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Description

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Comments

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Culinary Jane

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In the world of domestic intimacy that Jane Austen fashions for us, food, its production, preparation and consumption, appears almost nowhere, at least in the novels themselves.¹ But there is a complex moral economy that surrounds food, and its analysis tells us much of the broader social and economic hierarchies that swirled around the Austen families, as they engaged in a struggle for social recognition and social maintenance. When we take the Austen films into account, this analysis gains sharpness, and makes what is often inferred very clear indeed.

This paper examines the social meaning of these culinary habits, first in the letters of Jane Austen herself, then through the novels themselves, and finally through their filmic counterparts. I set these accounts in the wider context of the economy of the late Georgian and Regency period, a larger environment that we often lose sight of. So, using Bourdieu's theoretical schema as an aide, I interpret these infinitely small practices in the larger frame of social history. I argue that culinary practice is one of the overlooked elements of the Austen account of social distinction, and that a new look at her work, and the films that the work inspired, provides different understandings of her period.

The Letters and the Household.

Even a cursory glance at Jane Austen's letters tells us that she was heavily involved in finding food and managing the kitchen. Yet there's very little sign of this activity in her novels. She was a woman of limited means. She came from a parson's family, but when he died, she, her mother and her sister had few resources. She had a wealthy brother, indeed, but for most of her life she lived in conditions of genteel poverty, conditions which are reflected, for example, in the life of the four women in *Sense and Sensibility* when they lose their London house. Given her conditions of near-poverty, it is not surprising that she and her close family members were pre-occupied with collecting and managing food.

It was commonplace for individual households of the period to keep their own recipe books and for those same households to specialize in certain foods.² But the daily organization of mealtimes was quite different from those we now recognize, and, of course, it was dramatically shaped by class and social position. Hours of daylight regulated the domestic household³ much more directly. Households rose at seven or eight, and much business was conducted before ten, when breakfast was often taken. The 'morning' then extended into

¹ As a first take, Maggie Lane's *Jane Austen and Food* (Continuum, New York, 2007) is a thorough introduction to the use of food in her novels. A book that outlines the kind of recipes and meals that might have been served in the Austen household is *The Jane Austen Cookbook*, by Maggie Black and Deidre Le Faye (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, Canada, 1995). Even closer to home, Martha Lloyd's recipes, a woman who lived with the family for many years, are kept in a 'Household Book', available only in manuscript, but many of her recipes are repeated in the Black and Le Faye book. Black and Le Faye also tell us a second volume of recipes was compiled by Mrs. Phillip Lybbe Powys, a friend of Mrs. George Austen. Austen family names were attached to some of these recipes. Together with more general histories of the time, we can reconstruct much of what is likely to have occurred at the Austen table.

² Black and Le Faye, op. cit.

³ Black and Le Faye, pages 8ff.

what we now call the afternoon, and a meal called ‘dinner’ was commonly taken at three or four in the afternoon:

...during these ‘morning’ hours ladies would drive out to pay calls or go shopping, while the gentlemen continued to pursue the duties of their estates or profession. Dinner lasted about two hours; in summer a gentle stroll in the grounds or to some urban promenade might follow, while in winter the family and guests would gather round the fire in the drawing room for cards, conversation, perhaps impromptu music and dancing, until tea, accompanied by cakes or similar light refreshments were served there at about eight o’clock ... there might be a supper tray brought in with wine and further cold food, about eleven o’clock or midnight. (Black and Le Faye, pages 8-9)

Fashion and level in the social hierarchy dictated the time of meals, the later the meal, the more fashionable, because it indicated social distance from the acquiescence to desire and appetite. During the day, light refreshments and tea might be offered to callers. Meals were often served at a single moment, with all the food on the table at once:

As far as our Georgian ancestors were concerned, as soon as they walked into the dining room they saw before them a table already covered with separate dishes of every kind of food – soup, fish, game, poultry, pies, vegetables, sauces, pickles, sweet and savoury puddings, custards and jellies – in number anything from five to twenty-five items, depending on the grandeur of the occasion, and arranged symmetrically around the centre dish; this spread constituted a *course* – and even then formed only part of the dinner. (Black and Le Faye, page 11)

Men and women separated after such a meal, the time of separation reducing during the Georgian period. But meals of this substance were clearly the domain of middle and upper class families, in which world Austen resided, or hoped to reside. In Austen’s time, most food was local, and many items were produced in the home and the surrounding community. Those with more resources provided poorer relations and neighbours with gifts of food routinely. Most country houses of any size had poultry, producing meat and eggs. Milk cows were common, and milk, cheese and cream were plentiful. Vegetables and fruit were available seasonally. Many forms of preservation, whether ‘... salting, pickling, drying, potting, candying, jamming, cheese-making, brewing, wine-making ...’⁴ took place during the summer months to ensure a year-round supply of various foods.

Jane Austen liked to eat, and she liked to be involved with domestic arrangements concerning food. There are mentions of food in every almost letter she wrote, often as a backdrop to a social engagement, a dance, or a gathering of neighbours and friends:

We sat(e) down to dinner a little after five and had some beefsteaks and a boiled fowl, but no oyster sauce...(Wednesday October 24, 1798, letter to Cassandra Austen)...⁵
Mr. Lyford was here yesterday; he came while we were at dinner, and partook of our elegant entertainment. I was not ashamed at asking him to sit down to table, for we had some pease-soup, a sparerib and a pudding. (To Cassandra Austen, Saturday 1-Sunday 2 December, 1798)
We shall be with you on Thursday to a very late Dinner – later I suppose

⁴ Black and Le Faye, page 17)

⁵ These letters come from *Jane Austen’s Letters* (New Edition), collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1995.

than my Father will like for himself – but I give him leave to eat one before. You must give us something very nice, for we are used to live well. (To Cassandra Austen, Post-script, June 19, 1800.)

When you receive this, our guests will be all gone or going; and I shall be left to the comfortable disposal of my time, to ease of mind from the torments of rice puddings and apple dumplings, ... (Captain Foote) ... dined with us on Friday, and I fear will not soon venture again, for the strength of our dinner was a boiled leg of mutton, underdone even for James; and Captain Foote has a particular dislike to underdone mutton; but he was so good-humored and pleasant that I did not mind much his being starved. (Letter to Cassandra Austen, Wednesday 7-Thursday 8 January 1807)

The Hattons' & Milles' dine here today-& I shall eat Ice and drink French wine & be above Vulgar Economy. (Letter to Cassandra Austen, Thursday 30 June-Friday 1 July, 1808.)

But she also liked to manage the provisions and the wine cellar when possible:

I carry about the keys of the Wine & Closet; & twice since began this letter, have had orders to give in the Kitchen: Our dinner was very good yesterday, & the Chicken boiled perfectly tender; therefore I shall not be obliged to dismiss Nanny on that account. (Letter to Cassandra Austen, Saturday 27-Sunday 28 October, 1798)

My mother desires me to tell you that I am a very good housekeeper, which I have no reluctance in doing because I really think it my peculiar excellence, and for this reason – I always take care to provide such things as please my own appetite, which I consider as the chief merit in housekeeping. I have some ragout veal, and I mean to have some haricot mutton tomorrow. We are to kill a pig soon ... I am very fond of experimental housekeeping, such as having an ox-cheek now and then; I shall have one next week, and I mean to have some dumplings put into it...(Letter to Cassandra Austen, Saturday 17-Sunday 18 November, 1798)

... I endeavour as far as I can to supply your place, & be useful & keep things in order: I detect dirt in the Water-decanter as fast as I can, and give the Cook physic (medicine), which she throws off her Stomach... (Letter to Cassandra Austen, Friday 14 September 1804)

We began our China Tea three days ago, & I find it very good-my companions know nothing of the matter. – As to Fanny, & her 12lb. in a twelvemonths, she may talk until she is as black in the face as her own Tea, but I cannot believe her-more likely 12lb. a quarter. (Letter to Cassandra Austen, Friday May 31st 1811)

She kept her eye on the cost of produce when required:

Meat is only 8d. a pound, butter 12d & cheese 9 ½d. ... the exorbitant price of Fish (however) – a salmon has been sold at 2s. 9d. per pound the whole fish.(Letter to Cassandra Austen, Tuesday 5-Wednesday 6 May, 1801)

But this was not a woman who cooked, as far as we can tell, nor kept a recipe book of her own. As a member of the marginal middle class whose personal well-being was dramatically affected by the death of her father in 1805, Jane Austen always lived in a house with servants, usually a cook, but also maids, a nanny, and others to help around the house. Her involvement in the kitchen usually focused on budgetary matters, on arranging for the

distribution and reception of fruit, meat and vegetables to and from her own house, and on keeping an eye on the servants as they prepared food.

In particular, Jane Austen was a tea specialist. She delighted in getting up early in the morning to play piano, write (usually letters) and make the tea for the family. Wilson and Carpenter comment:

At 9 o'clock she made breakfast – that was *her* part of the household work – the tea and the sugar stores were under her charge.
(Wilson and Carpenter, 2004, page 3)⁶

Thus Austen was in charge of tea, a small art that took considerable skill and touch. She liked to eat, and doubtless made the tea to suit her palette. Wilson and Carpenter speculate that:

She would have made (the tea) much the way we make it today, with freshly boiling water poured bubbling over high-quality loose tea in a nice fat, warm teapot. Jane probably would have boiled the water in the Austens' large, copper kettle right in the dining room, on the black hob grate set into the fireplace.
(Wilson and Carpenter, 2004, page 2)

Tea was probably served with sugar, but not necessarily with milk or cream, though this is undocumented. Both tea and sugar were scarce and expensive. There was an active black market in both commodities, so they were both kept in locked cupboards, with Jane holding the key.⁷ The Austens, even though living in modest circumstances, as we already know, always had servants, and certainly had a cook. It was probable that the sterner duties of the kitchen fell into the cook's domain, including the cooking for breakfast, though Wilson and Carpenter claim that Austen probably made the toast for breakfast. Breakfast was usually a limited and informal event during this period. People tended to drop in and out, read the paper, make notes, and serve themselves food, a tradition carried into the 20th century in

⁶ The reference cites the memoir *My Aunt Jane Austen*, by Caroline Austen as the origin of this comment. Published first in 1867, it was part of James Edward Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford.)

⁷ Tea, of course, has a complicated history of its own. Drunk in China three millennia before Christ, it did not reach England until the late 1600s. It was first sold through coffee houses, and its presence annoyed tavern owners because it began to take the place of ale and liquor. One source argues that 'By 1750, tea was the favoured drink of the lower class', but it is unlikely this remained the case for long. The government, having suffered losses on tax income from liquor, turned its attention to tea, which at one time was taxed at 119%, thus putting it out of the reach of ordinary mortals. See www.britainexpress.com/History/tea-in-britain.htm. Tea smuggling then rose up as a growth industry until the intervention of the famous William Pitt the Younger, a minister at 22, and Prime Minister by 24. He passed The Commutation Act of 1784, which reduced the tax rate on tea to 12.5%. The origins of the ritual of 'afternoon tea' are in this era. From the same source we find: 'Afternoon tea is said to have originated with one person; Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford. In the early 1800's she launched the idea of having tea in the late afternoon to bridge the gap between luncheon and dinner, which in fashionable circles might not be served until 8 o'clock at night. This fashionable custom soon evolved into high tea among the working classes, where this late afternoon repast became the main meal of the day.'

Sugar came in large lumps and various grades, the 'finest, white' grade being reserved for the well-to-do and high prices, the brown, coarse unrefined material being more readily available. The phrase 'one lump or two' comes from this era, and refers to the 'snipping off' of small pieces of sugar from a larger block with sugar snippers, small tools designed for just this purpose.

many 'great houses'. Toast, muffins and rolls were probably the major accompaniment to tea at breakfast.⁸

Austen's own letters therefore reveal a series of insights into her analysis of social categories, and the role that the culinary plays in her assessment of the subtle games of hierarchy. While a recent film of the life and times of Jane Austen⁹ shows Austen's sister Cassandra up to her elbows in chicken entrails, it's hardly likely that Jane Austen spent much of her time transforming the raw into the cooked. Like all women of her class, the fight for position in the social hierarchy was a very serious battle – she ensured that a thin layer of servants separated her and her family from the necessity to clean, sweep, cook, kill animals or make beds. Certainly she was interested in food, and she chose to be involved in preparing breakfast to some extent. But the Austens had a cook, a maid and several other servants most of the time, as far as we can tell, and thus her culinary involvements were largely gestural and managerial in nature, as they had to be if she were to continue to succeed at the edge of the landed gentry, as commentators have suggested.¹⁰ The boundaries of social class were closely protected at all times. Austen did like to eat, and says so directly to her sister in one of her letters.¹¹ Thus, her primary impulse was to see that good food and good cooking reigned in the Austen household, and that the day started well with a breakfast that she directed. But she didn't plan to spend her life looking after the kitchen; she had better things to do, and so did her family. She had better have servants to do the normal work of the kitchen or there were consequences. People in her social category simply didn't do these things.

We also notice how deeply *social* the business of eating was at this time and in this social milieu. Most families of her rank and above entertained all the time. People came and stayed, sometimes for months. Thus the way the family ate, the kind of cutlery they used, the quality of silver on show, the manners they displayed, and the china they could afford were all matters of wide discussion and quotidian judgment, a judgment so quickly made and so soon forgotten that it rapidly became part of the social wallpaper of Georgian England. Jane

⁸ Wilson and Carpenter comment on the history of breakfast: "The typical "tea and toast" breakfast that Jane Austen enjoyed was a relatively new invention. Traditionally, British breakfasts had consisted of hearty fare that often included beef and ale. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, many people, especially those of the upper classes, considered such breakfasts to be antiquated and rustic. In the early 1700s, Queen Anne first set the mode of drinking tea for her morning meal, preferring the light, refreshing drink to the heavy alcoholic beverages ... Ladies and gentlemen followed her lead, and tea soon became part of the truly fashionable breakfast. To accompany the stylish new beverage, the upper classes developed a taste for a more delicate breakfast, gradually abandoning meat and other heavier breakfast foods." (Pages 7-8) The tradition of the heavy breakfast lingered on in working class households, and, as we know, a 'traditional English' these days is much more than tea and toast.

⁹ *Miss Austen Regrets*, BBC and WGBH Boston, 2008, directed by Jeremy Lovering, and starring Greta Scacchi as Cassandra and Olivia Williams as the 40 year old Jane Austen.

¹⁰ *Jane Austen for Dummies*, Joan Klingel Ray, Wiley, Hoboken, 2006. Page 39. Remember, of course, the swift rebuke that Mrs. Bennet gives to Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* when he asks which of her daughters did the cooking:

The dinner ... was highly admired, and he (Mr. Collins) begged to know to which of his fair cousins the excellence of its cookery was owing. But here he was set right by Mrs. Bennet, who assured him, with some asperity, that they were well able to keep a good cook, and that her daughters had nothing to do in the kitchen. He begged pardon for having displeased her. In a softened tone she declared herself not at all offended; but he continued to apologize for about a quarter of an hour. (*Pride and Prejudice*, 64)

¹¹ Letter of 17-18 November, 1798 to her sister Cassandra.

herself went visiting, sometimes for weeks on end. Relatives and friends of the families came and went on a regular basis. Visits and stays in London were common. The larger house and estates were expected to play their part as public arenas of discourse and ceremony. It was entirely acceptable to visit the larger houses and ask for a tour of the house. Indeed, in Austen's time, this particular fashion became very popular, and fees were often paid. Given these circumstances, the provision, consumption and display of food became a central part of the schema of social judgment that Austen and her contemporaries invoked on a daily basis. Along with the goings-on at dances, the clothes that were being worn, the furniture on display, and the nature of the landscaping efforts, food played its part in setting people apart, and keeping social groups together in their common customs. Thus both social distance and social proximity were established and reproduced through these simple practices.

*The Novels*¹²

When we come to the novels themselves, these inferential differences are much more clearly on display. But Lewis comments:

Jane Austen's correspondence indicates that she was deeply interested in food, which is not surprising as she was a woman of limited means and therefore necessarily involved in its production. What *is* surprising is that Austen's quotidian culinary interests do not carry over into her fiction. Indeed, she appears to use her novels to escape the tedious concerns of the body, thus reinforcing the longstanding fairy tale food morality that deems those who starve virtuous and those who consume ogres. (Lewis, 2006:1)¹³

But, to begin with, let us remember the extremes. There are, we imagine, on the one hand, the piles of food, of fruit especially, stacked high like miniature pyramids, as was the formal style at banquets at large stately homes like Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, so much food, as it appears in the depictions of the day, that it seems it would take an army to demolish it:

The next variation which their visit afforded was produced by the entrance of servants with cold meat, cake, and a variety of all the finest fruits in season ... There was now employment for the whole party; for though they could not all talk, they could all eat, and the beautiful pyramids of grapes, nectarines, and peaches, soon collected them round the table. (*P&P*, 268, cited in Lane, xii)¹⁴

¹² The seminal work in this area is *Jane Austen and Food*, Maggie Lane, Hambledon Press, 1995, London. I have drawn extensively on her work here.

¹³ Tanya Lewis, a talk, *Soup and Snobbery: Food in the Novels of Jane Austen*, for the Jane Austen Society, Vancouver, British Columbia, given on 8 April 2006, on the occasion of Jane Austen Day, and quoted in summary at the Vancouver Jane Austen website at jasnavancouver.ca/members/Soup_and_Snobbery_Summary.pdf. I draw on her ideas in this section.

¹⁴ This version of *Pride and Prejudice* is R.W. Chapman's third edition (Oxford 1923) of *The Novels of Jane Austen*.

Indeed class and appetite are largely inversely connected. Few upper class women seem to eat at all. Consider the women in Darcy's circle as they sit endlessly not eating in their drawing rooms or attending dances. They are surrounded by food, but make little use of it. On the other hand, in *Mansfield Park*, the heroine, Fanny Price, having dismayed the head of the household, is sent back to her original family in Portsmouth, and there she sees humans eating at the trough like animals, tearing at their food with their hands, starving and desperate to eat with little available to them. Where the need is greatest, the supply is least. We can overstate this case, of course. Changes in the agriculture of the early Georgian period meant that mass starvation was a thing of the past, though irregularities and uncertain supplies had not ceased. But the quality of food, the way it was prepared, and most especially, the fashion in which people ate their food, was central to the social judgments of the time. It is precisely because Mr. Hurst in *Pride and Prejudice* eats too much and snores the rest of the time that we have little regard for him, and think ill of his manners. He is a comedic figure. Similarly, the shame that Elizabeth feels about some of the behaviors of her family, and especially her mother, is not eased by the way in which Mrs. Bennet devours food like a woman possessed at Sir William Lucas's, party where Elizabeth again meets Darcy.¹⁵ Thus it is not in the quantity of food that we see social distinction, but rather in the way that the culinary world is fashioned by custom, taste and judgment.

Second, the weight of this moral economy rests most heavily on women.¹⁶ Men can eat like ravenous pigs, and still survive the barbs of the social order. Mr. Hurst is not cast into outer darkness because he eats barbarously. Yet he lacks all manners:

... as for Mr. Hurst, by whom Elizabeth sat, he was an indolent man, who lived only to eat drink, and play at cards, who when he found her prefer a plain dish to a ragout had nothing to say to her. (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.35)¹⁷

And men hunt, thus bringing them into direct contact with nature. But for women, the capitals at stake are much more serious. As Lewis shows us, Marianne, in *Sense and Sensibility* emaciates herself for love, and hardly eats at all for weeks after. Willoughby has discarded her, but Lucy Steele simultaneously dreams greedily of cows and cream at Delaford.¹⁸ Anne Elliott in *Persuasion* hardly ever eats, seeming apparently content to feed others and look to their needs. But her sister Mary eats all the time, and rarely considers others, even her injured son, who, you will remember, she abandons as soon as she can once Anne is one the scene. Few have a healthy, balanced approach to their eating, though Mrs. Jennings, in Lewis's view may be an exception, a woman who eats a deal, but is essentially kind and selfless. She is a rarity in the Austen novels. There are many more examples of gluttony on the one hand and abstinence on the other.

Indeed, Lane reminds us that:

¹⁵ *Pride and Prejudice*, pages 24. This outburst of 'eating' is not depicted in the book, but rather in the 1995 BBC TV film.

¹⁶ Lane, op. cit., spends a whole chapter, chapter four on this theme in her book. (pages 77-100) The chapter is titled 'Greed and Gender.'

¹⁷ *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen, with introduction and notes by Carol Howard, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, 2003.

¹⁸ Lewis, page 1, op. cit.

Jane Austen was not quite twelve years old when the Reverend John Trusler's book *The Honors of the Table for the Use of Young People* was published ... Trusler declares, with perfect seriousness that to eat very much 'is now deemed indelicate in a lady, for her character should be divine rather than sensual'.¹⁹

Austen was closely attuned to the absurdity of these attitudes, but she also understood their power. However absurd they might be, they still carried the force of social convention with them. Lane imagines, and I think rightly so, that Austen took the middle ground on these issues. Noble indifference to food implies an insult. High thoughts depended on full stomachs, and such attitudes implicitly demeaned those who struggled to make ends meet, and to feed their families. This very struggle was considered unworthy, yet to those engaged in the struggle, there was very little choice. Austen's view seems to have been that a moderate and steady supply of food was all that was needed. The excesses of Pemberley, that we assume Elizabeth Bennet will moderate when she takes control, (I always imagine Jennifer Ehle running things there to this day) are unnecessary. In the same light, the daily struggle so many faced for adequate provision was equally reprehensible to her.²⁰

Several writers comment on the difference between the so-called *Juvenilia*²¹ and the more mature work. The argument we are given in a general sense is that her 'young works', as we might anticipate, lack the sophistication and subtlety of the canonized texts of maturity. Thus here we see women eating huge meals or eating nothing at all.²² Such extremes are largely elided in the later novels:

After the *Juvenilia*, Jane Austen imposes on herself a greater delicacy in her handling of food. Her art becomes more subtle; her characterization less crude, her satire more oblique. (Lane, 82)

¹⁹ Cited in Lane, page 77. The reference is to John Trusler, *The Honours of the Table for the Use of Young People* (London, 1787) further cited in Elizabeth Burton, *The Georgians at Home*. (London, 1967) page 196) Lane's line of argument is that while Austen might ridicule this distinction between the 'divine' and the 'sensual', many of her heroines were closer to the divine than to the sensual.

²⁰ Lane also comments: 'Of all writers she is the one who seems ready to eschew physical detail in order to concentrate on a higher plane of existence altogether. Her most esteemed characters are rarely if ever preoccupied with 'the mean and indelicate employment of eating and drinking'. They eat to live, but certainly not live to eat. To take an interest in food in a Jane Austen novel is to be almost certainly condemned as frivolous, selfish or gross. (Lane, op. cit. page 78)

²¹ These works are collected in *The Works of Jane Austen*, vi. *Minor Works*, edited by R. W. Chapman. (2nd. Edition reprinted with corrections, Oxford, 1979). They include an unfinished fragment called *The Watsons*, a finished work in letters called *Lady Susan*, four short pieces on male heroes, three short plays, and a series of letters. Between 12 and 15, she wrote *Amelia Webster* and *The Three Sisters*, the first a romance though letters, the second an account of sisterly rivalry. She also wrote a history of England when she was 15, as well as *The Beautiful Cassandra*, the tale of a 'pleasure-loving female', *The Three Sisters*' a precursor to *Pride and Prejudice*, *Evelyn*, the tale of unrepentant male egoism, and *Frederic & Elfrida*, which focuses on proprieties. Most interestingly, perhaps, is *Catharine or the Bower*, her first serious attempt at fiction, and a clear precursor to her 'serious' work. This list should give pause to those who accuse Jane Austen of low productivity. An excellent commentary on some elements of this early collection are provided by G.K. Chesterton in his *The Apostle and the Wild Ducks/Jane Austen's Juvenilia*, to be found in Dorothy E. Collins' (edited) *Selected Essays of G.K. Chesterton*, Methuen, London, 1949. Chesterton was a fan, and championed her cause against the so-called great male writers, Coleridge and Carlyle, of her period. He said:

Jane Austen was not inflamed or inspired or even moved to be a genius; she simply was a genius. Her fire, what there was of it, began with herself; like the fire of the first man who rubbed two sticks together. (page 3 of 4, at en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Apostle_and_the_Wild_Ducks).

²² Lane, op. cit., page 79ff.

The powerful theme of ‘divine’ abstinence is exemplified by Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*.²³ In an archetypical section of the book, Marianne feeds her grief at the realization that her life with Willoughby is not to be, by disdaining food entirely, as if her banishment from society also requires her to destroy herself through self-imposed emaciation.

At breakfast, she neither ate nor attempted to eat anything ... As this was a favourite meal with Mrs. Jennings, it lasted a considerable time ... (*SS*, 131)²⁴

Mrs. Jennings ... returned to Marianne, whom she found attempting to rise from the bed, and whom she reached just in time to prevent her from falling on the floor, faint and giddy from a long want of proper rest and food; for it was many days since she had any appetite, and many nights since she had really slept; and now, when her mind was no longer supported by the fever of suspense, the consequence of all this was felt in an aching head, a weakened stomach, and general nervous faintness. A glass of wine, which Eleanor procured for her directly, made her more comfortable ... (*SS*, 134)

Had not Elinor, in the sad countenance of her sister, seen a check to all mirth, she could have been entertained by Mrs. Jennings’s endeavours to cure a disappointment in love, by a variety of sweetmeats and olives ... ‘Poor soul!’ cried Mrs. Jennings, as soon as she was gone, ‘how it grieves me to see her! And I declare if she is not gone away with finishing her wine! And the dried cherries too! Lord! nothing seems to do her any good. I am sure, if I knew of anything she would like, I would send all over town for it. (*SS*, 140-141)

Mrs. Jennings, for whom food is a central pleasure, rushes around in circles, believing deep in her heart that there must be something – a glass of wine, an exotic treat from the mid-east, an olive, a Madeira, a fruit, something in all of London, that will tempt the palette and bring Marianne round:

‘My dear,’ ... ‘I have just recollected that I have some of the finest old Costantia wine in the house that ever was tasted – so I have brought a glass of it for your sister. My poor husband! How fond he was of it! Whenever he had a touch of his old cholicky gout, he said it did him more good than anything else in the world. Do take it to your sister’ (*SS*, 143-144).

It is also food that is at the heart of recovery from the brink, but this is hardly richly covered in the Austen text. Indeed, one will search in vain in *Sense and Sensibility* for any discussion whatsoever that Marianne ever ate at all after this episode of enforced starvation, though this could hardly be the case. And after this period of self-imposed abstinence and social exclusion in Mrs. Jennings’ London house, Marianne becomes, as readers will readily remember, ill and close to death in the house of Mr. Palmer, on the way home to her mother. An apothecary is called, and she comes through, though it is a close call, and there are well-founded doubts about her survival. After the fever breaks, Marianne ‘... continued to mend every day ...’²⁵, though food is never mentioned. We are given to assume that normal meal service has been resumed.

²³ Lane 83ff.

²⁴ The edition is *Sense and Sensibility*, Wordsworth Classics, Jane Austen, with illustrations by Hugh Thomson, Ware, 1995.

²⁵ *SS*, 255.

Interestingly, however, one of the servants mentions, during this recovery period, that Mr. Ferrars is married,²⁶ which sends the three women in the household, and the youngster Margaret, into a state of grave concern and disappointment until the ambiguity is removed. And at this point we are told:

Marianne had already sent to say that she should eat nothing more;²⁷ Mrs. Dashwood's and Elinor's appetites were equally lost, and Margaret might think herself very well off, that with so much uneasiness as both her sisters had lately experienced, so much reason that they had often to be careless of the meals, she had never been obliged to go without dinner before. (*S&S*, 270)

It was ever thus; tragedy brings on an incapacity to eat, but when things get better, and food is once again possible, the story of its re-emergence becomes hidden from us.²⁸

Elsewhere in the other novels abstinence and denial are the order of the day:

The attitude towards food of the remainder of Jane Austen's heroines can be expressed in just one word: indifference. By this I don't mean just that Jane Austen does not trouble to give them feelings on the subject, but that their positive indifference is at some point in the text clearly demonstrate and approved ... Jane Austen's heroines eat to keep themselves healthy, to be sociable, or to conform. But not one ever anticipates or expresses pleasure in a meal, or admits to liking a particular food ... The indifference to food of Catherine Morland is explicitly stated towards the end of *Northanger Abbey* ... 'I did not like quite like at breakfast', says Mrs. Morland, 'to hear you talk so much about the French bread at Northanger', to which Catherine replies. 'I am sure I do not care about the bread. It is all the same to me what I eat.' (*Northanger Abbey*²⁹, page 209, in Lane, op. cit. page 87)

Third, there is the matter of moral gifts. In *Emma*, our heroine is endlessly tied up with good works, and many of these good works are associated with food. Emma, of course, eats no more than any of the Austen heroines, but she acts as a center of nutritional distribution. Emma teaches her friend and follower Harriet Smith the virtues of providing for the poor with gifts of food, and much more besides. She brings soup to the local community and boxes of apples and pork to Mrs. Bates. This ritual of culinary redistribution routinely reflects Emma's social superiority, dispensing social virtue and a surplus of wealth at the same time. And while these mechanisms were necessary and valuable to poorer households, they were also clearly ways of maintaining networks of social obligation and moral debt. Lane sets the scene perfectly:

One thing we can be sure of is that nobody will ever starve in Highbury. Food is always passing hands there. Indeed we hardly ever hear of anybody eating anything

²⁶ *S&S*, 270. Of course it is the 'wrong' Mr. Ferrars.

²⁷ Marianne is so distraught on behalf of her sister, that she has hysterics, and is helped from the room, and away, of course, from the table.

²⁸ As we shall see, this situation is remedied in several of the film versions of the novels. The BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* has many scenes where food is displayed, and there are several occasions where the family sits down to meals, takes tea, nibbles, bites and devours in various setting in *Sense and Sensibility*. The family do sit down at four for dinner (p. 275) and at that meal, Edward secures Elinor in marriage.

²⁹ *Northanger Abbey*, Penguin Classics, edited with an introduction by Marilyn Butler, London, 1995.

that has not been given by somebody else. Sometimes it seems that people only exist to feed their neighbors ... (Lane, 154)

But while such 'beneficence' was expected from those of social rank, it was a promise not always delivered upon. Indeed in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mr. Bingley, under the management of his prideful friend Darcy closes up the house for months, people are thrown out of work, tradesmen lose their income, and the flow of food from rich to poor is stopped in its tracks.

Emma has an unusual social status for an Austen heroine. Unlike the gothic *Northanger Abbey* and Catherine Morland, or the subjugated roles that Anne Elliot, the Dashwood sisters, and the Bennet sorority endure, Emma presides over a household in which her antique father is the only patriarchal control to hand in her immediate family³⁰. Given his adoration of his daughter, and his entire acquiescence to her plans, she has power enough to disperse goods of all kinds, and primarily advice, of course, to the community, whether they like it or not. In the famous opening we hear:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

She was the youngest of two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father, and had, in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period. (*Emma*, 1)³¹

It is not difficult to discern that Emma's culinary dispensations are closely tied up with her strategies of social domination and patronage.³² The novel is truly obsessed with food, the obverse of the other writings. This obsession takes several forms beyond the accounts of Emma's 'generosity' to her neighbours. There is a parallel focus on health, and Mr. Woodhouse's endless concerns. Mr Woodhouse's attitude to food is interesting because it is rare among men in the Austen novels. He is a beautifully-wrought hypochondriac, whose defining quality is caution and nervousness. He is frightened of eating the wrong foods and being up too late. He doesn't like drafts much either, and senses they could be lethal. And he carries his counsel on food to all those around him:

His own stomach could bear nothing rich, and he could never believe other people to be different from himself. What was unwholesome to him, he regarded as unfit for anybody... (*Emma*, 19, cited in Lane 155)³³

Because of his solicitude for the welfare of others, he provides detailed advice on all culinary matters. As Lane tells us, within his house during supper, he is at pains to advise every woman present what is best for them to eat:

³⁰ One could argue that Mr. Knightley is just such a patriarch, but he is only loosely connected to Emma by way of family ties, being her brother-in-law's brother. And she seems mostly to do what she wants, independent of his advice, except on one or two crucial occasions.

³¹ *Emma*, with an introduction by Lionel Trilling, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, the Riverside Press, Cambridge.

³² Lane provides a whole chapter on Emma and food, chapter eight, op. cit.

³³ This reference to *Emma* is to the Chapman edition.

Mrs. Bates, let me propose your venturing on one of these eggs. An egg, boiled very soft is not unwholesome. Serle understands boiling an egg better than anybody. I would not recommend an egg boiled by anyone else – but you need not be afraid – they are very very small, you see – one of our small eggs will not hurt you. Miss Bates, let Emma help you to a *little* bit of tart – a *very* little bit. Our are all apple tarts. You need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here. I do not advise the custard. Mrs. Goddard, what say you to *half* a glass of wine? A *small* half glass – put into a tumbler of water? I do not think it could disagree with you. (*Emma*, 25, cited in Lane, 156)³⁴

For Mr. Woodhouse, eating is an adventure, but it is a dangerous adventure; one should travel with caution and care if one is not to be ensnared by illness. Smallness of portions and apprehension are his watchwords. Double negatives are the strongest forms of praise he can provide for the act of eating. But his caution reaches beyond absurdity when he counsels against his own custards. One can think of no greater contrast to the robust young men of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, whose large appetites and eagerness to devour are not merely explained by the difference in age, but rather by a very separate set of dispositions. Consider, for example, this episode in *Emma*:

... Emma and Mr. Elton, having inquired after the sick Harriet, are overtaken by 'Mr. John Knightley, returning from a daily visit to Donwell, with his two eldest boys, whose healthy, glowing faces, showed all the benefit of a country run, and seemed to ensure a quick dispatch of the roast mutton and rice pudding they were hurrying home for. (*Emma*, 109, cited in Lane, 161)

One cannot imagine that Mr. Woodhouse was somehow very different as a younger man, and then underwent some magical transformation in middle years. When he talks of his own needs, he always includes the needs of others, and his advice, as we might predict, is always guided towards caution and removal from the world:

"My poor dear Isabella,"³⁵ said he, fondly taking her hand, and interrupting for a few moments, her busy labours for some one of her five children – "How long it is, how terribly long since you were here! And how tired you must be after your journey! You must go to bed early, my dear – and I recommend a little gruel before you go. – You and I will have a nice basin of gruel together. My dear Emma, suppose we all have a little gruel. (*Emma*, 77)

The medicinal concerns of Mr. Woodhouse, and the redistributive tendencies of his daughter combine halfway through the book:

"... we have killed a porker, and Emma thinks of sending them (the Bates's) a loin or a leg. It is very small and delicate – Hartfield pork is not like any other pork – but it is still pork – and, my dear Emma, unless one could be sure of their making it into nice steaks, nicely fried, as our's are fried, without the smallest grease, and not roast it, for no stomach can bear roast pork – I think we had better send the leg – do you not think so, my dear?"

"My dear papa, I sent the whole hind-quarter. I knew you would wish it. There will be the leg to be salted, you know, which is so very nice, and the loin to be dressed directly in any manner they like."

"That's right, my dear, very right. I had not thought of it before, but that was the best way. They must not over-salt the leg; and then, if it is not over-salted, and if

³⁴ The Chapman edition is used by Lane for this reference.

³⁵ Mr. Woodhouse's oldest married daughter.

it is very thoroughly boiled, just as Serle boils our's, and eaten very moderately of, with a boiled turnip, and a little carrot or parsnip, I do not consider it unwholesome. (*Emma*, 131)

Emma, by contrast, is not parsimonious with food:

Emma allowed her father to talk – but supplied her visitors in a much more satisfactory style (compared to her father); and on the present evening had particular pleasure in sending them (her guests) away happy. (*Emma*, 17)

And it is soon clear to the reader that she is at the center of the village's circulation of foodstuffs from one house to another. Moreover, Emma uses the instrument of the dinner party as a way of ensuring that her distribution of goods and largesse is not extended merely to the deserving poor, but is also used as a method of domination of those who she chooses not to like, but would still like to command. For example, the new Mrs. Elton brings her own 'high' standards about food from Bath:

She was a little shocked at the want of two drawing rooms, at the poor attempt at rout-cakes³⁶, and there being no ice in the Highbury card parties. Mrs. Bates, Mrs. Perry, Mrs. Goddard and others, were a good deal behind hand in knowledge of the world, but *she* would soon show them how every thing should be arranged. In the course of the spring she must return their civilities by one very superior party – in which her card tables should be set out with their separate candles and unbroken packs in the true style – and more waiters engaged for the evening than their own establishment could furnish to carry round the refreshments at exactly the proper hour, and in the proper order. (*Emma*, 224-225)

But Emma is not one to allow some upstart from the outside, and certainly not one as unworthy as Mrs. Elton, to replace her as the most distinguished hostess in the village. As she says:

Of the lady, individually, Emma thought very little. She was good enough for Mr. Elton, no doubt; accomplished enough for Highbury – handsome enough to look plain. (*Emma*, 140)

But her own plans to ensure her own continued ascendancy must be put in place:

Emma, in the meanwhile, could not be satisfied without a dinner at Hartfield for the Eltons. They must not do less than others, or she should be exposed to odious suspicions ... A dinner there must be. (*Emma*, 225)

Emma duly assembles those in her closest circle of acquaintances, taking care to keep the group small and select, and filled with the right judgments. It is the perfect stage on which to allow Mrs. Elton to 'be what she is,' a woman who lacks all discernment and taste. And this performance is not long in coming, as the new arrival sails into Miss Fairfax, with an ill-judged set of advice. After Mrs. Weston has gently suggested to Jane Fairfax that she should take care with early walks in the rain, Mrs. Elton moves from gentle persuasion to absolute insistence, turning a kindness into something much harsher and more blunt:

"Oh! She *shall not* do such a thing again," eagerly rejoined Mrs. Elton. "We will not allow her to do such a thing again" – and nodding significantly – "there must be some arrangement made. (*Emma*, 229)

³⁶ Rout-cakes are somewhat like shortbread cookies.

When the time to eat dinner arrives, Mrs. Elton is ready to charge in, taking her place as the most prominent person present:

Dinner was on the table. – Mrs. Elton, before she could be spoken to, was ready; and before Mr. Woodhouse had reached her with his request to be allowed to hand her into the dinner-parlour, was saying –

“Must I go first? I really am ashamed of leading the way.”

But Mrs. Elton is not done yet. She is eager to be of further service to Jane Fairfax, who she now embarrasses with entreaties to gain her a position as governess as soon as possible. In conversation with Jane, she comments:

“Oh! my dear, we cannot begin too early; you are not aware of the difficulty of procuring exactly the desirable thing.”

“I am not aware!” said Jane, shaking her head; “dear Mrs. Elton, who can have thought of it as I have done?”

“But you have not seen so much of the world as I have! You do not know how many candidates there are for the *first* situations...”

“... I am exceedingly obliged to you, Mrs. Elton, I am obliged to any body who feels for me, but I m quite serious in wishing nothing to be done till the summer...”

“And I am quite serious too, I assure you,” replied Mrs. Elton gaily, “in resolving to be always on the watch, and employing my friends to watch also, that nothing really unexceptionable may pass us.

In this style she ran on; never thoroughly stopped by anything till Mr. Woodhouse came into the room; her vanity had then a change of object, and Emma heard her say in the same half-whisper to Jane,

“Here comes this dear old beau of mine, I protest! – Only think of his gallantry in coming away before the older men! – what a dear creature he is; - ... I fancy I am rather a favourite; he took notice of my gown. (*Emma*, 232, 234)

The self-referential language is endless, and at every step Mrs. Elton manages to transgress every unspoken social code that matters to those present. Emma could have hardly wished for more. By the end of the evening, Mrs. Elton has drifted to the edge of the party and has been abandoned:

After tea, Mr. and Mrs. Weston and Mr. Elton sat down with Mr. Woodhouse cards. The remaining five were left to their own powers, and Emma doubted their getting on very well; for Mr. Knightley seemed little disposed for conversation: Mrs. Elton was wanting notice, which nobody was inclined to pay.. (*Emma*, 242)

Nonetheless, it is towards the socially deserving that Emma directs most of her culinary charity. We have already heard of her donation of meat to the Bates household, and her father’s detailed account of how it is best to be used. And soon after the beginning of the tale, we reach an archetypal happening that denotes the charitable quality of Emma’s giving:

Though now the middle of December, there had yet been no weather to prevent the young ladies from tolerably regular exercise; and on the morrow, Emma had a charitable visit to pay to a poor, sick family, who lived a little way out of Highbury ... They were now approaching the cottage ... Emma was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were s sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse ... In the present instance, it was sickness and poverty together which she came to visit; and after remaining there as

long as she could give comfort or advice, she quitted the cottage. (*Emma*, 64, 66-67)

Later in the same chapter, we learn that a youngster from the cottage has been directed by Emma to take a large pitcher to Hartfield, and to ask for broth for the family. A similar act of benevolence is revealed later in the Bates household:

“ ... The apples themselves are the very finest for baking, beyond a doubt; all from Donwell – some of Mr, Knightley’s most liberal supply. He sends us a sack every year. (*Emma*, 185)

Like many of Austen’s writings, the deep satire and irony is mixed with serious political and social commentary in *Emma*. The circulation of food draws the poor into the moral order, and allows them to believe that they are not on their own. The Knightley view of the village is that he has more than enough food, and that the surplus can be reasonably shared. Emma, of course, has more complicated motivations; she does her good works, of course, but she also gives dinner parties where her role in the social hierarchy is underscored. In an early version of the welfare state two centuries later, there is a genuine effort by those who have to pay attention to those who do not, even if this work is a backdrop to the real action of match-making, worrying about fabrics, and ensuring that nothing disturbs the social order too much. Lane comments:

To prevent lawlessness and disaffection spreading . . . it is necessary, the novel posits, . . . (that) the leaders of local communities keep the mechanisms of giving and sharing in good working order, alive to the real wants of the population and informed by genuine warmth of heart. Multiplied throughout England, such local efforts will secure the social stability which is so desirable, in the novelists view, both for individuals and the nation.

This is the true moral of *Emma*. (Lane, 165)

Imagining Jane: The Films

We started with Jane Austen’s letters, closest to the ‘actual conditions’ of her own family setting, then reviewed the novels themselves, full of evocation and imagery. This section goes a step further, a step that is often well beyond Jane Austen’s initial arguments, and it leads to an important methodological point. Jane Austen is so over-read, so many articles have been written, and now so many films have been made, that we are challenged in a fundamental sense to decide where the sources of our information come from. The scholar working in this field needs to pay close attention to the boundaries between literary imagery, and the semiotic structure of the films. If we fail to do so, we risk remaking Austen’s novels so that they become unrecognizable.

The analysis of films in the Austen genre is also complicated on its own account. There are at least three broad categories of film to consider. First, there are the films made of the novels. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, two major films are well-known, and often referred

to interchangeably, as if they constitute a single text.³⁷ But these two films also have precedents. For each novel, there are commonly several film versions, along with audiotape compilations. Then, second, there are films about Jane Austen's life, some elements of which are close to the facts as we know them, and some are wholly imagined. Typical of this genre is the recent *Becoming Jane*, which recounts the history of Austen's romantic life, and speaks to the issue of family, and the conditions under which she worked.³⁸ There is a third layering by film, in attempts to talk about the history of this period in a documentary way to set the context for her life.³⁹ Together, both in the multiple attempts, and in these three layers of representation, we face a complicated obstacle to interpretation, not the least of which resides in the problem of what Austen actually wrote, and what we have added. This says nothing about the vast armature of literary and critical interpretation which exists.

Here I focus solely on the best-known films of the novels. And in these films, food comes to act as a constant companion to social intercourse, hardly ever absent when people meet to talk. In Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility*⁴⁰, it is impossible not to be struck immediately with the flood of food in the first scenes of the film, compared the silence about food in the book. Early on, Marianne speaks to their servants prior to their leaving for Barton Cottage; the servants are seated at dining tables.⁴¹ When her brother arrives to start the 'take-over', the first conversation takes place at a lushly laid table, complete with flowers, silver, ornate crockery, candles, attendant servants and much food. At breakfast the next day, there is a fully laden table, smaller certainly, and probably too formal to be historically accurate, but nonetheless the action focuses on food again. One of the first scenes in which we meet Marianne, we find her picking at her food, rather than eating it, as she sulks at the nature of the insults the family is enduring. Thus begins her long commitment to emaciation, a process by which she expresses her emotional turmoil at every turn through her refusal to eat.⁴² Edward Ferrars arrives to visit the family; the room is strewn with tea-cups. As Edward starts to become acquainted with the family, the new owner Fanny, in order to break the connections that are rapidly being made against her

³⁷ *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Joe Wright, based on the screenplay by Deborah Moggach, released in the UK on September 16, 2005, and starring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen. This is a shorter version than the archetypal 1995 TV serial, which runs to six episodes, and therefore provides much more detail than a straight-forward film release. Here Jennifer Ehle plays Elizabeth Bennet, and Colin Firth, Darcy. They cast a 'long shadow' over all later versions. There are other earlier attempts as well, of course. Among these attempts, four stand out. The 1940 version was not an accurate depiction of the book. This was the Greer Garson, Lawrence Olivier version, and was directed by Robert Z. Leonard. In 1952, the BBC developed a mini-series, in which Daphne Slater and Peter Cushing starring. In 1967, the BBC tried again, this time with Celia Bannerman and Lewis Fiander in the starring roles. Then in 1980, the BBC developed a further mini-series in five parts.

Later versions of the tale arrived in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004).

³⁸ *Becoming Jane*, (2007), directed by Julian Jarrold, produced by 2 Entertain, and starring Anne Hathaway as Jane Austen, and James McAvoy as Tom Lefroy. See also *Miss Austen Regrets*, BBC and WGBH Boston, 2008, op. cit.

³⁹ See *Austen Country; the life and times of Jane Austen*, 2002, Delta Entertainment, UK. This is perhaps one of the poorest films made about the subject, with a curious commentary, and an ill-judged narrative form.

⁴⁰ *Sense and Sensibility*, Columbia Pictures, directed by Ang Lee, 1995, starring Emma Thompson as Elinor, Kate Winslet as Marianne, Alan Rickman as Colonel Brandon, and Hugh Grant as Edward Ferrars. Emma Thompson wrote the screenplay with considerable help from Jane Austen.

⁴¹ Scene 3/28.

⁴² Scene 3/28.

wishes, brings the room to order by the use of one single word issued as a firm command: "TEA!".⁴³

In the evening of the same day, teacups and silver are on display in the living room as the family talk. Then, a further dinner in an elaborate setting. Soup is served on elegant china; piles of food sit on the well laid table, sideboards are filled with more things to eat. Servants stand by ready to help.

And it is not as if this preoccupation with food disappears when the Dashwoods are consigned to the country, and to Barton Cottage. Here Mrs. Jennings invites them for dinner every night should they wish, and at one of these visits, we see the familiar 'pyramids of fruit' that were so typical of the way wealthy families displayed their food and their status simultaneously.⁴⁴ Glasses of beer are served. (perhaps Madeira, but it certainly looks like beer) These 'pyramids' seem untouchable; they appear not to have had their shape altered at all by human hands; they might as well be made of plastic for all the use they get. When Colonel Brandon first visits, a picnic is set out on the lawn, and a buffet table is placed to one side. Again, Elinor and Mrs. Jennings converse, and they do it outside, but still we have white table cloths, a huge piece of meat (apparently a turkey) brought by a liveried servant. Later skittles are played and tea is served. Desserts are again displayed in pyramidal form.⁴⁵

When the Dashwoods retire to the privacy of Barton Cottage, Elinor and her mother are talking loosely of the possibility that Edward Ferrars has formed an attachment. Elinor, who does not choose to allow herself to believe it because it may prove too painful, says dismissively:

I think we should be foolish to assume that there would be no obstacles in marrying a woman of no rank who cannot afford to buy sugar. (*S&S Film*, 10/28)⁴⁶

After a scene in which Willoughby's silhouette is drawn by Marianne, we are taken into the kitchen, where the ever-practical Elinor is arguing with her mother about food.

"Surely you're not going to deny us beef, as well as sugar?" (Mrs. Dashwood.)
There is nothing under a pound. We have to economize." (Elinor.)
"Do you want us to starve?" (Mrs. Dashwood)
"No. Just not to eat beef." (Elinor) (Scene 13/28)⁴⁷

The theme of ubiquitous food continues when Colonel Brandon proposes a picnic at his house. Though he soon quits the scene on mysterious business, the guests remain behind to enjoy the lush offerings of food and company, and to make fun of him in his absence. Willoughby is especially tart. There is tea with Mrs. Jennings;⁴⁸ as the Dashwoods sit with her in her living room, she proposes a visit to her London house to which they

⁴³ Scene 3/28.

⁴⁴ Scene 8/28. This was very much a 'French' disease, as Amy Trubek makes clear in her account of how 5,000 French chefs arrived in England at this time. See the last section of this paper for a fuller account.

⁴⁵ Scene 9/28.

⁴⁶ There is no direct parallel of this phrase in the book, and it appears to have come from the witty pen of Emma Thompson, in the form of her screenplay.

⁴⁷ Again, this is more Emma Thompson than Jane Austen, but a witty phrase indeed, and close to Austen's own interests in managing the household budget.

⁴⁸ Scene 16/28.

acquiesce with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and as soon as the trip is made, and their new destination reached, Mrs. Jennings calls for tea. “Tea, Pidgeon, Tea!” she commands as they come through the door from the carriage, and the world is set in order again.⁴⁹

Then comes the pivotal moment of the book, the Charteris Ball, at which Willoughby ‘cuts’ Marianne so roughly and so completely, and the rupture between them is sealed. Ironically, no food is present at this otherwise lush occasion. Not a teacup, not a plate, not a single glass of beer. One imagines this element of the evening’s entertainment required a separate room, but the film shows nothing of it. From that moment on, the great emaciation begins, and Marianne eats less and less. In the morning, Marianne and the family are shown eating a toast and tea breakfast at a formal table when a note arrives for Marianne. It is more than our heroine can endure in company, and she rushes from the room. Willoughby has now consigned to paper what was implicit in his behaviour the night before. In her tears, Mrs. Jennings comes to offer what comfort she may. ‘I will go look something out to tempt her. Does she care for olives?’ she asks.⁵⁰

Later that day, it appears, the Ferrars family, with Fanny at the helm, gather at a formal afternoon tea to gloat over Marianne’s demise, and reassure themselves that the social order has not been disturbed in any way by their sulky relative. Contentedly reminding themselves that money won the day again, they sip their tea and eat their scones off the finest china.⁵¹

And it is at this point that food almost disappears entirely from the landscape. Having been flooded with nourishment in multiple settings, and in every house we enter, we are reduced now to an occasional sight of a teacup, or a bowl of gruel. Marianne’s aversion to food plays a part, of course, but circumstances are unusual as well. On the way to the double wedding, however, we must pass through Marianne’s second saving from the rain, this time by Brandon, and her serious illness, during which, of course, she refuses the gruel that is offered as part of the cure.⁵²

Tea, and only tea, lasts to the end. As with two other occasions earlier in the film, tea is sought out again to put things right. When the Dashwood party finally reach the Palmer residence on their way home from London to Barton Cottage, they are exhausted, and in need of a restorative. Mrs. Palmer knows what to say as the new guests tumble out of the carriage that brings them there. ‘Mrs. Dashwood, come and have some tea’.⁵³ Thus begins the great recovery, from illness and misery, both.

*Pride and Prejudice*⁵⁴ starts with a similar flourish of culinary excess. Here, as with many of the scenes in *Sense and Sensibility*, those evocations that the novel only implies are here given full expression. Thus at the country dance when Darcy is presented in all his arrogance, tables are placed at the edge of the room, and crockery, food, plates and glasses are all set out.

⁴⁹ Pidgeon is her London butler. Scene 16/28.

⁵⁰ Scene 19/28.

⁵¹ Scene 19/28.

⁵² Scene 24/28.

⁵³ Scene 24/28

⁵⁴ *Pride and Prejudice*, 1995 TV serial, BBC, London, in six episodes. Adapted by Andrew Davies, starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth, directed by Simon Langton and produce by Sue Birtwistle, with additional funding from the A and E network.

This is a modest spread, with a large number of people and a small display of food. But people are drinking beer, and eating bits and pieces. Mr. Hurst, whose vulgarity is largely implicit in the book, is presented in all his glory here, to guzzle beer in the background. Mrs. Bennet is seen tucking into a large plate of food. There is a brief contrasting scene outside, where a group of working people are making fun of the 'toffs', and beer is being drunk, but it's a very brief moment. Most of the action is inside.⁵⁵

At Netherfield, when the Bingley party return home, they are able to develop their critique of the evening full of rustic pleasures to which they have been subjugated, over wine drunk from fine glasses, and tea from bone china. The detachment, space and lack of pleasure contrasts strikingly with the noise, the bustle and the lack of space at the dance they have just left. Pyramids of fruit remain untouched on the sideboard. Mr. Hurst is snoring, and apparently in a diabetic coma. As in *Sense and Sensibility*, the film is front-loaded with food. An occasion at the Lucas's requires wine to be drunk freely,⁵⁶ and, as with the dance, there are some modest side-tables filled with food. Breakfast at the Bennets' is formal. White table-cloths support tea, scones and jam, but meat and heavier food appears also to be laid out. This is very much the rural breakfast, rather than the ascetic offerings that are supposed to be the coming fashion among leading families.⁵⁷ Predictably, dinner at the Bingleys is extremely grand. Many servants in livery attend the heavily-laden table that provides flowers, the best crockery, the heaviest silver, and several fine wines as accompaniments to the evening. And breakfast at Netherfield is also quite formal. There are beautiful, pink, velvet seats (wooden, embroidered seats are routine at the Bennets), and servants are there in numbers even at breakfast. A huge pork pie takes center stage, and Mr. Hurst, never one for talking too much, fills his plate very high with it. The ladies drink tea and eat toast. Darcy hardly eats at all, as exactly befits his station at the top of the social pyramid. As Elizabeth Bennet enters the room, Mr. Hurst, the 'Great Engorger of Hertfordshire'⁵⁸ does not look up from his food, but continues shovelling. In contrast, both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy are all attention, and each bows formally to acknowledge her arrival at the meal, following this up with thoughtful questions about her sister's health. At a later breakfast, Hurst is seen eating with almost violent energy, while his female relatives sip at tea, and nibble the edges of toast.⁵⁹

The flood of food continues through a formal dinner given for Mr. Collins on the occasion of his arrival at the Bennets', at which a major Stilton presides, during a ball at Netherfield, where so much food is provided that Mrs. Bennet is able to talk and eat simultaneously all evening. She eats like a woman possessed, a rare occurrence indeed for a woman in an Austen setting, but then she is desperate.⁶⁰ The evening is also memorable for Mr. Collins' chaotic dancing that puts the fear of God, in more ways than one, into his chosen partners and others close by.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Scene 2/19.

⁵⁶ Scene 3/19.

⁵⁷ Scene 4/19

⁵⁸ At country fairs, eating contests were common. The 'Great Eater of Hampshire' might be touted as able to eat three pigs in an afternoon. People would pay to come to watch someone engorge vast quantities of food. The tradition is, of course, still alive in contemporary time.

⁵⁹ Scene 6/19.

⁶⁰ Scene 10/19.

⁶¹ The brilliant David Bamber plays this role with great gusto.

And tea; there is always tea. In a beautifully acted scene, Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth Bennet sip from good china, and discuss Charlotte's strategic marriage to the mad cavorter as a sensible decision.⁶² Charlotte is one of the most unsentimental analysts of the social order, and she see it for what it is far better than most. She brings a laser-like view to the swirling of emotions that various pre-marital encounters rouse up:

I'm not romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home, and considering Mr. Collins' character and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the married state. (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1995 Film, Volume 1: Scene 13/19)

She sees marriage in a practical sense first and foremost, and this straightforward materialism is a very significant theme throughout Austen's works, though it is not what we focus on the first time around, and often not the second. But this structural logic comes clearly into play through Charlotte's character when she expresses the view without adornment, and explains to Elizabeth, who is for once out-thought, why her own marriage makes sense. In the meantime, her hopelessly limited husband fiddles around in the background. And the drinking of tea, at a small, ornate table, and out of respectable china, provides the setting for this pivotal conversation.⁶³

We are next invited to enjoy another example of Mr. Collins living up to his reputation in the act of eating itself.⁶⁴ At his own breakfast table, he is shown stuffing his mouth full of food, so full that he can neither breathe properly, nor make any effort to speak. The table is loaded with food, his knife and fork wave upwards towards the ceiling; as usual the women pick at toast and tea. He grunts and makes noises that he might have learned from Mr. Hurst, one of the other great eaters of the story. Elizabeth and Charlotte have a conversation to which he is witness. He can only chew and grunt while this is occurring. And we are not spared further sightings of food, the first at the Inn as Elizabeth travels home to escape from Mr. Collins' gulpings, and to see her family. Halfway there, she meets up with two of her sisters who have come to meet them, and they enjoy a robust country meal around a wooden table, replete with large plates of meat, vegetables, salad and pork. At home, huge breakfasts, and what appears to be beer, remain part of the morning family ritual, and as before, this is a relatively formal affairs with a white tablecloth; a traditional country breakfast.⁶⁵ The Militia take their leave over tea, beer and sherry.⁶⁶ And when Lizzy takes her tour with her aunt and uncle, they enjoy a contented dinner in a private room at an Inn. This event might be described as 'small formal'. The private room comes equipped with a helpful servant, several dishes of meat and vegetables, along with red wine, all served in

⁶² Scene 13/19.

⁶³ The gender balance is completed at this moment in the film in one particular sense here. If Mr. Collins is one of the stupidest men in England, according to Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Bennet is ready to aver to his wife that they have two of the silliest girls in the nation. Both these explanations are provided over the meal table, where much of the major conversation of the film takes place.

⁶⁴ *Pride and Prejudice* (Film) 1995, Volume 2: Scene 2/19.

⁶⁵ Op. Cit, 2/19.

⁶⁶ Op. Cit., 3/19.

excellent china and glassware. An evening at Pemberley displays only tea, wine, and small plates of food, perhaps ‘sweets’. The breakfasts continue almost until the end of the film.

Dissipation and drink are, of course, natural partners, and so it is that we see Wickham in his debauchery on several occasions.⁶⁷ The first scene appears to be in lodgings when the hapless couple are about to be discovered by Darcy. The condition apparently becomes permanent, because one of the last scenes of the film shows Wickham still drinking with his ‘silly’ wife,⁶⁸ and conspicuously shunned by the rest of the family, who are celebrating the double wedding of Jane and Elizabeth. What’s also interesting is the bifurcated way the Bennet parents deal with the tragedy of their wayward daughter through food. Once he’s got over his short-lived guilt about the matter, Mr. Bennet retreats, as ever, to his study, there to drink his red wine and hide in a book, while his wife, who remains in a permanent fever, keeps court upstairs with tea and toast to accompany her long list of complaints.⁶⁹

There are also several unusual scenes related to food towards the conclusion of the film. In Chapter Fifteen,⁷⁰ Bingley returns to his large house, and we see a queue of servants carting huge baskets of food into the cellar of the house. It’s one of the very rare times we see food outside the dining-room or the ballroom. In the same chapter, we see Elizabeth and Jane in what appears to be a storage room adjacent to their kitchen, engaged in tying up herbs and lavender to dry. Clearly they are not cooking; rather, they are drying plants from the garden to scent the house, and to flavour the food. And soon afterwards, as Darcy and Elizabeth finally set things straight between themselves,⁷¹ the backdrop is a pile of grain sacks on a cart. Again, we rarely see anything actually being grown, cultivated or collected to eat, even though much of the activity of the novel occurs deep in the rural countryside where all their food originates. Most of the productive process is entirely hidden from us.

Rank, discernment and social difference are endlessly rehearsed and judged through food. Darcy makes his sharp judgments about the Bennet family in part because he witnesses Mrs. Bennet in a series of excessive feedings on several occasions. The number of servants in attendance, the quality of the silver, the china or the serving dishes, the sophistication of the food, and the delicacy with which food is eaten are all quotidian indicators of social categories and their memberships. All these details are inferred in the novels, and they are there for everyone to see in the films. There is, in short, a high degree of performativity⁷² involved in eating and the rituals that surround it in Austen’s work. It never happens by chance, but rather is a product of a long process of education, sufficient income, the development of familiarity with the contemporary social customs in which meaning resides, what is done and what is not, as we might say. None of this matters at one level, and it clearly doesn’t matter to Darcy at some level, since his wealth puts him above cursory judgments. As Mr. Bennet comments early in the film, Mr. Darcy is no more unpleasant than any other wealthy man used to getting his own way. But even Darcy must pay close attention to social custom if he is to go beyond his small social circle. And for the rest of

⁶⁷ See *Op. Cit.*, 11/19; and also the last chapter of the movie, Volume 2, 18/19. He drinks alone and in a chair, with just his wife looking on. The drinking has lost its larger social character, is now merely a matter of solace.

⁶⁸ Mr. Bennet’s term for his daughter, now advanced to matrimony.

⁶⁹ Volume 2: 14/19.

⁷⁰ Volume 2: 15/19.

⁷¹ Volume 2: 17/19

⁷² I use this term in the Judith Butler sense.

the community, these matters are part of the struggle for social recognition and social deference on which their livelihoods depend.

The Dark Hand of History

1. *The French Invasion.* There is much going on in the background while our Austen characters eat well or poorly, and drink too much or too little. This is a revolutionary age. Austen was born in the year the American Revolution started to bubble. At the same time, France was engaged in a series of social upheavals, and England was in a series of wars with Napoleon. The old mode of production had run its course. Most central to the culinary world is the advent of the French Revolution, and the flight of chefs from France. As the lickspittles of the hated aristocracy, French chefs were as despised as their masters, and their lives were in jeopardy. Certainly, job prospects had dwindled for them with the diminution of the aristocracy itself. As a result, a huge influx of new culinary talent arrived on English shores, and transformed the way the English ate. In particular, over the next generation, they upturned what counted as good food, good manners and good culinary taste. Amy Trubek⁷³ estimates that 5,000 chefs left French shores during the French revolutionary period, and most poured into England. They became cooks to the court, and to the leading families of the day, and not only did they cook differently, but they changed the social logic around food. Food itself became an autonomous source of distinction, another field in which to rise or fall. But they also developed a level of sophistication in the preparation and presentation of food that had been largely lacking in English social life. Much despised by the English aristocracy as decadent and lacking in ‘moral fiber’, the French nonetheless were grudgingly admired for their cultural astuteness, and especially for their cuisine, which soon set the standard for the English palette, at least among those that could afford to eat well, and who cared about food.

2. *The Social Revolution* in England itself could also not be ignored. Austen lived her life on the margins of the landed aristocracy. Her father was a clergyman, of course, and two brothers were admirals. A third was a banker who went bankrupt, and a fourth owned large land-holdings. In her novels Austen shows a clear ambivalence towards the land and those who own it, apparently valuing those who have a benevolent touch towards those that depend on them. But she was also very harsh in depicting the cruelty of selfish landowners, and made great fun at the expense of the foppish and wasteful Sir Walter Elliot, one of the most absurd of her entourage of absurd characters. But she also seemed to revere and celebrate the Navy, idealized perhaps most clearly in the character of Captain Wentworth, a self-made man of character and wealth who her heroine reveres and marries. This ambiguity about the future accurately depicts the shifting political landscape. Self-made men were coming into their own. The Industrial Revolution is now in full swing. Railways were about to sweep the country; the Enclosure Laws⁷⁴ were forcing rural workers off the land to become the industrial proletariat in the new mode of production. These changes were so extensive, and they penetrated so deep into English country life they could hardly be

⁷³ Amy Trubek, *Haute Cuisine: how the French Invented the Culinary Profession*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2000

⁷⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, New Edition, 1991. He comments (p.217): “In agriculture the years between 1760 and 1820 are the years of wholesale enclosure in which, in village after village, common rights are lost”.

ignored. The Tories, famously led by William Pitt the Younger, who was Prime Minister at 24, were being assailed by the Whigs under Mr. Fox, who brayed and prattled at the absurdity of the old order. Things were on the move, and Jane Austen saw something she liked about the new, even as she lived among members of the old order.

So, I want to insist that Austen is not only a paramount commentator on the most subtle of subtle social cues and their meaning, but that her life can not be entirely separated from some of the most pressing social conditions of the time, as some commentators have claimed. *Persuasion* is all about the Navy, the absurdity of some elements of the aristocracy, and the utter decency of some self made men like Captain Wentworth, especially if that rise in the social structure was achieved in the service of her beloved England. She understood the massive changes in the very mode of production itself, as the landed gentry started to lose control over the economy and the political system, and new Whiggish tendencies, and later socialist tendencies, started to gain traction. She could hardly have been ignorant of these changes, with her brother Edward, and indeed her own livelihood and that of her sister and mother, tied up with control of his estates and his struggle to maintain those estates.

3. *Food Practices and Dominance.* Most interestingly, her accounts tell us that food practices were part of the repertoire of dominance, part of the complex stratagem of manners that underscored hierarchy and privilege, not just as a backdrop to many important conversations and exchanges, but also a weapon in itself, a weapon that is always concealed and never discussed, hidden as part of the elaborate system of social difference of the time.

4. *Materialism.* We should avoid a simple materialist explanation that explains these events, the social structures they reflect, and the privilege and dominance they display simply as a product of history produced in some mechanical fashion. Indeed, one of the great joys of reading Austen is that she opens up new dimensions of social life for our analysis, and make subtle those explanations that are simple and wrong. It is precisely in her delicacy of understanding, her irony and in her extraordinary awareness of social cues that we find the power of her work. Yet a materialist culture is also at play here, and it cannot be ignored. Neither did Jane Austen ignore it. Some of her characters are rational maximizers of a kind that the 21st century would recognize as their own. But we can go well beyond the merely greedy and self interested to remind ourselves of Charlotte Lucas and her clear thinking. Of course, the hope is that all of us marry for love and for passion, as Elizabeth and Marianne insist, but everyone knows that a good income doesn't hurt. And the Austen heroines all understand in a very sophisticated way what is at stake in the social world they inhabit, and especially in the matter of marriage.

5. *Epistemology.* There's also a false epistemological assumption about the social imaginary⁷⁵ that's easy to make when we examine food in these texts. It concerns the levels of knowledge that we're facing here. We could believe we start with the unyielding, 'hard' world of facts in the Austen letters, where the narrator sets out her story in unalloyed fashion. Nothing comes between the writer and the reader, and the Austen life is openly displayed. The novels, partly imaginary by their very nature, but still decidedly connected to actual events, come next and provide a middle ground in which both the hard facts and the social imagination are interwoven. The films create further levels of the social imaginary,

⁷⁵ This is Charles Taylor's term.

and the factual world is left even further behind. And we place this all in the incontrovertible necessity of history, of Georgian England and its social conditions.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. The letters are clearly representations of parts of Jane Austen's life; they could hardly be more. They may *point* to the 'truth', some of it, but they are not the facts themselves. And we know many letters were destroyed. The novels follow the intellectual pathways of their times, and reside in a form of literary convention that we little understand.⁷⁶ Not only do they form a broad field of imagination for us to consider, but her writing endlessly interrogates these conventions, draws unseen parallels to other forms of imagination, without ever forgetting that a structural power still persists beyond imagination. The films are semiotically overloaded, to be sure, with a cascade of images to choose from, and here feelings and senses are flooded. Dialogue is rewritten, scenes redrawn, old plots upturned. Now we are at a second level of the social imaginary, a reinvention of the first act of imagination that Austen's novels give. And we are not returned to earth with a bump by history, because we can hardly avoid perspective there.

So, we face the problems of conventionalism⁷⁷ and realism at each level of analysis.⁷⁸ And this means we must deal with two resulting issues. The first is that we must be clear what we are talking about, even if, in the end this becomes a largely insurmountable problem. The novels bleed into the films, and it's hard to tell them apart. The Jane Austen we write about is a hybrid formed from the three or four media in which she now appears. Many of the ideas, the dialogue attributed to her, the things she is alleged to have thought, and the 'facts' she wrote about are simply not attributable to her work, and just aren't there in the pages of the novels. Yet we think they are because we've been moving between various layers of this social imaginary. And this leads us to a second conclusion, which is really a reminder. This 'bleeding' between genres reminds us also how the fictive world of her heroines is blended with social history, with her own experience and with the literature of her day, so that the social world she manages to describe is equally multi-valenced, which is where much of its richness lies.

6. *Austen and Symbolic Capital.* Austen's novels provide an exquisite account of the fight to the death over social hierarchy. Austen understood, like almost no-one else, what was at stake here, and how the rules of the game played out. In her novels, and in her own life, she gave subtle witness to the consequences of success and failure in the social realm. She knew what these matters meant in the course of a human life. A future, and especially a feminine future, might utterly depend on caprice, happenstance, a chance meeting, a comment poorly formed, a meal badly presented. Accident and reason bled together in this world. Social occasions, and the food that fueled these occasions, were the backdrop for these incidents. And from these apparently small, private, intensely domestic incidents came large consequences – lives of luxury or despair, of material comfort or relentless struggle. Much was at stake in these apparently 'trivial games', as people offered each other cups of tea, and worried about the proper way to cut cucumber sandwiches.

⁷⁶ See Marilyn Butler's extraordinary introduction to *Northanger Abbey*, in the Penguin edition, cited elsewhere.

⁷⁷ The notion that our sense of the factual world is always conditioned by assumptions

⁷⁸ The idea that a separate world exists independent of consciousness. I am thinking especially of Roy Bhaskar's realism here. See *The Realist Theory of Science*, (1975)

8. *The Apparently Trivial and the World of Dominance*. So, these social environments and their endless details were significant not because of any intrinsic value residing in these activities, but because people *chose to invest them with importance*, because, following tradition, hierarchy, and most essentially, the direction of those who had power over them – royalty, landowners, the state – they created a social field in which people struggled mightily to succeed, to survive, and to create distinction, that ‘finest’ of social qualities that puts some people above the rest, and assures them of domination over others.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, Harvard University Press, 1984, Boston, Massachusetts. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu elaborates on Weber’s original notion of status to construct a theory of symbolic struggle. See also his *Forms of Capital*: English version published 1986 in J.G. Richardson's *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, pp. 241–258.