissertation has benefited from my writing partners, Tara Beth Smithson and Dr. Laura Keigan, as well as Drs. Lauren Coats, Daniel Novak, Christopher Rovee, and members of the Victoria ListServ. Rachel Goodyear deserves a special thank you for tracking down a copy of her unpublished dissertation on *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* at the eleventh hour of my writing schedule so I could cite her valuable research here.

My partner, Christopher Robertson, deserves a special thank you as well for his never-ending support and kindness. Your patience, love, and advice have been nothing short of extraordinary, and I could not have tackled many of my final edits or revisions without you. Finally, I am forever grateful to my family and friends for their love and support. Thank you Linda Jones, Lise, Paul, Caroline, and Peter Duda, Haley Brigman, Christina Janke, Lydia Dorsey, and Michael Chajewski.
THINGS IN SEASON FOR JUNE.

FISH.—-Flounder, mackerel, sole, mullet, salmon, perch, Pike, plaice, ploons, shrimps, skate, smelts, tench, turbot, whittings, whitebait, haddock, hale, lobsters, cod, and crawfish.

MEAT.—Beef, veal, venison, and hare.

POULTRY.—Spring chickens, ducklings, pullets, bantam pigeons and rabbit.

VEGETABLES.—Peas, new potatoes, asparagus, lettuces, cucumbers, carrots, cauliflower, spinach, radishes, and scarlet flowers.

FRUITS.—Strawberries, currants, gooseberries, and cherries.

GOOSEBERRY CHAMPAGNE.—One of the best, if not the best, home-made wines can be fairly manufactured by following the plain directions hereunder given. Crush a bushel and a half of green gooseberries; put them into a tub with twelve gallons of river water to soak for three days; then draw off the liquor, and press the fruit. When you have extracted as much moisture as it will yield, put a gallon and a half more water to the hulls; stir it well, and press the fruit again; add to the first portion; dissolve forty-two pounds of loaf sugar in the liquor. Fill a cask with it, leaving the bung out as long as fermentation continues; then fasten it down. Bottle it in the following spring; cover the corks with wax and green wax to distinguish the wine. Of course, the proportions may be reduced to suit small families.

A FILLET OF VEAL should be cut either large or small to suit the number of your company. The bone should be taken out, and space for the filling, which should be composed of beef-suet, bread-crumbs, knotted marjoram, lemon-thyme, lemon-peel, salt, and pepper; mix the whole; afterwards, bound together with an egg. Skewer the fillet round, and serve with the large side uppermost to table. When partially roasted, place a piece of paper over the lid; and as the meat is very solid, keep it some distance from the fire. Serve it to table with plenty of melted butter.

Figure 1: “Cookery, Pickling, and Preserving for the Month of June” in The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine (Series 1, Volume 2, page 61).
“To Carve a Fillet of Veal.—A Fillet of veal is a simple dish to carve, resembling a round of beef. Cut thin and very smooth slices off the top. Cut deep into the flap, between Figs. 1 and 2, for the stuffing, which should be helped a portion to each person. Slices of lemon are always served with this dish.”

—The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine (fig. 1)

Like many recipe readers and writers, I began my project in the pages of a magazine. Enamored with several rare bound editions of The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine I had located in Louisiana State University’s Special Collections,¹ I pored over pages of forgotten articles on nineteenth-century women’s work. Designed to appeal to the period’s rapidly growing population of middle-class women readers,² the EDM offered educational articles as well as detailed advice on every aspect of being a “domestic” Englishwoman.³ One of the magazine’s most popular features was its “Cookery, Pickling, and Preserving” column (fig. 1), a modestly-sized section devoted to improving food preparation in the home. Occasionally referred to by their more archaic name “receipt,”⁴ readers’ recipes were unlike many of the nineteenth-century cooking instructions I had encountered before. These were not dense or pedantic blocks of text praising a famous male chef’s method for stuffing and preserving birds⁵; nor were they written in such a way that the unpracticed reader would have trouble duplicating their instructions at home. Clear, enthusiastic, itemized, and illustrated, the EDM’s recipes had been earnestly designed with its subscribers in mind, offering detailed instructions alongside seasonal bills of fare.

Given the taxes on English stamp and paper in 1851 (3d. per pound and 4d. per sheet⁶), the style of the magazine’s recipes were especially peculiar, and they raised, for me, a number of questions: Why had the magazine’s recipes been permitted so much space, and, as a result, so much textual and artistic detail? Figure 1 shows “a fillet of veal is a simple dish to carve,” but “it
may not be amiss to present young housekeepers with a view of the entire animal”—a fully-grown cow—“with the different joints distinctly marked out” (61). Did the magazine’s readers truly need this kind of careful instruction?

Seeking to answer these questions, I undertook a close study of the magazine’s cookery column between 1851 and the mid-1860s, hoping to identify both the traditions and patterns in which women read and wrote recipes. Yet the more I read The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, the more I was struck not only by the value the periodical placed on sharing private women’s knowledge, but also by the ways the magazine’s cookery column participated in the very meaning of the recipe itself. From the Latin imperative recipere, the word “recipe” signifies both to give and to receive, suggesting a collaborative genre in which agreed upon knowledge is exchanged and reused (“recipe, n.”). Yet in the early days of food writing, recipes were transmitted privately as family heirlooms rather than co-creations of a broader public. In what scholars now refer to as “manuscript recipe books”—velum-bound journals kept by literate members of affluent families—mothers shared recipes with their newlywed daughters, sisters, nieces, and friends. Unlike the thoughtful instructions the EDM presented in its monthly cooking column, early women’s recipes were highly fragmented, coded in such a way as to expose the direct contact between the recipe’s reader and its writer. Adam Gopnik has observed that this style of writing invokes a tradition of “compressed language—very much like the ‘fake books’ that jazz musicians compiled raggedly over the first half of the last century, with chords and melodies scribbled in—just enough to tell someone already expert how to do tricky turns” (“What’s the Recipe?” 61).

Because “tricky turns” lack transparency and exclude all but a few privileged readers, recipes published in The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine offered a revisionary idea of the
recipe genre as it evolved during the middle years of the nineteenth century. Increasingly, the magazine valued clarity and specificity, seeking to find an alternative language that could be useful to (and shared by) its large group of middle-class women readers. One reason for this change to recipe writing was historical. As Simon R. Charsley explains, recipes once belonged to “the realm of ‘mysteries’ or ‘secrets,’” but became visible objects of literary and textual inquiry with the rise of the periodical press (33). As a genre, this factor allowed the recipe to surpass the racial and/or class boundaries traditionally enacted by women’s magazines during this period. The second reason was social as well as communal. In her chapter on “Becoming an Author,” Janet Theophano notes that by considering “how they [recipe writers] presented themselves to readers, why and how they wrote, and for whom,” we can understand how female cookbook authors “embraced a diverse community of readers” (189-90). Because the audience for The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine was domestic Englishwomen, recipe readers were defined as much by their nationality as by their gender. A commentary on the reader’s environment, “domestic” points two ways: first, to the private sphere of hearth and home and second, to the reader’s country—more specifically, to England. What drew me to the EDM’s cookery column was the realization that Victorian women’s recipes were a textual form, and one that was regularly evolving. As of yet, I had not encountered a genre of writing during the Victorian era that had been written, edited, and produced solely for (and by) women. So when I first saw “Mother Eve’s Pudding” (fig. 2), a dessert recipe written in the form of a poem, the recipe’s style clearly suggested both the presence and omission of an individual identity. Anonymously sandwiched between receipts for “Mock Ice” and “Rabbit Roasted,” “Mother Eve’s Pudding” reimagines a recipe for apple pudding as poetry:
DANGEROUS ORNAMENTS.

The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine (7.251)

DANGEROUS ORNAMENTS.

To prevent injury to children, it is important to list the dangers of ornaments. Suitable substitutes should be found to prevent the risk of choking or ingestion.

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DANGEROUS ORNAMENTS.
If you’d have a good pudding, pray mind what you’re taught.
Take twopennyworth of eggs when twelve for a groat;
Then take of that fruit which Eve did once cozen,
Well pared and well chopped, at least half a dozen;
Six ounces of bread—let your maid eat the crust—
The crumb must be grated as fine as the dust;
Six ounces of currants from the stems you must sort,
Or they’ll break out your teeth and spoil all your sport;
Three ounces of sugar won’t make it too sweet;
Some salt and some spices to make it complete.
Three hours let it boil without hurry or flutter,
And then serve it up with some good melted butter. *(EDM Vol. 7, 251)*

Not only does “Mother Eve’s Pudding” interrupt the flow of the *EDM*’s cookery column
(perhaps unapologetically, as we see in fig. 2), but it also suggests that its instructions are distinct,
qualifying the recipe as the intellectual property of some unnamed source. Consequently, the
recipe’s style struggles with issues of authorship and authority that we see in food writing today.
According to Signe Rousseau, recipes are most often shared for the explicit purpose of “re-
creation, adaptation, and inspiration” (17). Blatant copying, however, is an ethical issue and
“straddle[s] a fine line between ownership and theft” (17). That the *EDM*’s editors chose to
publish “Mother Eve’s Pudding” anonymously introduces some of the ethical issues Victorian
women encountered when writing and publishing household receipts. Moreover, it supports the
idea that recipes are the communal property of all domestic Englishwomen.

Yet “Mother Eve’s Pudding” was not communal property, and while I knew who
“Mother Eve” and the apples she “did once cozen” were, I could not help but wonder who she,
the recipe’s author, actually was. My curiosity drove me to discover the writings of Eliza Acton,
a Romantic poet whom I discuss in Chapter 2. Studying Acton drove me to the cookbook
authors that either borrowed from or improved upon her work, most notably, the editor for the
*EDM*’s “Cookery, Pickling, and Preserving” column, Isabella Beeton, and art critic Elizabeth
Robins Pennell, whose works I examine in Chapters 3 and 4.
I have often tried to explain to my peers that it is hard not to read Victorian women’s recipes without, at some point, wondering who the recipe’s original writers really were. When I first began this study in 2012, I had just finished writing my own cookbook, *The Fresh Table*, for Louisiana State University Press, during which time questions of authorship, copyright, and intellectual property were frequently on my mind. “Is this your recipe?” my editor once asked, as we examined galley proofs. “Of course,” I answered, knowing that I had not only written the recipe’s instructions and calculated its ingredients list, but that I had also enjoyed the magical process of developing the recipe in my kitchen, retesting and improving upon its results. I made this reply while knowing that ownership of a specific recipe was hardly tenable, and that as my editor and I spoke, many of my digitally published recipes were currently being copied and pasted on the Internet, quickly gaining distance between the duplicated version and its original source.\(^1\) Publishing *The Fresh Table* meant my recipes would have a point of origin, as well as the little bit of “copyright” for which a recipe writer might hope.\(^2\) I am certain I felt a unique kind of empathy for a woman like Eliza Acton who could write something as useful, beautiful, and funny as “Mother Eve’s Pudding” without ever being widely known. Indeed, I learned that much depends on whether you “serve it up with good melted butter,” when I chose to test her recipe at home.

While my empathy for Eliza Acton was, in part, biographical, it was also embedded with a newfound curiosity about the circumstances under which her name had been simultaneously neglected and lost. *The Fresh Table* and all modern cookbooks owe their stylistics to Eliza Acton, the first recipe writer to introduce what she called “novel features” we still use today, including the invention of the ingredients list and its separation from a recipe’s mode or instructions.\(^3\) Acton, I would hazard, was also one of the first Victorian women writers to prove
that a recipe, like a poem, was, and is, a creative act. It wasn’t that recipes published in *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* needed large amounts of space or meticulous detail as my original research questions presumed, but that the magazine’s cookery column represented one of the many instances in which Victorian women writers found a venue for performing these creative acts.  

It has been two and a half years since I first opened the *EDM*, and I now understand that the recipe as we know it today appeared very late—between 1845 and 1851—and was revised regularly by recipe writers in order to meet the needs of a large and highly engaged reading public. As literacy rates continued to rise and significant improvements were made to print and cooking technologies, Victorian women adopted new roles as educated consumers. With 25,000 subscribers in its first year and a reported 60,000 by 1860, the *EDM* documents a crucial moment in how Victorian women read and wrote about food. By “position[ing] women both as purchasers and readers of texts,” the *EDM* performed a function similar to the nineteenth century’s family literary magazines that Jennifer Phegley studies in *Educating the Proper Woman Reader* (8). Significantly, women readers occupied dual-roles in which they felt comfortable moving beyond their traditionally passive strictures as magazine subscribers to more active and engaged roles as magazine contributors. Cookery columns and household recipes were one of the environments in which this transformation was made possible.  

Recipes such as “Mother Eve’s Pudding” and “To Carve a Fillet of Veal” have driven my research. Initially, I had planned to limit my project to cookbooks aimed at middle-class women, but it quickly became apparent that no such cookbook truly existed. While an author may dedicate their recipes to “the fair daughters of Albion,” as Alexis Soyer does in *The Modern Housewife, or Ménagère* (fig. 4, page 4), their contents are more complicated. Recipes published
for middle-class women regularly flatter readers’ aspirational ideals, providing cooking
instructions and ingredients the average Victorian housewife might never see or use. Truffles,
champagne, foies gras, or green sea turtle, for example, were hardly affordable, but they makeup
some of the most famous recipes published in Isabella Beeton’s 1861 cookbook, Mrs. Beeton’s
Book of Household Management. Likewise, recipes with detailed explanations for preparing
broths, stocks, and breads from limited ingredients appear more appropriate for a working-class
reader. This meant that many Victorian women’s cookbooks and recipes were read jointly, in
which “the mistress would read it [the recipe or cookbook] to decide on the day’s meals, and
then pass it to her cook to follow the detailed instructions for individual dishes” (Humble “Intro.”
to HM xxvi). This collaboration between housewife and servant made the recipe an especially
practical Victorian text, one which permitted middle-class women the ability to draw firm lines
between themselves—the recipe’s targeted audience—and their household’s staff—typically,
cooks who were expected to use the recipe’s instructions and do the actual work.

By shifting my focus from representations of Victorian women’s recipes in the periodical
press to Victorian women’s cookbooks, I aim to contribute to Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster’s
request that scholars document the “range and multiplicity of the [recipe’s] form” (2). In the
pages that follow, I hope to provide a more complete picture of this form as well as its functions
by raising important questions about the study of Victorian female authorship as it intersected
with domesticity and food. In discussing the “myths and realities of female authorship” in
nineteenth-century Britain, Linda H. Peterson observes that “[t]he phrase ‘woman of letters’ is,
tellingly, a Victorian invention,” and one that allowed professional women writers to develop
and present their own public personae (4). But what about the Victorian woman who preferred
to write about food? At the periphery of Victorian literature, history, and culture sits one of the
many facets of the period’s woman of letters, a woman who dedicated herself to writing artfully crafted recipes that rethought how she—and many women like her—conceived eating, reading, and writing.

Notes

1 In *A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman’s Magazine*, Margaret Beetham notes that the “ephemeral form” of the Victorian periodical greatly affected its availability for future scholars of print media (9). Because magazines and newspapers were intended for short-term use, they were manufactured with cheaper materials and lacked stiff covers, making it difficult to access Victorian periodicals in their original form. Fortunately, as Beetham notes, “Nineteenth-century readers who could afford…[to have] their periodicals bound in volume form” helped to preserve more fragile mediums like the women’s magazine (9). See LSU’s Special Collections in Hill Memorial Library for a well-preserved example of *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*: Volumes 1-8 (1860-1864), call number “RARE-- 052 EN36.”

2 Andrea Broomfield broadly defines the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century’s “middle-class” as “those who practiced a profession such as law or medicine, who served as military officers, or as clergy in the Church of England” (5). Historically, this definition would have included anyone earning between £50-1000 per annum. According to the 1851 census, 270,000 professional workers lived in Britain; by 1871, this number had tripled (data qtd. in Humble “Little Swans” 323).

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4 See Janet Lloyd and Laurel Forster, “The Recipe in Its Cultural Contexts” (6) as well as *OED* entry “recipe, n.” for more on the waning usage of the term “receipt” and its etymology.

5 I discuss the history and style of the British recipe in length in Chapter Two. For the poultry recipe I mention here, see “Method of Preserving and Stuffing of Birds” from *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine* (423-24).


7 See Laurel and Forster (6-7) and Luce Giard (149-22) on the recipe writer’s “multiplications of borrowing” and what historian William Eamon calls the implied “contract between the reader and the text” (qtd. in Theophano 89-90).

8 Andrea Broomfield and Janet Theophano have provided scholars with indispensable archival research on the origins of the women’s recipe books and cookery manuscripts. See Chapter 1 of *Food and Cooking in Victorian England* (Broomfield 2-3) and Chapters 1 and 2 of *Eat My Words* (Theophano 11-49).
9 See Dena Attar’s *A Bibliography of Household Books Published in Britain 1800-1914* for receipts and recipe books that pre-dated the nineteenth century (11).

10 See Beetham’s “Introduction” to *A Magazine of Her Own?* (7-9 and 28) and Jennifer Phegley’s *Educating the Proper Woman Reader* (9-12). Also, see Kate Flint’s chapter “Reading in the Periodical Press” in *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (137-83).

Notes

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11 Debates of recipe ownership persist today, especially amongst writers publishing online. In 2012, Elise Bauer, owner of one of the internet’s most successful food blogs, Simply
Recipes, took legal action against Amazon when Sarun Srirunpetch of Bangkok, Thailand, copied and pasted her recipes and photos into an eBook for Amazon’s Kindle store. Since then, an online group called “PIPO”—Protect Intellectual Property Online—has taken further action, creating a watchdog network on Google+. See “Recipes,” Factsheet FL-122, U.S. Copyright Office (http://www.copyright.gov).

12 See Signe Rousseau’s chapter “Food Not for Sharing” in Food and Social Media for recent discussions of “the fine line between flattery and theft” that recipe writers face on the Internet (17-33). Also, it is worth noting that as of 2015, copyright laws do not cover the listing of a recipe’s ingredients, but may, under certain and rare circumstances, cover a recipe’s literary merit (“Recipes,” Factsheet FL-122, U.S.).

13 I discuss the extent to which Acton developed “novel features” in Chapter Two. For Acton’s discussion of these additions to the recipe book, see her “Preface” to the first and second editions of Modern Cookery (xix-xxii).

14 See Alexis Easley’s First-Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830-70 (1-34) for her overview of the ways Victorian women entered cultural, ideological, and literary debates as “first-person anonymous” contributors to the periodical press.

15 For middle-class women’s new roles as “educated consumers,” see Lori Anne Loeb’s chapter “Victorian Consumer Culture” in Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women (3-15), Broomfield (26-28), and Shapiro (187-188). For data on the printing industry and its rising output from 1850-1860, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray’s Literary Dollars and Social Sense (xi-xii and EN 2, page 221).
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ABSTRACT

Until recently, critics have devalued the Victorian cookbook as an object of literary inquiry, regularly dismissing it as “Victoriana”—cultural, anthropological histories detailing bland culinary traditions. *A Domesticated Idea: British Women Writers and the Victorian Recipe, 1845-1910* seeks to provide a framework by which we can explore the Victorian cookbook as a literary text appropriated by writers responding to and advocating for cultural, educational, and artistic reform during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Looking specifically at how women used recipes to discuss food preparation, dining, and household management, I argue that British women writers participated in a collaborative tradition, borrowing and sharing knowledge, imagining communities, and generating large bodies of women’s work. Specifically, this dissertation investigates the food writings of three influential nineteenth-century cookbook authors, Eliza Acton (1799-1859), Isabella Beeton (1836-1865), and Elizabeth Robbins Pennell (1855-1936).

Why and how mid-century writers composed, shared, and stylized their food writings coalesced into a complicated relationship. In this project, I focus on one particular manifestation of that relationship, the generative effects of cookbook recipes. This effect explains why women pursued, shared, and composed recipes, appropriating the medium for their own purposes. I argue that because recipes are an instructional form of prose that creates something the reader may eat and regard as delicious (especially if made correctly), it is the recipe’s very nature to engender readers as creators. This is not to say that a recipe or a cookbook are living things, but that the testing and eating from a recipe’s instructions are a living process. In it, a life cycle exists that separates the recipe from other forms of prose. After the initial stages of reading, testing, eating, sharing, and improving upon a recipe, writers respond to new contexts and
“reasons-to-be”: they share again, revise again, and continue this cycle. All recipes exist, essentially, in a complex system of collaboration. By inviting us to read and eat, they also invite us to alter.
it, but if you consider it worthy of notice you can of
course describe it yourself. Now to business: before par-
taking of a breakfast, you must provide the materials,
(which I always select of the best quality,) and require to
know how to prepare them. I shall, therefore, give you a
series of every description of articles which may properly
be partaken of at the breakfast-table.

FIRST SERIES OF RECEIPTS.

1. TOAST.—Procure a nice square loaf that has been
baked one or two days previously, (for the new cannot be
cut, and would eat very heavy,) then with a sharp knife
cut off the bottom crust evenly, and then as many slices
as you require, about a quarter of an inch in thickness, (I
generally use a carving-knife for cutting bread for toast;
being longer in the blade it is more handy, and less liable
to waste it.) Conceive to have a clear fire: place a slice
of the bread upon a toasting-fork, about an inch from one
of the sides, hold it a minute before the fire, then turn it,
hold it before the fire another minute, by which time the
bread will be thoroughly hot, then begin to move it
gradually to and fro until the whole surface has assumed
a yellowish-brown colour, then turn it again, toasting the
other side in the same manner; lay it then upon a hot
plate, have some fresh or salt butter, (which must not be
too hard, as pressing it upon the toast would make it
heavy,) spread a piece, rather less than an ounce, over, and
cut the toast into four or six pieces; should you require
six such slices for a numerous family, about a quarter of
a pound of butter would suffice for the whole; but cut
each slice into pieces as soon as buttered, and pile them
dightly upon the plate or dish you intend to serve it on.
“TOAST.—Procure a nice square loaf that has been baked one or two days previously, (for the new cannot be cut, and would eat very heavy,) then with a sharp knife cut off the bottom crust evenly, and then as many slices as you require, about a quarter of an inch in thickness . . . place a slice of the bread upon a toasting-fork, about an inch from one of the sides, hold it a minute before the fire, then turn it . . . begin to move it gradually to and fro until the whole surface has assumed a yellowish-brown colour…lay it then upon a hot plate, have some fresh or salt butter.”

—“How to Make Toast,” The Modern Housewife (fig. 3)

In 1849, celebrity French chef Alexis Soyer published The Modern Housewife, or Ménagère (fig. 4), his first cookbook for England’s aspiring middle-classes. No ordinary cookbook, The Modern Housewife combined the instructional tone of the household manual with the intimacy of the epistolary novel. “I agree, with the greatest pleasure,” writes Mrs. B., in her opening letter, “to contribute towards your domesticated idea” for a “culinary journal” that would include recipes for “breakfast, luncheon . . . [and] the nursery dinner” (xvi). Soyer’s decision to write The Modern Housewife from the perspective of “Mrs. B.” (rather than his own) reflects a growing trend we see during the mid-nineteenth century. The rapid expansion of the Victorian middle-classes generated increased demand for instructional texts for women that predominantly featured household recipes.¹ No doubt, Soyer was already familiar with the unprecedented success of Eliza Acton’s Modern Cookery in All Its Branches in 1845, and had similar hopes to capitalize on this growing marketplace. The title of my project, A Domesticated Idea: British Women Writers and the Victorian Recipe, 1845-1910, both reflects and draws upon Soyer’s attempts to take advantage of the commercial success of women’s recipe books by considering the implications of this particular moment, one in which Victorian women writers found their style for writing recipes appropriated by a famous French chef.

It is worth pausing to note Soyer’s extraordinary success at the time of The Modern Housewife’s publication. By 1849, Soyer had been heralded as England’s preeminent culinary authority, famous for his position as the London Reform Club’s chef de cuisine. Soyer later
garnered national attention while feeding British troops in Crimea and held several patents for concentrated extracts and free-range gas stoves that would radically change Victorian cooking.\(^2\) In fact, many historians have credited Soyer with the invention of the modern-day soup kitchen, a concept he developed during the Irish Potato Famine while feeding the poor in Ireland between 1845-1846.\(^3\) But perhaps Nicola Humble has described Soyer’s celebrity best, comparing him to “the modern television chef with a strong media profile and a finger in every available pie” (Culinary Pleasures 12).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Soyer would dedicate no less than 250 words to his cookbook’s opening recipe for toast, as toast best defined the demands of household cookery for middle-class women. By today’s standards, few readers would consider toast as “cooking” in any traditional sense, but for the Victorians, toast was both a staple and centerpiece of the early morning meal. Andrea Broomfield argues that despite toast’s “rather humble nature, the quality of the breakfast toast could be used as a yardstick by which others measured the mistress’s faithful execution of her duties, and consequently, how worthy she was of her privileged social station” (26). Simply put, good toast revealed a married woman’s skills as a household manager as well as her ability to perform and participate in the managerial responsibilities of middle-class life. Yet in writing a book of recipes for middle-class women, Soyer faced a particular problem: how to write recipes for “the modern housewife” without actually being one himself. If “The Modern Housewife” was to be “a useful advisor,” as the book’s frontispiece suggests (fig. 4), then the cookbook’s recipes required a special kind of lived experience different from Soyer’s own. I have often thought that “B.” implied “Britannia,” an indisputable pen name by which Soyer could write about food for Englishwomen. Indeed, it would seem that nothing could be more British than the way Mrs. B. opens her cookbook “herewith the first receipt, How to Make
Toast” (xvi). Although Soyer could have easily written about his work organizing, building, and cooking in the London Reform Club’s kitchen, he chose, instead, a simpler path: Mrs. B.’s instructions for hot buttered toast illustrate an elegantly detailed recipe that is just as exacting as any demanding task performed by the famous chef de cuisine.

That England’s preeminent culinary authority chose to write his recipes under the guise of “Mrs. B.” says something about changing attitudes towards household cookery and female authorship during the mid-nineteenth century. Foremost, it reveals a wish to capitalize on the mass-market success of Victorian women’s cookbooks as well as the public’s enchantment with household recipes. In the five years before Soyer’s publication, Longman & Co. made a small fortune publishing Modern Cookery in All Its Branches by Eliza Acton, and fifteen years later, S.O. Beeton institutionalized Victorian cooking as part of the British culinary tradition with their blockbuster success Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management, a work that, like many Victorian best-sellers, has never been out of print. By 1861, it was clear that the voice of the domestic Englishwoman (typically, a middle-class housewife responsible for household management) held special appeal for women readers and comprised one of the key ingredients of the Victorian cookbook’s successful formula. Soyer’s penname “Mrs. B.” reveals the pervasiveness of recipe reading and writing amongst middle-class women during this era, while simultaneously achieving what Eve Sedgwick calls the “performative aspects of texts” (3). By repeating readers’ relationships to one of the Victorian cookbook’s most defining features—a figure Soyer fittingly calls, “the modern housewife”—Soyer actively rebuilds this model of gender within his recipes.

But this model is not limited to The Modern Housewife’s recipes and emerges most clearly in the image Soyer used to sell the book itself. A portrait of “the modern housewife” (not
Soyer) adorns the cookbook’s frontispiece (fig. 4), capturing the imaginary likeness of Mrs. B. for Soyer’s readers. Julian North has noted that Victorian printers routinely used authors’ portraits as “branding,” selling books “by the author’s face as much by the cover or contents” (“Picturing Nineteenth-Century Authors”). Mrs. B.’s image, for instance, suggests her immortalized status as an English housekeeper: enshrined by fish, fowl, gourds, and grape vines, Mrs. B.’s soft and relaxed figure depicts a young and healthy woman whose thoughtful gaze is
meant to connect with Soyer’s readers. Outstretched in her left hand, Mrs. B. offers a recently penned recipe, inviting readers to take what she offers and test it for themselves. This image is especially significant, as it draws upon a tradition of women’s recipe writing from which Soyer would have been excluded. In *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks they Wrote*, Janet Theophano describes a similar portrait of Elizabeth Raffald, an eighteenth-century writer and author of *The Experienced English Housekeeper* (fig. 5). According to Theophano, Raffald’s portrait is the book’s “opening device,” whose “personal and intimate gesture”—the giving of her household manual—“draws the reader to the author, connecting them through the presentation of the book” (205). The similarities between Raffald’s and Mrs. B.’s likenesses are remarkable. Not only are Mrs. B. and Mrs. Raffald seated in the same
outward-facing position as they engage readers with their unblinking gaze, but they are also
drawn within similar frames. Yet while Mrs. B. stays well within her oval enclosure, Mrs.
Raffald breaks through the frame that surrounds her, intimating the real, tangible value of her
experiences compared to those of Soyer’s fictional persona, Mrs. B.

Whether they are real or imagined, what are the recipes these women hand us? And, what
does it mean to describe the recipe as a form of women’s writing that is based on the shared
experiences of its readers and writers? A Domesticated Idea: British Women Writers and the
Victorian Recipe, 1845-1910 argues that, as one of the period’s most popular instructional texts
targeted towards women, the Victorian recipe provided a venue for women to contribute to a
distinct genre of prose that evolved during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. It is possible to
trace the Victorian recipe’s journey from its inception in 1845 as part of a trade cookbook for
middle-class women, to its most distinct shift at the end of the nineteenth century where the
recipe gave rise to food writing, a new style of journalism. I argue that the urge among readers
to do more than just passively read a recipe—rather, to actively participate in a text by testing
recipes, revising them, and later rewriting what they have read—is tied to women writers’ desires
to get more out of a recipe than cooking instructions.

To this end, I demonstrate that Victorian women writers do not conceive of recipes as
unequivocal blueprints, but as processes of negotiation between a reader and her text. By
examining how three cookbooks—Eliza Acton’s Modern Cookery in All Its Branches (1845),
Isabella Beeton’s Household Management (1861), and Elizabeth Robins Pennell’s The Feasts of
Autolycus: The Diary of a Greedy Woman (1896)—imagined (and reimagined) the Victorian
recipe, I reevaluate the prevailing assumption that women’s recipes served purely instructional
purposes. Because the Victorian recipe was a young and malleable genre, it provided women
with an experimental platform in which they could participate in debates about women’s education, nutrition, and unseen (but highly valued) domestic women’s work. Consequently, this platform also allowed women writers the opportunity to construct far more complex notions about food and domesticity than how to prepare a certain meal or dish.

My research agrees with Nicola Humble’s assertion that recipes “will always have more to tell us about the fantasies and fears associated with food than about what people actually had for dinner” (4). Yet I am less interested in determining whether or not women cooked recipes as Nicola Humble argues or sought the divine powers of food science as Laura Shapiro suggests, but more in identifying how and why women chose to read and write the Victorian recipe. Moreover, I am interested in how this style of writing matured over the period during and after Queen Victoria’s reign, creating a distinct style of domestic women’s prose. At 250-words, Mrs. B.’s recipe for toast is just one of many excellent examples of this creative tendency.

Finding a Place for Women’s Recipes in Victorian Studies

Victorian literature is filled with scenes of food and cooking—from elaborate dinner parties in Jane Austen and William Thackeray to that memorable moment in George Eliot’s Middlemarch when Fred Vincy appears late to the breakfast table, demanding a “grilled bone.” Yet no author describes the relationship the Victorians had with their food as clearly as Charles Dickens: from the hunger caused by poverty to the exasperation of hosting an unsuccessful dinner party, food-based narratives emerge repeatedly throughout his works. At the center of these narratives are Dickens’s heroines, women whose job it is to oversee household regulations as managers. Determined to fulfill these new roles, women find themselves acutely tested—newlywed Bella Rokesmith puzzles over “a sage volume entitled The Complete British Family Housewife” as if it were a “Black Art” in Our Mutual Friend (796), Dora serves unshucked
oysters during her first dinner party after marrying David Copperfield (592), and Esther Summerson shakes her basket of keys with an unconscious smile in Bleak House, evoking not just the familiar image of Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House,” but also the less familiar image of Alexis Soyer’s “Mrs. B.,” the domestic doyenne “acquainted with the keys of the store-room before those of the piano” (xiii). 8 Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine food in the Victorian Age without first conjuring up an image of Oliver Twist, malnourished and heartbreaking, as he pleads with the parish’s “fat master”—“Please sir, I want some more” (12).

While many scholars may be familiar with food and household management as domestic motifs in nineteenth-century literature, they are often less familiar (if not wholly unaware) of the Victorians’ relationship with food’s most textual form, the women’s recipe. At first glance, women’s recipes may appear wholly detached from the works of Charles Dickens, but cookbooks, according to Henry Notaker, make up a significant part of the history of literature (134). Dickens, in particular, had a keen interest in reading and writing about food, frequently studying his household’s menus before his guests arrived for dinner. For Dickens, analyzing a meal was part of the pleasure of eating, and reducing a meal to its base ingredients was especially important. Like many Victorians, Dickens subscribed to the belief that “dining was the privilege of civilization,” and understood the dinner table’s role as a site for performing one’s middle-class status and aspirational tastes (Beeton 363). According to his daughter Mamie, “he [Dickens] would discuss every item in his humorous, fanciful way with his guests . . . and he would apparently be so taken up with the merits or demerits of a menu that one might imagine he lived for nothing but the coming of dinner” (qtd. in Rossi-Wilcox 79). In fact, as I show in my second chapter, one of Dickens’s novels was directly influenced by correspondence with Eliza Acton in 1846 after the initial publication of Modern Cookery. Dickens and Acton’s exchange
provides significant evidence that cookbook authors engaged with mainstream authors about their work—in this case, how accurately Dickens described a recipe for suet piecrust in an upcoming serial installment of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Moreover, it offers historical insight into scholars’ contested readings of Dickens’s status as an unhappy husband and avid recipe reader. While Dickens and Acton may have had limited correspondence, it is clear that Dickens happily retained *Modern Cookery* for his household’s use, perhaps even conferring Acton’s gifted copy to his sister-in-law Georgiana or his wife Catherine (née Hogarth), whose own cookbook *What Shall We Have for Dinner?* would be published five years later, and as I will explain, borrowed from Acton directly.

I am not alone in studying how recipes and recipe writers effected change in either of the Dickenses’ works: Elizabeth Langland discusses how extreme domestic unhappiness influenced Dickens’s daily life while married to Catherine, providing “imaginative and material content” for many of his novels (81). Indeed, many of Dickens’s biographers have called attention to his wife Catherine’s (supposed) difficulties with household management and general domestic ineptitude, a widely accepted critical opinion stemming from Edgar Johnson’s 1952 biography, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and His Triumph*. In it, Johnson documents the author’s love of food and cooking, noting that Dickens regularly undertook many of his household’s traditionally feminine duties, including budgeting and shopping for groceries because, on the one hand, he could not trust Catherine to shop at the family butcher unsupervised, and, on the other, because he was determined to get the best price for the best cut of meat (451). While this view of Catherine as the domestically inept housewife opposite her brilliant (but long-suffering) husband, Charles Dickens, has long been considered definitive, Lillian Nayder’s 2011 work *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Dickens* argues that Johnson’s biography both promotes and perpetuates
Dickens’s misrepresentations of his wife that he circulated “publicly and privately” after their separation in 1858 (11). Nayder believes that by continually “[a]llowing Dickens to speak for his wife,” Johnson and the critics that followed him have “‘learned’ what Dickens wanted them to: that Catherine was an incompetent wife and mother, unloved by her children; that she was psychologically unfit to perform her domestic duties; and that her union, though for many years a successful one by Victorian standards, was ill-fated from the start” (11).

Like Nayder, Susan M. Rossi-Wilcox has sought to “unlearn” Dickens’s version of Catherine’s biography and recuperate Catherine’s damaged reputation as a household manager by studying her work organizing and writing the Dickenses’ household recipes. In Dinner for Dickens (2005), Rossi-Wilcox argues that Catherine’s 1851 recipe book What Shall We Have for Dinner? was both a publishing success and a financial asset that rescued the Dickenses from medical debts (Schlicke 112). Revised and reprinted in 1852 and 1860, What Shall We Have for Dinner? features fifty-five of Dickens’s favorite recipes in the form of practical, middle-class bills of fare. Published under the pseudonym “Lady Maria Clutterbuck,” a character Catherine played in an amateur theatrical production of Used Up (Schlicke 111), What Shall We Have for Dinner? opens with a description of Charles Dickens as “Sir Jonas Clutterbuck,” whose “good appetite” and “excellent digestion” have made for “many hours of connubial happiness” (v).

Like Rossi-Wilcox and Nayder, what interests me most about studies of food in the Victorian Age is the surprising lack of critical acknowledgement given to women’s recipes as they grew out of and participated in these contexts. Given the importance Victorian studies has placed on understanding separate spheres, it has largely dismissed the most textual form in which women engaged with their roles as housewives and managers. Catherine Dickens’s menu book clearly articulates a unique set of anxieties about cooking for one of the Victorian period’s most
adored authors and reveals “in a profoundly naked form the anxieties and paranoias of its precise historical moment” (Humble “Little Swans” 322).

Yet unlike Soyer’s imaginary domestic doyenne Mrs. B. and her 250-word recipe for toast, Catherine merely lists her recipes in the form of “bills of fare” (fig. 6), offering less than half of the volume’s possible recipes in the book’s Appendix. When she does, recipes are borrowed from a host of popular cookbook authors—notably, Alexis Soyer and Eliza Acton—and provide “less exacting measurements, fewer techniques, and often omit baking temperatures or characteristics of the finished dish” (Rossi-Wilcox 95). And these omissions are especially problematic because they support the generally accepted opinion that Catherine was an incompetent household manager. The interrogative “What?” that begins her slim volume suggests, from the outset, its author’s clumsiness. Woefully inefficient, Catherine’s incapacity is clear: she cannot write recipes. Augmenting this clumsiness is the way Catherine subverts the traditional authority of recipe writers: because “What?” both involves the reader and provokes a response, Catherine reveals that the question is not a rhetorical prompt that will allow her to segue into a response but that she, as author, doesn’t have a quick and easy reply. Moreover, fig. 6 shows that What Shall We Have for Dinner? values menus, not recipes, and gives us a sense of Catherine’s possible role as a transcriptionist, not a real recipe writer.

However clumsy Catherine Dickens’s recipe book may appear, this reading offers an unfair interpretation of the ways women stylized their cookbooks, which varied enormously by writer and household. I would hazard that the lack of original prose in Catherine’s recipes derives not from her incompetence as a household manager (an interpretation Dickens and many of his biographers would have us believe), but from her long-standing “voicelessness” within Victorian scholarship. Catherine asks the question, “What shall we have for dinner?” not because
doesn’t know what to say, but because no one will listen. According to Nayder, restraints in Catherine’s writings can often be read as the “product of her marriage to a man of remarkable descriptive powers” that, no doubt, “inhibited her in her writing” (9). For example, in Jean Elliott’s 1983 play My Dearest Kate, this theme is remarkably evident. When Catherine asks, “What can I say? . . . He is the great writer, the friend of the poor, the Inimitable Boz. He is Charles Dickens. I am only Mrs. Dickens. Nobody,” she voices this voicelessness (qtd. in Nayder 16). And, it is perhaps this voicelessness that may explain why the two-page “Preface” to Catherine’s cookbook was actually written by her husband Charles Dickens although it is signed, “Maria Clutterbuck” in much the same way Soyer signs his recipes as, “Mrs. B.”
In stark contrast to Catherine’s cookbook is *Mrs. Charles Darwin’s Recipe Book*, a cookbook published during the same time. Emma Darwin, however, seems to locate her voice in her husband’s evolutionary ideas and scientific theories, offering readers plenty of detailed notes, measurements, and cooking instructions and suggesting new ways for critics to examine Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. From Dickens to Darwin, it is evident that many Victorian wives regularly read and wrote recipes, contributing to a unique—but currently disregarded—field of Victorian women’s prose. Yet Victorian scholarship still persists in defining women’s recipes as “Victoriana” despite new research on Catherine Dickens’s and Emma Darwin’s cookery books. Why? Gender, certainly, has something to do with scholarly neglect of texts that deal with domestic women’s work. Writing in the shadows of famous men and/or serving their dinners could not have been easy, and there is a strong sense across many—if not all—of the women writers in this study that its authors are excluded from literary circles and feel safer as observers rather than active participants. Many of Dickens’s acquaintances, for instance, rarely recalled meeting Catherine, a figure who wrote a best-selling recipe book, but who “seems to disappear from his life . . . [in] letters between Dickens and his friends” (Johnson 453). Even Eliza Acton was known to sign her private writings as “an observer” and Elizabeth Robins Pennell frequently lamented taking up writing instead of spending her time recording the genius of members of her private circle, prominent figures like Oscar Wilde and James Whistler.

Understanding the vexed position of Victorian women’s recipes and their larger form, the Victorian cookbook, may be as simple as asking questions about the value scholars have placed on the cookbook’s material form. According to Susan Daly and Ross G. Forman, the illegitimate status ascribed to women’s recipes continues to persist for a number of reasons: in literary, cultural, and Victorian studies, scholars have invoked “the importance of maintaining the canon,”
contending that “food and cookery’s association with women and with popular culture” are part of “the field’s broader lack of interest in the aesthetics of the quotidian” (364). As a result, critics regularly dismiss women’s recipes “as Victoriana rather than Victorian studies” (364), supporting Notaker’s observation that cookbooks “were never treated with the same respect and esteem as other literary genres. Even antiquarians took a long time to include these books in the category of valuable collectors’ items . . . exceptions were books with illustrations of high quality” (132). However, such outright denial of the Victorian cookbook significantly limits our ability to understand how Victorian women perceived their roles as household managers, and perhaps more interestingly, how women’s authorship intersected with these roles. Andrea K. Newlyn suggests that cookbooks were “more than just a collection of recipes or ‘receipts’ . . . [but] the literary text of the nineteenth-century housekeeper, playing a crucial role in maintaining communal structure, social ties and cultural tradition” (32).

In recent years, feminist literary scholars have shown increased interest in studying the domestic lives of the Victorians, undertaking passionate defenses of everything from household management to needlework. Writing of the “unusual number of books” on Victorian domesticity that appeared in 2007, Talia Schaffer asks, “are we enter[ing] a new feminist cultural movement, and if so, how might we characterize this new kind of work?” (“Women and Domesticity” 385). Just a year later, Daly and Forman compiled their special issue on “Food and the Victorians” for *Victorian Literature and Culture*, in which they saw food as one of the field’s most timely subjects. The literary potential of nineteenth-century recipe books had been confirmed “not only by the quality of the papers we [Daly and Forman] received in response to our call, but [also by] the sheer quantity—more than any other special topic in the journal’s history” (364). Issue 36.2 (2008) includes articles from Helen Daly, Paul Young, and Deborah Mutch amongst others.14
The pioneering work of feminist scholars Helena Michie, Tamar Heller, and Patricia Moran has already begun to challenge the historical portrait that Victorian women certainly ate food and had appetites, but would never have read or written about it. In *The Flesh Made Word*, Helena Michie notes that while the dinner table is an important locus of a Victorian novel’s subplots, characters, and actions, the most crucial figure at the novel’s dinner party, the heroine, has been conveniently erased of any signs of her appetite or hunger. She writes, “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” (12). For feminist scholars, women-authored recipes provide new opportunities to discuss how women engaged with their food, providing a means of ingress to the “presumably empty plates” that interest critics like Michie (12).

This is not to say that nineteenth-century critics have not studied food and Victorian cookbooks, but that this research has been limited. Much criticism exists on Isabella Beeton’s bestseller *Household Management*—notably, work by Margaret Beetham, Nicola Humble, Susan Zlotnick, and Katherine Hughes—but there has only been one full book-length study (to my knowledge) on women’s recipes as literary prose. Janet Theophano’s *Eat My Words* (2003) deals primarily with rare archival samples of women’s food writings during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. From community cookbooks to manuscript recipe books, Theophano aims to recover “accounts of women’s lives” in the “previously undiscovered stories” of women’s manuscript recipes (6). Theophano does not, however, consider women’s recipes for the significance of their revolutionary style or their contribution to a new genre of women’s prose, nor does she consider how they intersect with ideas of female authorship during the nineteenth century (2-3). One rare exception to the dismissal of the Victorian cookbook as
literature is Susan Zlotnick’s article for the Branch Collective Online in which she compares *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* to “the literary form most closely associated with nineteenth-century England: the realist novel. Both *The Book of Household Management* and the great realist novels of the period focus on the ordinary and present an image of life rooted in the home, the family, and the affections.”

**Revising Misconceptions about Victorian Food and Cooking**

The debated status of recipe writing within Victorian studies stems, in part, from misconceptions about British cooking as a culinary tradition lacking both flavor and life. In *Inventing the Victorians*, Matthew Sweet argues that “liberated Moderns” are inclined to perceive cooking in the Victorian Age as unimaginative, boring, and insular. “Stodginess,” writes Sweet, “is one of the adjectives most commonly applied to the Victorians,” men and women, who, supposedly, “consumed unfeasible amounts of cabinet pudding, spotted dick, Pumblechookian pie and other lard-filled confections” (105-6). While Laura Shapiro has shown that many women did painstakingly blanch unlikely foods and prepare recipes for “White Sauce,” this tradition was primarily twentieth-century American and developed as part of the fin-de-siècle’s domestic science movement (91). The phrase “lard-filled confections” hardly covers what real Victorian cooking looked like, nor does it describe the kinds of recipes women wrote when preparing meals for their families.

Indeed, British cooking’s lack of culinary imagination is one of the greatest myths we still hold about the Victorian Age. *Real* Victorian cooking was hardly ever boring, but exciting and experimental. We can see this in the range of foods offered by any number of Victorian cookbooks, many of which feature recipes for spicy curries and vegetarian pie. Any randomly
selected recipe from one of the authors in this study—Eliza Acton, Isabella Beeton, or Elizabeth Robins Pennell—illustrates the prosaic qualities of Victorian women’s recipes in a substantial way. “Panada” (fig. 7), for example, shows a vegetarian bread soup recipe written by Eliza Acton in 1845. Although it is textually dense, the recipe is also delightfully descriptive:

![Recipe for “Panada,” Modern Cookery by Eliza Acton (1845).](image)

Not only does Acton’s language evoke a conversation—the rendered juice is “peculiarly delicate” and “superfluous,” the broth is “good,” the fire is “gentle,” the paste is “very dry . . . and adheres in a mass to the spoon”—but it also makes the living process of cooking Panada a tangible experience through expressive adjectives and personal notes. According to Humble, Acton’s “elegant prose” was what “elevated the culinary activities [she] described to the status of an art form” (CP 12). Indeed, it is because of this “elegant prose” that Victorian foods leave long-lasting impressions. According to Simon R. Charsley, despite the ephemeral nature of food and cooking, “food objects in European traditions are more accessible to long-term study than most” because of the language writers use to describe them (32).

Turning back to Soyer’s 1849 work, The Modern Housewife, we see a similar love of sumptuous eating and artful prose in Mrs. B.’s elaborate recipes for Iced Orange Soufflé, Neapolitan Fondue, and St. James’s Cake, a “monster cake . . . no less than four feet in height,
three wide, and most beautifully ornamented with all kinds of bon-bons, small-fruits, pistaches, &c.”

Lavishly executed, Mrs. B.’s recipe features myriad ingredients that add to the cake’s extraordinary weight and size. Although technically a recipe, Mrs. B.’s description of “St. James’s Cake” reads more like a review of a theatrical production than a set of baking instructions. Named after “the liberal and indefatigable manager of the St. James’s Theatre, Mr. Mitchell,” the cake’s recipe is meant to entertain and instruct readers simultaneously, if not to excite them into testing the recipe for themselves (395). “Not to tantalize your womanly curiosity,” writes Mrs. B. in her recipe’s adjoined letter, but “I shall, without delay, tell you that it [the cake] was a juvenile entertainment . . . [a] terpiscolyridramacomical festivity,” which brings to life her previously “ephemeral idea” (395). While a cake is ephemeral by nature, the lively prose of its recipe ensures a special kind of permanency within the cookbook’s pages. Of course, “Mrs. B.” is Soyer’s fictional manifestation of the Victorian housewife (not a real housewife), but her recipes nevertheless represent the imaginary nature of household cooking and the creative potential of women’s recipe writings.

From here, we can imagine Victorian cooking as a vast network that regularly adopted new foods and culinary trends from different parts of the Empire and rarely eliminated old recipes. Isabella Beeton offers such a catalogue in *Household Management*, a cookbook that has long been considered the bastion of Victorian cooking. While the majority of Beeton’s recipes promote domestic economy through the use leftovers, many appeal to readers’ imaginations, as “Mrs. B.” does with her recipe or St. James’s Cake, by describing exotic ingredients and the dining habits of guests at elaborate soirées. Sixteen ornate colored plates divide the book’s chapters, featuring silver salvers overflowing with exotic foods from land and sea (fig. 8). In her chapter “Dinners and Dining,” Beeton offers bills of fare for lavish dinners of 18 guests or more,
advising readers to dress “12 fine black truffles” with champagne, but only after “cut[ting] off the head” of a 300-pound Jamaican sea turtle before boiling its meat for soup (368-9, 254, and 90). These are “fantasy recipes,” writes Humble, dishes “not to be cooked but to be drooled over” as well as “talismans of the pleasures that await [readers] at the top of the social tree” (CP 17 and “Intro” to HM xxii).

For those dining at the top of Victorian England’s “social tree,” food and cooking were executed in especially brocaded terms. We owe the modern-day bridal cake with its tiered layers, thick frosting, and lifelike cake topper to Victorian innovation. According to Simon R. Charsley, the wedding cake’s history is directly linked to one specific instance when royal bakers prepared the bride’s cake for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert’s 1840 wedding (83). Historically, the recipe for bridal cake evolved little over the nineteenth century and most often consisted of “plum” (or “plumb”) bride cake. And it is no wonder: apart from the enormity of the Royal Wedding Cake (fig. 9) that Charles Hindley describes below, the Royal Cake was covered extensively by writers of the periodical press with some reviewers reporting that “the bride’s pie was so essential . . . that there was no prospect of happiness without it” (qtd. in Charsley 48). Of this cake Hindley writes,

On the top was a device of Britannia blessing the bride and bridegroom, who are dressed, somewhat incongruously, in the costume of ancient Rome. At the foot of the bridegroom was the figure of a dog, intended to denote fidelity; at the feet of the Queen a pair of turtle doves. A host of gamboling Cupids, one of them registering the marriage in a book, and bouquets of white flowers tied with true-lovers’ knots, completed the decoration. (354)

According to Emily Allen, such “regal confections . . . celebrated a dream wedding between matter and ideology,” noting that “as food became an important symbolic arena of social standing, it became increasingly ornamental—and vertical” (459-60). As a result, chefs turned to
Figure 8: Illustrated Plate, “Modern Mode of Serving Dishes” from *The Book of Household Management* by Isabella Beeton (1860).
classical architecture and statuary for inspiration. Tiered and dense, the Royal Cake both constructs and depicts Victoria and Albert’s union in classical terms. Visually, the cake’s grandeur and scale represent how recipes could be used to construct historical moments in architectural and Hellenistic ways, imagining Queen Victoria’s reign as both the incarnation of the ancient world and the apotheosis of the modern one.

Imaginative desserts did not end with Victoria’s wedding, and by 1891, Beeton’s book continued to show its readers how large a cake recipe could actually be. In figure 10, “Recipes for Making Ices and Confectionaries” opens with beautiful illustrations of Venetian villas and a Swiss chalet, romantic buildings, which, as Donald Bassett notes, “turn out to be cakes” (76).
2361.—NOUILLES PASTE.
(For Timbales and Ornaments.)

Ingredients.—½ lb. of flour, ¼ oz. of butter, a saltspoonful of salt, 2 yolks of eggs, 1 whole egg.

Mode.—Put the flour on the board, make a hole in the centre, put in the yolks of eggs, butter and salt, and add as many whole eggs as are needed to make a smooth stiff paste. Probably not more than 1 egg will be needed, but different flours absorb different quantities of moisture.

2362.—SWEET PASTE. (Fr.—Pâte d’Office.)

Ingredients.—2 lbs. of flour, 1 lb. of pounded sugar, 1 pint of water.

Mode.—Melt the sugar in the water over the fire, put the flour on the board, making a hole in the centre; pour in the syrup, and work into a smooth paste.

2363.—SPINACH GREEN.

Mode.—Pound some spinach in a mortar, press it through a coarse cloth into a pan, and boil for a few minutes, stirring the while; drain on a sieve, and squeeze out as much of the juice as possible, then rub the pulp through a sieve.

2364.—VENETIAN VILLA.

This illustrates most of the processes that are necessary for the construction of all ornamental stands, and for it most of the materials made for this purpose are required.

The plans for this, showing the different parts, are all drawn to scale, so that having determined the size of the model, which might be four, six, or eight times as large as it is represented, it will be easy to enlarge each section to the desired size.

2365. THE FOUNDATION (Illustration No. 2).—The first part to be made is the rockwork or pathway upon which the villa stands. This is composed of pâte d’office, No. 2362. It is cut in two rounds, the upper one...
Overview

My aim in this project, then, has been to offer readers a sample of the breadth of women’s recipe writings published during the mid-to-late nineteenth century and to suggest some of the ways in which these works may be read. Although recipes are most often defined by their didactic purposes for guiding readers through cooking instructions, I argue that the Victorian recipe was far more complex, permitting women writers a platform to comment on social, nutritional, and educational reform, develop and sustain large communities of middle-class women readers, and elevate the topic of food and cooking to the status of fine art. Additionally, I argue that these three distinct—yet overlapping—approaches to the Victorian recipe provide scholars with a revisionary model of nineteenth-century female authorship as it related to food. For many women, recipe writing not only helped to validate traditionally unseen women’s work, but it also aided in creating a distinct prose art form that could be easily revised and adapted.

In the chapters that follow, I use a chronological method, focusing on recipe books women published between 1845 and 1910. I have shown that during these years the modern recipe’s primary characteristics were first introduced by Eliza Acton in her 1845 cookbook, *Modern Cookery in All Its Branches*, and later popularized by Isabella Beeton in her 1861 work, *Household Management*. I end with a discussion of Elizabeth Robins Pennell’s 1896 volume, *The Feasts of Autolycus: The Diary of a Greedy Woman*, a work that helped to develop “food writing” separately from recipe writing.

Chapter Two of this dissertation begins by introducing lesser-known writer Eliza Acton and the formative role her work played in stylizing the Victorian recipe and middle-class cookbook. Printed in 1845, Eliza Acton’s *Modern Cookery in All Its Branches* was published by
Thomas Longman, a man who famously suggested that rather than a volume of poetry, Acton sell him “a cookbook instead.” Victorian scholars such as G. M. Young have often found this anecdote highly amusing, dismissing Modern Cookery as little more than an important footnote in the history of more fashionable publications by Isabella Beeton and Alexis Soyer. By examining the first and second editions of Modern Cookery (1845 and 1860), I argue that Acton’s revolutionary style and novel features—namely, listing a recipe’s ingredients, quantities, and cooking time separately from its mode—not only established the scaffolding by which writers would later structure their own recipes, but also created an opportunity in which domestic women’s work could be systematized and validated. For Acton, Modern Cookery’s dietary platform became a way in which to intervene in social and political debates. As a result, many of Acton’s recipes provide commentary on and solutions for England’s nutrition and food debates at the mid-century. I show that Acton’s cookbook establishes the “domesticated idea” Alexis Soyer attempts to capture in his own cookbooks: recipes written by useful advisors that, unlike their predecessors, were easy to read, use, and share with other women.

While Chapter Two investigates one of the most important milestones in the emergence of the nineteenth-century cookbook, Chapter Three examines the most famous. Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management (fig. 21) was edited (rather than written) by Isabella Beeton in 1861 and published by her husband Samuel Orchart Beeton. An instant success, Household Management sold 60,000 copies in its first year and upwards of two million copies by the end of the decade. Of all the cookbooks published during the Victorian era, Household Management remains the only one to have never been out of print. Filled with thousands of recipes and painted colored plates, Household Management is characterized by a curatorial tone with the intent of (re)defining the cookbook as a communal enterprise. As such, the cookbook’s author is
radically repositioned, moving away from the authorial status Acton struggles to achieve in *Modern Cookery* to the editorial status Beeton triumphantly reimagines in *Household Management*. Chapter Three explores the ways Beeton envisioned, developed, and sustained a large community of middle-class women readers from her earliest work corresponding with subscribers of *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* to her concise style for editing reader-submitted recipes in later years. I argue that *Household Management* provides a rare opportunity to look at the ways editors responded to large readerships, capitalizing on an imagined community of women that extending far beyond the magazine’s 60,000 subscribers. Offering solutions for every domestic challenge from teething babies to Bundt cake, *Household Management* is in dialogue with its readers, crafting recipes and guidance around readers’ anticipated needs.

My final chapter traces the Victorian recipe’s transformation at the end of the nineteenth century, exploring how American journalist Elizabeth Robins Pennell appropriated British recipe writing for art criticism. Rather than weigh readers down with cooking instructions, measurements, and timetables, Pennell used the recipe as a creative aid, invoking the language of aestheticism to recipe writing, and consequently, raising the status of food and cooking to fine art. Part of this process involves questions of taste, in which Pennell advocates for recipes that are transcendent and feed the body as well as the mind. I argue that Pennell’s sense of the meaning of food can be seen in her gustatory appetite. Spring’s “rosy radish,” for example, has a vibrant hue with its “virginal,” “pure,” “tender,” and “sweet yet peppery” skin (19); this vocabulary associates Pennell’s recipes with one of aesthetic culture’s favorite “organ[s] of taste,” the tongue. According to Denise Gigante, the tongue “was commonly considered the organ of taste, was housed in the head,” extending to the body’s digestive tracts (11). While Beeton
rarely uses the word “taste”—in fact, she prefers the word “elegant”—Pennell employs notions of “taste” by stressing the strong flavors, colors, and textures of food, a technique that distinguishes her work from the recipes of Acton and Beeton. Additionally, we get a sense of the ways the Victorian recipe shifts during the *fin-de-siècle* in how Pennell uses travel narratives in *Feasts*: movement, it would seem, allows Pennell to traverse the boundaries of art criticism and recipe writing, bringing the recipe into the modern age.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I discuss the tradition of women’s recipe writing that persists today in digital and print forms. I return to questions of authorship and ethics Signe Rousseau describes in “Food Not For Sharing,” considering the “re-creation, adaptation, and inspiration” of contemporary recipe writing today (17). Contemporary examples of British women recipe writers include Nigella Lawson and Sophie Dahl who regularly look back at the history of Victorian women and continue this tradition.

But why and how Victorian women composed, shared, and stylized their recipes coalesced into a complicated relationship. In the pages that follow, I have focused on one particular manifestation of that relationship, the recipe’s generative effects. This effect explains why women pursued, shared, and composed recipes, appropriating the medium for their own purposes. I argue that because recipes are an instructional form of prose that creates something the reader may eat and regard as delicious (especially if made correctly), it is the recipe’s very nature to engender its readers as creators. This is not to say that a recipe is a living thing, but that the testing and eating from a recipe’s instructions are a living process. In it, a life cycle exists that separates the recipe from other forms of prose. After the initial stages of reading, testing, eating, sharing, and improving upon a recipe, writers respond to new contexts: they share
again, revise again, and continue this cycle. All recipes exist, essentially, in a complex system of collaboration. By inviting us to read and eat, they also invite us to alter.

Notes
1 For bibliographies on Victorian household manuals, see Elizabeth Driver’s A Bibliography of Cookery Books Published in Britain, 1875-1914 and Dena Attar’s A Bibliography of Household Books Published in Britain 1800-1914.
2 For an idea of the wide-reaching influence of Alexis Soyer’s inventions such as “Soyer’s Magic Stove,” “Soyer’s Extract,” and “Soyer’s Nectar,” see Paul Thomas Murphy’s article “Culinary Utilitarian” (171-207) and April Bullock’s “Alexis Soyer’s Gastronomic Symposium of All Nations” (50-59).
3 Soyer stood foursquare as Britain’s preeminent culinary authority. See Katherine Hughes (210-12), Murphy (171-207), and Helen Day “A Common Complaint” (507-30) for more information about his national celebrity and philanthropic projects.
4 The female personification of Great Britain, “Britannia,” dates from Roman Britain. Traditionally depicted in plate armor, helmet, staff, and shield, Britannia invokes images of armored Athena.
5 It is important to note that The Modern Housewife, or Ménagère was originally published and sold as Alexis Soyer’s work, but that the volume’s narration is presented from the perspective of Soyer’s fictional persona, “Mrs. B.,” making it easy to forget that the work is written by a man and Mrs. B. isn’t real.
6 See Eliot (63-4); in nineteenth-century usage, a “grilled bone” signified reheating a cut of meat—typically from the previous meal or night before—and eating it as leftovers. Also, see Helena Michie’s chapter “Ladylike Anorexia: Hunger, Sexuality, and Etiquette in the Nineteenth Century” (12-29) for more information on the depiction of heroines’ eating habits in Victorian literature.
7 See Kay Boardman’s article “The Ideology of Domesticity in Women’s Magazines” (150-64) and Elizabeth Langland’s Nobody’s Angels for useful discussions of domestic women’s work and the ideology of the household manager.
8 Perhaps one of the greatest misconceptions about Victorian women recipe readers and writers is the idea that because they were middle-class, they did not cook. In a recent exchange between members of the Victoria’s List Serv, I received over twenty emails from scholars interested in scenes of women reading and writing recipes in Victorian fiction. Many listed Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford (which I discuss in Chapter Three), William Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, Wilkie Collins’s No Name, and the cucumber sandwiches scene in Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. One subscriber, however, proposed the idea that these scenes would be readily available since “British women didn’t cook.” See archives for Feb. 2014.
9 See Kathleen Tillotson (330) in The Letters of Charles Dickens (volume 4, 1844-1846). I am indebted to Tillotson’s research on “Eliza Acton and Martin Chuzzlewit” in her 1979 article for The Dickensian (143-44). See Chapter Two for my expansion on this article. Also see Appendix I: Letters for the full transcription of Dickens’s letter to Eliza Acton.
10 See Susan Rossi-Wilcox’s Dinner for Dickens: The Culinary History of Mrs. Charles Dickens’s Menu Books offers some examples of the ways Catherine borrowed recipes from cookbook authors. Eliza Acton was a particular influence and is copied directly (93-100).
Nayder’s description of Catherine’s “powers of description” refer to a letter between Catherine and Fanny Burnett, 30 January 1842. See footnote 11 on page 9 or a reprint of the letter in Frederic G. Kitton’s *Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil* (London: Frank T. Sabin, 1890, page 39).


13 Feelings of exclusion appear in the writings of Catherine Dickens, Eliza Acton, Isabella Beeton, and Elizabeth Robins Pennell. For a fascinating example of Acton’s narrative, see her manuscript poem “The Reception” in which she signs the work as a “looker-on” (Hardy 51-4). For Beeton, see Chapter 3; for Pennell, see Schaffer (“Importance” 108) and Pennell (*Nights* 172).

14 See Daly and Forman’s special issue “Food and the Victorian” (36.2 (2008)) for *VLC*. Articles include Lana Dalley, Tara Moore, Paul Young, and Helen Day.

15 Some readers may not be familiar with these iconic dishes. For detailed descriptions of cabinet pudding (recipe #1257) and spotted dick, see Beeton chapter on “Puddings and Pastries” (257-81). “Pumblechookian Pie,” however, is a reference to Dickens. See *Great Expectations* for references to “Pumblechook’s Pie” (42).

16 See Attar’s “Subject Index: Cookery: domestic economy: general, receipts” (397-98) and Lizzie Cunningham’s chapter “Chicken Tikka Masala: The Quest for an Authentic Indian Meal” (1-12).

17 See Soyer’s *Modern Housewife* for references mentioned (366, 370, and 395).

18 For more information on the recipes used for bride’s cake, its traditions, and ingredients, see Charsley (35-50), Beeton (339-40 and 608), Soyer (394), and Acton (357-68).

19 See Chapter Two for more on debates about Acton’s publishing career and contexts.

20 Ibid..

21 Ibid. and Humble (“Introduction” to *HM* viii).

22 For more information on the physiology of aesthetic taste, see Denise Gigante’s excellent overview of aesthetic gustatory appetite and the physical body in *Taste: A Literary History* (10-16).

23 See Margaret Beetham’s article “Good Taste and Sweet Ordering” (391) for more information about Beeton’s definition of taste and civilized dining.

24 My methodology favors action and reaction, building upon a Bloomian premise that Victorian women’s recipes make up their own literary history. While I anticipate that some readers may find this approach “outdated” or “limiting,” I argue that this general structure is essential to framing how Victorian women read and wrote recipes. Recipes are their own literary tradition/canon that was influenced by matriarchal figures who later adapted by new generations. Because recipes exist with the distinct purpose of “re-creation, adaptation, and inspiration,” as Signe Rousseau observes, then action and reaction are essential to my claim (17). Also see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “Preface” to *The Madwoman in the Attic* for an idea of how feminist criticism has (and will) continue to use this critical approach (xi-xiv).
CHAPTER TWO
THE POET: MODERN COOKERY IN ALL ITS BRANCHES BY ELIZA ACTON
(LONDON: LONGMAN, 1845)

MODERN COOKERY,

IN ALL ITS BRANCHES:

REduced to

A SYSTEM OF EASY PRACTICE,

FOR THE USE OF PRIVATE FAMILIES.

IN A SERIES OF RECEIPTS, WHICH HAVE BEEN STRICTLY TESTED, AND
ARE GIVEN WITH THE MOST MINUTE EXACTNESS.

BY ELIZA ACTON.

ILLUSTRATED WITH NUMEROUS WOODCUTS.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED

DIRECTIONS FOR CARVING, GARNISHING, AND SETTING OUT THE TABLE;

WITH A

TABLE OF WEIGHTS AND MEASURES;

THE WHOLE REVISED AND PREPARED

FOR AMERICAN HOUSEKEEPERS,

BY MRS. S. J. HALE.

FROM THE SECOND LONDON EDITION.

PHILADELPHIA:
LEA AND BLANCHARD.
1845.

Fig. 11: Frontispiece, Modern Cookery in All Its Branches by Eliza Acton (London: Longman & Co., 1845).
[Eliza Acton, Poet:] “Give me the subject of a book for which the world has a need and I will write it for you. I am a poet but I shall write no more poems. The world does not need poems.”

[Thomas Longman, Publisher:] “Well Miss Acton, we want a really good cookery book, and if you write me a really good one, I shall be happy to publish it for you.” (qtd. in Young 125)

In 1845, publisher Thomas Longman printed 5,000 copies of *Modern Cookery in All Its Branches* by relatively unknown journalist, food writer, and poet, Eliza Acton. Although not the most famous cookbook of the Victorian era, Acton’s *Modern Cookery* was an instant success, reprinted five times in two years and immediately revised for American audiences. Since relatively little is known about Acton’s career before *Modern Cookery*’s publication, the above story has become as famous as the book itself, frequently cited as the one-sentence back-story Victorian food scholars find most amusing. Some critics seem to take pleasure in pointing out that Acton’s verse “was little wanted” (Young 125), or that Longman was “half-joking” when commissioning the work (Humble, “Intro” to *HM* xiv). In these renderings, Acton is reduced to the cowering poet incapable of competing in a saturated publishing market and possibly driven by financial incentives. This image is a familiar one, in which the female artist is forced to put down her brush and get to real work. Yet these iterations only tell part of the story behind *Modern Cookery*’s publication and are most often proliferated by scholars wishing to cite the source material Isabella Beeton referenced and plagiarized when editing her own cookbook, *Household Management* in 1861. Generally, scholars have shown little interest in Acton’s prose despite Elizabeth David’s declaration that *Modern Cookery* is the “greatest cookery book in our language” (qtd. in Ray xxvii). As I will argue here, *Modern Cookery* is, indeed, one of the “greatest cookery books” in our language for the same reasons scholars such as David cite—Acton’s novel organization and style. But, perhaps more importantly, Acton also fulfills this role.
because of how she uses household recipes as a platform to discuss larger social issues, ranging from women’s access to practical domestic skills like cooking to the power of proper food preparation and good nutrition for the English home and nation.\(^5\)

Yet part of the critical tradition around Eliza Acton’s writings requires some amending. At the time of her correspondence with Longman, Acton had already published 1,000 copies of her collection *Poems* (1826) through subscription, several of her subscribers later being Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters according to her biographer for the *Encyclopedia of British Women Writers* (“Eliza Acton”). In fact, recent scholarship has revealed that Anne Brontë’s pen name, “Acton Bell,” was most likely a tribute to Eliza Acton’s unique “combination of poetry and domesticity” (Thormahlen). Notably, Brontë’s poetry exhibits stylistic and thematic similarities with Acton’s earlier work as well as her use of meter. What some critics have referred to as Acton’s “lost years” appear to be quite productive.\(^6\) In the years following her publication of *Poems*, Acton personally presented Queen Adelaide with her work, *The Voice of the North* (1842), commemorating Queen Victoria’s first visit to Scotland (“Eliza Acton”), published two editions of an earlier cookbook, *Modern Confectionary* (1826 and 1833), and contributed to the *Sudbury Pocket Book*. After the popularity of *Modern Cookery*, Acton went on to write for *The Ladies’ Companion* as their official cookery correspondent as well as Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*, although she published anonymously (Freeman 160). Not only does it appear that Acton’s verse was wanted, but that its demand surpassed multiple publishing markets and genres. While space limits me from offering a more detailed analysis of the specific links between Acton’s poetry and her recipe writing, I would like to note that both show more than thematic overlaps, such as domesticity, women’s relationships, and the value of feminine art, but also stylistic overlaps as well. Acton’s recipes often draw on her background as a poet,
creating an intertextual relationship that becomes quite appropriate for how she discusses aspects of Victorian food. In fact, I would hazard that Acton’s early career writing poetry that her peers labeled, “Byronic” and “Sapphic,” makes her an especially fit mother of the household receipt, as we will later see with her use of a hybrid genre I have termed, “recipe poems.” But Victorian scholarship rarely notes that Acton’s writing career spanned several generations and publishing mediums, nor does it acknowledge the real range of her influence. Forever pigeon-holed as the 150-recipe source Isabella Beeton borrowed from so unabashedly in *Household Management*—in fact, biographer Sheila Hardy has come to call her the “real Mrs. Beeton” (10)—Acton and her prose prove not only to be remarkably influential to many mid-century British women writers, but also creative and original.

Victorian scholarship’s problematic treatment of Acton’s work stems, in part, from her role as a literary footnote, often proliferated by the critical obligation to position *Modern Cookery* as the root of both the nineteenth-century recipe and the middle-class cookbook. As we see in Elizabeth Driver’s definitive work, *A Bibliography of Cookery Books Published in Britain, 1875-1914*, identifying the origins of the Victorian recipe is an important step when evaluating the history of the cookbook. However, such steps require that we read against the grain of recipes and cookery texts, analyzing more than just their niche as vegetarian, invalid, or haute cuisine, but also the critical choices cookbook authors made in their style, prose, and structure. Like many scholars, Driver traces the inception of the recipe’s organizing principles to Eliza Acton, but treats the author as an originator, or historical footnote, not as a creator whose intellectual property merits value. Driver thus confuses Acton’s 1845 cookbook with a more popular volume published some fifteen years later by S. O. Beeton (*Household Management*, 1861). Driver notes,
the major innovations in modern cookery writing and undoubtedly the most influential works of the century belong to the period before 1875, namely, Eliza Acton’s method of laying out recipes in her *Modern Cookery* (1845), with an ingredients list followed by instructions, quantities made and time required to execute. (18)

Initially, it appears that Driver gives Acton significant credit, describing how her 1845 recipes established the formatting rules of the period’s first cookbooks. But, Driver cites incorrectly. Acton lists ingredients after the instructions—Beeton would be the first to place them at the front of the recipe almost two decades later. Equally as important (but unmentioned), Acton also introduces a method of writing that would have been clearly accessible to literate members of the working classes as well as her targeted audience, the rapidly growing and aspiring middle class.

Driver, like most Victorian food historians, understands that Acton impacted how food was both written and documented for private domestic use during the nineteenth century. However, she fails to provide an explanation for why this shift might actually be important for Victorian readers, how it responded to important domestic and culinary needs, and what ways it intervened in social and educational debates. Instead, Driver’s bibliography, while a definitive resource for the history of the British cookbook, muddles *Modern Cookery*’s principle features with a plagiarized version of Eliza Acton’s original text, Isabella Beeton’s *Household Management*.

Yet Driver’s error isn’t unique to food scholarship for this period, possibly arising from the limited criticism that does exist on Acton’s work. Seldom, if ever, do critics closely analyze Acton’s prose itself, but instead look to more stylish offspring such as *Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1861), *Mrs. A. B. Marshall’s Cookery Book* (1888), or French chef Alexis Soyer’s *Modern Housewife, or Ménagère* (1849). Such omissions pose a particular critical irony, as Acton’s *Modern Cookery* simultaneously created the genre of the middle-class cookbook and identified the market that would make these publications possible. According to Nicola Humble, these omissions emerge due to Acton’s waning popularity and publishing
exposure by the 1860s: “Acton,” Humble explains, was the “Elizabeth David of her day, while the reassuringly plodding Beeton was the Delia Smith—less stylish, but reaching a far wider range of the population” (“Introduction” to HM xv). The distinction between “originator” and “popularizer” is an important one to consider as we examine what, exactly, Acton created, and how this creation greatly impacted more than just the way Victorian women came to stylize their food writings, but also how they thought about food and appropriated its usages during the last half of the nineteenth century.

This chapter rejects the notion that Eliza Acton is a literary footnote. In my reading of Modern Cookery, I position Acton at the center of what would become a booming market for the Victorian cookbook, aiming to understand Acton’s role as a creator of the nineteenth-century recipe and the symbolic mother figure of a novel genre of Victorian women’s prose. Part of my analysis examines Acton’s unexpected “motherhood” following the publication of Modern Cookery, and how more famous writers later appropriated and eclipsed her peerless writings’ style and content. In doing so, I consider how Acton simultaneously addresses her large readership beginning with the middle-class housewife and continuing with notes to the working-class laborers her household employed. Acton thus provides the “good cookery book” Longman commissioned while also offering thoughtful commentary on social and educational reform. To this end, I further argue that Acton was the first of her generation of women’s cookbook writers to treat household recipes as possible solutions to England’s national food debates, although she is rarely linked to the social change her work advocated. While Modern Cookery has traditionally been read as the Victorian Era’s first cookbook for the middle-classes, I argue that an interest in the national diet and culinary education are just some of the ways Acton meets the needs of a much larger readership, enabling her to define the necessary parameters for effective
recipe writing that would later be appropriated by “Mrs. Beeton,” the infamous cookbook author, whose relationship to Acton (and Acton’s writings) I discuss at length in Chapter Three. I support my claim by questioning Acton’s style, content, structure, and voice throughout *Modern Cookery*’s first and second editions. During a time in which Acton has become synonymous with the Victorian recipe, these questions enable us to read her cookbook in new ways.

*Modern Cookery in Context: Social and Educational Reform in the “Hungry Forties”*

The year 1845 saw the publication of the first cookbook for middle-class women readers, a date that marks both the beginning of the Irish Potato Famine (1844) and the repeal of the Corn Laws (1846). If we are to understand Acton’s choice of recipes and her approach to recipe writing, we must consider the influence such factors may have had on early cookbook authors like Acton. Moreover, it is important to recognize that when Thomas Longman commissioned Acton’s *Modern Cookery*, he was writing during a time at which Britain’s national diet was undergoing radical transformations. Issues of hunger and starvation captivated British readers as magazines such as *The Illustrated London News, Punch*, and *The Pictorial Times* reported on the realities of malnutrition amongst the working classes, homeless, and poor. According to Charlotte Boyce, the scholarly tradition to refer to this decade as “the hungry forties” was not unwarranted by early twentieth-century historians due to the number of overwhelming economic, agricultural, social, and political factors that contributed to widespread hunger. The 1840s, she writes, has come to acquire a special connection with “hunger” in historical discourse, column upon column of newsprint was dedicated to the topic, as a catalogue of contributory factors—bad harvest; prolonged economic depression; protectionist policies, such as the notorious Corn Laws; an austere Poor Law (dubbed the “Starvation Act” by its opponents); and, from 1845, a catastrophic famine in Ireland—combined to politicise questions of access and entitlement to food. Given this context, it is hardly surprising to
find that hunger figured as an insistent, though contentious, issue within early Victorian print culture, generating a mass of commentary and debate. (421)

Although Boyce’s research is primarily concerned with the politics of hunger and starvation as it was represented in the periodical press, she makes an apt starting point for two reasons. First, her “catalogue of contributory factors” gives us a sense of the pervasiveness of hunger narratives in mid-century print media. Second, this pervasiveness suggests how writers interested in nutritional reform would not only have been attuned to the realities of widespread hunger, but also motivated to provide practical solutions. According to Linda H. Peterson, one of the most pressing concerns for female authors writing during the mid-nineteenth century was “what kind of service the woman author renders and how the public understands that service” (44). With its thoughtful style and accessible prose, Acton’s *Modern Cookery* is dedicated to providing a special kind of public service for readers with the hope of nutritional and educational reform.

While I cannot attribute direct causality from one specific context to Eliza Acton’s decision to write *Modern Cookery*, I want to establish the idea that her recipes openly identify and participate in national hunger debates and how this participation helps to explain her systematic method for writing about food and providing cooking instructions. In the “Preface” to the first edition of *Modern Cookery* (1845), for instance, Acton opens with the claim that the “proper and wholesome preparation of our daily food” is England’s most powerful resource. She continues, “though it [cooking] may hold in the estimation of the world but a very humble place among the useful arts of life, can scarcely be considered an altogether unimportant one, involving so entirely, as it does, both health and comfort” (xix). Acton explores the degree to which “health” and “comfort” have become national issues for several pages, tracing how “modern cookery” has failed to keep up with rapid industrialization and shifting attitudes about English food. According to Sheila M. Hardy, Acton’s 1845 “Preface” was “designed to sell her
book” with the hope that “well-prepared nutritious meals would be the order of the day, and the nation’s health would generally improve” (159).

To aid in solving widespread hunger, Acton begins by questioning how household managers fail to provide enough “comfort” in the form of “good” nutrition, for their families. Acton wonders, if “England is, beyond most other countries, rich in the varied and abundant produce of its soil, or of its commerce, which in turn supply to it all the necessities or the luxury of its people can demand,” then why has English cookery “remained far inferior to that of nations much less advanced[?]” (xix, original emphasis). To be English is to have all of the advantages of progress and a booming post-agrarian society, but cooking, apparently, has not been part of these advancements. According to Acton, both proper food preparation and good nutrition demand that English cooking keep up with English innovation, as even the “small interests of society” possess great social and national power (xix).

The first cookbook published for middle-class women readers, *Modern Cookery* does not open with recipes for beer or bread, nor does it open with a systematic account of proper place settings, but a clearly articulated social consciousness about food’s integral role in the Victorian home, and thus, the British nation. As I will discuss in the following pages, Acton’s philosophy responds to timely discussions about available foods and proper food preparation that predominated these debates. In doing so, Acton sheds light on the many ways in which readers “starve,” beginning first with the ineptitude of many (if not most) English housewives and domestic laborers (in particular, cooks) and concluding with a survey of popular attitudes about “modern cookery’s” failure to properly feed British citizens (xix).

As a recipe book aimed at combating waste and hunger, *Modern Cookery* begins with recipes that are easy to follow and reliably written. According to Natalie Kapetanios Meir,
household manuals published before the nineteenth century were frequently distinguished by their omissions and “vacancies,” whereas nineteenth-century manuals were defined, alternatively, by their increased textual detail and prescriptive structure (135). Perhaps this is why Acton writes that her recipes “may be perfectly depended on . . . [by] any class of learners” (xxi), a phrase that suggests the wide range of her cookbook’s potential readership. Not only does the word “class” refer to the course or level of a reader’s education, but it also refers to his/her socio-economic status as well. Unlike Isabella Beeton or Elizabeth Robins Pennell, Eliza Acton belongs to what Dinah Birch calls a “generation of school mistresses” (79), having operated a boarding school for young ladies in Claydon, a village near Ipswich, during her “lost years.”

Indeed, Acton’s final words in *Modern Cookery* are entirely educational, instructing all readers that they should

> last, though, *not least*, be teachable: be always desirous to learn—never be ashamed to ask for information, lest you should appear to be ignorant; for be assured, the most ignorant are too frequently the most self-opinionated and most conceited; while those who are really well informed, think humbly of themselves, and regret that they know so little. (406, original emphasis)

That Acton writes recipes that can be reliably used by any class, or “classes” remains the keystone of her recipe writing philosophy.

Because of Acton’s unique understanding of domestic cookery relationship to England’s education debates, the phrase “modern cookery” becomes a springboard for other national issues. Of these, Acton advocates that readers increase their awareness over how mothers privately feed their families, and what constitutes “good” English taste, female “refinement,” and women’s limited access to useful culinary knowledge (ix-xxii). Ultimately, Acton treats national issues as significantly private, domestic ones with a larger call to action for her readers: if citizens wish to
remedy many of the problems risking their own “health” and “comfort,” then they merely need to turn their attentions to how food is prepared in the domestic sphere, primarily, their own.¹⁵

At the heart of Acton’s dietary platform was the question of proper food preparation and to what extent mothers, wives, and household cooks were able to prepare nutritious foods at home. Since the majority of citizens’ nutrition came from meals prepared at home,¹⁶ periodical commentators often debated the qualifications of English housewives and cooks. Articles engaged a wide range of perspectives, including exaggerated satires for “help-wanted” ads printed in The Examiner (“Wanted, A Good Plain Cook”) and Sharpe’s London Magazine, (“Why Don’t Ladies Learn to Cook?”) to advice columns in The London Journal such as, “How to Cook a Potatoe,” in which one writer asks readers to “stop” what they’re doing so she may, very seriously, “immortalize my old mother’s receipt” (note: the “immortalized” recipe is about fifty words long and contains no clear organization or structure) (166). In each, writers point fingers between the household staff and the ladies’ of the house, complaining that if finding “a cook who can roast a leg of mutton, and make batter-pudding or pea soup” is so hard, then “Why not try a little cooking?” (“Why Don’t Ladies Learn to Cook?” 45). In many cases, writers express significant concerns that their families are eating unsuitably, growing sick, and experiencing “impaired digestion” because of this domestic epidemic. This, according to one columnist for Household Words, was not the result of “over-eating”—what the author claims to be the most common and false accusation made of English eating habits—but an ailment directly caused by poor food preparation. He writes, “[t]he true difference between English and foreign cookery is just this: in preparing butcher’s meat for the table, the aim of foreign cookery is to make it tender, of English to make it hard” (139).¹⁷ Periodical writers give the impression that families everywhere suffer regularly from the plights of tough food, spoiled produce, and
“gastronomic grievances . . . solely due to neglected education” (139). Questions about whether a mutton-chop was “overdone” were more than just issues of taste or preference, but interventions into larger debates on women’s education as well.

In her passionate plea for increasing health and comfort, Acton invokes the rhetoric of her contemporaries when describing the household cook, typically, a female figure who was the regular target of many disgruntled middle- and upper-class families that employed her services. In Acton’s “Preface,” explanatory notes, and introductory sections to each chapter, she relies on the language frequently employed by periodical commentators writing for Blackwood’s Magazine, The Examiner, and Dickens’s Household Words when distinguishing between the makings of a “plain cook,” “good plain cook,” and “superior cook” to their readers. Importantly, a “superior cook” is the only term Acton footnotes in her volume, acknowledging that while such a term exists in common use, the excellent quality of cooking it describes is “that rare treasure of common English life” (xx-xxi).

Throughout her “Preface,” Acton relies on an array of key distinctions about working-class laborers that allow her to demystify what young housewives should expect when entering into their first domestic duties. Often placed at the mercy of “her own resources,” the housewife cannot feasibly rely on the availability of a qualified or dependable cook (xxi). In fig. 12, for example, an “intending mistress” interviews an applicant for a position as her household’s “very plain cook.”18 According to Sarah Freeman, terms used to describe household laborers carried subtle distinctions, sometimes denigratory, while, other times, purely informative. Freeman notes that a “‘plain’ cook was generally understood to mean one who did not claim to be able to undertake French cooking” (139), whereas phrases such as “good” indicated a cook could
prepare food without burning it (a “plain cook” did not make such promises). *Fun*’s illustrators use the term “very” to indicate just how incredibly *plain* the applicant’s cooking really is—“put a jint on a dish ready to go to the baker’s.”

In an 1851 article titled, “A Good Plain Cook” in *Household Words*, the author expands upon this distinction, citing a previous debate published in *The Examiner*, which read:

‘What is commonly self-called a plain cook . . . is a cook who spoils food for low wages. She is a cook, not because she knows anything about cookery, but because she prefers the kitchen-fire to scrubbing floors, polishing grates, or making beds. A cook who can boil a potato and dress a mutton-chop is one in a thousand.’ (139)

By *The Examiner*’s account, preparing meat and potatoes is merely an issue of personal preference, not skill, for hired household laborers. Cooking, then, is treated no differently than any other domestic chore, necessary for employment, but not necessary to perform well. Yet what’s especially important about *The Examiner*’s portrayal of English cooks is the way in which
they are frequently blamed for the poor diets of middle-class families. It wouldn’t be until 1874 when London’s first cooking schools for domestic servants, the National Training School for Cookery (NTSC), would first be established. After its opening, NTSC expanded across Great Britain, opening campuses in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Leicester, and Leeds over the next four years (Driver 33). Consequently, female cooks hired to feed English families before the 1870 Educational Act and NTSC’s founding could not have received formal culinary training simply because there were no institutionalized curriculums available to working-class women. Statistically, it is actually quite possible that “superior cooks” might have been as rare as The Examiner writer (and Acton) contend: of the almost 700,000 domestic servants recorded in Britain’s 1851 census, only 44,000 listed their employment as “cooks,” whereas 47,000 were “housekeepers” and 575,000 were “maids of all work.”

While Acton engages with popular rhetoric on British cooking, her cookbook grapples with the images of women they project, challenging how female cooks were perceived and treated by commentators. Yet what distinguishes Modern Cookery from other cookbooks of this period is its author’s keen awareness of the large number of domestic servants that have been disadvantaged by the educational circumstances of their class and sex. Acton understands that education is necessary for social reform and envisions a progressive system in which all classes of women have access to a reliable curriculum of domestic knowledge. While most scholars citing Acton’s Modern Cookery refer to it, aptly, by its defining characteristic, “the first middle-class cookbook,” all fail to mention that the volume, in writing for the middle-class housewife, simultaneously and specifically addresses the needs of the less literate laborers working in her house. Written with the intention that her recipes will be ones of “genuine usefulness” (xxi), Acton offers her own suggestions for women’s educational reform, including two sections in the
cookbook’s Appendix on the “Relative Duties of Mistress and Maid” (402-04) and “What Must always Be Done, and What Must Never Be Done” (404-06).

While periodical writers debated “how to cook a potatoe” or whether a household cook could “dress a mutton chop,” Acton informs readers that the ways in which English families eat at home exists, in part, because of a system of women’s education that lacks cooking. Later in this chapter, I will look more closely at Acton’s culinary curriculum for working- and middle-class women readers as well as the ways Acton responds to educational gaps by building reliable systems of education. According to Acton, “amongst the large number of works on cookery, which we have carefully perused, we have never yet met with one which appeared to us either quite intended for, or entirely suited to the need[s] of the totally inexperienced” (xxi, original emphasis). Modern Cookery functions as a response to these gaps for female readers, offering curricula for teaching the “totally inexperienced . . . [cooking] in All Its Branches, Reduced to a System of Easy Practice, for the Use of Private Families.” I argue that Acton’s cookbook advocates important educational reform because through its customization as a primer for women studying the individual branches of English cooking.

“Novel Features”: the Inception and Stylization of the Victorian Recipe

In the last section, I discussed how Acton’s philosophy of proper food preparation intersected with mid-century concerns over good nutrition and women’s education. Here, I will explain how Modern Cookery’s social consciousness acted as a keystone for the Victorian recipe’s organizing principles, structure, and prose for which Acton’s cookbook has become most famous. In order to understand Modern Cookery’s influence over celebrated Victorian food writers such as Isabella Beeton and Alexis Soyer, we must first identify what Acton termed her
work’s “novel features”: namely, an ingredients list separated from the recipe’s methodology, cook’s notes, and a reliable “Table of Weights and Measures” that corresponded exactly with each receipt (xxi). Acton’s recipes also included meticulous instructions that specified areas where readers might make common mistakes, alternative ingredients, and the time required to prepare each dish. Meant to “facilitate the labours of the kitchen,” Acton takes significant pride in these additions, including the first full instructions for boning poultry and game (xxi-xxii). What these “novel features” represented for the Victorian cookbook are more than simply creative innovations, but a timely (and necessary) deviation from the existing conventions of writing about food during the early-to-mid nineteenth century.

In her cookbook’s “Preface,” Acton explains that Modern Cookery “contains some novel features,” influenced by a democratizing impulse to make domestic knowledge accessible to all readers (xxi). Acton’s rhetoric for the boning of poultry and game illustrates this impulse:

Our directions for boning poultry, game, &c., are also, we may venture to say, entirely new, no author that is known to us having hitherto afforded the slightest information on the subject; but while we have done our utmost to simplify and to render intelligible this, and several other processes not generally well understood by ordinary cooks, our first and best attention has been bestowed on those articles of food which the consumption is the most general, and which are therefore of the greatest consequence; and on what are usually termed plain English dishes. (xxii)

Acton’s research accurately describes the limitations of contemporary British cookbooks. Not only did writers frequently omit information they deemed elementary or unnecessary, but they also wrote in a style that was inaccessible to “ordinary cooks.” This significance cannot be underestimated: prior to 1845, no cookery books included instructions for butchering meat at home, and many purposefully composed recipes with vague and/or irregular content that restricted a cookbook’s readership to a limited readership. In accounting for these new additions, Acton recognizes the need for detailed directions on household butchery. “To Bone a Fowl or
Turkey without Opening It” and “Another Mode of Boning a Fowl or Turkey,” for example (200-01) offer content that is both inventive and new. Although her selection of recipes depends on “what are usually termed plain English dishes,” Acton’s style, organization, and content rely on the reader’s involvement with the text—perception and readability help Acton to provide a workable system of household knowledge previously missing from the British cookbook tradition.

Reviewers of Modern Cookery were quick to pick up on Acton’s innovations, recognizing the inherent value of her organizing principles as a way to improve how household manuals discussed cooking instructions. One reviewer for The Athenæum writes that “Those better able than ourselves to report on this volume say that the directions are clear, simple, and generally excellent, and that it will be found a useful work” (149). Echoing The Athenæum’s sentiments, Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine offers a review with far more detail and admits that the only way to report accurately on Modern Cookery’s usefulness is to reproduce one of Acton’s receipts in their entirety: “To exemplify the lucid manner in which Eliza Acton gives forth her directions in this compendium, and to afford to numerous readers a valuable recipe, we shall copy out all that is essential of our author’s prescription for what she calls ‘Lord Mayor’s Soup’” (132, see fig. 8).

While both reviews explain how useful recipes will be to their magazines’ “numerous readers,” it is the Tait’s commentator who proves the great importance of Acton’s “novel features” for the history and style of British recipe writing. Rather than a one-sentence summary, Tait’s dedicates half a page to reprinting over 400 words of Acton’s recipe, including separate typefaces for “Author’s Receipt” and the title, “Lord Mayor’s Soup” (fig. 13). The recipe for “Lord Mayor’s Soup” appears to have been lifted directly from Modern Cookery’s pages and
neatly embedded within the reviewer’s column. This act of copying and pasting Acton’s recipe reveals the inherent novelty of her work and calls attention to the ease of her organization, formatting, and style. In sum, accurately reviewing *Modern Cookery* requires providing readers with a full excerpt. This is an important choice on the reviewer’s part for a number of reasons: before the mid-nineteenth century, recipes published in the periodical press were not given centralized articles or columns. As with the contributor reporting on “How to Cook a Potatoe” with such urgency in the *London Journal* (166), recipes were often short, one-paragraph instructions reserved for the blank space at the end of a column and almost always guaranteed to be printed below the fold. By printing such a lengthy excerpt from Acton’s cookbook—indeed, a whole recipe using Acton’s exact word choice, instructions, and measurements—*Tait’s* tantalizes readers with a free and modern recipe they would not have seen before.

Moreover, in reviewing *Modern Cookery*, it is evident that the reviewer carefully selected the recipe they reviewed. “Lord Mayor’s Soup,” embodies affordable English cooking that would have been appealing to many working-class and middle-class readers. Noting that “Lord Mayor’s Soup” could be attempted by “persons very inferior to Lord Mayors,” *Tait’s* emphasizes Acton’s democratizing principles as a recipe writer, explaining that the “soup . . . may be cheaply accomplished in every place where pigs are killed” (132). In 1845, “every place where pigs are killed” would have omitted few, if any, areas of Great Britain. This statement thus invites readers to experience the “lucid manner” of Acton’s prose, test her recipe, and taste the results for themselves. No doubt, such reviews contributed to *Modern Cookery*’s instant popularity and introduce an important moment in the history of the Victorian cookbook. By reprinting recipes with the aim that readers might test would take an active role and test them would have been a novel idea. This kind of press was not just excellent marketing, but also a
Fig. 13: Review of Modern Cookery by Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine.
kind of celebration—it celebrated Acton’s cookbook and her individual recipes and it celebrated readers as active and engaged participants in the magazine’s culture. When Longman took out its monthly one-page advertisement for “New Works and New Editions” in *The Literary Register* in 1851, the eleventh edition of *Modern Cookery* was positioned at the top, marked with a Roman numeral one (“I”), demarcating the book as Longman’s most important reprint of the season (910).

Critics of *Modern Cookery* have yet to point out the degree to which Acton’s cookbook was admired by periodical commentators. Yet this kind of primary research and context helps us to understand what a cookbook dedicated to “usefulness” meant to the hybrid population of working-class cooks and middle-class housewives Acton’s work addresses. Furthermore, the fact that Acton defines her content by its preconceived “usefulness” introduces the idea of the “niche market” which would come to define Victorian cookbooks for the rest of the century.

During this period, many cookbooks emphasized the hundreds of recipes collected within their volumes, rather than the reliability or the clarity of the recipes themselves. By positioning her readers’ comprehension as the motivation for her writing style—clearly, specifically, and following an organized system any woman or reader could use—Acton bypasses pre-existing conventions of the British cookbook, differentiating *Modern Cookery* as a new kind of volume unto its own. Moreover, Acton establishes an essential characteristic of the recipe genre we still value today: a reader’s ability to comprehend a recipe’s instructions, and the writer’s ability to compose fail-safe directions.23

Today, it is difficult to imagine recipes without a list of ingredients, definitive word choice, or specific cooking instructions. But early reviewers of *Modern Cookery* easily perceived these valuable additions during a time in which recipes lacked standardization and
cookbooks were irregularly formatted. Today, we have preconceived notions about the recipe as a genre: its simple, tidy format seems to have always been in order with an ingredients list, mode, and everything in its place. But to read many of the cookbooks published in Britain before 1845 is to read an experimental genre of writing frequently riddled with problematic, inaccurate, and inconsistent material. *Modern Cookery* made this material consistent.

**Revising a “Dilettante Gentlemanly Tradition”**

During the first half of the nineteenth century, cookbooks and recipes varied so widely that it’s often hard to see what connects them at all. Many of these issues originated, in part, from the fact that cookbooks were written exclusively by (and for) culinary professionals, French chefs, and male readers (Attar 15). When women did author their own recipe collections, their credits frequently read, “A Lady,” or some other *nom de plume*. The limited scope of early cookbook readerships coupled with the exclusion of women from the culinary arts left only a highly select group of male professionals that could actually read and perhaps more importantly, use published receipts. According to bibliographer Dena Attar, most cookbooks published after 1800 “follow a dilettante gentlemanly tradition, appealing to amateur pharmacists and experimental chemists . . . these compilations are addressed to their author’s fellow enthusiasts, who like them had time and money enough to amuse themselves with home-made concoctions and little experiments” (15). Later in the nineteenth century, science would become a predominant feature in the ways Victorians thought and wrote about food, legitimizing its status as a worthy art form for middle-class women. But in the early decades of the nineteenth century, scientific study acted as one of the ways food writing lacked universal clarity or appeal. Additionally, one of the most problematic traits of the genre Acton remedied was the fact that
recipes needed to move away from theoretical branches. To do this, recipes necessitated testing prior to publication instead of reprinting or copying them from other works.²⁴

Primarily, Acton’s *Modern Cookery* helped to reform many of the style and formatting of early nineteenth-century cookbooks, especially as they related to a cookbook’s organization and themes. An 1819 cookbook published by the American author Maria Eliza Ketelby Rundell is an excellent example of this kind of reform. Writers like Rundell took pride in the sheer size of their recipe collections. In fact, Rundell’s *Family Receipt Book* (fig. 14) promises as many as “Eight Hundred Valuable Receipts in Various Branches of Domestic Economy; Selected from the Works of the Most Approved Writers, Ancient and Modern; and from the Attested Communications of Scientific Friends” (see Fig. 14).²⁵ Rundell’s subtilte is especially revealing...
as it suggests how early nineteenth-century cookbooks valued encyclopedic content with curatorial tones. Cookbooks like Rundell’s fail to settle on old or new knowledge, accepting any receipt as worthy of publication. Of its 800 recipes, The Family Receipt Book covers everything from “Preserv[ing] Lemon Juice during a Long Voyage” (183) to instructing readers how “To Escape from a Fire” (232). Although recipes for “Walnut Ketchup” (189) and “To Make Salt Butter Fresh” (156) do suggest a culinary focus, Rundell’s work is primarily concerned with survival, not savor.26

Historians have suggested some of the possible reasons early cookbooks valued such vast amounts of material. First, recipes were defined very differently for readers in the early nineteenth century. During the 1820s, for example, the term “receipt” encompassed scientific as well as culinary information, reflecting readers’ agrarian lives (lives that greatly differed from those of mid-century housewives and cooks living in increasingly industrialized communities). Moreover, dining at this period had not yet become an iconic part of English middle-class life, a fact that influenced cookbook significantly. Recipe readers would have been more interested in basic food preservation and survival. But with Acton’s Modern Cookery, recipes capture a Victorian zeitgeist, making up “those articles of food of which the consumption is the most general . . . [and are] usually termed plain English dishes” (xxii). Acton’s recipes are written because they are intended for common, everyday use rather than because they are the easiest to preserve, as with Rundell’s recipe collection.

In addition to capturing popular themes and providing clarity to cooking instructions, Modern Cookery also helped to reform ideas about the Victorian cookbook’s potential readership and gender, namely, readers who were deemed “permissible” audiences for what was previously considered to be “privileged” male knowledge. Because most early nineteenth-century
cookbook authors were professional chefs and/or scientists, many of Acton’s predecessors intentionally incorporated traditionally masculine fields of science and medicine—or, what Attar refers to as the “dilettante gentlemanly tradition” of the early nineteenth-century cookbook (15).

One of the important characteristics of this period’s “catch-all” cookbooks is how authors created hybrid discourses in their recipe collections, appropriating scientific or medical advice to simple culinary tasks.

One notable example of these trends is the 1806 cookbook *Culina Famulatrix Medicæae: Or, Receipts in Modern Cookery; with a Medical Commentary, Written by Ignotus and Revised by A. Hunter, M.D. F.R.S. L.&E.* (1806).

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Fig. 16: Frontispiece, *Culina Famulatrix Medicæae: Or, Receipts in Modern Cookery; with a Medical Commentary, Written by Ignotus and Revised by A. Hunter, M.D. F.R.S. L.&E.* (1806).
(“transmigration, n.”). The opening image sets a confusing tone for the volume, making it unclear as to what is actually being passed into a different body—the boar’s protein into man’s, possibly—as well as who would use this cookbook or what they would find within its pages. Notably, Culina is missing a basic list of contents and/or recipes, although the volume does open with a “Preface” that details the Hellenistic roots of “the art of cookery . . . [which are] to be of use to Gentlemen of the Medical Line” (5-6). According to the collection’s author, “Ignotus,” his recipes contain no organizing system and should only be used by “correct Housekeeper[s]” when cooking “scientifically” for a Lord, Earl, or Duke (7, original emphasis). He writes,

This work being a collection of the most approved Culinary Receipts, without order or method, I flatter myself that the correct Housekeeper will not deem it the less worthy on that account. I have not made this Collection for the use of the ignorant Cook; I therefore wish the Receipts to be perused only by such as have made a considerable progress in the Culinary Art . . . [while some] persons may consider me (being a medical man) as one who has stepped out of the line of his profession; but having good grounds for my conduct, I do not feel myself disposed to be of their opinion: On the contrary, I consider myself as having contributed to the advancement of my profession[.] (9, emphasis mine)

Far from the sentiments that command Acton’s “Preface” to Modern Cookery with its aim for recipes “of genuine usefulness” that “any class of learners” might understand (xxi), Ignotus aspires for exclusivity, distinguishing the recipe as a medical, professional, and masculine genre not intended for the “ignorant Cook.” Generally, Culina’s recipes are “without order or method,” as a way to convey useful information only to those readers already possessing some mastery in the culinary arts. Unlike Acton, however, Ignotus’s aims for the British cookbook are the very opposite of usefulness and accessibility, arguing for scientific intervention by male, medical professionals. Here, the cookbook is seen more as an opportunity for doctors to intervene in debates about the human body instead of household management or England’s culinary tradition.
It is worth noting the doctor’s vague style for writing recipes and how this style purposefully restricts Culina’s content from non-scientific readers. In his instructions for how “To Melt Butter” (13), Ignotus uses two-sentences to describe his “formula” for combining two teaspoons of heavy cream for every quarter pound of butter (see fig. 17). Significantly, he does not specify between salted or unsalted butter, a distinction readers would have needed to know for both cooking and food preservation. Moreover, the author’s “recipe” is half the length of his medical “observation,” emphasizing not so much how one melts butter, but why this particular technique is important to medical professionals. Even though Ignotus’s stylistic choices may appear confusing (if not pedantic), his “Preface” invokes the same shortcomings Acton criticizes in Modern Cookery’s “Preface.” Like Acton, Ignotus complains of

All the books of Cookery that I have perused, seem to be greatly deficient in the directions given for preparing the respective Dishes. A pennyworth of this, a pinch of that, are vague expressions, and may prove the source of much doubt in the mind of some future Culinary Historian . . . [where the] quantity contained in the dish cannot be ascertained, we are unavoidably left, in many cases, to depend on the taste and judgment of the Cook, into whose hands we commit the health of ourselves and posterity. (8)

Ignotus’s complaints directly predict Acton’s motivations for writing Modern Cookery: the idea that private families put their health in the hands of “Cooks,” a risky business that may be improved by clearer recipes with better prose. But this shared philosophy hardly proves Ignotus’s and Acton’s writings are similar. Rather, it proves that their cookbooks place a similar value on revising the genre of British recipe writing for a greater good, the reader. For Ignotus, that reader is very clearly defined as a male academic, or a figure he calls, the “future Culinary Historian,” and a far cry from the “plain cooks” and housewives Acton would address in 1845 with Modern Cookery.
By the time of *Modern Cookery’s* publication, forty years had passed since Ignotus published *Culina*, and the recipe, as a genre of prose, was barely in its adolescence. I argue that Acton’s cookbook was just the intervention the recipe needed to move away from stylistic traditions that valued what Attar calls a “dilettante gentlemanly tradition” in addition to dated agrarian contexts and confusing cooking instructions. While recipes were meant to preserve domestic knowledge, they were restricted from those readers who needed this knowledge most, the cook or housewife. Ultimately, what *Modern Cookery* accomplished for British audiences was a revisionary style that allowed Victorian women writers to compose cookbooks in a clear, universally accessible, and agreed-upon format. Acton took the format of a failing genre and
revised it for new audiences with middle-class women and plain cooks in mind. We merely need to look at Acton’s title page (fig. 18) to identify many of the cookbook tropes we so easily take for granted today: that an instructional genre of writing should be truly instructional, and that its methodology should appeal to the largest possible audience.

Cooking the Acton Curriculum

What did Acton’s culinary education for women look like? Part of the appeal and timeliness of Eliza Acton’s Modern Cookery derives not just from the volume’s novel features and revisionary style, but also from its treatment of cooking as a privileged form of female knowledge. From her introductory notes to her illustrated figures, Acton’s theory of “modern cookery” is an educational departure from traditional women’s accomplishments that advocated for thoughtful instruction, repeated study, and helpful notes between a teacher and her student. In the way many Victorian writers provided “picture alphabets” or “An ABC Picture Book” to teach new material, Acton uses vocabularies of terms and illustrations in Modern Cookery.

Writing of Acton’s prose, biographer Sheila Hardy has suggested that “Perhaps it was Eliza’s early training as a schoolmistress that made her instructions so clear” (99). In fact, Acton’s instructions regularly rely on educational rhetoric, promising “a system of easy practice” that will provide readers with a comprehensive scope of modern English cooking. Modern Cookery thus focuses on popular recipes that may be termed, “modern” English cooking, but, it does so by treating cookery as a discipline: “Cookery, In All Its Branches.”

The strongest way in which cookery emerges as a discipline in the book is its emphasis on recipes that “have been strictly tested . . . illustrated with numerous woodcuts.” One reviewer for The Aberdeen Journal noted Modern Cookery’s universal appeal because of its visual
features, writing that while “[m]any books on cookery are liable to this objection, that they contain receipts purely theoretical, & which the authors have never themselves reduced to practice,” Acton’s reader-friendly layout “gives directions entirely new. The work is profoundly illustrated by neat woodcuts; and we predict will soon be found in all the kitchens of any pretence in the country” (qtd. in Hardy 90). Aberdeen’s commentator foretells a real truth: many of *Modern Cookery*’s images would end up in kitchens across Great Britain, but not, necessary, attached to Acton’s name. Figure 19, Acton’s accompanying illustration for “Pork,” identifies each part of the animal butchered in modern cooking and revises images of domestic animals seen in figure 16, page 53. For every kind of domestically consumed animal within *Modern Cookery*—whether it’s fowl, fish, or lamb—Acton produces a woodcut like the one for “Pork.”
A modern reader might see figure 19 and say, “I’ve seen that before,” because it is so familiar. Readers before 1845, however, would have never seen an image like it, and I would hazard that today’s home cook is more culturally intelligent because of this kind of visual narrative and the way it teaches readers to think about where their food comes from and how it is made. In moving away from the “theoretical,” untested recipes of the early nineteenth-century British cookbook, *Modern Cookery* takes on many of the defining characteristics of an English schoolgirls’ primer, combining images and text in thematic lesson plans for each major branch of “modern cookery.” In fact, a grammar of culinary terms (fig. 20) opens *Modern Cookery*, ensuring that readers know exactly what Acton’s terminology means.

In some cases, woodcuts depict the final product of a dish, as with the floral and decorative “Raised Pie” in Acton’s “Pastry” chapter (257), or the more bizarrely constructed...

Fig. 19: Illustration, “Pork,” *Modern Cookery* (1845).
“Apple Hedge-Hog, or Suédoise” from Acton’s chapter on “Sweet Dishes” (321). Images appear instinctively, evoking an identifiable format in which “A” clearly stands for “Apple.” But, in Acton’s grown-up version, “A” stands for “Apple Hedge-Hog, or Suédoise,” a cake that takes its spiky texture from “blanched almonds” that have been “cut lengthwise, [and] stuck over the entire surface” (321). It is important to note that when surveying Modern Cookery’s recipes, the more creative and aesthetically demanding dishes such as cakes, pies, and sculpted puddings receive special attention in Acton’s prose and illustrations. Recipes often point to the engravings
themselves, stating that readers will know when a dish is “complete” when it takes “the form shown” (321).

Writing of Acton’s “poet’s eye for the written word and her wry humour about things going wrong” (281), Kate Colquhoun observes how Acton’s use of images and text participate in a collaborative, imaginative process by which the written page both crafts recipes and becomes part of what the home cook creates. Colquhoun explains,

Acton inspired her readers to thoughtful and imaginative cookery, complementing her fine recipes with simple wood engravings. She [Acton] was the kind of practical cook, who, in an emergency, would make a dessert soufflé flavored with citron, coffee or chocolate in a ‘plain round cake mould, with a strip of writing paper 6 inches high placed inside the rim. (281, emphasis mine).

What is especially interesting about Acton’s treatment of the British recipe is how the instructions for a dish never completely leave the written page, but are sometimes served alongside the final dish with the cook’s (or, in Acton’s case, poet’s) “writing paper” scaling the food’s sides.
It is difficult to underestimate the kind of clarity this combination of text and illustration offered to inexperienced cooks who may have been attempting complex recipes for the first time, or of varying degrees of literacy. And, Acton’s clarity surpasses how to prepare food properly by instructing readers how to cook according to contemporary aesthetic tastes, inviting readers to not just to think as cooks, but to think as artists and creators. In her recipe for “Apple Hedge-Hog Cake, or Suédoise” (fig. 22), Acton encourages readers to take something as everyday as an English apple and be creative, crafting a “hedgehog” from fruit and almonds for their families. This creative focus helps to foster a playful tone, encouraging readers to imagine food in new and artistic ways. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, Acton’s welcoming style assures readers will take an active role in Modern Cookery’s recipes. By tracing the individual branches of English cooking, Acton speaks to her readers in a similar way as a teacher may speak to a student, encouraging experiential learning and creativity.

Conclusion: The Poet and the Publisher

Ten years after the first edition of Modern Cookery appeared in print, Longman & Co. published a fully revised second edition, including modernized ingredients, newly tested recipes, and one surprisingly contentious element that had not been in the book before: an amended “Preface” written by a much older Eliza Acton, now a “reformed” poet and best-selling cookbook author. Unlike the nutritional concerns that drove Acton’s 1845 “Preface,” the 1855 version is socially conscious while being notably personal and reveals one of the strongest examples (that I can find) of the ways British women writers perceived the intellectual, creative, and financial merits of their culinary prose. In discussing the immense popularity of her work, Acton gives voice to the ways her recipes have been repeatedly plagiarized since Modern
Cookery’s first appearance in 1845, leaving Acton to protest the blatant copying of her work and advocate for her intellectual property rights as an author of an unprecedented and original work. Switching from the inclusive “we” that dominates the 1845 “Preface” to the first-person “I,” Acton describes her experiences authoring a book that radically changed contemporary cooking:

I must here obtrude a few words of personal interest to myself. At the risk of appearing extremely egotistic, I have appended “Author’s Receipt” and “Author’s Original Receipt” to many of the contents of the following pages; but I have done it solely in self-defiance, in consequence of the unscrupulous manner in which large portions of my volume have been appropriated by contemporary authors, without the slightest acknowledgement of the source from which they have been derived. I have allowed this unfairness, and much beside, to pass entirely unnoticed until now; but I am suffering at present too severe a penalty for the over-exertion entailed on me by the plan which I adopted for the work, longer to see with perfect composure strangers coolly taking the credit and the profits of my toil. (ix-x)

While it may be tempting to read Acton’s account as a sign of lingering frustration over her perceived “failure” as a poet, I would hazard that her writing evokes a larger purpose and sense of duty to establish recipes as what Peterson calls, “Literature (with a capital L)” and recipe writers as “author[s] (with a capital A)” (53). In 1845 and today, recipes were not protected by any intellectual property laws, and for many writers, plagiarism had wide-reaching effects beyond just a loss of income to the devaluing of a writer’s original prose, a weakening of the canon, and a misunderstanding of a work’s original source.

It is worth noting that while Acton’s frankness about these issues may have been personal, they emerge as part of a wider debate arrogated by many mid-century writers. Hotly debated in the periodical press were campaigns for intellectual property laws, including questions about authorship as an acceptable profession that could provide writers with the necessary financial remuneration to live respectable middle-class lives. Because of the predominant impression that female authors were writing for “the public good,” it had long been the tradition for authors of
household manuals to avoid any admission of “writing for money or vanity” (Theophano 195). Peterson has shown that the “overt linking of professional status to income” during the mid-nineteenth century “reflects a new turn in the discourse of authorship” (34). For example, in his 1847 article on “The Condition of Authors in England, Germany, and France” for Fraser’s Magazine, George Henry Lewes asserts that “literature is a profession . . . a means of subsistence, almost as certain as the bar or the church” (285). Yet unlike the clergy or law, Victorian writers perceived over-saturation in the growing mid-century market, claiming that it directly hindered their ability to earn a living from writing alone. Not only do authors have “to struggle against [their] brother authors,” writes Lewes, but they also must struggle “against a host of interlopers” who write for lower wages because they “dabble” in writing and do not live solely by their pens (294-5).

As Acton prepared the second edition of Modern Cookery, it is difficult to say which instances of plagiarism she was exposed to and to what extent, but it is extremely likely that she had read or seen copies of Catherine Dickens’s What Shall We Have for Dinner? (1851). A slim recipe book and best seller for Charles Dickens’s publishers Bradbury and Evans, What Shall We Have for Dinner? directly reprints Acton’s recipes for Mayonnaise, Palestine Soup, Potato Balls, Cauliflower, and Kidneys à la Brochette (Rossi-Wilcox 101). Biographer Sheila Hardy has noted that Acton was fortunate to have been “spared witnessing . . . Mrs. Beeton’s betrayal of her,” since Acton died several months before the first installment of Household Management appeared in 1859, a best-selling cookbook that reprinted over one hundred and forty of the former poet’s original recipes (163). In the next chapter, I will discuss how the timing of Acton’s death is especially important to the legacy of editor Isabella Beeton, and that because Acton died in the same year that Household Management was first issued serially, it was
impossible for her to protest against what might be one of the most significant examples of plagiarism between two Victorian women writers. Indeed, if Acton had lived to see the 1860s, it is possible that the story of Beeton’s *Household Management* might have been written very differently.

Yet Acton’s frank discussion of the value of her original work (whether literary or monetary) raises questions about the nature of her publishing agreement with Longman. Given the importance scholars place on Acton’s apocryphal choice to give up poetry for recipe writing, Acton and Longman’s relationship is significant. Because of the lack of primary source materials available on Acton, scholars have no way of knowing precisely what Acton professional relationship with Longman was. However, this may not be entirely unique to Eliza Acton professional agreement with her publisher. Lillian Nayder has noted that “Researchers have never found a contract for the cookbook Catherine [Dickens] wrote and published with Bradbury and Evans” in 1851, a fact “which suggests that the agreement may have been an informal one or, if formally documented, considered too ephemeral to preserve” (6). And while we “cannot be certain whether she [Acton] was spurred on by a financial incentive[s]” (Freeman 156), there can be no doubt that *Modern Cookery* provided Acton with financial independence well into her middle age.²⁷

It is possible to envision aspects of Acton and Longman’s working relationship through extant documents currently housed at the University of Reading’s Special Collections such as the Longman account books for the years 1845-1855 (fig. 23).²⁸ Beginning on new lines, itemized entries record regular payments Longman made to Eliza Acton, including annual royalties that ranged from £70 to £189. While Acton’s first payment from Longman was just under £70,²⁹ it is clear that Acton continued to earn sizeable profits during the first five years following *Modern
Fig. 23: Longman Ledgers (Reading University Special Collections).
Cookery’s initial publication, including £162 5s 6d in 1846, £189 3s 5d in 1847, and £83 5s 10d in 1848.\textsuperscript{30} Longman’s records also reveal that the publisher provided Acton with other forms of payment, including a copy of “Webster’s English Dictionary and Books to Miss Acton” recorded on July 16, 1844. In addition to royalties for Modern Cookery, Acton received compensation for her work writing for Household Words and The Ladies’ Companion as a cookery correspondent. What is especially clear from Longman’s ledgers is that Modern Cookery enabled Acton to achieve the status of what Peterson calls “authorship with a capital A” (53), earning well within the range of fifty to five hundred pounds per annum income necessary for middle-class status (Broomfield 28).

Another important shift in the Longman ledgers is Acton’s profit margins. By 1849, Acton’s profits had dropped to one eighth of her initial earnings to £83 5s 10d, and these numbers suggest that in just four years of publishing Modern Cookery, Acton’s material had become widely available in markets without authorization or remuneration. I want to suggest that this sudden drop in income would not only have been especially significant to a writer who had reached success in her middle age, but also wholly new to Eliza Acton, a woman who spent ten years testing recipes on the budget of an unmarried poet and part-time school mistress. The result—infallibly written recipes—reveal Acton’s struggle to afford the ingredients necessary to write a well-tested cookbook; importantly, Acton uses a recipe’s ingredients to offer thoughtful social and financial commentary on her relationship to Longman and publishing within her book. In Acton’s detailed instructions for pudding recipes, she describes the dining habits of poor authors and their well-fed publishers. “This pudding can scarcely be made too rich,” writes Acton in the opening lines of her recipe for “Publisher’s Pudding” (fig. 24), revealing the notoriously wry wit Colquhoun describes with her loaded use of the word “rich” (275, original
emphasis). The recipe makes a “rich,” or heavy pudding, but it also requires a certain level of “richness” just to afford its ingredients:

- four ounces of macaroons . . . five [ounces] of finely-minced beef-suet, five of marrow . . .
- two ounces of flour, six of pounded sugar, four of dried cherries, four of the best Muscatel raisins, weighed after they are stoned, half a pound of candied citron, or of citron and orange-rind mixed, a quarter saltspoonful of salt, half a nutmeg, the yolks only of seven full-sized eggs, the grated rind of a large lemon, and last of all, a glass of the best Cognac brandy. (275)

Unlike “The Poor Author’s Pudding” which follows this recipe, the ingredients for “The Publisher’s Pudding” range from two kinds of fresh almonds and heavy cream to crushed macaroons, stoned Muscatel raisins, pounded sugar, the publisher’s “best cognac,” and a “glassful” of the publisher’s best wine (275). When we think of the one-sentence back-story Victorian food scholars find most amusing about Acton and Longman’s relationship, we are never given the option to consider how Acton responded to Longman’s request that day. Rather, the story always ends with Longman commissioning a cookbook and Acton never publishing a second volume of poetry (which, as Kari Boyd McBride notes, is “now lost”). In the pages of Modern Cookery, this story appears to end with Acton instead, criticizing her publisher’s extravagant diet as the “poor author” struggles to grate lemon rind.

“The Poor Author’s Pudding” (fig. 25) is miniscule, consists of no more than 100 words, and uses less than one third of the ingredients for “The Publisher’s Pudding,” swapping cream for milk, exotic fruits for common lemon rind, and expensive liquors for a pinch of cinnamon (294). According to Elizabeth Ray, Acton’s use of italics in this recipe carry satirical, biting weight because of their biographical origins: “The italics are her [Acton’s] own, the poor author’s” (xx). Whereas the recipe for “Publisher’s Pudding” is expensive, exotic, sweet, and richly alcoholic, the “Poor Author’s Pudding” is self-restrained and evokes images of David Copperfield as he alternates between two pudding shops, “depending” as Daniel Pool writes, “on
THE PUBLISHER’S PUDDING.

This pudding can scarcely be made too rich. First blanch, and then beat to the smoothest possible paste, six ounces of fresh sweet almonds, and a dozen bitter ones; pour very gradually to them, in the mortar, three quarters of a pint of boiling cream; then turn them into a cloth, and wring it from them again with strong expression. Heat a half pint of it afresh, and pour it, as soon as it boils, upon four ounces of fine bread-crumbs, set a plate over, and leave them to become nearly cold; then mix thoroughly with them four ounces of macaroons, crushed tolerably small; five of finely-minced beef-suet, five of marrow, cleared very carefully from fibre, and from the splinters of bone which are sometimes found in it, and shred, not very small, two ounces of flour, six of pounded sugar, four of dried cherries, four of the best Muscatel raisins, weighed after they are stoned, half a pound of candied citron, or of citron and orange-rind mixed, a quarter saltspoonful of salt, half a nutmeg, the yolks only of seven full-sized eggs, the grated rind of a large lemon, and last of all, a glass of the best Cognac brandy, which must be stirred briskly in by slow degrees. Pour the mixture into a thickly buttered mould or basin, which contains a full quart, fill it to the brim, lay a sheet of buttered writing-paper over, then a well-floured cloth, tie them securely, and boil the pudding for four hours and a quarter; let it stand for a couple of minutes before it is turned out; dish it carefully, and serve it with the German pudding sauce of page 112.

Jordan almonds, 6 ozs.; bitter almonds, 12; cream, ½ pint; bread-crumbs, 4 ozs.; cream wrung from almonds, ¾ pint; crushed macaroons, 4 ozs.; flour, 2 ozs.; beef-suet, 5 ozs.; marrow, 5 ozs.; dried cherries, 4 ozs.; stoned Muscatel raisins, 4 ozs.; pounded sugar, 6 ozs.; candied citron (or citron and orange-rind mixed), ½ lb.; pinch of salt; ½ nutmeg; grated rind 1 lemon; yolks of eggs, 7; best cognac, 1 wine-glassful: boiled in mould or basin, 4½ hours.

Obs.—This pudding, which, if well made, is very light as well as rich, will be sufficiently good for most tastes without the almonds: when they are omitted, the boiling cream must be poured at once to the bread-crumbs.

Fig. 24: Recipe, “The Publisher’s Pudding,” Modern Cookery (Longman, 1845).
how much money he [David Copperfield] has . . . a pudding ‘made of currants,’ the other—cheaper—with ‘a stout pale pudding, heavy and flabby, and with great flat raisins in it’” (208).

One of the purposes of this chapter has been to help readers understand Eliza Acton’s revolutionary reworking of the British recipe in her 1845 *Modern Cookery*, and its dimensions as an important text for Victorian scholars interested in studying food. Another purpose has been to examine Eliza Acton’s radically different career and legacy prior to the 1861 publication of *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management*. When examined closely, Acton’s recipes provide an important foundation for how British women not only came to write and think about food, but also how they appropriated recipe writing to establish their identities as authors.

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**Notes**

1 No exact transcript or letters between Longman and Acton have survived to prove that this famous conversation actually occurred. This quoted dialogue represents the closest retelling we have to what Longman may have said during his correspondence with Acton. See G. M. Young’s *Early Victorian England 1830-1865* (125) and Sheila Hardy’s description of this “apocryphal story” in *The Real Mrs. Beeton: The Story of Eliza Acton* (89-90).

While it seems odd Longman would request a cookery book from a poet, Hardy notes that his “publishing rival, John Murray” dominated the market for cookbooks at this time (90). Sarah
Freeman records the successes of other recipe books published before *Modern Cookery*, arguing that Longman was “trying to extend [his] list in this direction” (160).

2 This “heavyweight” title would be granted to the publication *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (London: S.O. Beeton, 1861).


4 Critics of the nineteenth-century cookbook enjoy comparing Beeton’s appropriation of Acton’s early recipes. For some notable examples, see Beetham 391-406, Freeman 162, and Humble’s “Introduction” to *Household Management*, pages xiv-xv and “Explanatory Notes” on pages 575-616.

Humble notes that soups, especially, are practically copied and pasted, as with Beeton’s recipe for “Chestnut (Spanish) Soup”: “this is one of the largest number of recipes Beeton lifts directly from Eliza Acton. A word here or there is changed, but the texts are almost identical” (*Household Management* 582). For Beeton’s version of Chestnut Soup, see page 83; for Acton’s, see page 17 in the second London edition (1845).

5 As I will discuss in the next section, “Social Consciousness and the Value of Domestic Knowledge,” this “power” extends beyond the domestic sphere to the larger nation as a whole. Essentially, what and how mothers feed their families generates a valuable effect: according to Acton, by preparing food properly so their children have good nutrition, English mothers ensure overall strength, health, and growth in British citizens that, notably, is an important factor in social change.

6 Sarah Freeman offers a valuable account of what historians do know about Eliza Acton’s life in her book *Mutton and Oysters: The Victorians and their Food*. See pages 156-60 for an idea of the “frustratingly little [that] has so far come to light about Miss Acton” (156). Author Sheila M. Hardy has attempted to unveil what “frustrating little” is known about Acton in her recent publication, *The Real Mrs. Beeton: The Story of Eliza Acton* (the History Press, 2011); however, much of Hardy’s work relies on educated guesses and historical speculation.

7 “Byronic”: see Young 125; “Sapphic”: see Acton’s biographer for *An Encyclopedia of British Women Writers* (Rutgers UP, 1998) who notes that Acton “who is best known today for her contributions to culinary history, had a small reputation in her youth as a poet. Her Poems (1826) have the sound and feel of her better-known contemporaries of the Romantic movement. A.’s poems, however, are distinct from those luminaries’ works in their imitation of Sapphic verse. Many of A.’s poems are addressed to women in the spirit of ‘romantic friendship’” (699). This “romantic friendship” intersects well with the friendship we see displayed between Eloise and Hortense in Soyer’s volume, and, more specifically, how Acton addresses her own female readers in *Modern Cookery*, frequently relying on shared information from “old Jewish ladies” and friends willing to share their work.

8 The fact that Acton’s writing career was not monumentally successful before the publication of *Modern Cookery* (1845) is especially important in understanding the recipe’s genre. To write a recipe properly and with the intent that home cooks may “perfectly depend upon” its instructions requires a strong understanding of trial and error. Elizabeth David has noted that Acton was excellent at learning from her past failures because “anybody who does not care to admit them [failures or mistakes] could not, or should not, write a cookery book” (xxvi).

9 To date, Delia Smith is one of the best-selling cookbook authors and television food personalities in the United Kingdom, whereas Elizabeth David, although popular and publishing
during a similar time period, was far less commercial in range. Humble’s pop-culture comparison highlights Acton’s influence and quality during the midcentury and Beeton’s mega-popularity as an author whose books have never been out of print. Note: Longman ceased printing Modern Cookery in the first decade of the twentieth century, whereas Beeton’s Household Management has never been out of print (“Eliza Acton” 699).

10 For some context on the food debates occurring during Modern Cookery’s publication in 1845, see Anthony S. Wohl’s chapter, “Tolerable Human Types” from Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain (Harvard UP, 1983), pages 43-79.

11 See Broomfield 91-99 for more information on the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Irish Potato Famine. The repeal of the Corn Laws made food cheaper and attempted to address larger issues of food preparation and nutrition in this country. Although space limits me from tying in Alexis Soyer’s ideas of nutritional and social reform here, I’d like to note that during this same time, Soyer created the first soup kitchens for the poor, helped improve the diets of soldiers fighting in the Crimean War, and revolutionized cooking in the London Reform Club. See Helen Day’s article, “A Common Complaint” (Victorian Literature and Culture 36.2 (2008): 507-30) for more information on Soyer’s social consciousness.

12 It is important to note that “the hungry forties” is a contested term, “originating in the early twentieth century when it was coined as part of a propaganda drive against protectionist tariff reforms” (Boyce 423). Despite early motivations for reformation, I have adopted this term because, like Boyce, I agree with Peter J. Gourney’s argument that critical reevaluations “should neither obscure the fact that a great many working people suffered” (101). See EN 7 (445) Boyce for more information on the correct usage of the “hungry forties.”

13 Acton’s discussion of “good nutrition” also ties in with rising food adulteration debates during this period that I do not cover here because of limited space. Published ten years before Dr. Hassall’s influential Food and Its Adulteration (1855), Modern Cookery (1845) is just one of many mid-century cookbooks that turn their attentions to the ramifications of poor nutrition on a national scale in Briton. However, as I will discuss in the following pages, Acton’s aim is slightly different than Hassall’s: food preparation. See Anthony S. Wohl’s Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain (1983) for more information on the Food and Drug Act of 1875 and its earlier version, the Adulteration of Food, Drinks, and Drugs Act (1872) that established nutritional standards for English food and commerce (54-55).

14 See Hardy 40-41.

15 As I will discuss in Chapter 2, the idea that English families receive poor nutrition at home became a motif adopted by other mid-century cookbook authors. Isabella Beeton revisits this topic in her “Preface” to Household Management (1861) when she writes that “[m]en are now served so well out of doors, at their clubs, well-ordered taverns, and dining-houses” (iii). In mid-century cookbooks, poor nutrition is frequently aligned with the feminine, domestic sphere where hearty, more nutritious meals are associated with masculine, public spaces like the London Reform Club. It is also important to note that women would not be allowed dining access at such clubs until 1981 (“Reform Club – Introduction”). For more information on the “discomforts and suffering” of dining at home, see Helen Day’s article, “A Common Complaint” in Victorian Literature and Culture (36.2 (2008): 507-30).

16 See Broomfield, pages 45, 54, and 56 more information about the rise of gentlemen’s clubs and dining out in Industrial London. For how the midday meal, or “luncheon,” was prepared at home, see chapter 3, “Luncheon or Dinner?: The Victorian Midday Meal” (41-57).
Acton makes use of this same narrative when describing “foreign” (typically, French) and English cooking with her recipes for soup. In her instructions for preparing the French Bouillon, she writes, “It [beef] will be excellent eating, if properly managed, and might often, we think, be substituted with great advantage for the hard, half-boiled, salted beef, so often seen at an English table” (42).

Also, see Chapter 4 for a detailed re-reading of this image as well.

Census data for 1851 can be accessed online. See “UK Census.”

One of the characteristics of Acton’s social consciousness that is especially important to her role as a cookbook author is the way she intersects with feminist and educational debates unique to late Romantic and early Victorian writers. Elizabeth David has noted that part of why Acton’s career and recipes were not as successful as those published by Beeton stems from the generational gap between these authors. Because Acton was born in 1799, she fails to keep up with changing Victorian eating and dining habits for the mid-to-late nineteenth century; thus, Acton’s recipes fall more quickly out of fashion than those published by later recipe writers who accommodated for monumental changes in food technology, English taste, and imported foods.

Likewise, I would argue that Acton’s social consciousness is unique to her year of birth, 1799. While space limits me from comparing Acton’s “Preface” with images of female education in Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), much of Acton’s interest in institutional reform stems from the same problems Wollstonecraft cites. Like Wollstonecraft’s image of the “Java tree” which sheds “a pestiferous vapour around” the area beneath it (144), issues with poor nutrition and food preparation stem, in part, from educational and class restrictions that lead to a pestiferous British climate. Like the poisonous ground produced by the Java tree’s shadow—“death is in the shade”—women’s culinary educations during the midcentury did not allow for a climate of growth, but a climate of disease and poor nutrition. See Acton’s “Preface” and chapter 1, “Soups,” and Wohl’s Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian England (Harvard UP, 1983) for more information.

As I will discuss in the section, “Soups, Puddings, and Recipe-Poems,” part of Modern Cookery’s educational format, curriculum, and universal appeal stems from the structure of her recipe chapters, treating introductory remarks as instructor comments, recipes as miniature lesson plans, and observations as teachers’ notes.

In my conclusion, “Unexpected Motherhood,” the periodical press’s unabashed copying of Acton’s work contributes to issues of plagiarism that followed both the publication history of Modern Cookery and Victorian cookbooks more generally. Simultaneously, however, this trend towards copying and pasting cookbook content participates in the generative nature of the recipe and testifies to the perceived value of Acton’s writings.

As I previously mentioned in my reading of Hortense’s 250-word recipe for “Toast,” clarity becomes an important feature in the evolving recipe genre. How authors anticipate their readers’ levels of comprehension, understanding, and skill sets works to create a genre of recipe writing aimed at many kinds of female readers. See my Preface, pages 5-9, for my discussion of Hortense’s 250-word recipe writing style.

Acton was the first of her generation of cookbook authors to emphasize the importance of testing recipes. See page xxi from her first edition’s “Preface.” See Freeman (162-63) for questions of whether or not Acton actually tested her recipes in which she questions Acton’s use of the word “we” for recipe testing. Isabellas’ popularize the trend of recipe testing as she shows in her “Introduction” to Household Management (3-4).
Rundell’s book does not contain the largest number of compiled household receipts during the early nineteenth century. Rather, an 1823 cookbook, *Five Thousand Receipts* by Colin Mackenzie, numbers domestic knowledge in the thousands.

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, 80% of British citizens lived in rural areas and small towns (Broomfield 11). These rural and agrarian contexts regularly explain the ways cookbook authors worked to meet readers’ demands for content and instruction in household receipts. Rundell is just one example of this trend.

See the University of Reading’s Special Collections on “Archive of British Publishing and Printing” online. Records for the Longman Group can be found using call number “MS 1393.”

See Hardy; £67 11s 2d, specifically.
CHAPTER THREE
THE EDITOR: *MRS. BEETON’S BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT* BY ISABELLA BEETON (LONDON: S.O. BEETON, 1861)

Figure 26: Frontispiece, *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (S.O. Beeton, 1861).
[Mrs. English, Housewife:] “I see difficulties in your way as regards Publishing a Book on Cookery. Cookery is a Science that is only learnt by Long Experience and years of study which of course you have not had. Therefore my advice would be to compile a Book from Receipts from a Variety of the Best Books Published on Cookery . . . Published by Baldwin and Craddock, Longman and Co.” (qtd. in Spain 115-16)

[Mrs. Beeton, Editor:] “For the matter of the recipes, I am indebted, in some measure, to many correspondents of the ‘Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine’ . . . . [and] the works of the best modern writers on cookery.” (3)

In 1859, self-made publisher Samuel Orchart Beeton printed the first of twenty-four installments of Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management by his wife and co-editor of The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, Isabella Beeton. Unquestionably the most successful cookbook of the Victorian Age, Household Management has been a best seller for over 150 years, boasting 60,000 copies in its first year and a reported two million by 1868. Yet for all of Household Management’s popularity, it is far more famous, still, for another fact: very little of the book’s material was actually written by Isabella Beeton, and of its 2,700 recipes, only fifteen are her own. Surprisingly immune to the ethical concerns critics typically demand of plagiarists, Mrs. Beeton’s “lack of originality” has granted her nothing short of apotheosis by critics like Susan Daly and Robert G. Forman who prefer, instead, to identify her as a curator of the Victorian middle class, rather than a thief (370). Generally, critics agree: Beeton should not be governed by the same ethical rules used to sentence most plagiarists because although Household Management contains borrowed material, it is not a derivative work, “containing,” in the words of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “more wisdom to the square inch than any work of man” (156). As I will argue here, these “square inches” rely on Beeton’s integration of the poet-turned-cookbook-author Eliza Acton, whose recipes not only comprise the bulk of Household Management’s stolen material, but also the system Beeton uses to establish her cookbook’s recipes. By focusing on specific instances in which Beeton amends, “Miss Acton’s Receipt,” I argue that her
acknowledgement of Acton is far from “random” or “scanty,” as Nicola Humble has claimed, but a thoughtful rhetorical strategy borne out of the community culture of *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*. Because recipes demand active reading and because recipe readers are expected to apply what they have read, Beeton fosters a textual relationship between *Household Management* and *Modern Cookery* that helps to explain the former’s “deathlessness” as a Victorian best seller that eclipsed the previous success of Eliza Acton’s earlier work.

Of course, it is impossible to separate the “deathlessness” *Household Management* has achieved from the “deathlessness” of its iconic editor, “Mrs. Beeton” whose name and likeness have been “a potent commercial and cultural force” for well over a hundred years (Hughes 18). Since her death from puerperal fever at the age of twenty-eight, Mrs. Beeton has had a remarkable ability to reinvent herself from one generation to the next, marketed first by her publisher husband, Samuel Orchart Beeton, and later by his successors, Ward, Locke, and Tyler. Although the last work Isabella Beeton edited was, technically, the little known *Dictionary of Cookery* in 1865 (Liveing 42), the name “Mrs. Beeton” has continued to appear on countless works, introducing readers to everything from Caribbean cooking to microwave meals. More recently, Mrs. Beeton has been the subject of several plays, a PBS made-for-TV movie titled, *The Secret Life of Mrs. Beeton* (2006), and a BBC special, *The Marvellous Mrs. Beeton*, featuring food writer (and former model) Sophie Dahl as its host (2011). In fact, it is relatively easy for Beeton’s contemporary readers to imagine her within their kitchens: not only has she authored an incalculable number of books, but her likeness has also been appropriated by kitschy popular culture, reprinted on everything from tea towels and placemats to vintage “Victorian” aprons. Today, Beeton’s readers can even purchase miniature copies of *Household Management,*
which have been manufactured for a different kind of reader, neatly fitting onto dollhouse shelves.6

Yet Mrs. Beeton “was never the stately matron of our imaginings,” explains Nicola Humble in her “Introduction” to the abridged Oxford World’s Classics edition of Household Management (2000), but “a journalist throughout her married life” who worked tirelessly alongside her publisher husband on Bouverie and Fleet Streets for almost eight years (vi).7 Born to lower-middle-class parents in Cheapside and raised at the Epsom Grandstands when her widowed mother remarried the racetrack’s clerk, Isabella Beeton “was”—not surprisingly—“an unlikely arbiter of middle-class taste and manners” (Humble viii). Kathryn Hughes and Sarah Freeman agree, arguing that Beeton’s unorthodox childhood of unwonted physical exercise, German education, and assistant child rearing introduced her at an early age to household management, including organizational systems that would prove useful when editing her famous work (Hughes 54-55 and Freeman 163). It was almost “by flukish chance,” writes Hughes in her biography The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs. Beeton, that Mrs. Beeton “became one of the most famous women in history” (18).

The “flukish chance” Hughes describes has a lot to do with renewed interest in the Victorians during the early twentieth century, and the timely installation of Isabella Beeton’s portrait (fig. 27) at London’s National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in 1932. First exhibited on “Boxing Day,” December 26th, Isabella Mary Beeton (née Mayson) became the first photographic subject within the museum’s collection.8 According to Hughes, Beeton’s likeness may have seemed “Oddly out of place amongst the confident new arrivals, all oily swirls, ermine and purposeful stares,” but she was singularly captivating and instantly popular with the museum’s crowds (3). Captured in a hand-tinted albumen print at the age of twenty-one—just
one year after her marriage to Samuel Orchart Beeton—Isabella Beeton tilts her head and gazes placidly at the viewer, as one hand grazes a string of beads. Beeton’s simultaneously upright and languid position evokes depictions of the model Jane Morris by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and I would argue that there is something Pre-Raphaelite about Beeton’s likeness and pose. Indeed, Beeton’s bright features seem to gently blur the lines between photography and painting, as the newer medium in which she is captured attempts to recreate motifs audiences at the NPG would have associated with fine art. Indeed, it is difficult not to see Beeton’s lavish setting, ethereal pose, and stylish, nimbus-like coiffure and not to believe she has been appropriately placed between the Marquis of Curzon and the Duchess of Kent. Later, periodical commentators
would remark that Beeton’s figure was the epitome of Victorian femininity and motherhood: “small tub-like” and “black,” wrote one journalist, Beeton “strongly resembled Queen Victoria” despite the evident youth of the photograph’s subject.¹¹

Young and matronly, then and now, Beeton captures a lost world of the Victorian middle class for a servant-less public. Perhaps this is why, just a year after the photograph’s acquisition, Beeton’s portrait was issued as a postcard in the gallery’s gift shop, where “it established itself as the third most popular portrait in the whole collection” and became “one of the most widely recognized images circulating in British print culture” (Hughes 10).¹² As scholars who have studied both Eliza Acton and Isabella Beeton know, the significance of Beeton’s widespread exposure cannot be underestimated because it has a lot to do with the culinary and critical traditions that remember their work. Despite Mary Aylett and Olive Ordish’s enterprising attempt to uncover a portrait of Eliza Acton in First Catch Your Hare (1965), critics have never been able to substantiate any version of the former poet’s likeness, leaving Eliza Acton a “shadowy mystery” which starkly contrasts Mrs. Beeton’s carefully preserved image (Hardy 199).¹³

While our public fascination with Beeton gives us an idea of the real Mrs. Beeton’s short, productive life and her emergent cultural status, it tells us relatively little about The Book of Household Management, which forms the center of this history. Like most Victorian best sellers, Household Management has never been out of print, having undergone copious reincarnations.¹⁴ However, unlike most Victorian best sellers, Household Management is not a single-authored work, and the 1861 edition reprints a number of unauthorized materials written previously by some of the nineteenth-century’s most influential figures, including French chef Alexis Soyer and English medical reformer Florence Nightingale.¹⁵ According to Rachel Goodyear, Isabella
Beeton’s publisher-husband, Sam Beeton, had early success publishing “popular established works, often those which were unprotected following the cessation of perpetual copyright in 1774, thus minimising the risk to the publisher . . . [and] drawing an audience from the entire social spectrum of the middle-class” (24). *Household Management* isn’t unusual in the way it adopts S. O. Beeton’s general interest books, but the book is “unusual in being explicitly attributed to a woman editor,” observes Margaret Beetham (“Of Recipes” 18).

Indeed, *Household Management*’s full title, “Mrs. Beeton’s Book of—,” highlights the book’s layout in the style of the general household manual that has been pieced together, or “scrapbooked,” by a supervising editor. As *Household Management*’s frontispiece (fig. 21, page 75) indicates, Mrs. Beeton saw herself as a compiler (rather than an author) who was responsible for collecting a large body of information into a single volume. Conjuring up images of pre-Industrial, agrarian Britain, the crowded illustration embodies the tangible act of cutting and pasting artifacts into a vellum-bound journal in much the same way “printed or handmade” cookbook diaries were historically made by women (Theophano 122). According to Janet Theophano, it was not uncommon for women to cut and paste recipes and remnants into a personalized scrapbook, thus

> ... textually draw[ing] together vestiges of woman’s work, intellect, and social interactions: the food she prepares or hopes to prepare daily and ceremonially for her family, the people who comprise her world, and the interests that distract her from or engage her work. With the brief recipe texts and saved paper remnants, the writer constructs an image of herself . . . [and] capture[s] aspects of the work that they do, itself evanescent and often unnoticed. (122)

As Theophano’s quote reveals, this style of writing captures recipes, recipe writers, and family ceremonies in a way that physically remembers unseen women’s work by giving “permanence” to fleeting tasks (122). Although the act of constructing a recipe book creates what Ann E. Goldman calls, an “opportunistic autobiography,” at no point does Beeton construct an image of
herself as an “author” within the pages of *Household Management*, but persists in identifying as an “editor” of other women’s recipes.\(^{16}\) Clearly stated on the cookbook’s frontispiece, “edited by” precedes Mrs. Beeton’s name, and it is perhaps this reason why Beeton spends half of her “Preface” recounting the people who contributed recipes to her book as well as each of the countries of friends who “have aided me” with their “receipts.” Both Nancy Spain and Rachel Goodyear have argued that Beeton seemed to take the advice Mrs. English gave her “very seriously”: “compile a Book from Receipts from a Variety of the Best Books Published on Cookery” because “you have not had” the requisite experience (Spain 115-16 and Goodyear 41).

This chapter looks at the ways Isabella Beeton, “the editor,” draws together what Theophano calls “vestiges of women’s work” by considering the textual relationship she fosters with poet and best-selling cookbook author, Eliza Acton, within the pages of the 1861 edition of *Household Management*. I disagree with Mary Aylett and Olive Ordish’s claim that “Beeton rendered Acton’s writings obsolete” when she published *Household Management* in 1861 (184), arguing that Beeton relies heavily on Acton’s recipes as necessary contributions for her cookbook’s success. In doing so, I consider how Beeton uses Acton’s recipes in a style that would not have been unusual for women editors during her time, but part of a rhetorical strategy employed to engage the 60,000 middle-class Englishwomen subscribing to her sister project, *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*. While Eliza Acton was originally writing for a more general audience of 1840s housewives and servants, Beeton was writing for a clearly defined niche market of women who were intellectually curious and actively involved in the magazine’s culture as content creators. As I will show, this culture rendered readers more autonomous than earlier readers of Eliza Acton’s *Modern Cookery* because of a shared likeness with Queen Victoria. Later in this chapter, I will apply Susan J. Leonard’s theory about women editors and
recipe writing as a way to frame conversations about Beeton’s extensive use of Acton’s recipes. Leonardi’s theory helps to revise what has previously been seen as Mrs. Beeton’s theft of Eliza Acton’s recipes as a more natural process of community authorship that was unique to British women recipe writers and readers during the mid-nineteenth century.

Mrs. Beeton’s Englishwoman Reader: Domestic Ideology and the Classical Ideal

In the previous chapter, I described Eliza Acton’s tenuous relationship with her publisher, Thomas Longman, and the ways *Modern Cookery*’s “Preface” and its recipes comment on their working relationship, including Acton’s struggle to receive appropriate remuneration and professional acknowledgment for her revolutionary cookbook. In this section, I consider what it means for *Household Management*’s editor, Isabella Beeton, to be “Mrs. Beeton”: essentially, a cookbook and magazine editor who was not only married to her publisher, Samuel Orchart Beeton, but who was also his professional helpmate. I argue that Isabella and Sam’s working relationship allowed *The Book of Household Management* to capitalize on an active community of Englishwomen readers previously cultivated within the pages of *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*. My argument supports both Beetham’s and Goodyear’s claims that the relationship between the magazine and the cookbook is “crucial” to understanding the latter’s success because of the important role women readers played in this connection.17

In order to understand how *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* fostered a large, active readership, it is important to note that women’s magazines are, by their very nature, commodities, and that during the nineteenth century, women’s magazines played a crucial role in a complex market bent on consumer participation and a desire to sell goods. *Household Management* was, ultimately, an extension of this consumer culture and one of these goods.18
According to Freeman, magazines like the *EDM* emerged out of an increasing need for
“something which never existed before—easy, unsophisticated, relatively entertaining texts
which would hold their [readers’] interest—and at very low prices” (*Isabella and Sam* 67).19
Before Sam Beeton’s first issue of the *EDM* appeared for 2d. in 1852,20 the previous generation
of women’s magazines rarely reflected the lives of its readers, but a select group of upwardly
mobile Englishwoman in a style known as the “drawing-room journal.” Periodicals such as the
*Lady’s Magazine* (1770-1837) and the *New Monthly Belle Assemblée* (1847-70), for instance,
defined its readers as “ladies,” *not* “women,” whose superior social positions lacked
compatibility with England’s growing middle class.21 This generation of magazines, writes
Hughes, was not only ideologically and socially different from Sam Beeton’s later publications,
but also “slightly stiff, like an awkward visitor in the drawing room who refuses to stay for a
second cup of tea” (156).

Sam Beeton played an instrumental role in revising this awkward model, and he is
generally credited with creating some of the most common features of women’s magazines today,
including essay competitions, dress patterns, medical columns, problem pages, and prize
contests.22 Such features were attractive to mid-century readers and helped to ensure Beeton’s
success as a publisher. Moreover, by catering to the interests and private lives of middle-class
women, Beeton created a space in which readers could “see [their] own [lives] reflected in its
[the magazine’s] pages, and not that of some luckier, richer, cleverer creature” (Grieve qtd. in
Dancyger 35). While this emphasis on the shared needs and experiences of readers may seem
commonplace today, its origins lie in magazines like the *EDM* which were not afraid to ask,
“What does it mean to be a woman?” and perhaps more importantly, “How do I become her?”
As I will show, Sam Beeton was able to appeal to his target audience, middle-class
Englishwomen, through a highly visible rhetorical strategy that capitalized on their shared interests, values, and ideas of domestic women’s work. Moreover, this strategy helped readers to become active participants in the EDM’s community culture and in turn, become content creators.

In 1851, twenty-one-year-old Sam Beeton commissioned illustrator Julian Portch for the frontispiece of his new magazine for women, ensuring the most visible rhetorical strategy he would use to define the magazine and its readers for the next twenty-five years. The first periodical published specifically for middle-class women, The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine focused on readers’ shared interests and private lives: “cookery, household pets, toilette, sick nurse, dress, amusements . . . fashion, embroidery, fruit and flower garden, wisdom, wit, [and] poetry” (fig. 28). Portch, whose detailed sketches and battle scenes featured extensively in The Illustrated London News, pictured the domestic lives of Englishwomen in an imaginary and dreamy space: Hellenistic, feminine, and democratic, Portch’s Englishwoman is drawn as a classical figure, employing a common motif that “allowed the admirer to reveal an appreciation of higher ideals” (Loeb 34). Borrowed from fine art, Portch’s Englishwoman is scholarly and productive, providing a pattern for readers’ identities as “women,” while highlighting their shared interests, skills, and desires.

Portch’s frontispiece (fig. 28) offers some idea of how The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine imagined readers’ private lives, aligning domestic ideology and Englishness with the growing middle classes. At 9.5 x 7 inches, the EDM’s first issue was the size of a modern paperback, grey and modestly printed, the cover of its 32-pages barely provided enough space to accommodate Portch’s draftsmanship. Due to the paper (“stamp”) tax, English readers had grown accustomed to reading small pages densely packed with text (Lake 213). Small, but remarkably compact with meaning, Portch’s illustration depicts two classical muses—the left, a
Figure 28: Frontispiece, *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*, by Julian Portch (1851).
painter, the right, a writer—as they gaze upwards towards a bust of Queen Victoria. Positioned above a framed sketch of Windsor Castle, Victoria continues the muses’ upward gaze with a calm, maternal, feminine air, anchoring a vertical triangular space for the magazine’s title, “The English Woman’s Domestic Magazine.” Crowning Victoria’s likeness, “The English Woman” reminds viewers that the Queen is “also a domestic Englishwoman, whose moral power derives as much from her traditional female responsibilities as wife and mother as it does from her extraordinary constitutional position” (Hughes 163). Because “Athens was the state that had approached political perfection,” notes Lori Anne Loeb (34), to draw Queen Victoria’s likeness in a classical style meant to imagine a similar world in which domesticity, femininity, and Englishness could attain “perfection” and the status of high art. Similarly, Portch was not the only artist who tended to appropriate classical figures in his renderings of private life. After the lifting of the paper tax in 1854, Beeton and other magazine editors significantly increased the number of illustrations that ran alongside previously compact pages of text. By 1855, Queen Victoria became one of many likeness to be sketched in a classical form in the EDM, as, so, too, were “the aspiring middle class [who] could see themselves reflected” in the “antique world” (Loeb 35).

Yet Victoria’s “constitutional position” serves a surprising role in Portch’s illustration, joining—rather than dividing—the Queen’s private sphere with the private spheres of the Englishwomen below her (fig. 28). Flanking Victoria’s figure, two ionic columns have been inscribed with the magazine’s subjects, ranging from

- cookery
- fashion
- household pets
- embroidery
- toilette
- fruit and flower garden
Performing an important structural task, the pillars support Victoria’s bust, symbolizing the shared domestic interests that connect all Englishwomen. Inscribed on left- and right-hand columns, the blocked text above reveals how the *EDM*’s subjects provided a literal and figurative bridge (or possible ladder) between various members of Portch’s imagined female community—classical muses, Queen Victoria, and the large population of Englishwomen readers. At the pillars’ base lies the community’s core: a group of women huddled around a periodical (most likely, *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*) and engaged in the shared activities of reading, consuming, and creating. Depictions of women’s work highlight the practical applications of reading the Beetons’ magazine: working patterns for embroidery, stenciling figures, and making good use of the magazine’s helpful “tips” and “hints” for the nurturing of all animals and small creatures. While Portch distinguishes each figure by the particular household task in which she is engaged, he also portrays the core values that unite them: the centrality of domestic life for each reader, and the ways the *EDM* could be a successful guide in teaching them to become “women.”

A shared domestic ideology was just one of the significant ways magazines like the *EDM* were able to provide such vivid imaginings of a specific group of female readers. In *Women’s Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman’s Magazine*, editor Ros Ballaster (et. al.) writes that print media engages ideology as a way “to designate a particular aspect of social reality” in which “a coherent and systematic body of or set of ideas about the social world and social relations” become apparent (19). Because Portch’s illustration emphasizes the domestic lives of
Englishwoman, he reveals their collective ideological framework as it was defined by the less visible boundaries of gender, class, and nationality that constructed a very real social world. In her unpublished dissertation, *An Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy and Beeton’s Book of Household Management: Tradition, Innovation and Borrowing in Nineteenth Century Household Books* (University of Leeds, 1995), Rachel Goodyear argues that Sam and Isabella Beeton were especially appropriate for representing this world to their readers, having lived and worked together as magazine editors who closely identified with the growing middle-class. “That Sam and Isabella Beeton set up home in a suburban semi-detached villa,” writes Goodyear, “signifies their complete identification with the middle-class for which they wrote; as the middle-class sought to define itself, it created a new space for itself within the city” (30). That space, Goodyear seems to imply, was not just the Beetons’ private home, but also their shared professional one: *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*.

To this end, my definition of *community* expands on the one provided by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* in which the idea of “community” surpasses geographic barriers for individuals who lack “socially visible boundaries” (98). For readers of the *EDM*, community was determined less by a shared location (such as London or York) and more by an ideological status as “women,” not “ladies.” In this regard, naturally shared interests are at the heart of what connects women’s communities in the Beetons’ magazine in which “participation in an activity system” allows “participants [to] share their understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (Lave and Wagner 98). While many middle-class Englishwomen could easily discern their relationships to their *physical* communities, the *EDM* explicitly spells out what their relationship was to a their less visible community of domestic Englishwomen. Essentially, in the
words of Dror Wahrman, the *EDM* helped to provide readers with an “umbilical link” between “the gendered separation of spheres . . . and ‘domestic ideology’” (397).

**The Englishwoman Reader as Recipe Writer, Reader, and Contributor**

It was not just a shared likeness with Queen Victoria or their countrywomen which established readers as members of the *EDM*’s imagined community. It was also a shared identity as content creators who perceived the *EDM* as “their” magazine. Jennifer Phegley has argued that many Victorian periodicals imagined their audiences as critically engaged consumers who also performed dual roles as content creators, confirming her own position that feminist literary magazines like *Victoria* allowed women readers to travel “one step further . . . to become critics by speaking out within the pages of the magazine” (167). Indeed, magazines like the *EDM* are a wonderful example of what Phegley describes as an emergent tradition amongst mid-century periodicals that sought to empower women as active readers. By challenging prevailing notions that reading was “dangerous,” editors like Sam and Isabella Beeton promoted a Ruskinian idea of reading as something that was *necessary* for personal growth and moral fitness.29

Because of the *EDM*’s general illustrated format and its miscellaneous content, readers had an extraordinary number of opportunities to become content creators, which was made even greater, still, by the magazine’s serial publication schedule. These opportunities ranged from monthly contests for the best submitted essay or poem—typically, featuring a by-line with thoughtful feedback from the magazine’s editors—to one of the *EDM*’s most popular features, Isabella Beeton’s “Cookery, Pickling, and Preserving” column. In order to encourage readers to contribute recipes to the magazine’s pages, the Beetons placed an extraordinary level of importance on reader-tested recipes, vaunting readers’ exceptional skills as recipe writers and
soliciting their opinions. These “honied words,” writes Nancy Spain in *Mrs. Beeton and Her Husband*, were a staple of the *EDM*’s community culture, which is evident from the example below:

The very numerous recipes which appear in this Magazine are tried and tested and to those ladies who have favoured us with the results of their experience in cookery, pickling, preserving, etc., we have to tender our best thanks. We hope also to secure many more of these communications so that, by means of the *E. D. M.*, the knowledge and skill of a few may be acquired by thousands[.] (qtd. in Spain 119)

As I have previously mentioned, the distinction between “women” and “ladies” was an important rhetorical device for mid-century women’s magazines because it ensured a more accurate representation of the lived experiences, values, and tastes of a magazine’s subscribers. The above quote, however, makes a conscious choice to subvert the *EDM*’s regular use of “women” for “ladies,” elevating the social status of the *EDM*’s recipe contributors to a higher social rung above other subscribers. When the Beetons remark that *EDM* recipes are special because they “are tried and tested” by “ladies,” they assert this superior position. Whereas prize-winning poets and essayists were, simply, “women,” recipe writers were socially mobile, an image that would have been highly appealing to the aspiring middle-class.

Not surprisingly, Isabella Beeton appropriated this kind of flattery and incentive when collecting recipes for *Household Management*, and its primary aim to share “the skill[s] of a few” with the “thousands” who needed their help. Freeman has noted that in the several years it took Isabella Beeton to test and collect recipes for her cookbook, at least “2,000 [were] sent in” by *EDM* readers because Beeton “originally hoped to acquire hers [recipes]” through the magazine’s existing readership (165). Indeed, Sam and Isabella ran the notice “To Our Subscribers” (fig. 24) on a monthly basis for several years, inviting them to contribute original recipes that, ironically, had not been “copied from any existing ‘Cookery Book’” (this was
Isabella’s task). It is also worth noting that between the late 1850s and the time of *Household Management*’s publication in 1861, at least 50,000-60,000 women subscribed to the *EDM*. With 2,000 recipes received at six recipes per reader, one can safely assume that Isabella Beeton corresponded with no less than three hundred women when editing *Household Management*.

Yet the recipes *EDM* readers submitted to Isabella Beeton are less important than the liaison their submissions established, and how this liaison makes possible connections between communities of Englishwomen who would otherwise remain isolated. Here, Beeton performs the role of community organizer, transforming her role as the *EDM*’s “editress” into what would become her definitive persona in the magazine’s side project, “Mrs. Beeton” of *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management*. This is significant because reader-submitted recipes clearly helped the Beetons to actualize *Household Management*’s unprecedented quantity of material. As fig. 24 boasts, Beeton’s book was originally projected to be 700-800 pages, but far surpassed this number in 1861, when the first bound edition appeared with over 2,700 recipes (not including other materials within the book). It is further safe to speculate, then, that without the magazine’s readers, *Household Management* might never have been as “nearly thick as it was high” (Humble “Intro” xxxi). Scholars merely need to look at *Household Management*’s publication history to confirm this fact: of the 60,000 copies S. O. Beeton reportedly sold within its first year, *Household Management* was most likely either purchased by the *EDM*’s 60,000 subscribers or paid in kind to these same women, “as acknowledgement of their assistance” to the cookbook’s “editress.”

Later, I will argue that this culture of sharing recipes and inviting readers to contribute is important to the ways critics understand Isabella Beeton’s appropriation of Eliza Acton’s recipes within *Household Management*. But in order to do so, we must first establish how Isabella
TO OUR SUBSCRIBERS.

In another portion of this month's Magazine will be seen a notice and prospectus of a new work called BEETON'S BOOK OF HOUSE- HOLD MANAGEMENT, the first monthly Part of which will be published on November 1st. It is to be completed in from fifteen to eighteen Parts, and will form, when finished, a handsome volume of some 700 or 800 pages.

As it is desired that this volume should be as original and comprehensive as possible in all its departments, our subscribers are respectfully solicited to forward any new and authenticated recipes they may have been in the habit of using and testing.

As an acknowledgment of their assistance, a copy of the BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT will be presented to every lady who will furnish the Editress with, say, six original recipes connected with any "household department."

These recipes, it is almost unnecessary to observe, must not, of course, be copied from any existing "Cookery Book."

The recipes required may be ranged under the following heads—

I.
Recipes for Cooking, Pickling, Preserving, and for all the requirements of a Kitchen, or relating to the duties of a Cook.

II.
Recipes for Polishing, Cleaning, and for all matters relating to the duties of a Housemaid.

III.
Recipes and information relating to the duties of the Nursemaid, &c. &c. &c.

** For all other particulars the reader is respectfully referred to the prospectus which accompanies this number of the Magazine.

Figure 29: "Notice to Our Subscribers," The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine (Vol. 8.188).
Beeton processed and printed reader-submitted recipes before situating Acton’s un-submitted materials within this context. As with the magazine, *Household Management*’s recipes were published anonymously and without a signature attached to the receipt. While today’s community cookbooks frequently publish readers’ recipes with their full name, city, and state, the practice of anonymous journalism was still widespread during the mid-nineteenth century (27 Fraser, Green, and Johnston). As editors Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston contend in *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*, this kind of anonymity was “frequently under attack” because it ran the risk of forcing women “to write . . . in the style of ‘the clever college don’ favoured by the Saturday Review” or “‘the purely masculine standpoint’ endorsed by . . . Saint Paul’s” (27). Yet in *Household Management*, anonymity serves a different function because of the original context in which recipes were first solicited by and shared with the cookbook’s editor. As I have previously stated, readers’ recipes were part of a community culture that valued sharing individual experiences on domestic women’s work. Sharing recipes, then, is a symbolic act that, much like acts of sisterhood or motherhood, permits the “experienced few” to offer advice to the “inexperienced many” and relies on a rhetorical understanding that, through recipe writing, readers could elevate their social position from “women” to “ladies.” Isabella Beeton reinforces this idea in her notice “To Our Subscribers” when she writes, “every lady” will receive a copy of *Household Management* if they “furnish the Editress with, say, six original recipes” (fig. 29, emphasis mine).

In addition to establishing ongoing relationships between the editors of *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* and their subscribers, recipes also reveal the ways correspondents thoughtfully applied what Louise Rosenblatt calls, “efferent reading,” or the process in which a reader takes something away from a text and applies it to something else (qtd.
Here, the recipe becomes not just a rhetorical strategy, but also a rhetorical *style* in which women gain access to public debates through a set culinary formula. According to Phegley, nineteenth-century feminist magazines like *Victoria* actively “pushed” the intellectual powers of its readers by “creating a public forum for the expression of women’s critical reading skills” in the magazine’s “Correspondence” section and allowing them to become contributors to public debates (170). While a majority of recipes women submitted to the *EDM* were formulas for baking cakes and pickling vegetables, between the magazine’s inception in 1851 and through the 1860s, there is considerable evidence that the Beetons received more substantial “recipes” from readers. Two notable examples, “Recipe to Make a Romance” (fig. 30) and “An Infallible Recipe for Making Poor Relations,” invoke the predominant style of recipe writing as a way to comment on side-issues of the “Woman Question” such as women’s education, employment, and conflicting definitions of “womanhood.”

Featured in the 1853 issue of the *EDM*, “Recipe to Make a Romance” (fig. 30) describes romance writing through a specific and measured formula, or “recipe.” According to its author, romance writing begins, first, with setting, in which one “Take[s] an old castle, pull[s] down a part of it, and allow[s] the grass to grow on the battlements” (2.215). Gothic and unfriendly, the castle should be thoroughly dilapidated with gates that “creak most fearfully” from heavy rain. With their *mise en place* arranged, the writer can gently mix in other ingredients such as “an old man,” “a young lady,” and “either a skeleton with a live face, or a flying body with the head of a skeleton, or a ghost all in white” (2.215). “Dissolved to a jelly,” the young lady is transformed by the other ingredients and after enough time is “delivered by the man of her heart and married” (2.215).
RECIPE TO MAKE A ROMANCE.

Take an old castle, pull down a part of it, and allow the grass to grow on the battlements, and provide the owls and bats with uninterrupted habitations among the ruins. Pour a sufficient quantity of heavy rain upon the hinges and bolts of the gates, so that, when they are attempted to be opened, they may creak most fearfully. Next take an old man, and employ him to sleep in a part of this castle, with frightful stories of lights that appear in the western or the eastern tower every night, and of music heard in the neighbouring woods, and ghosts dressed in white who perambulate the place.

Convey to this castle a young lady, consign her to the care of the old man and woman, who must relate to her all they know—that is, all they do not know, but only suspect. Make her dreadfully terrified at the relation, but extremely impatient to behold the reality. Convey her, perhaps on the second night of her arrival, through a trap-door, and from the trap-door to a flight of steps downwards, and from a flight of steps to a subterraneous passage, and from a subterraneous passage to a door that is shut, and from that to a door that is open, and from that to a cell, and from that to a chapel, and from a chapel back to a subterraneous passage again. Here present either a skeleton with a live face, or a flying body with the head of a skeleton, or a ghost all in white, or a groan from a distant part of a cavern, or a shake of a cold hand, or a suit of armour moving—fierce, "put out the light, and then—"

Let this be repeated for some nights in succession; and, after the lady has been dissolved to a jelly with her fears, let her be delivered by the man of her heart, and married. Probabilium est.
This unlikely pairing of culinary rhetoric with literary narrative characterizes the *EDM*’s treatment of its women readers as creators and reveals the ways recipe writing provides a communal vocabulary for criticizing poor writing, low-brow reading materials, and images of women. In her book *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Kate Flint describes the ways periodical commentators encouraged women to study styles of writing in order to gain “some faint notion of the difficulties of authorship, and better still, imbibe a lesson in humility” (91). In “Recipe to Make a Romance,” recipe writing allows the author to do just that: by making a thorough study of the popular motifs and tropes familiar to romance fiction, she is able to provide a quantifiable formula that not only tests the effects of the genre’s ingredients, but also measures these effects with professional accuracy. She finds that like any tried and tested recipe, the results will always be the same: the story’s “young lady” will always be “dissolved to a jelly” and become a sweet, spreadable substance defined not as a “heroine” but as the “hero’s” wife.34 “Probatum est,” “it is proved,” emphasizes this effect, merging the acts of reading, writing, and creating into one activity much like the women depicted on Portch’s frontispiece (“Probatum est,” ph. OED).35

In the years Sam and Isabella Beeton co-edited *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*, the recipe emerged as a way for women readers to enter into the profession of authorship within the magazine’s pages and to question, measure, and test conflicting messages about their sex. Later, readers would continue this trend, appropriating recipe writing for other issues such as England’s divorce laws to debates about women’s education. Long-time contributor “M.S.R.,” the pseudonym of Maria S. Rye,36 offers a notable example in her “An Infallible Recipe for Making Poor Relations,” which, explains Rye, “produces that well-known and highly-flavoured domestic sauce, daily swallowed by every family in the United Kingdom, and labeled, ‘Poor Relations’” (6.280). The two variations of Rye’s recipe, “education for boys” and “education for
girls,” challenges the sexual differences that dominated nineteenth-century education debates (6.281).

Biting and critical, Rye’s recipe dramatizes the “middle-class domestic circle” and its long-suffering citizens from a “great social evil”—girls taught “to sit and look pretty” (6.280). According to Rye, the most dangerous ingredient in girls’ early educations is inertia because it creates “do nothing, un-wanting-anything, care-for-naught women . . . poor, pale, pithy, listless, saddened creatures, who, twenty to one, will fool away both themselves and their money as soon as their hour of emancipation arrives” (6.281). This pattern gives new meaning to ongoing debates of women’s education, work, and labor, advocating that England’s “surplus women” are not the country’s problem (as most commentators argued), but the faulty method used by English families to prepare young women.

In tracing how the recipe fails, Rye further argues that the basic ingredients for teaching young boys and young girls are the same, and that boys evince no differences from girls in core ingredients. In fact, writes Rye, boys and girls are the same:

But to return to the recipe. We take a family, all branches of which, up to a certain age, are treated in precisely the same manner; their privileges, duties, studies, are alike; but at a given period the boys, who, until that hour, have not evinced the slightest superiority in perception or exhibited greater aptitude for receiving knowledge, are suddenly removed, and enter upon a course of study, which, from long experience, is well known to brace the mind, produce accuracy of judgment, and give a considerable insight into realities of after-life[..] (6.281)

However, the recipe for girls, Rye shows, is very different:

. . . the girls on the contrary, remain in the lowland of elementaries for some three or four years more, after which they are advanced into the prettinesses of certain frivolities, better known under the general head of “accomplishments;” but, as nothing under the existing régime is accomplished, finished, or completed, we must be allowed to consider that term absurdly inappropriate. Nothing is thoroughly in the course of education through which girls, in the present day, are hastily dragged; where half, like so many miserable turkeys, are crammed and choked with but the husks of knowledge, containing, alas! only here and there—and that, as it were, by chance—a bare grain of wisdom; and
doomed with an indecent haste, before they are either fattened or fed—and not unfrequently before even this scanty meal is half-digested—to be brought at an early age, as actors upon a stage . . . the most pitiable of all created beings. (6.281, original emphasis)

I have quoted the above passages at length not to document the number of times recipe writing appears within the *EDM*, but to provide evidence of the ways Englishwomen appropriated recipe writing for other purposes and for other women. Moreover, it provides evidence of how influential this style of writing was to middle-class women readers who found in it a shared language to discuss everything from femininity to food. In writing against the gendered formulas that currently stunt women’s education, Rye makes a powerful statement against the widespread acceptance of gendered curriculums and female “accomplishments” John Ruskin would later criticize in “Of Queens Gardens.” According to Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, works like “Queens” promoted the idea that girls should be “turned loose” in the library because “the solitary acts of exploring a library and reading books are the defining rituals for a scholar” (67).

In the same style that Portch constructs domestic Englishwomen on the *EDM*’s frontispiece, M.S.R. constructs her own recipe and becomes the active consumer-creator the *EDM* imagines for its readers. But unlike subjects like “toilette” and “embroidery,” it is the language of household cookery, recipe writing, that provides Rye with an avenue to get there.

**Beeton Edits Acton**

In the previous sections, I discussed the prominent role readers played as content creators for both *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* and its sister-project, the 1861 edition of *Household Management*. I have borne witness to some of the visual and rhetorical strategies the Beetons used to engender readers as creators, arguing that recipe writing provided a shared vocabulary for women. Here, I move away from the magazine’s correspondents, turning, instead,
to one of *Household Management*’s most substantial contributors, the poet-turned-cookbook author Eliza Acton, whose recipes appear no less than 140 times within Beeton’s cookbook. Unlike the *EDM*’s readers, Eliza Acton never submitted recipes to Mrs. Beeton and was a strong proponent of intellectual copyright reform before her death in 1859. *Modern Cookery* appeared fifteen years prior to Beeton’s cookbook during “the hungry forties” and when middle-class women did not have easy access to household recipes. According to Janet Theophano, because cookbooks “embrace the past and locate a group in its present,” they become part of a process in which authors edit previous women’s knowledge that then gets “[p]assed on to the next generation . . . commemorate[ing] those who came before and create a bridge with those who will come after” (83). The placement of Acton’s recipes in *Household Management* is a wonderful example of this kind of continuum. By placing Acton’s recipes in specific passages of *Household Management*, Beeton not only provides a bridge between multiple generations of recipe readers and writers, but she also comments on the recipe as a community-authored text that is meant to be revised and edited for (and by) new generations of women.

Before I discuss how Beeton appropriates Acton’s recipes for the 1861 edition of *Household Management*, I want to address why recipe reading was so important for middle-class women. As I have previously mentioned, household managers were responsible for an extraordinary amount of unseen domestic women’s work, work that depended on their active reading of household manuals. Like “efferent reading” that requires readers take something from a text and apply it to real, critical situations, Beeton’s book identifies “the physical labor of the servants as well as the managerial labor of the middle-class woman” in a way that “exposes the household as a site of enormous labor” for Englishwomen (Zlotnick). This exposure teaches women “to negotiate . . . [the] labour relations of the home” (Guest 8-9) in a way that could be
first learned from a text, and then applied to their own lives. In her “Introduction” to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Household Management*, editor Nicola Humble argues that this application was extraordinarily important for middle-class women because “many of [Beeton’s] readers were in need of such guidance” and because they “liv[ed] completely different lives from those of their mothers and grandmothers” (xxiii).

Active reading wasn’t always an easy task and depended on the dual responsibilities of the recipe’s reader to understand instructions and the recipe’s author to impart those instructions in a language both women shared. In his novel *No Name*, Wilkie Collins captures a popular image that would have been familiar to Beeton and her readers: the struggling housewife, unversed in the art of cookery, who endeavors to keep an orderly home while cooking from recipes she cannot understand. Unlike Dickens’s idealized housekeepers who swing baskets of keys and prepare beef pudding *without* recipes, Collins’s housewife is made of different stuff, repeatedly defined as an awkward “giantess” who suffers from an incessant “buzzing in [her] head” that occurs when she reads recipes. When we first encounter Mrs. Wragge in Chapter 2 (Book 2), she is depicted poring over the pages of “an old-fashioned Treatise on the Art of Cookery, reduced under the usual heads of Fish, Flesh, and Fowl, and containing the customary series of receipts” (207). But instead of the crumbs of food or flecks of grease that provide material proof a recipe has been tested, Mrs. Wragge’s cookbook is “thickly studded with little drops of moisture, half dry,” signifying a very different kind of reader-response (207). Crying—not cooking—and tears—not grease—personify her relationship to the text’s instructions.

When read forgivingly, Collins’s description of the cookbook offers a number of phrases that suggest the problem with the cookbook’s recipes lies not in Mrs. Wragge’s mental dissonance, but in the cookbook’s unhelpful style for providing cooking instructions. For
instance, Collins describes the book as an “old-fashioned Treatise” filled with “customary receipts” (207, emphasis mine). In the previous chapter, I described the tradition of recipe writing that predominated household books before the mid-nineteenth century, arguing that before Eliza Acton’s Modern Cookery appeared in 1845, “customary” recipe writing was either intentionally scientific or vague and used confusing jargon to prevent women readers from gaining access to a “dilettante gentlemanly tradition.”

“Customary receipts” and “old-fashioned Treatise,” then, invoke the language of this tradition, suggesting that Mrs. Wragge’s cookbook contains the worst kind of recipes: recipes that have not been recently tested, updated, or modernized for a mid-century Englishwoman, but belong, instead, to an earlier generation of recipe readers and writers of which she is not a part. Notably, magazines like the EDM ensured that recipes were regularly revised for modern readers, safeguarding the recipe’s style as a popular form of women’s writing that was updated monthly.

Yet what appears to give Mrs. Wragge the most trouble is not just that the recipes are outdated, but the way the cookbook’s author employs a special kind of feminine shorthand inaccessible to outsiders. Filled with informal comments and notes, the recipe for an “Omelette with Herbs” provides instructions that only lead to more questions. Reading from the recipe, Mrs. Wragge cries, “‘Boil, but do not brown’—If it mustn’t be brown, what colour must it be? She won’t tell me; she expects me to know, and I don’t” (207). Susan J. Leonardi has argued that recipe reading is a communal act that “implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver” (370), and when Mrs. Wragge declares “she expects me to know” and “she won’t tell me,” she reveals that no kind of exchange can take place. Importantly, it is this kind of exchange of information that helped books like Eliza Acton’s Modern Cookery and Isabella Beeton’s Household Management to be so successful. By standardizing a system of writing that reduced cooking
instructions to “easily digestible nuggets” (Humble “Intro” xii), both Acton and Beeton provided Englishwomen with works that were more than just manuals of household duties, but indexes of possible solutions in which agreed upon knowledge was given and received.

Mrs. Wragge, however, isn’t as lucky as one of Acton’s or Beeton’s readers, and she grows increasingly obsessed with deciphering how to make an herb omelette, murmuring repeatedly, “Seasoned with salt, pepper, chives, and parsley” (209) and chanting, “And then turn the frying-pan over, then turn the frying-pan, then turn the frying-pan over” (208). But it is her final comment that reveals the real barrier between her and the recipe’s instructions: when Mrs. Wragge asks, “It sounds like poetry doesn’t it?” she subverts the explicit purpose of recipe writing and reveals the weighty mask she cannot penetrate (208). As I will show, there is an important distinction between recipes that are meant to be shared and recipes that are intentionally withheld and thus, not meant to be given.

Mrs. Wragge’s tear-stained recipe book is a powerful image, and I have chosen to discuss it not just because its weathered pages enhance the verisimilitude of No Name’s portrait of domestic life, but because of the profound way it captures the tradition of women’s writing Acton so successfully transformed and Beeton so successfully popularized. Mrs. Wragge’s obsessive, anxious remarks give modern critics some idea of how deeply involved recipe readers could be when grappling with vague instructions, and it is this kind of subjective prose—“Put a piece of butter the size of your thumb into the frying-pan”—that had many Englishwomen (not just Collins’s fictional housewife) exclaiming, “Look at my thumb, and look at yours! whose size does she mean?” (207). By their very nature, Mrs. Wragge’s comments are embodied because of the high level of involvement recipes require of their readers. That Mrs. Wragge cannot make an omelette using the instructions in the “old-fashioned Treatise” proves its failure to perform what
Leonardi has called the “prototypical feminine activity” of sharing recipes with other women (343).

It is my contention that two of the reasons Isabella Beeton felt comfortable editing Eliza Acton’s recipes for *Household Management* arose out of the community culture of recipe writing exhibited in the *EDM* that I have previously discussed, as well as a communal voice and level of encouragement Acton provides readers in *Modern Cookery*, assuming they will take an active role testing her recipes. Throughout *Modern Cookery*, Acton employs the subjective “we” and the objective “us” to describe a shared community of women who helped in testing and writing *Modern Cookery*’s receipts. It is this aligning of voices—the narrative voice with the larger communal voice of a group of female friends—that allows Acton to cross barriers and create a discourse that would have also included the cookbook’s audience. When she writes that “Our improvement[s]” to English cooking were previously “opposed by *our* own strong and stubborn prejudices,” Acton addresses a set of experiences she shares with other Englishwomen, (ix-xx, emphasis mine). Like Mrs. Wragge, Acton’s readers are expected to make active choices when using the cookbook’s recipes, and even *Household Management*’s editor, Mrs. Beeton, would not have been immune to these kinds of direct remarks. In fact, it is highly likely Beeton would have been even more attuned to Acton’s communal voice (“our” and “us”) after years of editing recipes for *The Englishwomen’s Domestic Magazine*. “Our” thus invites Isabella to become involved with *Modern Cookery* in two ways: she is one of “us” because, like Acton, she is also a compiler of women’s recipes, but she is also one of “us” because she is an Englishwoman reader who, like all readers who test recipes, become active participants in the recipes themselves.

In fact, we know from Beeton’s great-niece Nancy Spain that she was an especially active recipe reader who valued accuracy and accessibility when editing the recipes of other
women. “It was one of [Isabella’s] rules,” asserts Spain in her 1948 biography, “that ‘Nothing [was] to go into the book untried’” (119). Critics like Beetham have since disproved these kinds of remarkable claims, arguing that Spain’s image of Beeton was part of a marketing construct perpetuated by Beeton’s family and publishers, Ward, Locke, and Tyler, in an attempt to orchestrate a more experienced authorial persona who could then “parad[e] under the name of ‘Mrs. Beeton’” (“Of Recipes” 19). However orchestrated, Isabella’s youngest sister Lucy (née Mayson) provides several accounts of Isabella that help Spain to authenticate this portrait. She writes,

> With admiring eyes, [Lucy] watched her brilliant sister (who was always so smart and fashionable), whirling about the place, beating eggs and mixing pastry: divinely dissatisfied with her efforts. One of the cakes was a sad failure and turned out like a biscuit. Isabella handed it to Lucy and said, “This won’t do at all.”

Lucy ate it without a word. It may not have been up to Isabella’s standard, but it seemed very good. “It had currants in it,” said Lucy afterwards, wistfully. (Spain 119-20, original emphasis)

Lucy’s vivid description reproduces the social context in which recipes are first read, tested, and shared amongst communities of women, and Isabella’s assertion, “This won’t do at all” adds an important layer to this context, articulating the primary reason these communities altered the recipes they shared: was the recipe any good? Was it worth sharing? It is important to note that while a dry cake with currants might easily satisfy a peckish eight-year-old girl, Spain understands that Beeton was thinking in terms of the 1860s English housewife who was responsible for overseeing the preparations of her family’s meals and would have been judged harshly if she failed to meet the standards of middle-class taste. In her book *Family Ties in Victorian England*, Claudia Nelson explains that many “middle-class wives . . . were often seen as potentially incompetent, ignorant, or distracted” by the popular media, and could be quickly criticized for any lapse or “failure” to perform their “primary function . . . to make home pleasant”
(26 and 25). As both the editor of *Household Management* and *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Beeton was in a unique position to combat images like Collins’s Mrs. Wragge, writing in her “Preface” that she was “moved, in the first instance . . . to attempted a work like this . . . [by] the discomfort and suffering which I had seen brought upon men and women by household mismanagement”; she continues, “I have always thought that there is no more fruitful source of family discontent than a housewife’s badly-cooked dinners and untidy ways” (3).

According to Hughes, Beeton had at her disposal a rare skill for “bringing order to chaos and provisionality of the middle-class household” to paper (188). Apparently, “What excited her [Beeton]” was the process of “making lists, tables, [and] rules much more than . . . Victoria sponge or the best way to get stains out of silk” (188). In the pages that follow, I will show that organizing recipes to fit new systems of meaning was a large part of this process and fosters a narrative discourse between Beeton, her readers, and the former poet Eliza Acton in *Household Management*.

But to get at this narrative, we must first consider how revising and editing recipes can create new systems of meaning within women’s cookbooks and how these new systems can be applied to the recipes Beeton edits from Acton’s earlier cookbook. In her pioneering article “Recipes for Reading,” Susan J. Leonardi discusses how recipes become “an embedded discourse” in serial publications, arguing that when authors revise and reissue recipes for new editions, they alter a recipe’s relationship to the material that surrounds it, or what Leonardi calls, their “frame” or their “bed” (340). Using the example of “Red Devil’s Food Cake” that appears in the 1951 American edition of Irma S. Rombauer’s *The Joy of Cooking*—but is later deleted from the book’s 1963 edition—Leonardi describes the recipe’s deletion as an “embedded” act (341-42). By “purging” the recipe from subsequent editions of the book, Rombauer’s daughter,
Marion Becker, provides readers with a shorter number of recipes in the section on “Chocolate Cakes,” and as a result, enhances the value of Rombauer’s remarks, including the specific comment that red devil’s food cake is “Generally popular—but not with me” (qtd. in Leonardi 341). According to Leonardi, this omission “significantly alters the context of every other recipe” that follows, “enhance[ing] the recipes she [Rombauer] does bother with” and diminishing the recipes she doesn’t (342). Rombauer’s chocolate cake recipes are thus *embedded* because they respond to the text that surrounds them—the larger section on “Chocolate Cakes” and/or the preceding remarks Rombauer makes.

In the case of the recipes Beeton borrows from *Modern Cookery*, the process of moving recipes and embedding them in new material is especially meaningful because it vocalizes possible narratives about Beeton, the editor, who chose to leave that majority of Acton’s recipes uncredited. I agree with Leonardi’s theory that by modifying aspects of another woman’s recipes, an editor like Beeton performs an “embedded” act because new narratives are introduced to a text that did not exist previously. However, I am not convinced that these changes are meant to be transgressive, and I disagree, specifically, with Humble’s assertion that Beeton acknowledges sources like Eliza Acton in a “random and scanty” way (“Intro” xv). Rather, Beeton’s editorial choices show a high level of thoughtfulness about how she appropriates Acton’s recipes, and we see evidence of this thoughtfulness in the two labels she establishes for Acton’s reprinted work. The first label Beeton uses is “credited recipes,” or recipes Beeton has chosen to amend with the phrase, “Miss Acton’s Receipt” (of which there are three). The second label is “uncredited recipes,” or recipes Beeton chose to lift directly from *Modern Cookery*, revise, and alter, but also chose not cite (of which there are over 140). To get at the “embedded discourse” that arises when Beeton edits these texts, I have selected two of Acton’s
most influential recipes on household butchery credited within *Household Management*’s pages:

the landmark “To Bone a Fowl or Turkey without Opening It” and its compendium, “Another

Mode of Boning a Fowl or Turkey.”

The first instance we see of what Leonardi calls “an embedded discourse” occurs when Beeton

places Acton’s “To Bone a Fowl or Turkey without Opening It” (figs. 31 and 32) within the

middle—rather than at the beginning—of a larger chapter on “Birds.” Acton had originally

reserved a prominent position for this recipe in *Modern Cookery*, and used it as the instructions

on which her entire “Poultry” chapter was based (199-221). But when Beeton places Acton’s

recipe at the center of the chapter rather than at the beginning, she gives it a different frame,

consciously demoting “To Bone a Fowl” from its premier position and making it one of many

recipes in a larger compilation of other women’s writings. Recipe readers then and now have

always been uniquely attuned to recipe order when reading cookbooks. When authors endorse

choice recipes by giving them prominent positions—as Acton does with “To Bone a Fowl”—

they determine future adventures in reader response, or the likelihood that readers will “bother

with [them]” (Leonardi 342). By reordering the position of Acton’s recipe, Beeton alters other

aspects of its context too. Because it is no longer placed in a featured position, “To Bone a Fowl”

is firmly embedded in a mass of other material, erasing any signs of its initial importance and

removing its potential for influence over the recipes that follow. In *Modern Cookery*, Acton’s

intention was that the opposite be true of “To Bone a Fowl.” Having placed “To Bone a Fowl”

before any other poultry instructions, Acton devised an underlying system on which all of the

chapter’s recipes were based. This kind of intentional “embedding” is especially common of

cookbooks and functions “in a sort of Grant Tradition of recipe sharing,” writes Leonardi, where

“each recipe thus . . . comments on every other recipe in the section” (342).
CHAPTER XII.

POULTRY.

TRUFFLED SAUSAGES; (Saucisses aux Truffles.)

With two pounds of the lean of young tender pork, mix one pound of fat, a quarter of a pound of truffles, minced very small, an ounce and a half of salt, a seasoning of cayenne, or quite an ounce of white pepper, a nutmeg, a teaspoonful of freshly pounded mace, and a dessertspoonful or more of savoury herbs dried and reduced to powder. Test a morsel of the mixture; heighten any of the seasonings to the taste; and put the meat into delicately clean skins: if it be for immediate use, and the addition is liked, moisten it, before it is dressed, with one or two glasses of Madeira. The substitution of a clove of garlic for the truffles will convert these into Saucisses d'Ail, or garlic sausages.

TO CHOOSE POULTRY.

Young, plump, well-fed, but not over-fitted poultry is the best. The skin of fowls and turkeys should be clear, white, and finely grained, the breasts broad and full-fleshed, the legs smooth, the toes pliable and easily broken when bent back; the birds should also be heavy in proportion to their size. This applies equally to geese and ducks, of which the breasts likewise should be very plump, and the feet yellow and flexible: when these are red and hard, the bills of the same colour, and the skin full of hairs, and extremely coarse, the birds are old.

White-legged fowls and chickens should be chosen for boiling, because their appearance is the most delicate when dressed; but the dark-legged ones often prove more juicy and of better flavour when roasted, and their colour then is immaterial.

Every precaution should be taken to prevent poultry from becoming ever so slightly tainted before it is cooked, but unless the weather be exceedingly sultry, it should not be quite freshly killed. If pigeons only

*If from accidental circumstances it should become apparently unfit for table, it may be restored to an estable state by the same means as fish; it should not, however, be purchased, at any time, when it exhibits a greenish tint on any part of the skin, as this indicates its being already stale.

Figure 31: “To Bone a Fowl or Turkey without Opening It,” *Modern Cookery in All Its Branches* by Eliza Acton (1845).
Beeton’s reordering of Acton’s recipe—most likely an alphabetic one—both erases this tradition and creates a new one. Moreover, Beeton has systematically removed “To Bone a Fowl’s” novelty, as described by Acton in her cookbook’s “Preface”: “Our directions for boning poultry, game, &c., we may venture to say, are entirely new, no author that is known to us having hitherto afforded the slightest information on the subject” (xxii). By itemizing Acton’s instructions and removing this prefatory remark, Beeton catalogues “To Bone a Fowl” as she might any other set of instructions, remarking that like the recipes that surround it, Acton’s recipe is not particularly special, nor is it necessarily new. This constructs a new “frame” or “bed” that is particularly important to the social context of Beeton’s organizational system (fig. 32). When Acton first composed “To Bone a Fowl,” she was writing in response to the rampant malnutrition and culture of misinformation that informed cooking in the “hungry forties,” a time at which learning household butchery was necessary for many women readers. But by 1861, Acton’s instructions are more than fifteen years old, and it is no longer true that “no author that is known to us” has written on “boning poultry” because, as Beeton shows, “Miss Acton’s Receipt” has done so.

Contextually, it is easy to surmise that “To Bone a Fowl” belongs to a different generation of English cooking and that Beeton’s readers would have belonged to a newer generation: one that was more interested in learning about birds than boning them. According to Beetham, one of the hallmarks of the publishing house S. O. Beeton was that it “specialised in general knowledge, miscellanies, [and] encyclopedias” (“Of Recipes” 17-18). This is especially true of Beeton’s chapter on “Birds,” which moves first from an overview of classifications—“Birds of Prey, Perches, Walkers, Waders, and Swimmers”—to “their habits of life” before ever offering recipes for cooking poultry (210, see fig. 32). Nothing about this scientific approach,
CHAPTER XX.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON BIRDS.

"Birds, the free tenants of land, air, and ocean,
Their forms all symmetry, their motions grace;
In plumage delicate and beautiful;
Thick without burthen, close as steel's scales,
Or loose as full-blown poppies to the breeze." - The Pelican Island.

987. The Divisions of Birds are founded principally on their habits of life, and the natural resemblance which their external parts, especially their bills, bear to each other. According to Mr. Vigors, there are five orders, each of which occupies its peculiar place on the surface of the globe; so that the air, the forest, the land, the marsh, and the water, has each its appropriate kind of inhabitants. These are respectively designated as Birds of Prey, Perchers, Walkers, Swimmers, and Swimmers; and, in contemplating their variety, lightness, beauty, and wonderful adaptation to the regions they severally inhabit, the functions they are destined to perform in the grand scheme of creation, our hearts are lifted with admiration at the exhaustless ingenuity, power, and wisdom of Him who has, in producing them, so strikingly "manifested His handiwork." Not only these, however, but all classes of animals, have their peculiar ends to fulfill; and, in order that this may be effectually performed, they are constituted in such a manner as will enable them to carry out their conditions. Thus the quadrupeds, that are formed to

ROAST TURKEY POULTS.

991. INGREDIENTS.—Turkey poult; butter.

Choosing and Trussing.—Choose a plump bird, and truss it in the following manner:—After it has been carefully plucked, drawn, and singed, skin the neck, and fasten the head under the wing; turn the legs at the first joint, and bring the feet close to the thighs, as a woodcock should be trussed, and do not stuff it.

Mode.—Put it down to a bright fire, keep it well basted, and at first place a piece of paper on the breast to prevent its taking too much colour. About 10 minutes before serving, dredge it lightly with flour, and baste well; then nicely frothed, send it to table immediately, with a little gravy in the dish, and some in a tureen. If at hand, a few water-cresses may be placed round the turkey as a garnish, or it may be larded.

Time.—About 1 hour. Average cost, 7s. to 8s. each.

Sufficient for 6 or 7 persons.

Seasonable.—In full season from June to October.

The Feathers of the Turkey.—Human ingenuity has subjected almost every material to the purposes of ornament or use, and the feathers of turkeys have been found adapted for more ends than one. The American Indians convert them into an elegant clothing, and, by twisting the inner ribs into a strong double string, with hemp or the inner bark of the mulberry-tree, work it into mats. This throws has a very rich and glossy appearance, and is as fine as silk stuff. The natives of Louisiana used to make fans of the tail, and four of that appendage joined together was formerly constructed into a parasol by the French.

TO BONE A TURKEY OR FOWL WITHOUT OPENING IT.

(Miss Acton's Receipt.)

992. After the fowl has been drawn and singed, wipe it inside and out with a clean cloth, but do not wash it. Take off the head, cut through the skin all round the first joint of the legs, and pull them from the fowl, to draw out the large tendons. Raise the flesh first from the lower part of the backbone, and a little also from the end of the breastbone, if necessary; work the knife gradually to the socket of the thigh; with the point of the knife detach the joint from it, take the end of the bone firmly in the fingers, and cut the flesh clean from it down to the next joint, round which pass the point of the knife carefully, and when the skin is loosened from it in every part, cut round the next bone, keeping the edge of the knife close to it, until the whole of the leg is done. Remove the bones of the other leg in the same manner; then detach the flesh from the back and breast-bone sufficiently to enable you to reach the upper joints of the wings; proceed with these as with the legs, but be especially careful

Figure 32: “General Observations on Birds” and “Miss Acton’s Receipt,” Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management by Isabella Beeton (1861).
however, “was . . . particularly radical for readers of *Household Management,*” writes Humble, but it was unusual in its “assumption of the intellectual curiosity of those female readers, crediting them with enquiring minds and a desire for self-improvement” (“Intro” xiv). It is this respect for readers’ intellectual curiosity and a general systematic presentation that helps to explain why Beeton reorders Acton’s recipe.

The new position Beeton provides Acton’s recipe has symbolic meaning as well. Reading *Household Management,* it is easy to imagine Eliza Acton as another one of Beeton’s classified animals—appropriately rearranged, Eliza Acton, the poet and author of *Modern Cookery,* now fits neatly into a Beetonian system of classification “of the best modern writers on cookery” first describe in the cookbook’s “Preface” (3). “Miss Acton’s Receipt,” therefore, further comments on this system, representing the special code for locating Acton within Beeton’s classification. And, it is not just Acton Beeton reorganizes, but the titles of Acton’s recipes as well: “To Bone a Fowl or Turkey” has become “To Bone a Turkey or Fowl” (note the word order), suggesting that Acton’s recipe now “fits” *Household Management*’s classification of birds (222). Natalie Kapetanios Meir argues in her article on “Victorian Dining Taxonomies” that changing word order became part of the new system for writing conduct literature during the mid-nineteenth century, and *Household Management* provides some of the strongest examples of this trend (133). According to Meir, Beeton’s use of “must” and “should” illustrate moments in which readers are provided with “corrective[s]” that rearrange everything from acceptable social behavior to how to properly use forks (133, 138-39).

As for issuing correctives, Beeton’s version of “To Bone a Turkey” is surprisingly unremarkable, preserving Acton’s original recipe rather than correcting it. Although it is clear that Beeton has gone to great lengths to reformat Acton’s recipe with a new script, typeface, and
title, Beeton has made almost no changes to the original recipe’s content, and for the most part, leaves Acton’s wording in its place. The area where Beeton does differ, however, is in the recipe’s final paragraph when she corrects Acton’s comma-heavy punctuation by introducing a semicolon and attaching the phrase, “but it [the bird] must be gently cooled, or it may burst,” to the end of the recipe (223). Given the extent to which Beeton revises 140 of Acton’s recipes throughout the rest of the book, these changes are relatively small, suggesting that Beeton had different intentions. Moreover, Beeton’s choice of revisions suggests she only intervenes at points that fix errors in punctuation or clarify cooking instructions. In fact, it is hard not to read Beeton’s version of “To Bone a Turkey” with the script “Miss Acton’s Receipt” without imagining that she has deliberately held herself back and controlled the “cunning hand” Samuel Beeton admired so much when working alongside his wife (Liveing 42). Beeton thus preserves Acton’s recipe, “To Bone a Fowl,” suggesting that the recipe may be alphabetized, re-categorized, and reformatted, but it is still “Miss Acton’s Receipt.”

Some of Beeton’s most interesting changes to Acton’s recipes occur in the following entry because they open a discourse between Beeton and Acton about English taste. In the 1861 edition, Beeton includes “Another Mode of Boning a Turkey or Fowl” immediately after “To Bone a Turkey” (223), directly copying the order in which these two recipes first appeared in the 1845 edition of *Modern Cookery* (199-201). Whereas Beeton has previously made no substantial changes to Acton’s first recipe, she makes a conspicuous deletion in the second one, notably removing Acton’s authoritative voice from the revised version (201). In the original recipe, for example, Acton describes a possible modification to “Another Mode” commonly referred to as “a galantine”: “French cooks add three or four onions to these preparations of poultry (the last of which is called galantine); but these our own taste should lead us to reject” (201). This kind of
supplemental detail is typical of Acton’s style in *Modern Cookery* where Acton encourages readers to try alternate versions of the same dish. From the French adjective *galant*, meaning “gallant” or heroic, a *galantine* requires that the cook be more “gallant” or heroic as well, taking more time (an hour) to produce more lavish results. By inviting readers to meditate on “our own”—English—“taste” and to judge, for themselves, if the variation is any good, Acton creates a discourse with readers who take an active part in testing the recipe themselves.

What Beeton does with Acton’s comment is truly interesting: she deletes it, removing any mention of “the French way” from this or subsequent editions of the recipe. Appearing to have succumbed to Acton’s rejection of *galantine*, Beeton does what all recipe writers expect of their readers by revising “Another Mode” and making it her own. According to Leonardi, this is part of what makes recipes resemble other genres such as “Folktales, ghost stories, [and] jokes” (344). Recipes, like folk tales and ghost stories, are repeated, revised, and remade. Yet unlike these genres, the recipe has a result that is much more tangible because it is significantly altered when changes are made to the original text, echoing Margaret Homan’s observation in *Bearing the Word*: “women may value the literal more than men do” (344). This is especially true of Beeton who understood that recipes requiring additional time not only needed to ascribe to notions of English “taste,” but they also needed to meet housewifely demands of domestic economy. And this is where Beeton really makes “Another Mode” her own, taking Acton’s advice about “our tastes” by economizing the recipe. Perhaps one of the greatest misperceptions about *Household Management* today is that its recipes are all extravagant, featuring “Turtle Soup” and sentences like “take 12 dozen eggs.” But *Household Management* is primarily frugal “with many pages devoted to plain family dinners and the use of left-overs” (Humble “Intro” vii).
One assumes that Beeton agreed with Acton’s authority, and her choice to listen to the former poet is a significant part of the discourse that emerges between the two authors in *Household Management*. This discourse, however, is rife with tensions. By eliminating Acton’s final sentences from “Another Mode,” Beeton systematically removes the authorial persona with which she is so inclined to agree, displacing any authority Acton had in her original recipe onto the bombastic narrator that equates the “mistress of the house” with the “commander of an army” in the book’s opening chapter (7). Although “Another Mode” is attributed to “Miss Acton” and the recipe is subtitled as “Miss Acton’s Receipt,” the recipe is reproduced by Mrs. Beeton’s deft hand and is a little more nuanced because of this. A second persona emerges: the editor, Mrs. Beeton, who edits Eliza Acton’s recipes.

**Conclusion: The Editor’s Wife**

As with Eliza Acton, I think it is important that critics consider Isabella Beeton’s writings in relation to her editor and the ways valuable life writings document this relationship. For Acton, this material is the most limited, and scholars owe an extraordinary debt to Sheila Hardy and her biography *The Real Mrs. Beeton: The Story of Eliza Acton* (2011) which has made primary source documents for Acton’s life widely available. For Isabella Beeton, historian Kathryn Hughes’s work *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs. Beeton* (2007) gives us similar information in the form of the Mayson-Beeton archives purchased by Hughes in the late nineties. As the current owner of the archives, Hughes has provided us with samples of Isabella and Sam’s private letters, making it possible to compare the private writings of two very public individuals. These letters reveal Isabella Beeton’s propensity for editing over writing that made her one of the great editors of Eliza Acton’s recipes.
According to Janet Theophano, for those women who found it difficult or impossible to write about their own lives, the cookbook provided a way to appropriate recipe writing as “a vehicle for making themselves visible” (9). This visibility, it would seem, had a lot to do with Beeton’s ability to edit recipes, since she lacked the life experiences of writers like Acton who spent at least ten years testing her cookbook’s recipes. Yet unlike Acton, Beeton didn’t have to worry about supporting herself through writing, nor did she live with the burden of an editor’s rejection letter. Her marriage to Samuel Orchart Beeton provided her a unique opportunity not often available to women journalists during this period: the role of “editress” instead of author. Indeed, the opening notes to her cookbook are filled with trepidation, a sense of regret, and definitely fear.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the ways Elizabeth Robins Pennell appropriated the recipe for aesthetic purposes, elevating it to the status of high art. For now, Isabella Beeton continues to be a literary figure, regularly conjured by playwrights and musicians hoping to depict the Victorian age.

Notes

1 One of the earliest known documents on Household Management, Mrs. English’s letter, dated “Newmarket, July 21, 1857” (Spain 115), is reproduced in full in the appendix.

2 While critics typically designate the year 1861 as the official date of publication for Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management, this date marks the binding of the first bound edition, not the first monthly part. In her unpublished dissertation, An Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy and Beeton’s Book of Household Management: Tradition, Innovation and Borrowing in Nineteenth Century Household Books (University of Leeds, 1995), Rachel Goodyear notes that Isabella Beeton’s first of twenty-four serials appeared in “the autumn of 1859 and cost threepence”; the first complete volume appeared on 1 October 1861 at “seven shillings sixpence” (38). See Goodyear (38-44) as well as Nancy Spain’s biography, Mrs. Beeton and Her Husband (123).

3 See Humble’s “Introduction” to Household Management (vii) and Driver/Attar. It is difficult to gauge the accuracy of these numbers as publishers like S. O. Beeton regularly inflated their annual reports. See Humble, “Intro” to HM vii; Beetham 59; and Ballaster et. al: “Actual numbers of readers of magazines are notoriously hard to establish. This is because they
command so many 'hidden' readers - those who do not subscribe to, or buy, the magazine, but have access to it by some other means”

4 See Humble’s “Introduction” to Household Management.

5 Add information on some of Beeton’s more irregular titles.

6 Kathryn Hughes quickly references Beeton’s commodification in her biography (see page 18, for instance), but there are a remarkable number of online retailers and private sellers marketing her likeness. See users “ALavenderDilly” and “MiniBookforDollHouse” on Etsy.

7 Rachel Goodyear points out that Sam Beeton opened operations at “18 Bouverie Street” in 1855 (25). In her book Isabella and Sam: The Story of Mrs. Beeton, Sarah Freeman lists “148 Fleet Street” as the offices of Charles Clarke and Beeton by 1851 (71).

8 For more details about Isabella Mary (née Mayson) Beeton’s portrait, visit the National Portrait Gallery’s website.

9 In considering Beeton’s portrait and the Pre-Raphaelites, I am indebted to Dr. Christopher Rovee for this insight.

10 Hughes describes these portraits briefly on pages 3-4 of her biography’s first chapter.

11 See Hughes (8).

12 In his “Foreword” to Sarah Freeman’s Isabella and Sam: The Story of a Love (1977), H. Montgomery Hyde explains that Beeton’s postcard was “accompanied by a few explanatory words written by Mrs. Margaret Mackail, which emphasized how husband and wife were ‘mutually helpful in their literary work’ and how to his inspiration her own principal book ‘distinguished by its intellectual and interesting qualities’, owed its origin” (13). While I have not been able to locate an image of this artifact, it is worth noting that the NPG still sells high-quality copies of this image in its store.

13 See Sheila Hardy’s discussion of Acton’s mysterious likeness in The Real Mrs. Beeton (199). In their 1965 book First Catch Your Hare: A History of the Recipe-Makers, Mary Aylett and Olive Ordish claimed to have uncovered a portrait of Eliza Acton, dubiously titled, “Mrs. Acton” (plate 12, page 182). Scholars have since disproven its authenticity, most likely because it is an 1803 pencil drawing (1803) of one of Eliza Acton’s family members, drawn when she as only four years old. See Appendix II: Images, for this portrait or visit the National Portrait Gallery’s digitalized collection online.

14 The number of “spinoffs” and “reincarnations” of Beeton’s book has been studied by Dena Attar, Elizabeth Driver, Margaret Beetham, Nicola Humble, and many others. As I show on the next page, it is difficult to gauge exactly how many editions of the book have been printed in English alone; see Driver and Attar for the most complete bibliography.


17 See Beetham ("Of Recipes" 18) and Goodyear (23).

18 See Beetham et. al, (1, 4, and 10).

19 Many scholars have commented on publishing trends towards lighter reading and previously underrepresented classes. See Chris Braggs, “Ladies’ Reading Rooms and British Public Libraries 18-18” on how lending libraries helped cater to the growing demand for light

20 In their chapter on “The General Illustrated Magazine,” Beetham and Boardman note that the *EDM* first appeared at 2d. per issue in 1852 and was later raised to 6d. in 1860, which “was a typical cost for the rest of the period” (32).

21 The different kinds of women’s magazines that appeared during the Victorian period have been copiously studied by Margaret Beetham and Kay Boardman in their work *Victorian Women’s Magazines: An Anthology*. See chapters “The Drawing-Room Journal” (21-31) and “The Ladies’ Paper” (53-59) for more information on the distinction between “women” and “ladies” that helped magazines to define their targeted audiences. Also see Ros Ballaster’s *Women’s Worlds Ideology, Femininity and the Woman’s Magazine* (88) and Nancy Dancyger’s *A World of Women* (53-55) for similar commentary on the ideological rhetoric of “lady” versus “woman” readers.

22 For information about Sam’s innovations to magazine publishing, see Freeman’s *Isabella and Sam* (75), Hughes’s chapter “A Most Agreeable Mélange” (151-79), and Humble’s “Introduction” to the 2000 Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Household Management* (x-xv). Margaret Beetham and Kay Boardman offer detailed examples of these novel features in their work *Victorian Women’s Magazines: An Anthology*, noting that these features were “commercial,” “rhetorical,” and “structural” strategies that helped magazine editors like Sam Beeton “to create a loyal readership” (4).

23 See Hughes 161.

24 See Williamson.

25 According to Kathryn Hughes and Sarah Freeman, Portch’s illustration appropriates the style of *Household Words* and *Family Friend*, which, like the *EDM*, also sold for 2d. (Hughes 61-62 and Freeman 75).

26 Before Sam’s tenure at the *EDM*, the price of printing books and periodicals was expensive and determined by increased by what Sarah Freeman calls “so-called taxes on knowledge” in Isabella and Sam (67). In 1851, publishers paid 3d. per pound of paper and 1 and 6d. per advertisement; by the time *Household Management* was published in 1861, the advertisement tax had been abolished in 1853, the stamp duty in 1855, and the paper duty in 1861 (Freeman 67 and 314).

27 I am not the first to make this particular connection with the material *EDM* and the magazine Portch depicts on the magazine’s frontispiece. Kathryn Hughes has also noted that the “cluster of three girls [are] busy reading a copy of what is presumably the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*” (163). Overall, I provide a similar reading of Portch’s illustration as Hughes, and I have cited the similarities in our readings where appropriate.

28 Add international readers—see magazine’s editors letters.

29 This, essentially, is Phegley’s thesis, outlined on pages 1-2 of *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*.

30 Benedict Anderson notes that communities are “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives [there is] the image of their communion” (6).
As Flint notes in her section on “Methods of Reading,” Rosenblatt’s terminology consists of a binary between “aesthetic reading” and “efferent reading.” The former “involves experiencing a text fully, imaginatively living through its events as they are encountered,” whereas the latter “involves taking something away from the reading, making use of it” (90).

See the following volume and page numbers for these articles: “Whatever Shall I Do?” (Vol. 8.179+), “What We Used to Wear” (Vol. 7.15+), and “[The] Amazons” (Vol. 5.238-239+).

See also Barbara Onslow’s Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain for her discussion of the challenges that faced female journalists as they discovered new ways to enter public debates. Onslow writes that those women who took up “the challenge of journalism” found the pages of the periodical “an arena to debate directly those social and political issues from which women were excluded at all levels of government, a vehicle to promote political and religious beliefs, [and] a channel to educate or influence other women” (16).

Mary Poovey has written extensively about many of the patterns “Recipe to Make a Romance” identifies. “Images of enclosure and escape,” she writes, create patterns that dominate much of the historical tradition of women’s literature (xi).

While rare in contemporary usage, “Probatum est” is especially fitting for recipe writing—“Orig. in recipes or prescriptions: ‘it has been proved or tested’. Hence more generally, used as a formula of approval or recommendation, or to indicate a proven truth” (“Probatum est,” ph. OED).

Until recently, M.S.R.’s identity has been difficult to trace. I am grateful to Marion Diamond’s impressive biography of M.S.R., Emigration and Empire: The Life of Maria S. Rye (Routledge 2013), in which she traces rare primary source materials between Rye and her journalism career (xiv).

Of the relatively few biographies available on Beeton, Nancy Spain’s Mrs. Beeton and Her Husband (1953) provides what Kathryn Hughes calls a “splashy” but “sloppy” narrative of Beeton’s life: “Spain was far less of a scholar than Hyde, and her writing on Mrs. Beeton is spattered with factual errors” (15). For this reason, Spain’s biography must be used with caution even with its rich primary source research from the Mayson-Beeton families.

Our primary source for Isabella Beeton’s time testing recipes in her Pinner kitchen comes from Nancy Spain’s authorized biography, Mrs. Beeton and Her Husband (Collins, 1948). Spain was one of the few journalists permitted to interview and publish correspondence with members of the Dorling-Beeton families. At the time, Lucy Smiles was Isabella’s only living sister and the former flower girl at Isabella and Sam’s 1856 wedding (Spain 109).

“Credited” and “uncredited” are terms I use to differentiate between the three recipes Beeton felt deserved citation/attribution to Eliza Acton and the large number of recipes she didn’t. Beeton does not use these attributions within her text.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE AESTHETE: THE FEASTS OF AUTOLYCUS: THE DIARY OF A GREEDY WOMAN BY ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL (NEW YORK: SAALFIELD, 1900)

Figure 33: Frontispiece, The Feasts of Autolycus: The Diary of a Greedy Woman by Elizabeth Robins Pennell’s (1896).
“All animals eat. An animal that eats and thinks must think big about what it is eating not to be taken for an animal.” —Adam Gopnik (“What’s the Recipe?” 8)

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the language of recipe writing permitted readers of *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* and *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* a shared vocabulary in which to comment on everything from female “accomplishments” and gendered education to lowbrow culture and romance reading. Here, I consider what can only be described as the grandchild of this mid-century style of writing: *fin-de-siècle* recipe writer and journalist, Elizabeth Robins Pennell, wife of the artist Joseph Pennell and biographer of James McNeil Whistler. Part art critic, part journalist, Pennell stylized herself as a female aesthete rather than a recipe writer, adopting the language of aestheticism to recipes and creating a hybrid genre, or what we call “food writing” today. According to Alice L. McLean, “Over the course of the nineteenth century, a rigid gender gap solidified . . . men’s and women’s food writing[s]” in which male chefs were situated as “gourmands,” “artists,” and “determin[ers of] public taste” whereas women were the record keepers of household management, cooking, and the home (15). In *The Feasts of Autolycus: The Diary of a Greedy Woman* (fig. 33), Pennell bridges this gap by rupturing what Adam Gopnik has called, “natural membrane” of the recipe (60).¹ *Feasts* represents the point at which this rupture took place for many nineteenth-century women writers. Unlike Isabella Beeton or Eliza Acton, Elizabeth Robins Pennell saw the recipe as a form of art criticism capable of promoting proper nutrition through the aesthetic principles of good taste. I agree with Talia Schaffer’s argument that *Feasts*’ aesthetic vocabulary establishes the cookbook author as a “sophisticated connoisseur” and symbolic art critic by exploring how this masculine identity redefined women’s roles as cookbook authors and marked one of the first major divisions between the female tradition of recipe writing and new generation of food essayists (“The Importance of Being Greedy” 105).
Since its publication in 1896, *The Feasts of Autolycus: The Diary of a Greedy Woman* (fig. 33) by Elizabeth Robins Pennell has gone largely unnoticed by nineteenth-century critics. Those more interested in the success of mass-market cookbooks and housewives’ companions have avoided Pennell’s unusual volume with good reason: rather than provide a catalogue of workable recipes with clear ingredients lists, formulas, and instructions, Pennell’s recipes begin *in medias res*, commenting on the pleasures of eating and the aesthetics of good taste.

Previously published in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, Pennell’s essays are topically arranged and dedicate significant attention to her favorite foods such as spring’s “rosy radish” (19), the “magnificent mushroom” (143), winter’s “incomparable onion” (155). Intentionally excessive and flamboyant, Pennell’s language marks a conscious attempt to revise the highly edited, iterative formula that came to define Victorian women’s recipes during the mid-to-late nineteenth century and merges what McLean calls “the male world of the gourmand as an artist” with “the woman’s tradition” (14). Indeed, Pennell makes a point to move recipes away from those “cookery books, prosaic as primers . . . business-like, practical, direct” in her “Introduction” towards a style that favored the nineteenth-century male language of culinary arts and travel narrative, Pennell promotes a “gospel of good eating” in which food and cooking are reconfigured as fine art (qtd. in “Introduction” ix).

It is important to note that Pennell was not just a recipe writer, but also the co-author of several authorized biographies on James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), and a journalist who wrote at length about her passion for food, travel, art, and cycling. Pennell’s work was most often autobiographical, featuring her accounts from rapidly moving perspectives atop the New Woman’s bicycle. Cycling was Pennell’s preferred mode of transportation, and after moving to London in 1884, she would regularly map out London’s streets, restaurants, and markets (often
unescorted) while her husband, the illustrator Joseph Pennell, stayed behind to sketch them. In her chapter “New Women, New Criticism: Elizabeth Robins Pennell,” Meghan Clarke notes that Pennell was considered a cycling authority well before she arrived in London and was once asked by John Ruskin’s publisher George Allen if she was the “Mrs. Pennell of cycling fame” as he knew all her books” (120). Pennell’s sense of movement played a central role in her identity as a journalist and cookbook author, giving way to a new style of food writing that would blend travel with recipe writing, or what Gopnik calls, “the cookbook improper.”

I argue that Feasts represents an important shift in the Victorian cookbook’s evolution at the end of the nineteenth century by which aestheticism enabled Pennell to negotiate and offer solutions for many of the genre’s limitations wrought by the success of Modern Cookery and Household Management. Blending the language of aestheticism with cooking instruction and narrative, Pennell reconnects cookbook authors with food’s sensory, material values. To do this, Pennell first redefines the act of eating as “feasting,” thereby redefining the cookbook altogether. Jamie Horrocks points out that by adopting a “highly stylized rhetoric,” Pennell was able to “cultivate, and, in turn, exhibit an expertise that relied on a body of knowledge entirely different from that on which the authority of other Victorian cookery writers was based” (“Camping in the Kitchen”). Through Feasts, the Victorian cookbook thus becomes a study in eating as a way to experience art and pleasure, in addition to its primary focus, cooking instruction.

I am especially interested in the ways Pennell’s style not only emancipates recipe writers from the strictures of a household management, but also how her work uses the ideology of “feasting” to subvert images of female hunger, gluttony, and the body’s relationship to food. At the end of this chapter, I examine the recurring motif of female gluttony and the crucial role hunger plays in Pennell’s recipe writings. In the chapter that opens Feasts, “The Virtue of
Gluttony,” Pennell defines gluttony as the recipe writer’s “cardinal virtue” rather than a “cardinal sin” (9-10). This subversion allows Pennell to destabilize gendered superstitions of women’s appetites in which “silly matrons and maidens [have] starved, or pretended to starve, themselves that their bodies might seem fairer in the eyes of men” (10). Pennell argues that if recipe writers, cooks, and culinary critics are to write honestly about food, then they must understand their own physical cravings and think more of the joys of eating. Pennell writes, “I think, therefore, the great interest of the following papers lies in the fact that they are written by a woman—a greedy woman” (6). Pennell’s greed symbolizes more than just the cookbook author’s physical instincts when satiating bodily hunger, but the aesthetic criteria she would use to breathe new life into the Victorian recipe. According to Pennell, when a recipe writer eats to experience pleasure, she accomplishes a dual task: not only does she increase a recipe’s accuracy, but she also achieves artistic transcendence, becoming a “Sappho” in the kitchen who makes the world more beautiful for herself and others.⁸

**Autolycus: Or, the Male Gourmand**

In 1896, Elizabeth Robins Pennell commissioned the frontispiece for *The Feasts of Autolycus: The Diary of a Greedy Woman*, featuring a detailed illustration of the culinary aesthete, “Autolycus,” a name originating from classical literature (fig. 33). With its dense typeface and decorative borders, the medieval-style woodcut offers no name of the artist, but alludes to a revived interest in both classical antiquity and the Renaissance. According to Rachel Teukolsky, “Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian culture was seen to embody many qualities that Victorian thinkers wanted to appropriate, with its flourishing of classical scholarship, its visual artistry, and its prizing of individualism captured in the bold type of the ‘genius’ inventor
or artist” (“Walter Pater”). Perhaps the most famous example of this is Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). For Pater, the Renaissance is not a historical time period, but a state of mind. “Renaissance” becomes Paterian shorthand for a certain kind of aesthetic vibrancy and artistic fulfillment.

For a cookbook with only one illustration, the medieval-style frontispiece, *Feasts* alludes to Paterian aesthetics and medievalism. The illustration portrays a solitary scene inside a modest kitchen whose triangular lines direct our attention towards a man absorbed in the act of cooking. Poised over a hot stove, the chef gazes attentively as he stirs his ingredients. One hand balances the skillet over a fire while the other daintily grasps a wooden spoon. Both the chef’s posture and his actions indicate the delicate task before him: he is creating something important that shall be consumed by others. If prepared correctly, his patrons will not just enjoy his work, but also perceive the artistic achievement that it is. As with “Vatel, Carême, Ude, Dumas, Gouffé, [and] Etienne,” the chef will achieve apotheosis, joining those “immortal cooks of history…[in] laurels” (5). Pennell’s frontispiece reminds us that the male gastronome—presumably, also a classically-trained French chef—is an artist in his own right, whose culinary power derives as much from his professional skill, as it does from his genius in both perceiving and creating beauty from the food before him.

Pennell’s choice to open *Feasts* with a detailed illustration of a sophisticated gastronome (and symbolic son of Hermes) characterizes the recipe collection’s interest in British aestheticism and the celebration of food.⁹ In Greek mythology, Hermes is both the messenger of the gods as well as the God of trade, thieves, and travellers, all traits adopted by Autolycus in Homer’s *The Iliad*. Rather than *Modern Cookery*’s bolded typeface or *Household Management*’s elaborate colored plates, Pennell’s work draws on a critical artistic tradition that
celebrates perception and good taste. The word “Aesthetic is derived from the Greek, aisthesis, signifying perception” (Hamilton vi, original emphasis). Part critic, part artist, Pennell’s male chef personifies the subjective experiences necessary for transferring life into art. According to Meagan Clarke, Elizabeth Robins Pennell was just one of many literary Americans writing in London at the turn of the century who was “instrumental . . . [in] disseminating French and English modern art discourses to a diversity of reading publics” (115). By definition, “British Aestheticism” refers to a mass-cultural movement from the mid-to-late nineteenth century into the early decades of the twentieth. Loosely correlated with the phrase, “art for art’s sake,”¹⁰ aesthetic philosophy aims to articulate what Walter Hamilton calls, “the science of the beautiful, especially in art” (vi). Like many aesthetes, Pennell had a critical obligation to inquire into a theory of beauty in the objects before her. The ability to cultivate taste carried significant responsibility, necessitating that critics such as Pennell not only inquire into what made food inherently beautiful, but also convey that beauty to others (vi).

In their introduction to Women and British Aestheticism, editors Talia Schaffer and Katherine A. Psomiades explain that by the 1870s, aestheticism was fully realized in the works of Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, coming to represent “the popular manifestations of a belief in art’s ability to make life more beautiful and to allow the beholder to achieve transcendence” (2-3). Pennell appropriates these themes throughout her recipes. Positioning herself as an art critic, traveller, and cookbook author, Pennell uses the Victorian recipe to suggest how the most quotidian experiences (such as cooking and eating) are part of the beauty of daily life. Moreover, I would hazard that Pennell symbolizes artistic transcendence by focusing her volume not on how a recipe is made, but how to enjoy the completed recipe through “feasting.” With no
ingredient lists, no cooking times, and certainly no temperatures, there is only the food—the lovely, “odoriferous,” comely dishes that provoke the kind of writing of art criticism.

Nonetheless, Feasts’ opening illustration sketches a heavily romanticized view of domestic cookery that had evolved little since Eliza Acton published Modern Cookery in 1845. With Autolycus positioned over the kitchen stove, Pennell subverts the reality of kitchen labor into a kind of artistic connoisseurship, aligning cooking and recipe writing with fine art. According to Schaffer, cookery was an unlikely topic for any aesthete since it depended on “idealising…the labour of working-class female cooks” (106). The problematic nature of writing about labor, or any physical task, really, stemmed from the realism with which it revealed the dirt and grime of hard work—hours of backbreaking labor, wage disputes, dirty kitchens, food adulteration, and the déclassé status of working-class laborers and female cooks. According to Leonore Davidoff, the female servant was often “associated with the dirtier tasks of cleaning, cooking, and childcare—as a more embodied figure than the etherealized lady who superintend[ed] her labor” (qtd. in Heller and Moran 23). As I discussed in Chapter Two, the female cook often had little to no formal training throughout the nineteenth century, and it wouldn’t be until 1874 that the National Training School for Cookery (NTSC) would be established.11

Working-class female cooks frequently lacked exceptional culinary skills and were often depicted by periodical commentators as interchangeable members of middle-class household staff. Discussed at length in Chapter 1 (page 11), Figure 2 offers a humorous—albeit telling—representation of Davidoff’s reading of the “woman and lady” (qtd. in Heller and Moran 21). While interviewing a domestic laborer for a post as her household’s cook, the physically delicate mistress faces outwards on the left-hand side of the frame, her figure much more visible than that
of the stout, buxom servant. While physically larger, the dark, shawl-covered woman is significantly diminished by her rounded posture and hidden face, revealing that she neither understands nor knows how to cook “plainly”: “[I can] put a jint on a dish ready to go to the Baker’s.” The applicant’s cooking skills appear to be nonexistent, suggesting that cooking is optional and/or preferable to “cleaning the grates or scrubbing the floors.”

Pennell’s choice to open *Feasts* with Autolycus, a romanticized depiction of the male gourmand, demonstrates her understanding of the female cook’s déclassé status as well as aestheticism’s embrace of the male chef’s gastronomic expertise. In her article “The Importance of Being Greedy,” Schaffer aptly notes that Pennell’s food criticism had to walk a fine—albeit highly gendered—line. Pennell’s role as an aesthetic critic writing from the position of a cookbook author meant balancing the privileged connoisseurship of the male art critic with the practical knowledge of the middle-class housewife. Pennell’s gender also required that she “create a connoisseur’s role for herself” more carefully than would have been required of her male predecessors (110). *Feasts*’ frontispiece represents one of the ways in which Pennell balances these tensions, but it is her specific embrace of the male gourmand’s artistic credentials that aligns her with popular aesthetic figures’ food writings (as depicted in Figures 1 and 2), including those of Oscar Wilde and Emil Henry D’Avidgor.

During Pennell’s tenure writing *The Pall Mall Gazette*’s cookery column, Oscar Wilde reviewed *Dinners and Dishes* by Elim Henry D’Avidgor. Part travel narrative, cookbook, and aesthetic treatise, *Dinners and Dishes* declared that dining was an art of the highest order (5). In his review, Wilde praises D’Avidgor’s disquisition on England’s gastronomic plights and “strongly recommends *Dinners and Dishes* to everyone” (5). Wilde’s recommendation reflects his own experiences eating burnt and bland dinners. Presumably, these meals would have been
prepared by any of England’s untrained female cooks, whom Wilde positions as the real villains of England’s dull culinary climate. He writes,

The real difficulty that we all have to face in life is not so much the science of cookery as the stupidity of cooks. And in this little handbook to practical Epicureanism [Dinners and Dishes] the tyrant of the English kitchen is shown in her proper light. Her entire ignorance of herbs, her passion for extracts and essences, her total inability to make a soup which is anything more than a combination of pepper and gravy, her inveterate habit of sending up bread poultices with pheasants,—all these sins and many others are ruthlessly unmasked by the author. Ruthlessly and rightly. For the British cook is a foolish woman who should be turned for her iniquities into a pillar of salt which she never knows how to use. (5)

Wilde’s review imagines the male chef as everything England’s female cook is not—a symbolic Autolycus and educated gourmand whose masterful understanding of flavor makes good use of spices, broths, gravies, and breads. On the other hand, there exists the British female cook, who, like Sodom and Gomorrah, commits immoral transgressions against the laws of food: she does not know how to use, or, perhaps more likely, refuses to use, salt. While much of Wilde’s review employs the hyperbolic excess typical of aesthetic criticism for this period, it does so intentionally. Wilde’s goal is to promote Dinners and Dishes as more than just a treatise on the principles of good cookery and culinary taste, but an intervention into England’s national diet. By exaggerating the female cook’s lack of culinary skill as well as the offensiveness of her bland, lifeless cooking, he is able to endorse D’Avigdor’s own culinary expertise, arguing that food, more than anything, should have some sense of flavor, texture, and presentation. Of these, salt plays an all too important role in which bland cooking is depicted as the ultimate immoral act.

Like Wilde and D’Avidgor, Pennell received similar accolades from contemporary critics who reviewed Feasts as part of a larger aesthetic intervention into England’s bland culinary landscape. While Feasts received only a few reviews in British newspapers and magazines—in fact, the Wellesley Index lists only three—they are unique in their rapturous praise of Pennell’s
work. In 1896, for example, contributor Agnes Repplier reviewed *The Feasts of Autolycus* for *The Cosmopolitan, A Monthly Illustrated Magazine*. In her review, Repplier championed *Feasts* as “a useful volume…not full of empty witticisms and vain conceits, but teaching plainly on every page how the delights of gluttony can be secured” (329). As with Wilde’s review of *Dinners and Dishes*, Repplier represents *Feasts* as a book for which readers have long been waiting, but should embrace with the necessary caution. For contemporary readers and cooks, *Feasts*’ revolutionary excess might take considerable time to adapt to Pennell’s indulgent ideas of flavors, spices, and herbs. After all, *Feasts* eloquently praises serving “wine at breakfast” notes one reviewer for *The Literary World* (231). Repplier cautions that salt, pepper, garlic, and onions risk being “too far advanced for such beginners in the art. It hardly seems worth while to talk about the delicate stimulus of onion and garlic, of shallot and parsley and fragrant herbs, to a people who have not yet learned how to use salt and pepper” (329). Advanced or perhaps simply dangerous, the spices Repplier identifies were often equated with a pronounced sexual appetite, lust. In *Physiological Mysteries and Revelations in Love, Courtship, and Marriage*, author Eugene Becklard warns, “eating hard salt things and spices, the body becomes more and more heated whereby the desire for venereal embraces is very great” (29).

Published during a time in which cooking was exemplified by its tastelessness and the domestic cook symbolized uncomfortable debates over working class labor, Pennell’s *The Feasts of Autolycus* needed not only to define food’s aesthetic value, but also to prove how cooking participated in existing culinary conversations with critics. Schaffer contends that it is more than likely that Pennell read Wilde’s review of *Dinners and Dishes* between 1884 and 1891 (110). In fact, Pennell would have had a particular interest in Wilde’s contributions to aesthetic conversations involving food especially. Hoping to do “something besides ride bicycles and
dine,” Elizabeth Robins Pennell and her husband Joseph held a Thursday night salon at their home on Buckingham Street (Clarke 123). Wilde was a regular presence in the Pennells’ household, and it is possible that he bore a literary imprint on Elizabeth’s own flamboyant style and ideas about food. Schaffer notes, “D’Avigdor had done the important preliminary work of establishing that food was art and that professional training and thorough travel were requirements for anyone who wished to take food seriously. These are the basic ingredients from which Pennell would mix her cookery columns” (110). Indeed, Wilde’s endorsement of D’Avigdor’s *Dinners and Dishes* created a space in which cookbooks like *The Feasts of Autolycus* could treat food as a topic of serious artistic study. However, I would contend that Pennell’s real contributions to this field lie not simply in her appropriation of aestheticism, but how she uses an aesthetic vocabulary to improve Victorian women’s recipe writings. The Victorian recipe would have excluded writers like Wilde and D’Avidgor from participating in typically unseen women’s work. Pennell’s unique understanding of aesthetic criticism and her gendered knowledge of household management created a nexus at which more could be added to British recipe writing than merely a pinch of salt.

It is important to note that while provocative and highly romantic, Pennell’s frontispiece is not intended to provide a realistic portrayal of the middle-class kitchen, but to position the cook and cookbook author as a culinary manifestation of the aesthetic critic. Pennell understood that few families could afford the qualified expertise of a trained French chef, and many middle-class homes employed a “plain cook” who was most likely female and trained in preparing simple English fare. Pennell’s choice to open *Feasts* with the impeccably skilled male chef named “Autolycus” possibly reflects her own experiences hiring domestic laborers. In an article titled “Enrietter” for *The Pall Mall Gazette*, Pennell openly discusses hiring her first housekeeper
in London. Of the article’s ten pages, Pennell details episodes of domestic drama after having “set out to engage the wrong sort of servant in the wrong sort of way…I had never engaged any sort of servant, anywhere, before” (36).

By skirting much of the realism that defined kitchen labor, Pennell’s frontispiece is able to communicate *Feasts*’ essential project—to elevate and see food as a topic worthy of serious artistic study and to position the home cook as an artist in his or her own right. According to Pennell, cooking represented an exceptional opportunity for the housewife to hone a noble skill that could be appreciated by others and give great purpose to her life. Pennell asks, if

> all his life a Velasquez devoted to his pictures, a Shakespeare to his plays, a Wagner to his operas: [then] why should not the woman of genius spend hers in designing exquisite dinners, inventing original breakfasts, and be respected for the nobility of her self-appointed task? For in the planning of the perfect meal there is art; and, after all, is not art the one real, the one important thing in life? (12)

Like painting, music, and plays, Pennell sees cooking and recipe writing as an extension of the artistic canon in which the gourmand becomes synonymous with the artist and daily consumption invites numerous opportunities to create art. As seen on Pennell’s title page, cooking will afford the housewife a little more beauty by “giv[ing] an object to life” (11). With his sloping chef’s hat, clean tunic, and trim facial hair, Autolycus bears little resemblance to the Beeton’s stiff-collared matron in *Household Management* or the cowering poet, Eliza Acton, presumed to be scribbling recipes because her publisher gave her no other choice.

**The Principles of “Good Taste”**

In the previous section, I discussed that in order for *Feasts* to succeed in treating food as high art, it needed both to engage with the works of established and/or recognized male *fin-de-siècle* writers’ criteria for good taste. In dealing with advancing an aesthetic theory of food, Pennell’s volume observes both the sentiments of writers like Wilde and D’Avidgor as well as
the larger aesthetic movement’s definitions for what qualified as “good” and worthy art. In 1882, critic Walter Hamilton published *The Aesthetics Movement in England*, the first popular history of the school of aestheticism from the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Beginning with John Ruskin’s defense of the Pre-Raphaelites to *Punch*’s humorous attacks on flamboyant figures like Oscar Wilde, Hamilton argues that poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and “ideal . . . passionate . . . beautiful” Wilde exemplified the movement’s principle aim: “a correlation of the arts” between poetry and painting (57 and 110). Poetry and painting enabled the school to articulate a standardized theory of beauty from which critics could determine an object’s value—or, “worthiness,” as it was often termed—as “good” art (vii). “Good” was an important term for artists and critics alike because it represented a work’s ability to comply with accepted notions of quality and taste. According to Hamilton, without this “scientific” definition, art would be vulnerable to more ambiguous and unstable influences: an artist’s and/or their follower’s personal preferences, for example, however crude they may be. Essentially, Hamilton argues that inborn preferences offer little or no logic for why an object is beautiful itself, but rather encourage uneducated faculties that are incapable of fine art appreciation (vii).

Positioning food as a topic worthy of serious admiration required that Pennell overcome the limitations of inborn preferences and prove her refined intuition in perceiving the beauty of food and cooking. In “How to Form Good Taste in Art,” an 1896 feature article in *Cornhill Magazine*, the author projects a thesis similar to Hamilton’s, arguing that taste “is an educated instinct” reliant on the critic’s deep understanding of an object’s fundamental truths (172). Like Hamilton, the reviewer explains how “inborn preferences” limit the development of an artistic instinct; but, with the right instruction, may be overcome through “reasoned taste” (172). “People are born to prefer red to blue, expression to action, figures to landscape, as they prefer
burgundy to claret, or rhyme to blank verse,” writes the author (172). But “tastes, to this degree, will differ to the end of the world” (172). Indeed, differing tastes made up one of the late nineteenth century’s ongoing debates about aestheticism. “The question,” asks Hamilton, is “to whether an object is truly beautiful in itself, or merely appears so to persons capable of appreciating it” (vi). Answering this question necessitated that aesthetes inquire into a theory of beauty which would not only allow them to prove an object had artistic value, but also to endorse a systematic standard for art itself.

Most critics would agree that taste was “not fanciful or inexplicable,” but “follow[ed] a standard,” as the author of “How to Form Good Taste in Art” attests (171). Aesthetic discourse endorsed the argument that a thorough understanding of an object’s tangible and intelligible facts was the clearest way to articulate its natural beauty and, consequently, make that beauty accessible to others. Moreover, fostering these “educated instincts” required learning three kinds of knowledge (“How to” 171). Many of Pennell’s recipe chapters engage this rhetoric, analyzing how a strawberry is an object of beauty in a material way. Her chapter, “A Study in Red and Green,” literally studies what makes the strawberry beautiful. And, as Schaffer points out, alludes to paintings by Whistler (“Importance” 110). As I will show here, Feasts adopts these “three knowledges” as part of its essential framework for treating food and cooking as serious artistic topics. This framework created a space in which recipes would display Pennell’s educated instincts as an art critic and female aesthete.

The first knowledge, the “knowledge of natural fact,” was a significant foundational skill for any critic of aestheticism, requiring that an object accurately reflect and/or imitate the real world (173). Using the image of the sculptor, the Cornhill reviewer describes how, by working in stone or clay, an artist invokes his expert knowledge of the human form (173). Importantly,
“whatever art it tries to express,” the artist’s statue must represent something viewers “have already seen, or might see, have heard or might hear” (173). Christopher Rovee discusses the appeal of working in stone for artists like William Hazlitt. According to Rovee, “marbles are beautiful because their veins and muscles, bones, bowels, and intestines, are visible to the eye. They turn the body inside out, demystifying depth by making it visible” (142).

*The Feasts of Autolycus* was well positioned to follow such standards of and for verisimilitude, appealing to the material memory and sensory experience readers would appreciate about food. According to Schaffer, two of the terms central to aestheticism, “taste” and “consumption,” are “interestingly literalised” in the study of food (“Importance” 106). The literal nature of cooking not only “strip[s] ‘taste’ and ‘consumption’ of their mystified auras,” but also “reduce[s] them to mere synonyms for ignoble greed. Cookery, then, insist[s] on the physical sensation of pleasure as the basis of consumption and the meaning of taste” (“Importance” 106). Pennell articulates the physical pleasures of food by focusing on classic pairings readers would appreciate. In her recipes for “A Perfect Breakfast,” Pennell describes the texture of freshly baked breads and the way sweet butter melts when spread over warm pastry. Pennell inspires readers to take part in the pleasurable excess of eating, but with the intention of forsaking all foods that are not worthy of their discriminating palates. She writes, “forswear all [other breakfasts] but the *petit déjeuner*: the little breakfast of coffee and rolls and butter…[which inspire] Vague poetic memories and aspirations within you” (18-19). In her first bill of fare, the *petit déjeuner*, Pennell solicits readers to remember the physical joys of eating rolls that are “crisp and light and fresh” and served with “pure and sweet” butter (18). Bread and butter elicit the same passion Wilde evokes for a British culinary tradition that embraces salt.
Pennell’s readers would have understood that certain foods such as bread and butter were inherently pleasurable.

More than an exaggerated *aperçu*, Pennell’s breakfast menu relies on material descriptions of popular foods, highlighting her intentions as a culinary aesthete. Pennell preaches that readers “need not stray after false gods . . . with silly fads” for truth is found in “the love of good eating [which] gives an object to life” (11). Pennell’s recipe for *petit déjeuner* exemplifies feasting’s simple pleasures while showcasing how a basic understanding of an object’s tangible qualities—the crunch of buttery bread, for instance—reveals natural beauty. In her book *Food and Cooking in Victorian England*, historian Andrea Broomfield explains that during the nineteenth century, nothing was considered more beautiful than properly prepared toast at breakfast: “middle-class people elevated breakfast to one of the most important meals of the day . . . [giving] it a great deal of symbolic significance” (26). Despite their humble appearance, breakfast rolls and toast “could be used as a yardstick by which others measured the mistress’s faithful execution of her duties, and consequently, how worthy she was of her privileged social station” (26). Calling upon bread’s well-known symbolism, Pennell establishes her worthiness as a culinary authority (18).

A masterful understanding of an object’s material qualities required that Pennell employ a second knowledge, “the knowledge of the natural conditions of each art” (174). Simply put, aesthetic critics were expected to develop a theoretical understanding of and appreciation for art’s classical values in tandem with its material ones. Often dubbed, “the laws of art as art,” a work’s composition and style were part of the “essential touchstone[s] of goodness” that permitted a critic to perceive a work’s moral and intellectual laws (“How to” 174-5). I will
discuss this second knowledge at length in my discussion of Pennell’s chapter “On Soups” and how Pennell’s reading of soup recipes is especially coded as part of the British culinary tradition.

The critic’s third and final “knowledge” required Pennell to employ a more complex skill set with her recipe writings. Beyond a keen understanding of an object’s material and/or theoretical qualities, Feasts needed to emphasize Pennell’s “acquaintance with the history and mental conditions of the age or country in which a work belongs” (178). This skill necessitated that literary aesthetes observe a thorough understanding of a work’s contemporary context, artistic conventions, and popular responses to them (178).

In volume five of Modern Painters (1860), John Ruskin alludes to this “acquaintance” between the history of a work and a period’s contemporary thought when he updates the Law of Help—“the help of everything…by everything else” (7.205)—through a modern, industrialized gaze. In his first two volumes of Modern Painters (1843 and 1846), Ruskin systematically analyzes the forms in J. M. W. Turner’s landscapes as symbols of nature’s Godlike order (vol. 1, page 406). By 1860, nature comes to represent a different order entirely, the industrial order of capitalist enterprise, in which even the smallest part of a tree, the stem, participates in its own microscopic urban world. As with the Law of Help, each part of the tree supports the other in a mutually beneficial relationship: “It [the branch or plant stem] carries nourishment, being, in fact, a group of canals for the conveyance of marketable commodities, with an electric telegraph attached to each, transmitting messages from leaf to root, and root to leaf, up and down the tree” (5.60-61). Ruskin perceives this relationship as both mechanical and urban, revealing many of the industrial tensions that were rapidly defining his world. In her article “Modernist Ruskin, Victorian Baudelaire: Revisioning Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics” (PMLA 2007), Rachel Teukolsky notes that volume 5 of Modern Painters shows an increasingly “modernist Ruskin,”
who, despite “all his efforts,” cannot escape “the city . . . [or] his own cosmopolitanism” (719). Ruskin, who played a principal role in promoting the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood during the mid-nineteenth century exemplifies how even the most cursory understanding of an object, a tree stem, for example, reveals the aesthete’s understanding of greater historical and mental truths. We see these truths in the way Ruskin characterizes plant-based communication as an electric telegraph transmitting messages between stem and leaf, leaf and tree, and, ultimately, tree and the critic’s gaze.

*Feasts* reveals Pennell’s own thorough knowledge of the historical and contemporary conditions surrounding food during the *fin-de-siècle*. Pennell’s cookery columns did more than just overlap with Wilde’s reviews of cookbooks like D’Avigdor’s *Dinners and Dishes* or periodical debates over the iniquities of the working-class female cook. Rather, Pennell’s scholarship makes a bibliographic study of food and cookery, revealing an artistic and culinary education that far surpasses any of her contemporary critics. Like most Victorians, Pennell enjoyed an avid love of collecting rare antiquities and cultural artifacts, many of which were cookbooks to aid in the writing of her weekly food column for *The Pall Mall Gazette* (*My Cookery Books* 2-3). “It was something of a shock that I woke one morning and found myself a collector of cookery books,” writes Pennell in the opening chapter of *My Cookery Books* (1-3). “A shock” not because “there should be cookery books to collect” (1), but because Pennell’s collection quickly surpassed the size and scope of the British Museum’s catalogue within a couple of years (4-5). The book that resulted from Pennell’s small “treasures” was *My Cookery Books* (1903), a bibliographical study of Pennell’s private cookbook collection. Pennell’s titles ranged from the Middle Ages to the first decade of the twentieth century, and, over her lifetime, she amassed some 732 cookbooks which now reside at the Library of Congress (Beck 15).
In *My Cookery Books*, Pennell proves a rare connoisseurship for nineteenth-century cookbook culture and the motivations behind cookbook author’s artistic sense of food in their recipe writings. She notes that the mid-century saw a rise of “cookery books, prosaic as primers . . . with their business-like, practical, direct methods” which influenced many middle-class mistresses to learn the basics of cooking and culinary skills (viii). No doubt, Pennell is making a specific reference to the period’s first mass-market cookbooks and culinary guidebooks aimed at the needs of the middle class—*Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (S. O. Beeton, 1860) and *Mrs. A. B. Marshall’s Cookery Book* (Marshall’s School of Cookery, 1887), for example.

But Pennell understands that the nineteenth century was a far more active period for experimentations in the Victorian cookbooks as well, something she happily notes of her private cookbook collection. Publishers made money on more than just housewives’ companions, but a sizeable body of work that was

> so literary in flavor that they [cookbooks] were not adapted to the kitchen at all. The new writers, of whom Grimod de la Reynière was the first great master, brought about such a revolution in not only the style, but the very attitude of writers on cookery, that I prefer to consider their work by itself. My study of all these books has made me sufficiently an artist to want to see my own volume as perfectly rounded out. (viii)

From the outset, Pennell positions herself as a culinary aesthete writing interested in studying the bibliographic background of the Victorian cookbook. That certain recipes are so “literary in flavor” readers cannot possibly make them attests to the genre’s status as high art. Moreover, Pennell’s use of the word “study” further emphasizes the seriousness of her own work in *Feasts* as an artist, critic, and cookbook collector. While some Victorians were busy collecting everything from taxidermy to china, Pennell sought out less likely treasures until “[g]radually they [my cookbooks] spread out into an imposing row on my desk; they overflowed to the
bookshelves; they piled themselves up in odd corners; they penetrated into the linen closet,—the last place, I admit, the neat housekeeper should look for them” (*My Cookery Books* 3). As cookbooks colonize the space of Pennell’s London apartment, she suggests that the principles of aesthetic cookery are as much a recipe for eating as they are a recipe for life. According to late nineteenth-century economist Phillip Wicksteed, the objects Victorians collected stemmed from a base desire. Objects were more than just material “things,” but a “circle of exchange” between the object and its owner (qtd. in Briggs 15). Pennell shows us that cookbooks, like other collectables and antiquities, were subjective experiences. As we see with Pennell’s all-knowing gourmand, the subjective experience of eating was what *Feasts* aimed to show its readers.

If aestheticism is posited as a theoretical branch that both standardizes and describes an object’s natural beauty, then *Feasts* provides an appropriate subject from which critics could celebrate beauty in a literal and bodily way. While the “Principles of Good Taste” apply to the most beautiful foods, they do not, necessarily, apply to Britain’s most iconic recipes, soups.

**Soup and the Victorian Recipe**

“The soup tureen is as poetic as the loving cup; why should it suggest but the baldest prose to its most ardent worshippers?” —Elizabeth Robins Pennell, “On Soups” (80)

“[L]et us take the scene of the apple…what Eve will discover in her relationship to simple reality, is the inside of the apple, and that this inside is good. This story tells us that the genesis of woman goes through the mouth, through a certain oral pleasure.” —Hélène Cixous, “Extreme Fidelity” (133)

Thus far I have outlined a theme that is central to reading Elizabeth Robins Pennell’s *The Feasts of Autolycus*: the role aesthetic criticism plays in recipe writing and the cookbook author’s treatment of food. In her chapter “On Soups,” Pennell opens by addressing middle-class women
readers about this treatment, arguing that when preparing “good” soup for their families, they should employ their best artistic intentions (75). I contend that by entreating soup to be “good,” Pennell provides an important bridge between the language of art criticism—that is, whether a subject may be deemed worthy of being called “good” art—with the language of British recipe writing. She advises, “‘When all around the wind doth blow,’ draw close the curtains, build up a roaring fire, light lamp and candles, and begin your dinner with a good—good, mind you—dish of soup” (75, original emphasis). In this and the soup recipes that follow, “good” takes on a symbolic status, signifying an explicit attempt to characterize recipe writing with the language of art criticism. Both Pennell’s word choice and repetition emphasize that cooking and recipe writing demand distinctions: Is the recipe any “good?” Or is it any “good?”

In this section, I discuss the chapter “On Soups,” and how Pennell’s aesthetic vocabulary allows her to debate a recipe’s artistic merits while simultaneously augmenting the predominant style that defined Victorian recipe during this period. Pennell contends that “The soup tureen is as poetic as the loving cup,” but popular recipes have failed to provide readers with any sense of this poetry (80). Instead, many women recipe writers exhibit the “baldest prose,” injuring consumers with the endorsement of “false foods” in their disingenuous, but “ardent worship” (80). I have chosen to look at Pennell’s chapter “On Soups” because of the ways in which her prose is especially flamboyant and critical, often jumping from one disappointing bowl of soup to another. Pennell writes of recipes that are “wickedly equipped,” “hopelessly inadequate,” and feed base “animal hunger” before ever offering any soup recipes of her own (77). When she does, soup recipes are almost entirely foundational, endorsing the cooking of broths and bouillons as the cook’s most important artistic skill. Pennell’s soup recipes advocate for a core
process in which “fair and fitting proportions” of ingredients are boiled “slowly and demurely” before a recipe for consommé or Julienne can begin (84-5).

Pennell employs what Patricia Yaeger calls the “pleasurable, powerful aspects of orality” in which the woman writer figures as a “honey-mad woman” with a gustatory appetite. Like this figure, Pennell becomes “a blissful consumer and purveyor of language, the honey-mad writer is a symbol of verbal plentitude, of woman’s capacity to rewrite her culture” (qtd. in Heller and Moran 5). Pennell’s soup recipes reveal a love of prose paragraphs with excessive descriptions and reliance on the principles of good taste. This style praises the early poetics of British women’s recipe writings while discrediting the genre’s predominant style, “bald prose.” Pennell’s style conceives an aesthetic counter-tradition in which recipes—both their prose and their finished product—enlighten consumers.

Pennell’s exaltation of the adjective “good” rethinks the tradition of recipe writing as an all-inclusive and encyclopedic genre. Since 1845, the Actonian mode of organizing recipes relied almost entirely on descriptive hierarchies. Opening Modern Cookery, one finds endless variations of the same receipt. As I discussed in Chapter 1, part of this practice stemmed from Acton’s cultural commentaries against her social status, her country, and her publisher. The other arises in part from economic restrictions and what ingredients recipe writers had readily available. But whether a recipe had any artistic merits is difficult to infer from the 1845 edition of Modern Cookery. Acton indicates a recipe’s virtues, primarily, through her choice of title: “A Good [Recipe for] Green Peas Soup” (55) or “An Excellent [Recipe for] Hash of Cold Beef” (205). In Feasts, Pennell exalts “good” over all other modifiers. A recipe is either “good” or it is not, therefore occupying no space within her pages. Moreover, determining whether a recipe is any “good” provides Pennell the authority of the traditionally male art critic in which she not
only appraises the aesthetic values of food, but also provides a guise from which to discuss food’s nutritional quality, or symbolic “goodness” for the consumer.

Pennell’s interest in defining if a recipe is any “good” embodies the organizing theme behind her essays: to eat with an elevated sense of purpose and to avoid “artless,” “senseless” gluttony. From her first chapter on “The Virtues of Gluttony,” Pennell is especially interested in the “vulgarity” of ill-prepared foods, and soup reveals specific nutritional dangers of poor food preparation. Historically, soup recipes provided a window into how new food technologies altered the Victorian kitchen. *Fin-de-siècle* recipes were some of the first to show authors substituting a soup’s key ingredients for cheaper, less nutritious man-made alternatives. Bovril’s and Liebig’s Beef Extracts, for example, promised to reduce domestic toil and save time. No longer did recipe writers need to discuss the “large and lavish” directions for making a beef bouillon with onions, carrots, celery, parsley, and other aromatic herbs, but the one-step process of diluting bottled extracts in boiling water (Pennell 85-6). According to Lori Anne Loeb, man-made cooking alternatives allowed recipe readers and writers to indulge in middle-class ideologies of progress and luxury, becoming “[t]he ultimate ideal of prosperity . . . [and] freedom from toil…a life of leisure” (15). Similarly, Schaffer observes that even Isabella Beeton helped to promote ideologies of progress to middle-class readers with recipes that emphasized “efficiency, ease and thriftiness in the kitchen rather than the food’s flavour or appearance” (“Importance” 112).

For British women writers recording and publishing recipes during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, soup was a significant part of the British diet and daily nutrition. In 1845, Eliza Acton chose “the art of preparing good, wholesome, palatable soups” as the first series of receipts to open her volume *Modern Cookery* for both practical and dietary reasons (1-47). Not
only were *bouillons* and broths easy recipes for the middle-class housewife to master, but they were also the most reliable form of dietary sustenance. Regardless of readers’ socio-economic status or culinary skill, broths were uncomplicated points of entry into a British culinary tradition. In 1860, Isabella Beeton augmented this tradition in *Household Management* when she compiled the best soup recipes from readers of *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*. This time, however, Beeton was especially interested in answering readers’ concerns about handling their household budgets and added the cost for making each recipe. As a result, a soup’s nutritional value came to be represented in (and by) economic terms.

In the tradition of British women recipe writers and Victorian cookbook, *The Feasts of Autolycus* offers a revisionary approach to the genre’s predominant Beetonian style. Because of soup’s status at the beginning of a multi-course dinner, Pennell sees soup recipes as playing a transformative role, altering one’s physiognomy as “good” soups inspire the mind. She writes, “Over *Julienne* or *bisque* frowns are smoothed away, and guests who sat down to table in monosyllabic gloom will plunge boldly into epigrammatic anecdotal gaiety ere ever the fish be served” (76). Since “fish” was the second course (Broomfield 104), Pennell suggests that this transformation is instantaneous as well as revelatory: soup helps to establish a meal’s tone. It is no wonder that Pennell sees learning to cook “good” as her volume’s best “[w]ords of wisdom…to be pondered over by the woman who would make her evening dinner a joyful anticipation, a cherished memory” (75).

So “Why,” asks Pennell, has soup “never yet been praised and glorified as it should? How is it that its greatness has inspired neither ode nor epic?” (80). Notice how Pennell’s question leaves out poetry—she omits Sydney Smith’s “Poet’s Receipt for Salad” as well as Eliza Acton’s “Mother Eve’s Pudding” that appear in later editions of *Modern Cookery*.17
Unlike salads or puddings, Pennell sees soup recipes as having the highest artistic potential, but the most undervalued representation in culinary prose. Perhaps because of its lack of vogue or its preliminary status at the beginning of a meal, soup for many writers was just soup—a bowl of consommé or broth customarily served before the real food was plated. In fact, many Victorian cookbooks avoided offering overly flavorful soup instructions for practical and moral reasons. “It is generally established a rule not to ask for soup or fish twice,” Beeton writes in her chapter on “The Mistress” (22, emphasis mine). If a guest was served seconds during the soup or fish course, then other guests would be left waiting an uncomfortably long period of time between courses while others finished. Worse, second servings could encourage overeating in its most dangerous form, gluttony. For this, a second bowl of soup would make the consumer the object of unwanted attention at a dinner party while guests waited for the next course to be served. Beeton warns of this unwanted attention and the strange looks “when, perhaps, a little revenge is taken by looking at the awkward consumer of a second portion” (22-3).

By the late nineteenth century, *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* had set the standard for popular soup recipes, endorsing what Pennell criticizes as a greasy (and bland) culinary tradition. Of *Household Management*’s 81 recipes for soup, only one managed to capture the English imagination: Turtle Soup (90-2). In fact, no edition of *Household Management* has ever been printed without it. An expensive recipe, Turtle Soup required cooking live sea turtles from the West Indies in which readers were instructed to “cut off the head of the turtle the preceding day” in order to make the recipe easier (90). According to Nicola Humble, Turtle Soup was “aspirational food par excellence” because of the “rarity of and difficulty in obtaining the giant turtles of which it was made” (584, n92). Because green sea turtles had to be transported live from the West Indies,
Real turtle soup was not only incredibly extravagant, [but] it also required at least two days’ work, as the length and complexity of the recipe [by Beeton] indicates. It was the sort of dish that was served at grand functions like the Lord Mayor’s Banquet, and it is extremely unlikely that Beeton had ever herself seen, let alone dispatched, a huge live turtle. (583-4, n92)

As I discussed in Chapter Three, Turtle Soup captured the British culinary imagination from the mid-to-late nineteenth century with Household Management’s detailed—albeit aspirational—instructions. Even writers like Lewis Carroll appropriated Turtle Soup’s tremendous status in Through the Looking Glass. Not only was Turtle Soup seen as the soup to signify one’s socio-economic status and sense of refined upper-class taste, but it was also what Kate Colquhoun calls, “a byword for success, [and] the venison of the middle classes” (211). Yet upwardly mobile middle-class housewives most likely never ate Turtle Soup and could only afford to serve the “Mock Turtle” variation, a less exotic (albeit, more regionally appropriate) dish that featured calf’s head for the meat.18

In her chapter “On Soups,” Pennell is highly critical of this culinary tradition and the ways Victorian recipe writers have promoted tasteless in the form of vogue cooking styles and imported colonial ingredients. Greasy and rich, Turtle Soup represents an artificial idea of refined aesthetic taste. Those who ate Turtle Soup did so not because of a refined tuition, but because of spectacle, and/or performance. “In England,” writes Pennell, “soup long since became synonymous with turtle, and the guzzling alderman [Lord Mayor] of legend. Richness is held its one essential quality—richness, not strength. Too often, a thick, greasy mess, that could appeal but to the coarsest hunger, will be set before you, instead of the dish that can be comforting and sustaining both, and yet meddles not with the appetite” (75-6). Here, “richness” connotes a dual meaning of class and quality. Turtle Soup may be rich, therefore laden with fatty calories and high nutrition, or it may be “rich,” that is, available only to those who can
afford the main ingredient. But Pennell is clear that richness does not equate to quality. For culinary connoisseurs such as Pennell, the value of soup is revealed in its effect on the physical body. She is adamant that soup recipes are “good” because of how they visibly alter the frowning face, the quiet mind, and the dull personality (76). By reading in soup the underlying aesthetic response represented in her cookbook’s frontispiece, Pennell defines “good” soup as what Christopher Rovee calls, “a progressive aesthetic that promotes the exposure and synthesis of . . . active ‘enlightenment’” (142). This sentiment is clearest when Pennell praises the effects of feasting on the female body: “Rejoice in the knowledge that gluttony is the best cosmetic…a woman not only grows beautiful when she eats well, but she is bewitchingly lovely in the very act of eating” (13). According to Pennell, even Cato could not “censor himself…[nor] help yielding to the influence of a woman eating” (14).

For Pennell, good recipes amount to a refined sense of taste that rejects middle-class culinary trends for a higher purpose: artistic indulgence, beauty, pleasure, and active enlightenment. Refined taste, however, depends on feasting defined as “artistic gluttony.” She writes,

By artistic gluttony, beauty is increased, if not actually created. Listen to the words of Brillat-Savarin, that suave and sympathetic gourmet: “It has been proved by a series of rigorously exact observations that by a succulent, delicate, and choice regimen, the external appearances of age are kept away for a long time. It [gluttony] gives more brilliancy to the eye, more freshness to the skin, more support to the muscles.” (13, original emphasis)

Here, gluttony is subverted for the purpose of pursuing beauty and pleasure through the act of feasting. Traditionally, gluttony was not just equated with the sin of overeating, but visual proof of the sin itself. According to Brillat-Savarin, overeating without a sense of taste or artistic intentions scarred the body and distorted the face. Out of one hundred obese people, “ninety [would] have short faces, round eyes, and snub noses.” Pennell intentionally subverts this idea,
defining gluttony not by its relationship to the seven deadly sins, but by its relationship to the artist’s transformation. Like Autolycus, gluttony makes the eyes more brilliant (not rounder), the muscles stronger, and the skin fresher. In soup, there lies “a logic in…eating and drinking…Gluttony deserves nothing but praise and encouragement” (16, 38, and 135).

The Feasts of James Whistler

“Run through the list of poets and painters of your acquaintance: do not they who eat best write the finest verse and paint the strongest pictures?”

—Elizabeth Robins Pennell, “On Soups” (135)

The aesthetic value of well-prepared soups was something Pennell continued to take seriously well after the publication of Feasts. In dining carts from New York to Chicago and chophouses in Britain and France, soups were part of the daily diet for millions of people. “Equally desirable in illness and in health, it [soup] has its own aesthetic value,” writes Pennell, “perfect in itself…the one perfect dish” (80). While Pennell’s exaggerated comments suggest the possibility of self-parody—is it feasible to create a “perfect” recipe for soup? Is there really such a recipe?—her ardor suggests its status as the highest form of art (especially in cooking). But before Pennell can offer any soup recipes of her own, she defers to the “perfect” recipes of others, displacing her authority as an art critic for that of established male authorities. In one instance, Pennell praises the bowls of bouillon described by Henry James in his “Little Tour in France” (80), and, in the next, the grand consommé recipe recorded by Alexander the Great (84). Like her readers, Pennell reads these recipes “with awe and something of terror,” intimidated by the writer’s divine status and intuition. Yet no male authority is deferred to more in The Feasts of Autolycus than Pennell’s mentor, the painter James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903).
No accident, Pennell makes significant and sustained references to Whistler as an aesthetic ideal that are echoed throughout her private letters and journals. As *The Feasts of Autolycus* is really the “Diary of a Greedy Woman,” or, Pennell’s diary from the 1880s to 1900, it represents *The Whistler Journal* in many ways. For example, in *The Whistler Journal*, Pennell records the last time she spoke with Whistler during a visit to his London studio after a long bout with heart disease. During her visit, Pennell was struck less by Whistler’s new lithographs than by his apparent anxieties with food. Recent convalescence had led to supervised and mechanical overeating in which Whistler was forced to consume excessive quantities of broths and soups (291). It is important to note that before this passage was recorded in 1903, Pennell depicts Whistler as a robust and playful figure throughout her journals, often remarking on his voracious appetite. Whistler attended countless dinner parties at which Elizabeth and her husband, the illustrator Joseph Pennell, were present. Of these, Elizabeth records lively anecdotes in which Whistler mischievously pranks his hosts, either by appearing in disguise or by alternating between three pairs of eyeglasses at dinner (21). In one episode, Pennell writes of a dinner party where Whistler arrived so late that his place was served during each course despite his absence. When Whistler did arrive, dessert was being served. To the astonishment of the other guests, Whistler ate greedily, consuming his “cold dinner backward” (9).

But in 1903, Whistler’s diet radically changed due to illness, and he was forced to consume hourly a traditional convalescent diet, broths and soups. In order to give a richer sense of what Pennell suggests when she writes of the “vulgar plenty and artless selection” of overeating, I have quoted this passage at length below. Whistler’s heightened sense of flavor and appreciation of food gives us a better sense of how food can take on the symbolic status of art. Moreover, he suggests how easy it is to desensitize one’s sense of “good” taste through
excessive, artless consumption. Pennell reflects this argument by returning once more to the body, noting Whistler’s transmogrification from artist to invalid. The entry reads:

_Tuesday, July 14, 1903—_Altogether, he [Whistler] was like another man, or rather like himself again, especially when Miss Philip brought him a cup of chicken broth. He was in a fury at the sight of it. “I suppose I must take the damned thing—excuse the word,” turning to me, “but it must be said.” And he scolded in a voice as strong as ever. How did they expect him to have an appetite for his dinner? They never gave him a chance, they were always making him take something, _he had no peace_, every hour it was something until of course he did not want his dinner. Miss Philip looked as if her nerves were giving. She poured him out a cup of tea instead, and went in the next room for a minute.” (291, emphasis mine)

What is especially significant about Pennell’s entry is not the good intentions of Whistler’s caregiver Miss Phillips, but how she fails to recognize the importance of Whistler’s physical hunger. Pennell understood that food, like poetry or painting, was an object of serious artistic study and that no one would have been more capable of appreciating its beauty than a talented and acclaimed artist like Whistler. Pennell sees this distinction immediately, noting that the time at which Whistler appears most himself, he is condemning the unnecessary amounts of broth forced upon him. Only when Whistler is forced to blaspheme, denouncing that the soup is no “good” and raising his blood pressure does Whistler become himself, the discriminating painter and art critic.

Pennell’s entry reveals more than just her sympathy for Whistler’s deteriorating body or the frustrations he feels over consumption and appetite, but how eating excessively and without discretion becomes a transgressive act against art itself. According to Pennell, this kind of “inartistic excess” disconnects the artist from their physical body, intuition, and hunger. It is clear that scheduled consumption erodes Whistler’s valuable educated instincts. Unable to tell if the chicken broth before him is any “good,” he “had no peace…until of course he did not want his dinner” (291, emphasis mine). “Soup,” writes Pennell, should never be forced, but an artful
anticipation, “a prelude to the meal—the prologue, as it were, to the play…its excellence, a welcome forecast of delights to follow, a welcome stimulus to light talk and lighter laughter” (76). The Whistler episode embodies a very different definition of soup than the one Pennell suggests in *Feasts*. Transgressive rather than stimulating, unnecessary eating drains Whistler of any previous cultivated skills or status.

I argue that Whistler is more than just a beloved friend, artist, and mentor, but the physical model of Pennell’s cookbook persona, Autolycus. While Elizabeth Robins Pennell’s journalism career was profoundly productive, Pennell suffered from significant doubts of her contributions as an art critic and female aesthete. Unlike Eliza Acton or Isabella Beeton, *The Feasts of Autolycus* features a different representation of the female cookbook author on its title page: “A Greedy Woman” who is reluctant to give her name. Instead, she defers to an elaborate illustration of a male artist caught in the act of cooking, suggesting an idea of artistic success that is surprisingly Anti-Pennell. According to Schaffer, Pennell was both doubtful and intimidated by the skills of the male aesthetes in her weekly salons: “She [Pennell] rather humbly perceived herself as an overworked amateur journalist amongst a crowd of literary artists, and later she even regretted that she had conversed with them instead of transcribing their words for posterity” (“Importance” 108).
I want to take issue with who these male influences may be. Persuasively, Schaffer contends that Pennell is inspired most by contemporary male art critics Oscar Wilde and Emil D’Avidgor, of whom she consciously chose to emulate (“Importance” 110-12). Yet this reading makes no mention of the detailed portrait that opens Pennell’s cookbook (fig. 33), or the obvious lack of resemblance between Wilde and Pennell’s mustachioed chef. For the Victorians, the male aesthete was easily identifiable by a set of signifiers and visual cues: silk stockings, velvet knee breeches, a flowing tie, and a velvet jacket were iconic representations of Oscar Wilde’s sartorial “cavalier” style (fig. 34). Autolycus shows none of these trappings despite the fact that such “pejorative hallmarks…could be called up and bestowed upon the male aesthete with a series of stylized strokes” (Horrocks, “Asses and Aesthetes” 4). Comic illustrations of the “dandy aesthete” in Punch and Fun were highly pervasive, influencing even the more costly Illustrated London News for which both Elizabeth and Joseph Pennell contributed (Horrocks, “Asses and Aesthetes” 22). According to Jamie Horrocks, “When illustrators took up their pens to create a visual representation of male aestheticism in the 1880s, they had at their disposal a living model in Oscar Wilde, and a two-dimensional model of deviant masculinity already well established by mid-century illustrators” (“Asses and Aesthetes” 4). Yet Feasts’ offers a different version of the male aesthete that goes against accepted models. Unlike Wilde, Autolycus is broad-shouldered, serious, and angular, wearing masculine facial hair that is out of place with Wilde’s famous caricature. I argue that there is a very clear reason for this distinction: while meant to be an illustration of the male art artic and aesthete, Autolycus is not intended to be Wilde, but a caricature of James Whistler.

On first glance, we might be hard pressed to see Whistler’s figure in the frontispiece that opens The Feasts of Autolycus, or to see what similarities the “imaginary” French chef bears with
Whistler, but Pennell’s private journals leave little doubt. *The Whistler Journals* reprints some of Elizabeth’s favorite portraits of Whistler alongside detailed personal records on his appearance, presence, and style. The illustrator for *Feasts* has captured many of these predominant features in a sort of artist’s studio (fig. 35). Like Whistler, everything about the chef’s physiognomy is sharply angular—the square jaw, strong angular nose, square brow, and muscular build are practically replicated. In figure 33, the chef’s self-conscious sense of taste is conveyed by his actions: spoon in hand and head lowered, he creates a dish akin to a work of art. Equally delighted by creating and consuming, the chef seems above all else obsessive, a zealous artist. In fact, there is no mistaking the male chef for an artist or his wooden spoon for an artist’s tools, a symbolic paintbrush.

Like her “diary of a greedy woman,” Pennell’s journal entries enhance this reading with Whistler’s love of cooking. In “The Last Months,” Pennell records the close detail with which Whistler crafted and approved menu recipes for dinners held by the International Society of
Sculptors, Painters, and Gravers, an artists’ union based in London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an entry dated “Friday, April 17th [1903],” Pennell records how Whistler “approved the menu—added but one suggestion which was typical: that the salad should be Romaine, with next to no vinegar or dressing!” (283). Pennell’s take delight in knowing that Whistler, too, writes recipes. And, in the following paragraph, she describes Whistler’s aesthetic vision of food and favorite ingredients as an extension of his aesthetic vision, writing that Whistler had a “respect for the art of dining. If he gave a dinner he studied the menu as carefully as he studied his palette when he painted a picture” (283).

**Soup and the National Body**

Bound up in the issue of a British culinary tradition is the issue of good nutrition and its influence on the national body. In her book *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women*, Lori Anne Loeb notes that “The Victorian advertisement may reflect three determining factors: the consumer, the agent, and the product. But as it becomes part of the visual and verbal vocabulary, it may even indirectly and unconsciously shape as well as reflect popular perceptions” (“Preface” x). During the Victorian period, fashionable innovations to cooking and food preservation offered to cheapen the cost of ingredients while also saving time. During times of war and rationing, this becomes especially important. However, Pennell sees this as a sacrifice of real food and its nutrition as a symbolic death at the expense of the consumer’s nutrition. Aestheticism provided Pennell with the necessary guise to criticize the mass-consumption of alternative man-made food products and recipe writing…and “pleasure” became a substitute for “nutrition.”

Writing that “Beef tea gives courage to battle” (76), Pennell adopts a military vocabulary to describe innovations to cooking products, commenting on the injured consumer body and its
Figure 36: Advertisement, “Bovril is Liquid Life,” *The Illustrated London News* (1900).
relationship to popular Beef Tea substitutes by the Bovril and Liebig companies (see Figure 36). For the thousands of Englishmen fighting overseas and subsisting, primarily, on Beef Tea, the role of “good” soups had never been more important. Just as the bouillon inspired Henry James in his essay on “Little Tours in France,” soup should “sustain and nourish” (79-80). It is important to note that readers encountering Pennell’s chapter “On Soups” would have been especially attuned to Pennell’s national tone. In 1870, one million cans of Bovril were ordered for the Franco-Prussian War, and by 1888, 3,000 cans were consumed domestically (Broomfield). According to Stefanie Markovitz, war had a transformative effect on Victorian journalism, changing not just the ways periodicals handled wartime content, but the ways readers engaged with war coverage (559).

To strengthen its appeal to English readers, Bovril emphasized the extract’s nutritional values as a reliable alternative to real broth. In their advertisements printed during the Franco-Prussian war, Bovril depicted robust soldiers “At the Front and in the Front” while drinking Beef Tea made from its extract. In figure 36, two soldiers in pith helmets brave rainy conditions while gathering around a campfire, a symbol of hearth and home. As one man kneels down to offer a cup of tea to his comrade, we realize that he is injured and wrapping a hand wound with fresh linen. In a state of convalescence, the soldier is weary and tired, relying solely on the diluted beef extract—depicted in the lower-left corner of the frame—that promises, “liquid life.”

What’s especially remarkable about this and other Bovril illustrations is the significant role ascribed to soup. Not only is Beef Tea the soldier’s only reliable form of nutrition, but it is also a man-made alternative to good nutrition.

Of all her recipes in the chapter “On Soups,” Pennell is most critical of products like Bovril because of its lack authentic ingredients with real nutritional values (81). Dubbed,
“make-shifts,” “paltry make-believes to be avoided,” canned soups and bottled extracts with their “ensnaring tin” and “insinuating bottles” should be “forsworn” by all recipe readers and cooks (81-2). According to Pennell, man-made alternatives such as Bovril’s Beef Extract represent an offensive rejection of the “whole science of soupmaking,” which is based entirely on the brewing of rich stocks from aromatic herbs and fresh meat. I am interested in how products like Bovril and Liebig altered the relationship between consumers and their food, encouraging the consumption of lesser recipes with poor nutrition. Moreover, I am interested in how this relationship created tensions between the cookbook author and the national body. Cookbook authors like Pennell knew that canning and extracts saved time and made food preservation possible, but at the expense of the consumer’s body. She writes, the “lukewarm Bovril” is a “hopelessly inadequate substitute for soup freshly made from beef or stock” (77). While not capitalized, the term, “Lukewarm bovril,” is a targeted reference to the Bovril brand, a company famous for its “Bovril’s Beef Extract,” a thick, brown beef extract seasoned with salt, yeast, and starch (Broomfield). Developed by John Lawson Johnston in 1870, Bovril was an immediate success as a popular drink (i.e., Beef Tea) and increasingly widespread substitute for homemade beef broth. Easy to use, Bovril simply required being dissolved in boiling water, and housewives would save hours of leeching the flavors out of animal bones and herbs to make a stock from scratch.19 But, as Pennell shows, Bovril is merely a substitute without artistic or nutritional value.

What’s especially interesting about this regression is how it subverts the very reason for the Victorian cookbook’s during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In Household Management, Isabella Beeton championed the idea that “Men are now so well served out of doors,” as a way to inspire middle-class housewives to improve their cooking and centralize their husbands’ eating in the home (7). Yet in her chapter “On Soups,” Pennell reveals that men are actually less well
fed when eating outside the home more than ever. To do this, she appeals to the diets of British soldiers “battl[ing] with paint and suffering.” Pennell also frames her soups chapter around travel narratives in England and France. After visiting tens of lunch counters and railway dining carts, she is hopeless. Exacerbated, Pennell writes, “wickedly equipped, eating becomes what it never should be!—a sad, terrible necessity, a pleasureless safeguard against pangs of hunger, a mere animal function” (77). The word “animal” is especially significant. While susceptible to base animal instincts, the aesthetic critic was above these temptations, honing an evolved and refined intuition.

Ultimately, new food technologies risked impeding the progress of nineteenth-century recipe writers rather than promoting it. With its ingenious bottling, carrots, onions, and turnips are made “pretty to the eye, [but] without flavour to the palate” (82). Pennell suggests that man-made alternatives are, at best, fraudulent. In fact, they are a new form of acceptable food adulteration. She writes,

Liebig, and all its many offshoots may serve you—and serve you well. But if you be a woman of feeling, of fancy, of imagination, for this emergency alone will you reserve your Liebig. Who would eat tinned pineapple when the fresh fruit is to be had? Would you give bottled tomatoes preference when the gay pommes d’amour, just picked, ornament every stall in the market? Beef extract in skillful hands may work wonders; the soup made from it may deceive the connoisseur of great repute. But what then? Have you no conscience, no respect for your art, that you would thus deceive? (81)

Pennell’s use of the conditional tense (“may work wonders,” “may deceive”) suggests the unlikeness that man-made substitutes like Liebig’s Beef Extract will ever be used for a palatable bowl of broth. Moreover, Pennell exalts fresh fruits and vegetables as essential ingredients for the artist’s toolbox and necessary for flavor and beauty. Freshly picked tomatoes and sliced pineapples are alive, unlike their canned counterparts living in suspended animation. By characterizing Liebig as lifeless and barren, Pennell implies the dire circumstances under which
food substitutes should ever be used. And, nowhere is this problem more obvious than in the “artless” liquid substitutes passing for soup (81-2).

Understanding the relationship between periodical representations of the English soldier and national dialogues about nutrition sheds light on additional advertisements Bovril published during wartime. Advertisements ran across a variety of platforms, and *The Illustrated London News* and *The Pall Mall Gazette* never ran without one. “What the Soldiers Say about Bovril” (Fig. 7) depicts a popular style of advertising that featured personal (supposedly authentic) testimony from British soldiers. This testimony was used to promote a healthy image of men fighting overseas and to link its product, Bovril, with a general sense of the commentator’s masculinity, vigor, and national pride. Markovitz notes that letters from soldiers were commonplace, offering “a public forum for the expression of private experience, a forum in which public and private voices are mixed” (561). In it, a hearty male figure wearing heavy boots, a work shirt, and hat claims the black and white illustration’s central position, which lies to the right of two soldiers’ testimonies about the Bovril brand. Carrying a box labeled, “Bovril,” the soldier reveals just how strong he is—strong enough to carry a brick of “Bovril” and strong because of it. Indeed, the testimony to the left, readers gain a sense of what this kind of strength means for soldiers on the battlefield. In a letter from “Lance-Corporal Kenworthy of the 14th Hussars” serving with “General Buller’s force in Natal” (fig. 37), he writes this to his mother:

Yesterday we had reveille at half-past three and turn out half-past four, in drill order, for a day of reconnaissance, and it was the hardest I have had in the saddle. We started trotting and galloping about six in the morning, and we were at it six o’clock at night, had no dinner, as I had a tin of Bovril Lozenges with me, which kept me up all night.

After a twelve-hour day riding horses and training, the brave soldier is part of a hard-working labor force, the British army, a national everyman. But, what’s interesting about Bovril’s advertisement—and, no doubt, the reason why it was published—is that Kenworthy foregoes
dinner for the alternative, Bovril Lozenges, or, Beef Tea. The soldier’s preference for dinner suggests that he is actually better off with the Bovril alternative than without it. A hard worker, the soldier deserves to eat heartily, so he does. While the soldier is identified, the mother is not. Anonymous, the unidentified female figure suggests a different kind of mother altogether—the mother, Queen Victoria, Mother of the British nation. How did Victoria eat? How did she feed her soldiers? If Victoria’s well-documented eating habits are any indication of her diet, then we can gain some idea of what her preferences were for soup during times of war.

Notes

1 Adam Gopnik is an especially useful authority for Victorian critics studying Pennell’s work. His book *The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food* (2011) dedicates half of its chapters to “meditations” on *Feasts* in the form of “emails” written to Elizabeth Robins Pennell. Additionally, Pennell is the first writer I have found who calls for an uprising amongst her fellow cookbook authors to write the first “great Food Novel”: “Accept the gospel of good living and the sexual problem will be solved. She who first dares to write the great Food Novel will be a true champion of her sex” (15).

2 As I will discuss, resurging interest in Elizabeth Robins Pennell’s art criticism and food writings owes much of its success to Talia Schaffer. See her article, “The Importance of Being Greedy: Connoisseurship and Domesticity in the Writings of Elizabeth Robins Pennell” (*The Recipe Reader*, pages 105-26). Also see Gopnik, page 62 for his discussion of Schaffer’s work on Pennell. See Kimberly Morse Jones: “Better known as the co-biography of celebrated artist James McNeill Whistler and the wife of the talented American illustrator Joseph Pennell, Elizabeth Robins Pennell has traditionally been viewed as an appendage to high profile men in the Victorian art world, diminishing her independent contributions to art, mainly her art criticism” (“Bibliography” 271).

3 The essays Pennell collects in *Feasts* first appeared as part of the collaborative column, “The Ware of Autolycus” for in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (1880s). Contributors to the column wrote anonymously, taking their name from William Shakespeare’s rogue character, “Autolycus,” in *A Winter’s Tale*. According to Schaffer, other contributors to “Wares” included Alice Meynell, Rosamund Marriot Watson, and Violet Hunt (“Importance” 125). For information on *The Pall Mall Gazette’s* circulation numbers, see Clarke 2 and endnote 3 (page 163).

4 For more information on the specific innovations Eliza Acton played in standardizing the Victorian cookbook and the Victorian recipe, see Chapter Two. For Isabella Beeton, see Chapter Three.

5 Both Elizabeth Robins Pennell and her husband, the artist Joseph Pennell, contributed detailed cycling narratives in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* and *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine.*

Since Acton’s and Beeton’s groundbreaking work during the mid-nineteenth century, the Victorian cookbook had changed little by the 1890s. While valuable to the genre, recipe standardization encouraged the widespread belief in accurately transcribing a dish’s instructions; however, this emphasis on accuracy (often intersecting with changing technologies and modernity) threatened to disconnect the cookbook writer from the very nature of food itself. *Fin-de-siècle* cookbooks showed a rise in untrustworthy recipes that catering to culinary trends and printed *en masse* (McLean 14). According to Nicola Humble, a recipe’s unreliability revealed the publishing industry’s best kept secret: “most recipes were never tested” (*Culinary Pleasures*).

As I will discuss, *Feasts* combines two of the principles unique to aestheticism—“taste” and “consumption”; cooking made (and makes) these two concepts incredibly literal (not theoretical). See Schaffer (“The Importance of Being Greedy” 106).

According to Walter Hamilton in *The Aesthetics Movement in England* (1882), the aesthetic movement’s “essence” relied on “persons of cultivated tastes” to define what is beautiful for others” (vii). This skill—to identify an object’s beauty—relied on those with the faculties capable of appreciating it.

See Chapter Two (57-9) and Chapter Three (80-3) for discussions of Acton’s and Beeton’s title pages.

The English term, “art for art’s sake” originates comes from the French phrase, “L’art pour l’art,” meaning art for the sake of art, or, art void of political, social, or moral themes and agendas. Instead, art should focus on creating beauty, or what George P. Landow calls, “art for the sake of beauty and its elevating effects” (“Aesthetes”).

See Chapter Two, page 11.

Isabella Beeton offers a wonderfully helpful chart about the kinds of cooks middle-class households could afford. See the 2000 abridged edition of Isabella Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* for Oxford World’s Classics for information on domestic workers’ salaries (16) and the price of kitchen equipment (47).

For Hamilton’s writings on John Ruskin, see pages 13-22; for his chapter on *Punch* magazine, see pages 75-84.

Pennell was not the first to grant toasted bread and butter its elevated position. In 1849, celebrity chef Alexis Soyer published *The Modern Housewife, or Ménagère*, a middle-class housewife’s compendium in the guise of an epistolary novel. A fictional persona of the domestic housewife, “Hortense B.,” opens the volume’s recipe collection with a response for how to make toast to the woefully inefficient “Eloise L.”


See pages ix-xi in the “Preface” for a discussion of Eliza Acton’s “Mother Eve’s Pudding” and its relationship to Victorian women’s recipe writing. Also, see the Chapter Two Section, “The Poet and the Publisher” (62-70), for more information on the relationship between recipe writing and poetry.

See Chapter Two, pages 23-28 and Chapter Three, pages 89 and 583.
See Acton’s and Beeton’s recipes for Beef Broth. Both authors agree that a proper broth or stock should take anywhere from one to ten hours.
CHAPTER FIVE
EPILOGUE: RECIPE READING AND WRITING TODAY

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that recipe writing provided Victorian women writers alternative routes to authorship that were not previously available. The rise of the periodical press along with the growing demand for household manuals provided a climate in which middle-class women not only had access to cooking instructions they could use, but also a style of writing that was generative in nature, encouraging readers to take active roles as recipe writers with the hopes that recipes would be shared amongst communities of women. Rather than see the recipe as a series of unequivocal blueprints, this dissertation argues that the recipe was, in fact, a malleable genre produced for and by women. I have shown how the poet Eliza Acton established the recipe’s parameters as a genre of women’s prose, how Isabella Beeton popularized it, and how Elizabeth Robins Pennell deviated from these strictures with the creation of “food writing” by adopting an aesthetic vocabulary to define cooking and eating.

For a dissertation about Victorian women writers, it may seem strange to conclude with a discussion of copyright theft and recipe writing today. Yet what the Victorians have in common with contemporary recipe writers is a complex negotiation of creativity and authority that is unique to the genre itself. In Eliza Acton’s time as well as our own, recipe writers continue to ask the question, “If writing a recipe is a creative act, then why is it not creative property?”

Recently, highly publicized instances of recipe plagiarism have focused on blatant copying and pasting of original content in which “authors” claim ownership of copied material and fail to credit their original source. Perhaps the most notable example occurred in early 2012 when popular food blogger Elise Bauer of Simply Recipes notified Amazon that an eBook in their Kindle Store titled, Simple Pasta Recipes, reproduced recipes and photos directly from her website, repackaging them as their own (Gratto). In response to a complaint made to Amazon’s
trademark and copyright agent, Bauer was told to contact the book’s author for “compensation.” Amazon’s critics accuse them of overly lenient systems for reviewing copyrighted materials for digital publication, arguing that “tick boxes” in which content creators claim to have “permission to use the content [has] never stopped scammers before” (Essex qtd. in Gratto). In fact, Bauer is just one food blogger who has been repeatedly targeted by this kind of theft since, “Sooner or later, almost every food blogger finds her work being published somewhere else without her permission” (Bauer “How to Deal”).

In response to the pervasiveness of recipe plagiarism, many food writers have turned to social media to increase awareness of recipe plagiarism and to create systems for dealing with copyright theft. On Facebook and Google+, the community “PIPO”—“Protect Intellectual Property Online”—acts as a watchdog group for stolen material, including links to “Offending Facebook Pages” and “Offending Content Curators.” Similarly, The Food Blog Alliance now provides community members with a list of helpful tips for dealing with recipe theft. In an article on “How to Deal with Copyright Theft,” food bloggers are encouraged to “Know your rights” by reviewing the U.S. Copyright Law on recipes as well as useful ways to contact site administrators about published stolen material. In the case that material is not taken down or properly credited, bloggers are provided a template to file a Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) complaint.

Bauer’s involvement with PIPO and The Food Blog Alliance introduces questions previously seen in Eliza Acton’s appeal to her readers in Chapter Two. When original content is stolen and reproduced for the benefit of other writers, recipe writers miss out on valuable compensation for their work. In an email to Genie Gratto of BlogHer, Bauer writes, “We’re supposed to hunt them down and demand compensation? . . . Yeah, right.” Although 150 years
removed from Acton’s appeal to her readers, Bauer’s biting tone reflects upon this tradition, while simultaneously cautioning other bloggers to think about the future of their posts: once a recipe is shared, it can be shared and shared and shared without the knowledge or consent of the recipe’s original source.
REFERENCES


*Records of the Longman Group*. Special Collections and Archives, University of Reading, Reading, Berkshire, United Kingdom. MS 1393.


APPENDIX I
CORRESPONDENCE

Throughout this dissertation, important correspondence has been referenced/cited between authors such as Eliza Acton, Isabella Beeton, and Elizabeth Robins Pennell. When appropriate, I cited these letters at length, but in the rare occasion where a writer’s superfluous content and/or style and my own interest in space prevented me from including their full letter, I refer readers to the longer correspondents reprinted below. Sources for these works are footnoted.

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CHAPTER TWO:
“THE POET”: MODERN COOKERY IN ALL ITS BRANCHES BY ELIZA ACTON (LONDON: LONGMAN & CO., 1845)

(I)
1 Devonshire Terrace, York Gate, Regent’s Park
Eleventh July 1845

Dear Madam,

I beg to thank you cordially for your very satisfying and welcome note of the tenth of January last; and for the book that accompanied it. Believe me, I am far to sensible of the value of a communication so spontaneous and unaffected, to regard it with the least approach to indifference or neglect—I should have been proud to acknowledge it long since, but I have been abroad in Italy.

Dear Madam, Faithfully Yours
Charles Dickens

CHAPTER THREE:
“THE EDITOR”: MRS. BEETON’S BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT BY ISABELLA BEETON (LONDON: S. O. BEETON, 1861)

(I)
Warren Villa, Newmarket, July 21

MY DEAR MRS. BEETON,—Yours of the 18 received.

I thought you dead as Emma wrote to say by my wish 2 months relative to yourself and baby. But to which you never answer.

As regards yours of the 18 I see difficulties in your way as regards Publishing a Book on Cookery. Cookery is a Science that is only learnt by Long Experience and years of study which of course you have not had. Therefore my advice would be to compile a Book from Receipts from a Variety of the Best Books Published on Cookery and Heaven knows there is a great

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1 Qtd. in volume 4 of The Letters of Charles Dickens (330). See footnotes 3 and 4, which describe Acton as “miscellaneous writer; contributed to annuals and published volumes of verse, including one in 1847 to which CD [Charles Dickens] subscribed” according to the Bradbury and Evans accounts. The book Acton most likely sent to Dickens was her 1845 cookbook, Modern Cookery.
variety for you to choose from. One of our best Woman Cooks who is now retired whom I know
told me recently one of the Best and Most Useful Books is

Simpson’s Cookery
Revised and Modernised

Published by Baldwin and Craddock, Longman and Co. and other Publishers. She is good
authority for I consider her one of the best woman cooks in England. She is now retired and
living near you at East Barnet. I had her and Her Husband Lately on a visit with me and showed
her several books I had but she Preferred Simpson’s.

And is your intended book meant for Larger or the Higher Classes or the Middle Class?
The latter is the one I should recommend you. I enclose you 12 Rules for General Guidance if
you Approve of them.

I have your sister Mary and brother William staying with me for the last fortnight.
Hoping both Sam and yourself and baby are well.

Yours v. sincerely,
V. ENGLISH.²

² Qtd. in Spain 115-116.
APPENDIX II
IMAGES

CHAPTER THREE:
“THE EDITOR”: MRS. BEETON’S BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT BY ISABELLA BEETON (LONDON: S. O. BEETON, 1861)

(I)

Figure 37: Mary Aylett and Olive Ordish’s misidentified portrait of Eliza Acton; “Mrs. Acton” by John Grove Spurgeon, after Sir William Beechey etching, circa 1803.
VITA

Helana E. Brigman grew up on the coast of Maine where she spent her time fishing on lobster boats and hiking the isolated terrains around Mount Katahdin. Raised by a professional chef (and amateur poet), Brigman’s formative years revolved around a love of food and reading. In 2008, Brigman earned her Bachelor’s Degree in Literary Studies with Honors at Columbia College (Columbia, SC) where she contributed to the school’s newspaper and literary journal and the city’s weekly arts and entertainment magazine, The Free Times. Brigman received the Paula Shirley Women’s Studies Award in 2007 and the English Department’s Annual Essay Prize in 2005. She is a proud women’s college graduate and 2004 Horatio Alger National Scholar.

In 2008, Brigman moved to Baton Rouge, LA, where she enrolled in Louisiana State University’s PhD program in English and minored in Women’s and Gender Studies. She received her Master’s Degree in English from LSU in 2010, and her Doctor of Philosophy in English in August 2015.

When she is not reading and writing about Victorian cookbooks, Brigman is a professional food writer, photographer and cook. She is the author of The Fresh Table: Cooking in Louisiana All Year Round (LSU Press, 2013) and creator of the website, Dances with Lobsters (formerly, Clearly Delicious). Her work has been featured on James Beard award-winning website, Serious Eats and national publications such as Louisiana Cookin’ Magazine and The Times Picayune, and from 2010-2014, she created and wrote the column “Fresh Ideas” for Louisiana’s state newspaper, The Advocate. Today, Brigman lives in Maine with her greyhound Cara where she studies Victorian literature, British women writers, and the history of the cookbook.