

## Gentlemen Are What They Eat

### Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel

By Gwen Hyman.  
Ohio University Press, 2009. x + 309 pages.  
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Review by Marc DiPaolo.

Real men don't eat quiche.

Republicans are coffee drinkers and Democrats are latte drinkers.

Processed food is killing us. Local food is the key to healthy living and sustainability.

In the 21st century, food has enormous socio-political significance. What we eat and drink says much about our culture, economic class, political ideology, region, and gender. And yet, none of these issues concerning food, health, and personal identity is new, as scholar Gwen Hyman reveals in her absorbing monograph *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*. According to Hyman, understanding how and why British gentlemen indulged in, or abstained from, certain food and drink offers the modern reader refreshing new insights into 19th century masculinities. Furthermore, in employing a food-studies approach to literary studies, Hyman offers new and surprising ways of reading classic novels by Jane Austen, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Bram Stoker, and Anne Brontë, making her study fascinating for lovers of 19th century British fiction.

Hyman's readings are informed by historical research about transformations

in food production and consumption that took place while these texts were being written. These real-life events, she argues, shed light upon the actions and opinions of the characters inhabiting the fictional worlds of the British novel. Focusing primarily on Victorian Gothic works—in which the appetites of the wealthy, and their desires to devour take on an oft-sinister hue—Hyman crafts close readings of *Dracula*, *Little Dorrit*, *Emma*, *Law and the Lady*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Whether they ingest gruel or mutton, drink wine or blood, take opium or transformative chemical potions, the men in these novels are defined by their dietary choices and act as commentaries on the conspicuous consumption of the Regency and Victorian eras. Despite their wealth and political power, however, these men are embattled figures, haunted by the uncertainty of their own position of primacy, and fearful of their own bodies, Hyman observes.

In her first case-study, Hyman examines Mr. Woodhouse, the wealthy valetudinarian father of Emma Woodhouse, who confines himself to a peasant's diet of gruel, boiled eggs, and overcooked apples—and who expects all of Highbury to join him in this austere diet. Hyman observes that Woodhouse's simple tastes are dictated by common socio-political fears of the Regency period. For example, Woodhouse believes in eating only local food because the then-contemporary “innovations” in canned foods meant that poorly preserved (if not outright rotten) food was being mass-produced for the first time and causing widespread food poisonings. In a similar vein, Mr. Woodhouse's distaste for layered, frosted cakes comes from his distrust of the newly trendy French chefs that had come to England in the wake of the French Revolution, bringing with them sauces and icings that disguised the quality of food stock and signaled a creeping Jacobin influence in British culture. Notably, Woodhouse is not necessarily incorrect in these

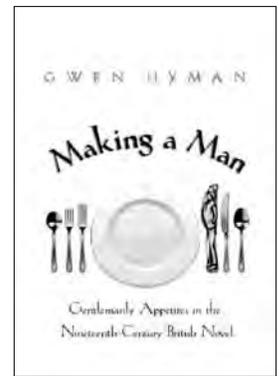
opinions, as the novel's moral paradigm, Mr. Knightley, essentially shares Woodhouse's views, though Knightley does not try to force others to eat as he does. It

is also significant, from a food-studies perspective, that the novel's “invader” figures—Frank Churchill and the Eltons—are linked through dialogue and dietary habits to French cooking, gluttony, and imported, indigestible confections. While Woodhouse should know enough to be wary of these invaders, he is an ineffective food-policeman who assumes that the people of Highbury follow his dietary advice even as they eat cake behind his back. Therefore, he isn't aware enough of what is really going on in town to identify Churchill and the Eltons as dangerous dishes.

But Mr. Knightley is.

Hyman's interest in masculinities is one of the things that makes this book intriguing, as characters who have merely stood, unexamined, as cardboard-cutout representations of the excesses of patriarchal British culture in feminist interpretations of novels become unexpectedly complex and intriguing figures in Hyman's hands. As a case in point, instead of dismissing the villainous husband of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a drunken boor, Hyman examines what social imperatives drive him to drink and why he is, oddly, a much more engaging character than the heroine, who is supposed to be where audience sympathy lies. Hyman's interpretations of the other novels in her study are equally compelling.

An assistant professor of humanities at Cooper Union in New York City, Hyman is the coauthor, with Andrew Carmellini, of *Urban Italian: True Stories and Simple Recipes from a Life in Food*.



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