

### Primary Source Analysis

Eating has been apart of all of our lives since before we can remember. As a species, our eating habits have evolved immensely and it can continually be asked whether we eat to live or live to eat. As our eating habits have changed so have our attitudes toward food, its significance, and also the manner in which we eat food. There is also the question of how our food is attained and prepared. This coincides with family roles and who is responsible for purchasing the food and who is responsible for preparing it. Traditionally, men are “breadwinners” and women are responsible for keeping the home and preparing the meals. These ideals have been haughtily debated and even today people still try to rebel against this typical cultural model. The role of women and their place in society is one that is constantly advancing. Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, women increasingly were beginning to pervade new parts of society and seek equality to men. Women at this time were living in a man’s world, as we might still even now, and were not allowed to vote and frowned upon for working. Specifically, women in the 1890s were fighting for suffrage and became more serious about pursuing education and careers. This was a time of struggle for women in American society as they were seen as a lower and lesser counterpart to men. On the other hand women were responsible for keeping their households in order and raising their children, and of course to be good wives. In this sense, was the woman’s role celebrated? Through the analysis of excerpts of *Delicate Feasting* and *Crumbs and the Round*

*Table*, both published in the mid to late nineteenth century, the conflicting ways in which women and their roles are valued and moreover their overall place in society can be seen.

Theodore Child wrote *Delicate Feasting*, a book on gastronomy, in 1890. This book came at a time when food was a subject that was gaining more attention. Child opens the book with a list of proverbs that he believes are valuable to cooks as well as diners. These proverbs set the tone of the book and offer many different insights about food. The first proverb, written by P.Z. Disbury states, “A man can dine only once a day” (Child 1). On the opening page of this book, which was intended for women, as they are the ones responsible for cooking and catering to dinner parties, a proverb is presented about a man. Can a man only dine once a day but a woman can dine many? Or does the woman not even exist? The next proverb again addresses only men; “The pleasures of the table may be enjoyed every day, in every climate, at all ages, and by all conditions of men” (Child 2). This proverb is even more compelling, as it says that the pleasures of eating can be enjoyed in rain or shine with people of all ages in the conditions of *men*. Not the conditions of men and women, because women are included in these meals, but just men. Another ironic proverb he quotes states, “A well-cooked and well-served dinner implies, on the part of the host, a sense of the respect he owes his guests, whose happiness he controls while they are under his roof” (Child 3). This is notable because it shows a complete shift in society’s perception of who the host is of a dinner. When a couple hosts a dinner party now, the credit and hosting responsibilities are usually shared equally between the couple or are solely the woman’s. This quote gives the responsibility and credit to the man by using the pronoun “his”. Furthermore, this well-cooked and well-served dinner, which is the responsibility of the woman, is part of a man’s respect that he owes his guests. That is interesting because

the woman is putting all the work in to make the dinner what it is. The subtle use of masculine pronouns and the word “man” may seem small and insignificant but actually imply a time in which only men deserved to be addressed and theorized about even if it wasn’t the actual case. Women were not given the same respect even in a book that they are the intended audience for.

*Delicate Feasting* addresses many different aspects of food preparation and consumption. In one specific part of the book, Child criticizes the way people and especially women consume their food. He claims that there are many instances in which, “I have seen ladies attempt to eat craw-fish with a knife and fork and abandon the attempt in despair” (Child 186). He goes on to say, “Fingers must be used for eating certain things...” and explains, “Eating is not a thing to be ashamed of” (Child 187-188). Here it is evident that Child is insinuating the way women consume food indicates that they are ashamed about eating. Child believes in order to thoroughly enjoy certain foods they need to be eaten with fingers and instead women are embarrassed and put their manners before their enjoyment. He is condemning women for acting in this cowardly manner and continues on to give them advice, “Imitate Marie Antoinette, ladies: use your fingers more freely; eat decently, of course, but do not be the slaves of silly Anglomania or Newport crazes” (Child 188). Child is critiquing the Anglo Saxon traditional manners and is instead calling for women to learn from Marie Antoinette. He claims that she used her fingers to eat certain foods and that she enjoyed it more that way. He used the case of fruit, specifically peaches, as an example and explains, “To thoroughly enjoy a peach you must bite it and feel the juicy, perfumed flesh melt in your mouth. But, let the Anglomaniacs say what they please, there is no necessity of sticking a fork into the peach and peeling it while so impaled...A peach is as beautiful to the

touch as it is to the eye; a peach held between human fingers has its beauty enhanced by the beauty of the fingers” (Child 188). In this case, Child is using the way women cut and slice their peaches instead of just biting right into them as an example of the incorrect ways in which women eat. He is poking fun at the women by claiming how the peach looks even more beautiful by being held in the fingers as opposed to be sliced by a fork or knife. Women are judged for the way in which they eat something as it is a signal of how they are ashamed but men do not receive the same such slap on the wrist. His advice is to the “ladies” and his use of Marie Antoinette is used to entice the women to follow his logic because it is the way royalty has acted as well.

*Crumbs from the Round Table* written by Joseph Barber is another book on gastronomy published in the mid-nineteenth century. Barber outlines in this book what is like when fruit come in season in New York City in June. He states, “Well do the fruiter-ers know the public weakness for strawberries. Their windows are a-glow with plump and luscious beauties, newly torn from their leafy beds to tempt the senses of the voluptuary...” (Barber 19). Here he is explaining that the fruit sellers know the community's yearning for strawberries and tempt the people by putting the strawberries outside their windows. Barber gives these strawberries human like qualities calling them “plump and luscious beauties” and almost sexualizes them by having the reader envision them being torn from their beds and then going on to say that they “tempt the senses of the voluptuary”. He gives the strawberry sexy and woman like qualities and makes them sound more than just appetizing but also tantalizing. Barber continues this saying, “Blessed be the bosom of our common mother that proffers such rosy, juicy cones to our eager lips” (Barber 19). Here he also gives the strawberry woman like qualities describing the strawberry like a breast to

“eager lips”. In stark contrast to *Delicate Feasting*, Barber is celebrating women and their sexiness and is comparing fruit to sexual woman like qualities. He is describing how people are so tempted and eager to enjoy the strawberries and is implying the same thing about women. He is signifying that women are tempting and sexual and by giving strawberries these women like qualities he can give the strawberries the same powers. Barber uses sex and femininity to help describe the delicious fruit and therefore values these qualities.

These two primary sources signify the vastly different ways women were viewed in society in the nineteenth century. On one side of the spectrum, women were condemned for the way they ate their peaches and it in turn this was seen as a signal of their embarrassment to eat. They were treated as non-existent compared to men in a book that was addressing them. On the other hand, in *Crumbs from the Round Table*, strawberries were romanticized and given women like qualities in order to describe the amount of enjoyment they gave the people who ate them. This reflects the mixed views about women during this time. Women were valuable and responsible for keeping the home and being wives, but they were not granted the same rights as men. They were not allowed to vote and as they became more educated they were less likely to get married. Women were fighting for their rights and while they were seen as valuable in some respects they were not seen as equal to men. Fast-forward over one hundred years, women have gained the legal equality to men but they are still plagued with the same burdens. They are still responsible for keeping the house and raising the children but are also responsible for being sexy and enticing creatures. On top of all this women now are working and being educated. By analyzing the way in which women interacted and related to food through these primary sources it was evident that their place in society had many contradictions.

## Works Cited

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