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Citation

Thomas, Kate. "Alimentary: Arthur Conan Doyle and Isabella Beeton." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36, no. 2 (2008): 375-390.

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ALIMENTARY: ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE AND ISABELLA BEETON

By Kate Thomas

2450. The human body, materially considered, is a beautiful piece of mechanism, consisting of many parts, each one being the centre of a system, and performing its own vital function irrespectively of the others, and yet dependent for its vitality upon the harmony and health of the whole . . . the mouth secretes saliva, to soften and macerate the food; the liver forms its bile, to separate the nutriment from the digested aliment . . . the veins, equally busy, are carrying away the *débris* and refuse collected from where the zoophyte arteries are building, – this refuse, in its turn, being conveyed to the liver, there to be converted into bile.

—Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management* (1861)

There were long seats of stone within the chimney, where, in despite of the tremendous heat, monarchs were sometimes said to have taken their station, and amused themselves with broiling the *umbles*, or *dowsels*, of the deer, upon the glowing embers, with their own royal hands, when happy the courtier who was invited to taste the royal cookery.

—Walter Scott, *Woodstock; or, The Cavalier* (1855)

Umble-pie. A pie made of umbles – *i.e.* the liver, kidneys, etc., of a deer. These “refuse” were the perquisites of the keeper, and umble-pie was a dish for servants and inferiors.

—E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1898)

Media

IN 1893, OVERWHELMED BY READERS’ insatiability for Sherlock Holmes stories, Arthur Conan Doyle killed his detective off at the height of his popularity. Writing to a friend in 1896, Doyle described how literally sick he was of the figure he had created: “I have had such an overdose of him that I feel towards him as I do towards *pâté de foie gras*, of which I once ate too much, so that the name of it gives me a sickly feeling to this day” (Chabon 17). Holmes’s (first) literary demise was marked by his creator with a culinary simile, one which recalls that his literary debut was made under the name that, above all others, stood for the culinary in late nineteenth-century Britain: Isabella Beeton. The first Sherlock Holmes story, “A Study in Scarlet,” appeared in the 1887 edition of *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*.¹ Three other editors

had rejected the story before the Beeton *Annual* accepted it. This Doyle-Beeton publishing encounter was an instance of one publishing phenomenon recognizing another one and ushering it into the limelight. When Doyle's reflections on his huge publishing success turn to a gustatory memory of overindulgence in a purposefully overdeveloped organ, it raises the following question: what were the relationships between the mass market, the culinary, and the production and adjudication of judgment and refinement in the nineteenth century?

As the above epigraph from Beeton's influential text suggests, digesting a foodstuff entails the differentiation of use from waste, the gauging of deficits and excess. The liver plays a dominant role in this business of discernment; it "separates" and "converts," as Beeton describes it, aliment from refuse and is thus an organ of critique. When the organ itself becomes foodstuff, as described in the passages above from Scott and the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, it continues to be an agent of evaluation. This time, the distinctions it produces are those of social class: the liver on their plates both produces and marks separations between servant, courtier, and monarch. When Doyle recalls suffering from the over-consumption of over-fattened liver, the sickening distension of the organ is, I will argue, emblematic of problems Doyle experienced in his role in the production of mass culture: his own middle-class station was precarious, dogged by threats of poverty, hunger, and social marginality. When he wrote his way into financial health, he did so by producing middlebrow literature that threatened his aspirations to join a highbrow literary elite. I read Doyle alongside Isabella Beeton because Beeton was also a powerful force in the making of middle-class Victorian domesticity, and her life and career were similarly enmeshed in struggles to hold on to class status, financial stability, and respectability. If Beeton and Doyle were anxious to tread a careful line between high and low, market and reputation, they were also, through the characters of the cook and the detective, anxious to prove that through discernment and method, the middle classes could tell the difference between trash and quality, waste and aliment, and thus pass into respectable society.²

Doyle's musing upon *foie gras*, Holmes, and excessive consumption recalls – through the word "overdose" – his detective's addiction to cocaine, an addiction to which Holmes turns when he is starved for intellectual stimulation and one that often stands surrogate to food, human company, and the physical comforts that satisfy his contrastingly prosaic sidekick and chronicler, Dr Watson. Doyle quickly moves past drugs, however, and the emphasis of his remark falls on the more Watsonish indulgence of overeating. *Pâté de foie gras* is the epitome of the luxurious foodstuff and is metonymic of excess not only because of its fatty richness (enjoyed by the French and the Romans before them), but also because the pâté is itself a product of grotesque and enforced overeating. The crux of *foie gras*, and of Doyle's metaphor, is that its production changes eating into feeding: the animal's exaggerated consumption of food turns a life-seeking act of digestion in which the liver plays an integral part, into a death-driven enslavement to the harvesting of that liver. As such, *foie gras* was a foodstuff that distressed many Victorians, including Isabella Beeton.³ In her chapter on poultry, for instance, Beeton decries the "fashionable and unnatural size" to which goose and duck livers were forced, and she describes at length a method of force-feeding and its "diabolical cruelty." "We would," she concludes, "rather abstain from the acquaintance of a man who ate *pâté de foie gras*, knowing its component parts" (450).⁴

Beeton deftly leaps from describing the production of *pâté de foie gras* to advocating social discrimination against those who eat it. It is a move that resonates with the etymology of "diet," which much like "culture," means *mode* or "course of life" (*Oxford English*

Dictionary): Beeton suggests that people are *typed* by their culinary choices. A culinary choice is a social choice; the reader is asked to “abstain” – to choose not to enjoy – the consumer of *foie gras* as much as to abstain from *foie gras* itself. Readers should reject the man who chooses to eat the goose, which could not choose, but was forced to eat. *Foie gras* in the hands of Mrs Beeton becomes a dense and slippery organ of resignification and subjectification, eerily anticipating the subject positions of Doyle’s metaphor, which are similarly slippery. His readers greedily consume his stories, yet he is sickened, forced by them to write beyond his own desire and need to do so, and in so doing recalls once having eaten too much pâté. Is Doyle the consumer of *foie gras*, or the goose who unwillingly produces the *foie gras*, or is he even a kind of literary Prometheus, bound to a rock for the sin of bringing light to mankind, his liver ever regenerating for the delectation of an insatiable public, a public not tasteful enough to reject either the obscene *foie gras* that is Sherlock Holmes or his hapless, unwilling creator? Doyle himself recedes in his metaphor, moving ever further away from any authority over Holmes, confusing feeding, eating, and being eaten and figuring himself as the nauseated consumer-feeder of Holmes, rather than, as readers might imagine, his creator – author or cook.

If Doyle demurs at donning the cook’s apron that his own metaphor proffers, I want to recentre the cook in the Holmes oeuvre by returning to Isabella Beeton, and to read Doyle with Beeton in order to explore the confluences of feeding and reading that I see demonstrated by the literary careers of both of these Victorian authors. Their careers hardly overlapped: Beeton died from post-partum complications in 1865, at the age of 29, while Doyle did not start publishing until 1879, and he was to enjoy a far longer life and career, dying in his armchair in 1930. There are, however, several logics that justify reading them alongside each other. Not only did Holmes make his first appearance in a volume bearing her name, but Doyle, as I explore later in this article, also devotes a chapter to Beeton in his one and only novel of manners. These two seemingly unconnected writers are most intimately connected under the sign of consumption through their reputations and publication histories; their almost complete subsumation to the fame of their product is similarly extraordinary. Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* reportedly sold over 60,000 copies in its first year of publication, nearly two million by 1868, and quickly became and remained for generations *the* name in British kitchens, the death of the supposed “author” putting no kick in its gallop.⁵ The Holmes stories have never once fallen out of print and have been reprinted, translated, and reissued on such an enormous scale that publication sales figures have ceased to have meaning. Sherlock Holmes is regularly hailed as “the most familiar and widely known character in English fiction” (Stashower 6). The two authors share the dubious but noteworthy distinction of being two of the most enduringly mass-marketed and commodifiable nineteenth-century figures. “Beeton” and “Holmes” have become by-words – brand names – for their respective crafts.

Isabella Beeton appreciated the value of turning oneself into the first and the last word on a topic. In *Household Management*, she asserts that the mistress of a house “ought always to remember that she is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega in the government of her establishment; and that it is by her conduct that its whole internal policy is regulated” (18). The well-conducted mistress is the first and last principle of a household, and, as Beeton expounds at length, civilization too. She is thereby indexical, encyclopaedic, biblical, and alphabetised (Alpha-Omega) – the living image of *Household Management*, a text that differentiated itself from the field of domestic and cookery books by those very features.

Beeton sold the notion that by understanding the fundamentals of housekeeping, any woman could come to be an expert. Success, *Household Management* promises, is built upon detailed, organised building blocks of knowledge. The Holmes stories, too, teemed with information that encouraged readers to believe that understanding the minutiae of everyday life give them insight into themselves. Distinctions of gender, genre, and publication date aside, Beeton and Doyle were founding figures in a literature of everyday life, attentive to and invested in the elementary and the alimentary as tools that could make a middle class. They shared an investment in indexical or encyclopaedic knowledge of the quotidian which, for Beeton, could be mastered and supervised by the middle-class household mistress, and for Doyle, could be animated by anyone who apprenticed themselves to detection through observation and deduction. Each writer crossbreeds the manual – that is to say, the text of method – with literary and narrative forms of several kinds. Beeton’s cookbook bulges with natural history and literary allusion and citation. Doyle’s detective fiction is structurally pedagogical (its methods were later taken up by the Boy Scout movement and the Metropolitan Police) and filled with references to encyclopaedias, timetables, and monographs.⁶ Method, each writer demonstrates, makes and organises class and institution and allows the seemingly magical permanence of those structures to be digested, deduced, understood, and rationally recreated. (Recreation is important for both writers – neither is a revolutionary.) And, as the philosopher of food Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin reminds us in his 1825 *Physiology of Taste*, “A man does not live on what he eats, an old proverb says, but on what he digests” (200). The most effective methods of class and institutional reproduction are those that enter the national gut and nourish the most everyday, domestic practices: the alimentary is elementary.⁷

Wisdom Found in Inches: Detection and Housekeeping

THE HERO OF DOYLE’S novel of manners, *A Duet: With an Occasional Chorus*, jokes that Mrs Beeton’s book “has more wisdom to the square inch than any work of man” (160). “Wisdom found in inches” would seem a fit description for the business of Sherlock Holmes, that scientist of minutiae par excellence, who studies stains, ashes, smudges, footprints and can make legible the details of dress and other practices of everyday life. Detective fiction and the household management text share an investment in the notion that the common and the trivial can be mastered – or be made to make sense – if only the proper methods are used. When describing the importance of details, Holmes emphasises that they are the building blocks of, specifically, *method*: “You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles,” Holmes tells Watson in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” (214).⁸ This method successfully overrides the deviations of the criminal undertaking precisely because it can respond to anything it comes across and therefore can specifically read and take account of deviation. Similarly, Holmes’s own police force, the young riff-raff who form the Baker Street Irregulars, better the official organ of social control, Lestrade’s police force, precisely because they can inhabit and navigate irregularity – the regions and the byways that are out of bounds to uniformed police. Holmes and the Irregulars see signs where the police see none. In contrast, by not seeing – or by failing to recognise – the signficatory power of details, the police replace them with generic, inherited, and inadequate master narratives. Holmes waves aside the temptation of the big narrative that ignores detail in favour of rehearsed plot, reaching instead, through “method,” for an extraordinary understanding of ordinary signs.

Riff-raff and odds and ends turn, in the Holmes canon, into in-depth taxonomical knowledge of the quotidian. The Holmes stories often refer to Holmes’s monographs on various aspects of human debris: “I found the ash of a cigar, which my special knowledge of tobacco ashes enables me to pronounce as an Indian cigar. I have, as you know, devoted some attention to this, and written a little monograph on the ashes of 140 different varieties of pipe, cigar, and cigarette tobacco” (“Boscombe Valley Mystery” 214).⁹ If the Holmes canon is animated by Victorian archive fever, enfolding “footnotes” to “monographs” and collected with fervour by Watson, *Household Management* – as a canon unto itself – exhibits a non-fiction version of that, too. The encyclopaedic text expressly advertised itself:

A new and important feature, which, it is felt, will form an invaluable portion of BEETON’S BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT, is the history, description, properties, and uses, of every article directly or indirectly connected with the Household. Thus, if in a recipe for a Christmas plum-pudding, are named the various ingredients of raisins, currants, candied oranges [etc] BEETON’S BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT will give ample information on questions such as these:-
Where are Raisins grown, and how are they dried? – In what Countries do Currants flourish most, and what Process do they undergo in order to be made suitable for the English market? – How are Candied Orange and Lemon-peel manufactured, and what are the characteristics of the growth of the Orange and Lemon-Trees?¹⁰

For both Beeton and Doyle, the emphasis falls on Holmes’s and on the household mistress’s roles as *domestic* interpreters of specifically *colonial* comestibles: tobacco, lemons, and oranges. Both have “special knowledge” that supplements and even transforms the articles consumed: Doyle’s text focuses on the traces consequent to consumption, Beeton’s on those which precede it. Both intervene into ignorant practices of ingestion, providing sciences of domesticity. Both texts share an ideal of the acquisition of knowledge as extensive as the British Empire, and both aver that training in orderly thought and method offers the best means to exploit this knowledge base. Beeton stresses:

Cleanliness, punctuality, order, and method, are essentials in the character of a good housekeeper. . . . Order, again, is indispensable; for by it we wish to be understood that ‘there should be a place for everything, and everything in its place.’ Method, too, is most necessary; for when the work is properly contrived, and each part arranged in regular succession, it will be done more quickly and more effectually. (21)

As many commentators have noted, Beeton’s description of method sounds mechanical, thus aligning the household with the factory. It also sounds like narrative or serial publication: “each part arranged in regular succession.” Ever the astute businesswoman, Beeton covertly promotes the benefits of serialization, urging a regulated rhythm of domestic labour that matches and amplifies the rhythm of serial publication.

Both Beeton’s and Doyle’s literary province was the circulating magazine – they produced short, hunger-satisfying numbers or instalments, and they made their livings from this mode of circulation. They also share similar generic ground, in the sense that their work addresses problems in the transmission and organization of information. Slavoj Žižek points out that the detective story has a “self-reflexive strain,” namely the detective’s “effort to tell the story,” and that this effort can be described as the effort “to reconstitute what ‘really happened.’” (49). “Reconstituting what really happened” is an excellent description of

Beeton's concerns and innovations in the history of the household. *Household Management* is a nostalgic text, and its nostalgia derives from Beeton's concerns that the old ways of life and food production were being lost. The text has an urgent sense of preservation and reconstruction. Beeton's recipes eschew the loosely written directions that were grounded in inherited knowledge possible in a pre-industrial world; instead, they seek to give the reader a detailed, reliable, and contextualised way of reconstituting a dish. When Žižek proposes that the detective must "arrive at the solution on the basis of *reasoning*, not by mere 'intuition'" (49), this is also the mandate of the earnest, amateur, aspirant mistress and her cook in the industrial nineteenth century.

Indeed, Beeton strenuously opposed intuition. In publicizing *Household Management*, she trumpeted the *testing* of her recipes (a claim which neatly sidestepped the problem that none of the recipes were hers; she made them hers by verifying them). The text itself is vehement about the importance of uniform, standardised descriptors that allow the perfect replication of recipes. She writes:

In order that the duties of the Cook may be properly performed, and that he may be able to reproduce esteemed dishes with certainty, all terms of indecision should be banished from his art. Accordingly, what is known only to him, will, in these pages, be made known to others. In them all those indecisive terms expressed by a bit of this, some of that, a small piece of that, and a handful of the other, shall never be made use of, but all quantities be precisely and explicitly stated. With a desire, also, that all ignorance on this most essential part of the culinary art should disappear, and that a uniform system of weights and measures should be adopted, we give an account of the weights which answer to certain measures. (40)

She proceeds to advise the acquisition of graduated glass measures from chemists and includes an illustration of such a measure (see Figure 3). The note to this illustration presages Doyle's/Holmes's contention that a Niagara can be inferred from one drop of water, as she notes that the "metre" is "the exact measurement of one forty-millionth part of a meridian of the earth" (40). In Beeton's case, the metaphor links the English home to the girth of the British Empire and connects culinary measurements with a global axis, an administrative pivot of the earth. The acquisition of the scientific weights and measures and the bringing of the tools of the pharmacy and the laboratory into the domestic kitchen are a significant resituating: Beeton is urging mistresses to become managers, explorers, conquerors. Moreover, she is quite aware that this manager-making involves gender and class recalibrations and that the territory to be explored and conquered is that of respectability. In the above quotation, for instance, she refers to the cook using the masculine pronoun. The realm of this Cook is "esteemed" and rarefied. Indeed, Beeton's claim that "what is known only to him, will, in these pages, be made known to others" sounds slightly threatening; this is a coup, in which the domestic (female) reader of *Household Management* can learn the secrets of the professional (male) chef. This inference – that *Household Management* unlocks knowledge previously guarded by the portcullis of the gender divide – is made explicit a short ways on in the chapter and extended to include class and wealth, where Beeton notes, "It is in the large establishments of princes, noblemen, and very affluent families alone, that the man cook is found in this country. He, also, superintends the kitchens of large hotels, clubs, and public institutions" (40). Another paragraph on, the topic shifts to the domestic kitchen and, consequently, the cook becomes a woman. Beeton simply starts referring to the cook with

A DROP.—This is the name of a vague kind of measure, and is so called on account of the liquid being *dropped* from the mouth of a bottle. Its quantity, however, will vary, either from the consistency of the liquid or the size and shape of the mouth of the bottle. The College of Physicians determined the quantity of a drop to be *one grain*, 60 drops making one fluid drachm. Their drop, or sixtieth part of a fluid drachm, is called a *minim*.

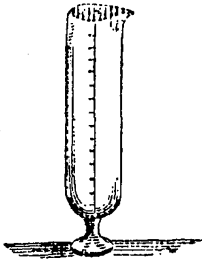


Fig. 22.

Graduated glass measures can be obtained at any chemist's, and they save much trouble. One of these, containing a wine pint, is divided into 16 oz., and the oz. into 8 drachms of water; by which any certain weight mentioned in a recipe can be accurately measured out. Home-made measures of this kind can readily be formed by weighing the water contained in any given measure, and marking on any tall glass the space it occupies. This mark can easily be made with a file. It will be interesting to many readers to know the basis on which the French found their system of weights and measures, for it certainly possesses the grandeur of simplicity. The *mètre*, which is the basis of the whole system of French weights and measures, is the exact measurement of one forty-millionth part of a meridian of the earth.

Figure 3. "A Drop." Illustration from Isabella Beeton, *Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861) (London: Chancellor Press, 1994), 40.

the feminine pronoun from here on. It is implicit, but emphatic, that if the cook pursues "cleanliness, neatness, order, regularity and celerity of action" (41), then she too can attain the success and status of the professional male chef. With Beeton's blueprints, the domestic household can be trained to a professional calibre; she has the measure, literally, of the upper classes and their public institutions, and she teaches the middle-class housewife not how to "ape" those structures, but how to reconstitute them within her own home.

In Beeton's kitchen, class can be made as one makes a cake. Beeton recasts the kitchen as "the great laboratory of every household" (25), while Holmes turns his household into a laboratory. His surname and his address are both redolently domestic, hearth-focused: Holmes/homes lives at Baker Street. Not for him, however, "cleanliness, neatness, order," etc. Unlike Beeton's socially anxious mistress, Holmes luxuriates in the masculine privilege of domestic slapdashery. His home is also a halfway kind of house: its address is 221B instead of 221; the rooms are rented, not owned, and the carelessness of his housekeeping arrangements is a prominent feature of Holmes's eccentric lifestyle. The long-suffering housekeeper Mrs Hudson is forced to keep hours as unsocial as Holmes's and to allow him to conduct alarming experiments in his/her rooms. Just as Holmes is in his element studying the scratches on a pocket-watch or the stains on a bowler hat, he lives surrounded by the kind of scuffed surfaces that Beeton would never allow.¹¹ But despite, or because of the scuffs, Holmes is as immersed in and defined by domesticity as Mrs Beeton, and this is remarkable for a nineteenth-century male protagonist of, essentially, adventure stories. Holmes is an educated man of leisure who turns away from a career as a don, scientist, colonial bureaucrat, military man, doctor, or man of state – all public occupations for which he has plenty of aptitude and knowledge. He has, moreover, no office but his rooms and no workplace except the living spaces of his clients.

Rather than standing for a particular profession, Holmes stands for method, reasoning, and deduction per se – method that proceeds from domestic rather than public life. In the Holmes stories, houses are revealed to be ordinary structures that enable extraordinary behaviours: bell pulls and ventilators are used as conduits for deadly snakes (“The Speckled Band”), plumbers’ vents and the joints of gas-pipes hide stolen treaties (“The Naval Treaty”), and, of course, the crop of a goose destined for a Christmas dinner table of modest means hides a lost jewel (“The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle”).¹² Karl Marx describes the commodity as something that at first seems “an extremely obvious, trivial thing” but under analysis is revealed to be “strange.” As a capitalist fetish, an ordinary table “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” (163). Through mass production, and the substitution of social relations effected through and around the product, that which is material [*dinglich*] starts to gallivant. Under the spell of capitalism, trivialities become mystical and tables can dance. Helping stir the capitalist brew, Beeton animates the household, turning it into an organism that can be anatomized and that can itself digest and discern. Doyle also turns the household into a body capable of both discernment and subterfuge, and he animates that body through revealing its systems of circulation and digestion. All the examples of Holmes plots above are plots conducted and solved through conduits: air ducts, gas-pipes, and one actual goosely alimentary canal.¹³ Beeton and Doyle are internists, and they concur that method must be relocated to the household, where through the most ordinary routes that most ordinary of classes – the middle one – can teach itself discernment.

Pots and Magazines

ALTHOUGH BEETON AND DOYLE both seem to offer lessons in how to acquire discernment, their writing falls under an umbrella genre widely recognised in the nineteenth century which denigrated the middle classes who aspired to discernment but smelled of the shop. That genre is the potboiler. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this derogatory term, as applied to literature or art, dates back to the late eighteenth century. It refers to artwork executed solely for the purpose of gaining a livelihood. The term derives from the earlier term “potwaller”:

the term applied in some English boroughs, before the Reform Act of 1832, to a man qualified for a parliamentary vote as a householder (i.e. tenant of a house or distinct part of one) as distinguished from one who was merely a member or inmate of a householder’s family; the test of which was his having a separate fire-place, on which his own pot was boiled or food cooked for himself and his family. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989)

A man’s status as an enfranchisable citizen was, in other words, determined by his command over a cooking space. The term’s transformation into potboiler – “the name facetiously given to hasty, worthless pictures and books . . . composed for the simple and sole purpose of being sold under cover of a reputation,” as the *Saturday Review* explained in 1864 (275) – would appear to derive from the pre-1832 practice of men who were not householders boiling a pot on an improvised fireplace in the presence of witnesses in their borough. Passing as a “potwaller” could gain them a vote, for which they could be bribed with money or food and drink. The practice of boiling a pot, then, initiated a circuitous route, by which imitating the condition of having economic independence and sustenance, signified by having a hearth,

could lead to one actually gaining those things. Early nineteenth-century potboiling mimed householder status through, quite literally, cooking.

The relationship of mime to manufacture is indeed the crux of the term as it applies to Victorian print culture. If “potboilers” form a sort of genre in the nineteenth century, it is a genre of disavowal: the allegedly genuine artist passes off allegedly shoddy, mass, or mechanically produced work as equal to their alleged masterpieces. But, of course, since the artistic merit of any art is notoriously hard to determine, the measure of the category “potboiler” is that money rather than creative drive is the motivator. Desire for money is almost as hard to quantify as artistic merit; the body and its gustatory needs quickly enter in as the bottom line, and the artist produces the potboiler because of the “burden of scheming . . . for to-day’s dinner and to-morrow’s breakfast,” as Dickens’s “happy swindler” Mrs Lammle puts it in *Our Mutual Friend* (689). It is that hint of hunger, that need for food, that animates the metaphor “potboiler” and makes it clear that its combined origins in cookery and class-shift remain powerful in its later manifestation as a derogatory term in the publishing and art worlds. When the accusation of potboiling is applied to an established artist, the accusation is not only that they are motivated by money, but also that money will entangle them in an economy of production and consumption, an economy which Dickens characterises at its most fundamental as literally hunger-driven. The potboiling artist, who sees fit to feed his own grumbling stomach, is a betrayer of both new and very old models of the artistic life. He betrays the romantic model of the starving artist, too brilliant to concern himself with food; Renaissance models of the artist who is fed and clothed by a patron; Victorian notions of the duty and national obligations of the poet; and the female, youthful, invalid, or otherwise dependent artist. None of these artists enjoy a hearth, or leg of mutton, of one’s own. Potboiling artists, however, are or aspire to be householders, and they sell art so that they can eat and then produce art again. Under the rubric of potboiling, consumption is a necessary condition of production, and the potboiling artist has grasped and participates in Marx’s C-M-C model of the circulation of capital, in which the sale of commodities is used to generate money to enable the sale of other commodities.

The designation “potboiler,” therefore, purports to describe quality of art, but it is as much a designation of the artist as the art. As a category, it imperils or degrades the artist’s own categorization by typing that artist as someone whose base material needs debase their artistry and integrity. Now often used loosely to mean “sensation fiction” or “page-turner,” the nineteenth-century use of the term specifically typed the artist as being, or as catering to, the middlebrow and middle class. Tracing this chain of “potboiler” – from art to artist and from upper- to middle-class sensibilities – clarifies the slide between producer-and-consumed that Doyle makes when he compares *producing* Sherlock Holmes stories with having *consumed* too much *pâté de foie gras*. No longer do we understand his metaphor as tangled: to be the author of mass-produced, mass-consumed literature *is* to be consumed and debased oneself.

Developed in the age of capital, the term “potboiler” rests on a curious proposition about production: that artists can produce their own fakes. This, it should be emphasised, is a different problematic from the one that Walter Benjamin examines in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin’s 1936 essay focuses consistently on art made subject to technologies and cultures of *re*production. I am concerned here not with actual copies or reproductions, but with the slur of “mass production” as used against original pieces of art, that is to say, with the aesthetic devaluation of certain originals perceived to have been “churned out.” Accusing an artist of producing a potboiler declaims against the

production of art for lucrative mass markets in order to put bread on the table. It is an accusation that seeks to establish cordons of taste or quality, *between markets and conditions of production*, ensuring that art is not tainted by the mass – neither the mass market, nor the financial and bodily amassments of the artist. The label “potboiler” implies that the artist has not suffered, laboured, or sacrificed enough to the piece in question. No longer starving in garrets or feudally fed by patrons, it is the *artists* – not the works of art – in the age of mechanical reproduction who stand accused of having lost their aura.

This accusation is made by, or from the perspective of, the wealthy would-be consumer who is afraid of the illegibility of art and of the artistic hustle. Benjamin’s concern, of course, is not internal capitalist squabbings of this kind, as his essay drives towards how “mass audience response” (234) is, under Fascism, used to deliver the feeling of self-expression without allowing a change in property relations (241). Paying attention to the “potboiler,” is to pay attention to art that changes property relations, just not for the greater good. A scrappier mode of inquiry, following the potboiler, nonetheless yields a useful revelation about the artist and subject-formation. Both Benjamin’s questions about art and authenticity in the repro-room of modernity, and postmodernist work on authenticity tend – even when taken up by critics schooled under poststructuralism – to overlook the possibility that one artist can produce both genuine and fraudulent art, so-called. When Frederic Jameson turns to *reproductive technologies* – parody and pastiche – he defines pastiche as uninflected, “blank parody” (5), concluding that postmodernist art articulates “the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic” (7). En route, however, he describes “the ideology of the unique self” setting up an informed modernism (6) before postmodernism “replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism” (20). Early capitalism, however, had an aesthetic crisis that sprouted between cracks in its own market logics and pivoted around the problem of the commodification of the unique self *by* the unique self. Nineteenth-century potboiled art exposed the idea of the unique self as a fraud.

Pies and Pennies

THAT THE PRODUCTION OF his detective fiction had a pecuniary motor and marked him as a potboiler worried Doyle over the length of his career, and he was deeply anxious to prove himself as a serious novelist. Peter McDonald has described Doyle’s literary standing as liminal in terms of his professional profile. “Neither a purist nor a profiteer, he occupied a more uncertain position between those two extremes as a populist with high aspirations who became increasingly anxious about his own literary standing” (121). If Doyle was anxious to refine and assert the literary standing of his profession, his class development was also a source of concern to him. He came from a Catholic family of limited means. A mix-up with a scholarship kept him poor during medical school, and then as a provincial doctor with an “ill-paying practice.” His stories, however, significantly improved his income (McDonald 126). The Beetons, too, had backgrounds (and futures) of dramatically mixed financial fortune. Isabella was the daughter of a textile merchant or “warehouseman” and stepdaughter of a printer who, upon becoming Clerk of the Racecourse at Epsom, played a key role in turning racing into a respectable leisure activity and who amassed a tidy fortune from printing “Dorling’s Genuine Card List” – an accurate list of the horses and riders for each race. Dorling’s fortune came via the printing press, which was also the making of Isabella’s husband Sam Beeton. Sam was the son and grandson of publicans, who himself had got

into publishing through an ungentlemanly training in paper trading. Hughes emphasises that both Isabella’s and Sam’s family had suffered fluctuations of fortune, and that the nature of their trades meant they struggled for and were acutely aware of respectability. The marriage between Isabella and Sam bound together histories which writ large the precarious natures of finances and reputations and united families which had both made their money in the printing/publishing business. Sam Beeton’s early fortune came from reprinting (unlicensed) British editions of the wildly successful *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). He had no head for business, however, and many believe that it was only his “dear little brick” and “manager” Isabella (120, 100) and her “careful little rows of figures” (260–61) that kept them afloat financially. After Isabella’s death, the distraught Sam became a “licensee in bankruptcy” to publishing company Ward, Lock & Tyler, selling the Beeton copyrights as part of a deal that brought him something like £1,900. This was, as Hughes notes, “a paltry sum,” and “Mrs Beeton . . . proved to be a fantastic acquisition for Ward, Lock[,] building them a multi-million-pound fortune over the next 150 years” (334–35). Although the name went on to make millions, the Beeton family fortune rose from and ended in penury.

While Doyle was to enjoy the riches of his literary success, his career was also haunted by poverty and, importantly, hunger. In his autobiography *Memories and Adventures*, he describes the inauguration of his literary career in this way:

I may say that the general aspiration towards literature was tremendously strong upon me. . . . I used to be allowed twopence for my lunch, that being the price of a mutton pie, but near the pie shop was a second-hand book shop with a barrel full of old books and the legend “Your choice for 2d.” stuck above it. Often the price of my luncheon used to be spent on some sample out of this barrel. (24)

This tale of competing hungers for lunch and literature is immediately followed by a description of writing and selling his first story. The relationship upon which Doyle is focusing readerly attention is that between books and food, and both, for him, are about subsistence. Books were what – across the arc of his career – brought home the bacon. But if this passage transubstantiates books into pies and pies into books, there is another kind of transformation at work in this scene. The “price of my luncheon,” Doyle says, was spent on copies of books that he says he still has “within a reach of my arm as I write these lines” (*Memories and Adventures* 24). Those books are Tacitus, Pope, Addison, Swift. The story he writes after such an education and in the presence of such volumes is “a little adventure story which I called ‘The Mystery of the Sassassa Valley’” (24). Scholars today might well suspect that his diet of classical authors and eighteenth-century men of letters was seasoned with something a little more akin to the adventure stories he went on to write. If we doubt the account he gives of his curriculum, his motivations are also open to question. The passage opens with the assertion that “I first learned that shillings might be earned in other ways than by filling phials,” but it is hastily followed by his claim that his “aspiration towards literature” was hearty and true. The whole passage is clearly contorted by an anxiety that structured Doyle’s literary career: he was profoundly concerned to establish himself as a serious author, and mercenary rather than literary interests are an embarrassment to his retrospective self.¹⁴ This passage is about publicly establishing literary propriety, smoothing out the creases in his literary motivation and education. He cooks the books, we might say. But what exactly happens when you cook the books, confuse reading and writing with cooking and eating? You become, again, a potboiler, and pennies, pies, books – both classics and adventures – add

up to a lucrative literary career. Sticking his thumb into that “twopenny box” of literature – rather than into a pie – Doyle pulls out cheap classic works that, when digested, turn into lucrative pulp, into (literally, masticated) fiction. His memoirs struggle to preserve a classical literary pedigree, but end up demonstrating that any canon or pantry can be turned to all kinds of ends.

Selection, Magazines, and Digests

BEETON’S *HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT* IS also concerned with the fate of masticated texts. But where Doyle seems bemused by the fact that he fed himself classics and spit out adventure pulp, Beeton’s chewed-up sources are haunted by another bugbear of the aspirant social-climber: plagiarism. Plagiarism – or as Benjamin has it in “The Author as Producer,” “so-called plagiarism” – can be considered a means of intervening into property relations because it detaches the object from the original owner and redistributes it (22). Such theft – vulgar, or bad borrowing – is the necessary other to the Platonic ideals of mimesis upon which Western cultures of representation are based. *Household Management* is, as commentators have noted, mostly comprised of shameless cutting and pasting from mostly unacknowledged sources. Not only does Beeton not give sources for her recipes, but a careful examination of the prose and notes surrounding the recipes also reveals wholesale plagiarism of passages modified only through syntactical reordering and cutting and splicing between multiple texts. She is particularly careful to avoid attributions to competitors. Even the book’s supposed innovation of listing all the ingredients separate from the recipe’s instructions is pre-empted by Eliza Acton’s 1844 *Modern Cookery for Private Families* (Hughes 201-02). If Beeton’s text invented anything, its inventiveness derived from the comprehensiveness of its compilation, its encyclopaedic scope, and the success of its promotion and dissemination. A colossal text with huge circulation and an even bigger reputation, *Household Management* achieved the paradox – a distinctly Darwinian paradox – of preservation through distribution. Despite the ideological conservatisms of its content, the work’s drive to collect, store up, and disseminate activated some engaging paradoxes about knowledge and knowledge ownership, consumption, and discretion. Perhaps the eating artist is vulgar because eating is plagiarism. The unacknowledged incorporation of other people’s work into one’s own matches the untagged incorporations that happen when one body eats parts of another body. Whether overfed goose or overindulging author, we are all compendia.

Manuals, Method, and the Business of Marriage

AT THE OUTSET OF this article, I noted that Doyle writes about Isabella Beeton and the *Book of Household Management* in his 1899 novel *A Duet: With an Occasional Chorus*. As its title and subtitle indicate, this is a novel that considers marriage as a compendium or collaboration. *Duet* charts a modestly middle-class marriage made within economical constraints. At the outset, the husband-to-be, Frank Crosse, worries about asking his beloved to take on “the housekeeping, the planning, the arranging, the curtailing, the keeping up appearances upon a limited income!” (12). The “drudgery and sordid everlasting cares” (13) of a meagre household and their courtship are shadowed by concerns that they must “learn to be economical” (44). The answer to the press of the material world is method and marital coordination: “Frank Crosse was a methodical young man – his enemies might sometimes

have called him pedantic – and he loved to reduce his life to rule and order. It was one of his peculiarities. But what about this new life into which he was entering? It took two to draw up the rules for that” (114). Maude takes the business of ordering and rule-following a little too far, and in a chapter headed “Concerning Mrs. Beeton,” Frank enters the bedroom to find his wife with “a large book upon her knees,” her face “stained with tears” (150). The weight that is burdening Maude turns out to be the bulky *Beeton’s Book of Household Management*. Maude had conceived a secret ambition to “know as much as any woman in England about housekeeping. To know as much as Mrs. Beeton. I wanted to master every page of it from the first to the last” (151). The rhetorical form of Maude’s ambition matches that of Beeton, who, to reiterate, tells the mistress that she is “the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega in the government of her establishment” (18). Maude’s quest for mastery leads, in this sentimental scene, to comic misery, as Maude’s ambition dissolves into “a single large tear-drop” that blots the chapter “General Observations on the Common Hog.” “It had fallen,” Doyle writes, “upon a woodcut of the common hog, in spite of which Frank solemnly kissed it and turned Maude’s trouble into laughter” (151).

Why did Doyle choose this particular animal, rather than Beeton’s observations on fish, fowl, or mutton-carving? One answer pertains to genre: Maude’s drive towards knowledge and household mastery is fittingly illustrated through this particular animal because in the Abrahamic religions, the pig is the pre-eminent animal for law-formation. Culinarily speaking, it forms a fulcrum for religious and cultural law. And indeed, in Beeton’s “General Observations on the Common Hog,” it turns out to be a chapter all about rules and manuals. For Beeton, the pig serves as a lesson in the value of lessons. She accounts for the Jewish law against pork by noting that a hot, dry climate was the wrong landscape for pork-consumption and that “in this light, as a code of sanitary ethics, the book of Leviticus is the most admirable system of moral government ever conceived for man’s benefit” (332). Beeton, in other words, uses the pig to celebrate the “admirableness” of systems of government that legislate the small into the large. It is another example of skilful self-advertisement enabled by aligning her compendium with that other authoritative source of advice, the Bible. Within her own manual for household management we find a celebration of one of the original manuals: Leviticus. Leviticus is a book of code – priestly ritual, regulations for sacrifice, laws concerning purity and impurity. When readers encounter Doyle’s citation of Beeton’s “Observations on the Common Hog,” they are therefore encountering the novel-cum-marriage-manual *Duet*, citing a household manual-cum-natural-and-cultural-history, citing a biblical manual.

In *Duet*, Maude’s tragic-comic desire for household mastery is more about knowledge per se and texts about knowledge than it is about domestic science. It underscores her frustrated desire to “know” and to “know as much as” the master of mistressing. She and Frank read Beeton’s hog facts out loud to each other, alternately applauding and decrying its “bloated, pedantic” prose and its wisdom (157). Mrs Beeton, who opens the chapter as Maude’s oppressively demanding tutor, turns out to be a useful third in marital banter. Maude reads out Beeton’s recommendations about harmonious conversation, which caution a wife never to criticise her husband. It is at this point that Frank utters the line quoted earlier, exclaiming, “this book has more wisdom to the square inch than any work of man” (160). The book “excites me,” he declares (159), and he and Maude proceed to flirt by gently mocking and impersonating the dissertations of Mrs Beeton. With his characters literally chewing over and chewing out Beeton in order to restore and reproduce middle-class domestic felicity, it is clear how Doyle and Beeton are both “alimentary” – writers whose somewhat pre-digested

guides provide nourishment and maintenance to the middle classes. With happy marital order restored through triangulation with Beeton, the young couple “clatter” off for their golf clubs, the very picture of a carefree and modern middle-class couple. Just as Holmes demystifies the scene of the crime for Watson at the end of each story, Doyle has here demystified domestic felicity, and with his embedded citation of Beeton, provides a manual on the manual of making a middle-class household.

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NOTES

1. Isabella Beeton had died in 1865, but the Christmas Annual was published from 1860 to 1898, and its success was due largely to the association of the Beeton name with Isabella and her stupendously successful *Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1859–61).
2. My construction of the liver as a “telling” organ owes a debt to Ginzburg’s essay “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method.” Ginzburg’s article focuses particularly on the relation between detection, racial science, and the fiction that physiology tells truths about mental or moral capacities.
3. Thomas Babington Macaulay, for example, expresses distaste for *foie gras* in the course of pursuing a literary-gustatory simile: “The faults of Horace Walpole’s head and heart are indeed sufficiently glaring. His writings, it is true, rank as high among the delicacies of intellectual epicures as the Strasburg pies among the dishes described in the *Almanach des Gourmands*. But as the *pâté -de-foie-gras* owes its excellence to the diseases of the wretched animal which furnishes it, and would be good for nothing if it were not made of livers preternaturally swollen, so none but an unhealthy and disorganised mind could have produced such literary luxuries as the works of Walpole” (260).
4. All references in this text refer to the Chancellor Press’s facsimile edition of the original 1861 bound edition of the *Book of Household Management*, unless otherwise noted.
5. Biographer Hughes points out that the Beeton’s success as publicists means that these figures are likely unreliable. She is also clear, however, that *Household Management* was a publishing phenomenon that attained brand status unprecedented in that field (6-7). It could be argued that Isabella’s death led to her name being propagated more widely, as her husband and business partner Sam Beeton subsequently sold the copyright to the name.
6. There are several examples of how Holmes’s methods have been taken literally. For the scouting/Sherlock Holmes connection, see Baden-Powell 70, 93, 94, 96. The Holmes stories were, at one time, required reading in the Metropolitan Police force training. The UK police forces use an IT system that is known by the acronym HOLMES, for Home Office Large Major Enquiry System (*What Is Holmes 2?*). In 2002, Holmes was inducted as an honorary fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry – the only fictional character to receive such an honour – in recognition of his contributions to forensic investigation (McGourty).
7. There is a culinary link between the words “elementary” and “alimentary.” Alimentary means to nourish with food, or other monetary support or provision for maintenance, and the word is etymologically and semantically connected to “alimony,” which also refers to nourishment and to “supply the means of living” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The word “elementals” refers to the unconsecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist, and “elementa” was used in Late Latin to mean “articles of food and drink, the solid and liquid portions of a meal” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Although the catchphrase associated with Holmes, “elementary, my dear Watson” is not found in the stories, Holmes does repeatedly use the term “elementary” to dismissively describe his methods of deduction that so amaze others.

8. In *The Novel and the Police*, Miller points out that detective fiction made details matter. Miller cites Sergeant Cuff in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), who observes that spots of ink on tablecloths are the stuff of murder investigations, and “I have never met with such a thing as a trifle yet” (Collins 136). Robert Louis Stevenson and Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson, authors of *The Dynamiter* (1885), similarly describe the detective as someone who “from one trifling circumstance divines a world” (7). *The Dynamiter* has an episode titled “The Story of the Destroying Angel,” a tale of Mormons which clearly influenced Doyle’s own (1887) “A Study in Scarlet.” This quote itself is also closely echoed by Holmes’s claim, in “A Study in Scarlet,” that “From a drop of water . . . a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it” (*The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* 23). Sherlock Holmes, as Miller notes, repeatedly describes his techniques as based on the observation of trifles (28) and lectures Watson to “[n]ever trust to general impressions,” but instead to “concentrate yourself upon details. My first glance is always at a woman’s sleeve. In a man it is perhaps better first to take the knee of the trouser” (“A Case of Identity,” *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* 197).
9. For more on dust, debris, and techniques of seeing, see Flint.
10. Advertisement in vol. 2 of the 24-volume serialization of *Household Management*, published 1859–1861.
11. That these material surfaces reveal stories and histories through their scuffs and striations characterizes Holmes’s lines of reasoning as Darwinian. These objects assume geologies of living. For more about detective fiction and evidence as “archaeological or paleontological fragments,” see Frank 141–42, where he notes that the evidence of a pocket-watch (a metaphor drawn from William Paley’s 1802 *Natural Theology*) most particularly signals Doyle’s engagement with Darwinian versus divine Design debates.
12. Klinger shows that Doyle makes an “alimentary error” by assigning a crop to a goose (*The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes* 1: 224).
13. See also Otis’s work for a wonderful analysis of the Holmes stories as narratives in which the microscopic becomes legible, and small particles carry threat.
14. Another *Strand* contributor and Doyle’s friend and neighbour, Grant Allen, had to defend himself from similar accusations of a mercantile attitude to literature and science. Allen cited the threat of starvation in his defence: “When some of his learned friends, who included Charles Darwin, T. H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer and Alfred Russel Wallace, expressed pained surprise that he had written a serial story for the periodical *Tit-Bits*, he answered that the thousand pounds he was paid for it saved him from the ‘slow starvation’ that faced him as a writer on science for the monthly reviews. He was a semi-permanent invalid who subsisted chiefly on oysters and Benger’s Food” (Pound 68).

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