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“THE OBSERVATION OF TRIFLES”: CULINARY KNOWLEDGE IN DETECTIVE

FICITON

by

Emily Joy Powell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2023

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

“The Observation of Trifles”: Culinary Knowledge in Detective Fiction

Emily Joy Powell

Food in detective fiction functions in multiple ways. It can heighten realism, enhance the setting, and even act as a murder weapon. While there are books and published articles dedicated to analyzing food as a literary device in detective fiction, this essay investigates how the culinary knowledge of a detective can signify larger ideological meanings regarding gender, class, and identity. For example, a dinner of curried mutton acts as a clue to the mystery for Sherlock Holmes in “Silver Blaze,” but for readers the meal can illustrate Holmes’s relationship with Victorian masculinity and imperialism. This essay builds on the work of authors such as Pierre Verdaguer, Beth Kalikoff, Andrea Hynnen, Angelica Michelis, and Silvia Baučková. I compare the culinary knowledge of two professional male detectives – Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot – with the culinary knowledge of an amateur female sleuth – Miss Marple. This analysis differs from scholars such as Baučková's by looking at more than one author and focusing on the culinary knowledge of a detective as well as the food they consume to gain larger cultural context. With all the clues, weapons, and red herrings found within detective fiction, it can be difficult to look beyond “whodunit.” This essay points readers to specific instances and dishes in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie where food proves to be more than a clue to the mystery.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Brian McCuskey, for always reminding me it was us against the thesis. Without your encouragement and feedback this would have remained just another topic I wrote about for class. It has been wonderful working with you to create something I am proud of. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Christine Cooper-Rompato and Dr. Jessica Rivera-Muller, for your time as well as your genuine excitement to read and discuss detective fiction and food. It has been encouraging seeing others take interest in this subject. I am grateful for my family, especially my mom, who was always willing to answer the phone and give encouragement when I felt like nothing was coming together. A special thanks to my husband Kennan. You deserve an honorary degree for comforting and helping me through the last two years. I hope you'll never get sick of watching David Suchet's *Poirot* with me.

Emily Joy Powell

*"Life without the mystery would be like roast beef without the mustard"*

– *"Four and Twenty Blackbirds"*

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“It was while I was in the carriage, just as we reached the trainer’s house, that the immense significance of the curried mutton occurred to me” (Doyle, “Silver Blaze” 415). How significant could curried mutton be? As it turns out, the curry served in “Silver Blaze” is quite significant. A stable boy on watch is drugged with opium in his curry dinner the night both a famous racehorse disappears and its trainer is found dead. Holmes explains to Watson and the reader that “powdered opium is by no means tasteless” and “were it mixed with any ordinary dish the eater would undoubtedly detect it and would probably eat no more” (415). However, the level of spice and consistency of curry is perfect for disguising the taste of powdered opium. Holmes finds the pairing too convenient, and the meal is his first clue in a “chain of reasoning” that leads him to solve the case (415). After reading this story, one might wonder if curry can really hide the taste of opium, but a far more interesting question is this: Why does Sherlock Holmes know so much about curry? Casual readers of Holmes might not think to ask this since his method of deduction is “founded upon the observation of trifles” (253), but Sherlock Holmes using culinary knowledge to solve a case seems to go against Victorian notions of masculinity. While curried mutton is just a clue to the mystery for Holmes, the culinary knowledge of a detective is a clue for the reader to consider larger ideological meanings regarding gender, class, and identity.

One of the first works dedicated to looking at food and literature was Norman Kiell’s *Food and Drink in Literature: A Selectively Annotated Bibliography* (1995). In Kiell’s own words, his book “is the first full-length, annotated bibliography on the twin subject of food and drink in literature, and as such should be considered a beginning” (3).

Since the book's publication, many critics have become interested in looking at food's function within specific literary genres, such as detective fiction. Food often plays a unique role in detective fiction as a murder weapon. Poisoned drinks and dishes are popular weapons of literary murderers since poison requires minimal physical exertion and is often easily obtainable. Although poisoned foods are popular weapons, Roald Dahl's "Lamb to the Slaughter" shows even a frozen leg of lamb can be deadly when used on an unsuspecting victim as an impromptu club. Along with being weaponized, food can be used as a literary trope or motif. In the article "Daily Bread: Food and Drink in the Holmes Canon," Simon J. James recognizes the "aesthetic choice" of showing characters eating as well as the structural role of breakfast within Sherlock Holmes stories. In many of Holmes's adventures, the anxious client comes during breakfast time. At the end of the story, when Holmes and Watson once again share breakfast, it signals to the reader "the return of the story-world to the stable regularity of the quotidian, of which Holmes will in turn eventually weary, craving in turn the excitement and disruption of the next case" (James 6-7). Others such as Jean Anderson see the inclusion of food within detective fiction, specifically through recipes, "as a mechanism for enhancing the realism of the texts in which they feature, or which they accompany" (13).

Although there is much to be discovered in analyzing food as a literary trope in detective fiction, I am interested in drawing from work like Pierre Verdaguer who saw food references as a way to "reflect the cultural orientation of novels" (187). Verdaguer's "The Politics of Food in Post-WWII French Detective Fiction" was published in *French Food: On the Table on the Page, and in French Culture* (2001) and is significant for two reasons. Verdaguer was one of the first scholars to write about how "food and cooking

tend to complement the social backdrop of the story and reveal the milieu described by the author” (187). For example, Verdaguer observed that Georges Simenon’s Inspector Maigret’s culinary preference for “hearty and unsophisticated homemade dishes” reflects his rural social background (188). “The Politics of Food” is also significant because Verdaguer begins drawing connections between food’s function in detective fiction and gender. Verdaguer specifically sees food in culinary whodunits as “linked to a woman’s search for self-assertiveness, fulfillment, and autonomy” (187). It is important to know that when Verdaguer mentions culinary whodunits he is specifically referring to American mystery novels in which kitchens and cooking are important to the plot and described in detail (185). He associates these novels and food’s ability to grant female characters independence with America because in countries like France, where gastronomy is of national importance, “the kitchen is hardly perceived as the place for a woman’s emancipation” (187). Other than the sub-genre of culinary whodunits, Verdaguer does not use food to explore ideas regarding gender. Instead, he focuses on examples where “food references are designed to reveal inadequacies caused by society’s ill-conceived priorities” (187).

Beth Kalikoff and Rachel Franks expand Verdaguer's idea that food provides women with independence and autonomy in culinary whodunits and recognize that participating in culinary activities also provides female amateur sleuths with implicit skills needed to become better detectives. Kalikoff's “Killer Cupcakes: Food, Feminism, and Murder in Mystery Fiction by Women” and Franks's “Developing an Appetite for Food in Crime Fiction” expand Verdaguer’s definition of “culinary whodunit.” Typically, the novel will have a domestic setting focused on a female amateur sleuth for whom



cooking is an “investigative practice, [and] a basis for solving murders” (Kalikoff 68). Often these sleuths engage in culinary activities themselves. Readers may also find complete recipes for dishes and desserts either at the end of the novel or scattered throughout (Franks 4). Food in these novels provides women with the self-sufficiency needed to support themselves financially, allowing them to break free from ex-husbands or abusive spouses (Kalikoff 70). The very act of cooking or baking provides them with freedom and independence. Culinary whodunits also draw “connections between the skills required for food preparation and those needed to catch a murderer” (Franks 4). The skills are more implicit. Franks points out that cooking and catching crooks both require planning, people skills, “creative thinking, dedication, reliability, stamina, and a certain willingness to take risks” (4). Kalikoff adds to the list by seeing how contextual knowledge and the art of deduction both can be practiced in cooking classes and used to catch criminals (69).

Franks restricts her analysis to culinary whodunits, but Kalikoff looks outside the sub-genre and sees food consumption providing clues to the character of female hardboiled detectives (72). This is where food and gender move beyond Verdaguer’s observations. Verdaguer primarily sees food references relating to gender taking place in culinary whodunits, but Kalikoff and Andrea Hynynen looks toward hardboiled novels featuring professional female detectives such as Sue Grafton's *Kinsey Millhone* and Sara Paretsky's *V.I. Warshawski*. In “Food and Gender in Crime Fiction: Attitudes to Food and Eating Among Female Detectives” Hynynen argues that, within hardboiled crime fiction, “the female character's relationship with food and their eating habits contribute to the creation of gender identity and their position as detective figures in crime novels”

(Hynynen 64). These detectives are removed from domestic settings and cozy kitchens. Instead, they are described running around eating fast food, indulging in ice cream, and having large breakfasts. Food for the hardboiled female detective is a symbol of agency (Kalikoff 73) allowing them to refuse traditional gender norms and challenge societal ideas of beauty and thinness (Hynynen 66).

“Food and Crime: What’s Eating the Crime Novel?” by Angelica Michelis brings together these different perspectives on food in detective fiction acting as an entry point for my research. Verdaguer looks at food as “reflecting the cultural orientation of novels” (187). Kalikoff and Franks see food as providing women with autonomy, financial independence, and implicit detection skills. Hynynen extends the conversation regarding female autonomy and independence and apply it to professional hardboiled detectives who defy traditional beauty standards. For Michelis, “food and eating function as connective tissue,” joining “different scenes to each other as a commentary on issues of personal, gendered and national identity” (155). Michelis recognizes that gender relates to other parts of identity and that it is difficult to separate conversations regarding gender from conversations regarding race, class, and culture. This is where I am seeking expand the thinking of food in connection with gender and cultural identity.

Whereas most scholars have looked at the relationship between women and food in detective fiction, I will be comparing the culinary knowledge of two professional male detectives with the culinary knowledge of an amateur female sleuth. My analysis will begin with the importance of the curried mutton in Arthur Conan Doyle's “Silver Blaze” and then contrast the masculinity of Sherlock Holmes with the feminine domesticity of Miss Marple and her knowledge of English trifle in Agatha Christie's “The Thirteen

Problems.” I will then place Hercule Poirot in conversation with both Holmes and Marple to complicate notions of masculine and feminine knowledge. My work differs from that of Silvia Baučeková's *Dining Room Detectives: Analysing Food in the Novels of Agatha Christie* because it looks at authors other than Christie and narrowing in on the specific culinary knowledge of a detective regarding a particular dish or food, rather than solely looking at food consumed by a character as an indicator of their identity. I want to know what a detective's culinary knowledge can tell me about larger social ideologies regarding gender and cultural identity. I will conclude by thinking of future avenues of research regarding the representation of professional female detectives and their relationship with food in contemporary TV series. This approach is valuable because it is easy to become entirely focused on “whodunit” rather than thinking about the larger cultural landscape of a detective novel. With all the clues, weapons, and red herrings readers might not notice how food acts as a symbol pointing to a larger cultural meaning outside of the novel. Now, let us sit back down at the dinner table and see what a few dishes and desserts have to say about the complexity of gender representation within the genre of detective fiction.

Sherlock Holmes's in-depth knowledge of curried mutton is not typical for the average Victorian male, especially one associated with “distinctive markers of Englishness” (Burrow 24). The middle-class “separation of work and home” (Tosh 13) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries caused more men to leave the home and work in public spaces as primary breadwinners and providers for the nuclear family while wives attended to domestic work in the private space of the home. Increased urbanization and industrialization of cities, such as London, also led to high employment of working-class women as domestic servants. By 1911, “35 percent [of working women]

were servants” in England (Scott 38). Many middle- and upper-class households were dependent on domestic servants to keep everything running smoothly (Tosh 13).

Holmes's upper-middle-class family would most likely have hired a cook. There would have been no need for Holmes's assistance in the kitchen and therefore little chance he would have participated in food preparation while growing up.

Speaking of cooks, Holmes would have continued to stay away from the kitchen while renting a room at 221B Baker Street since Mrs. Hudson acted as a landlady, housekeeper, and perhaps even cook. If Sherlock Holmes learned about food, it is likely he learned through consuming Mrs. Hudson's food rather than cooking for himself. Mrs. Hudson is first introduced in *A Study in Scarlet* as Watson recounts the morning of March 4th: “I rose somewhat earlier than usual and found that Sherlock Holmes had not yet finished his breakfast. The landlady had become so accustomed to my late habits that my place had not been laid nor my coffee prepared” (16). A maid is mentioned living at 221B Baker Street later in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle 36), but no cook is ever referenced throughout the canon. Even if there was a cook, Mrs. Hudson was “the mistress of [the] lodging- or boarding-house” and as such, she would have been “the woman in control of the female servants” (Cooke 14). She might not have prepared every meal served at 221B Baker Street, but Mrs. Hudson would have been involved in meal preparation, or at the very least, would have overseen the maid or cook preparing meals.

In most stories, Mrs. Hudson is limited to bringing tea or coffee for Holmes, Watson, and guests. Holmes is only occasionally described as sitting down at 221B and eating a meal. In “The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet” he makes something like a rude sandwich grabbing cold beef and shoving it in some roll or bread (371). It is easy to think

that Holmes could exercise some level of cooking autonomy in creating something as simple as a sandwich, but the beef would have had to be cooked presumably the night before (because Holmes is using cold beef), bread would have been purchased or baked, and everything plated in advance by Mrs. Hudson. Even in simple cooking tasks, Mrs. Hudson is the one behind the meal. This makes it all the more unlikely that Holmes would have gained culinary knowledge specifically through food preparation. One of the few times Mrs. Hudson is mentioned preparing a full meal is in “The Naval Treaty.” Along with ham and eggs, the breakfast includes “a dish of curried chicken” (552). From this meal we can assume that Mrs. Hudson has a basic understanding and ability to cook curried dishes. Holmes could have learned about curry by consuming Mrs. Hudson's food.

Perhaps a curry dinner one night prompted Holmes to experiment with the consistency of the dish and its ability to hide certain powdered drugs. If this is the case, Holmes would be more of a chemist than a cook. In “The Musgrave Ritual,” Holmes explains that when he first came to London he spent time “studying all those branches of science which might make [him] more efficient” (463). Culinary science could have been one of those branches Holmes deemed important to study. Even if it were, by thinking of food as a “science, practical application, exact knowledge, logic and system” (Kestner 29), Holmes is aligning himself with the Victorian “model of masculinity” founded upon logic and rationality (Gillis 69). Knowing that curry covers the taste of opium through experimentation and scientific inquiry makes this specific culinary knowledge appropriate for Holmes to know. It is a product of masculine scientific curiosity and as such does not compromise his masculine status. Knowledge of curry through

consumption and/or scientific inquiry rather than through participation in food preparation solidifies Holmes's position as a Victorian, imperialistic male.

“Silver Blaze” was published in 1892 during the British Raj. The expanding empire and “acceleration of global trade meant that during the Victorian period, foodstuffs (and, consequently, consumption patterns) were circulating to, from, and between the colonies and the extra-colonial world in a way they never had before” (Daly 364). Curry became an incredibly popular dish due to this expansion and circulation. The magazine *Vanity Fair* even provided an attachment on curry preparation, stating that it “was one of the dishes which returned colonial officers and civil servants most missed, and which they demanded of the chefs of their clubs” (Daly 367). While curry began as a dish served to officers and civil servants in gentlemen’s clubs, it soon began to spread to the masses through the means of cookbooks or household guides. French chef Alexis Soyer who worked at the Reform Club in London (Daly 367) wrote the *Gastronomic Regenerator* (1849), which was a “simplified and entirely new system of cookery, with nearly two thousand practical receipts suited to the income of all classes” (Soyer). It was his first of many cookbooks dedicated to creating accessible recipes for middle- and lower-class families. All contain multiple curry recipes. Two of Soyer’s published cookbooks contain a recipe for curry paste called “Captain White’s Curry Paste and Powders,” that claims to contain “several ingredients [that] are so well proportioned, that Capt. White’s Curry Paste and Powder possess a delicacy of taste not always to be met with in India” (Soyer). Soyer’s recipe is a great example of how many in England during the Victorian period attempted to make curried dishes more “British.” Decreasing the level of spice or including more local ingredients – such as mutton – shows “just how

imbricated the culinary and the colonial already were” (Daly 367). The inclusion of curry in “Silver Blaze” is not random. Even though Sherlock Holmes continues to appeal to audiences 136 years after *A Study in Scarlet* was initially published, “the canon stands in a particular relationship to the late Victorian and modernist periods in which it was originally produced and consumed” (Allan and Pittard 6). The popularity of curried dishes in London during the nineteenth century makes Holmes's knowledge of curried mutton more understandable and negates the idea of Holmes challenging Victorian gender norms by having and using culinary knowledge to solve a case.

All these “observations of trifles” – or, in this case, gendered observations of curry – are consistent with broader representations of gender roles in the Holmes canon. Female characters are “often under-represented and marginalized, habitually appearing as helpless victims in need of male aid” (Rood 34). There are three cases in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in which a female character comes to 221B Baker Street: “A Case of Identity,” “The Speckled Band,” and “The Adventures of the Copper Beeches.” All three women are described as helpless. When Sherlock Holmes meets Helen Stoner in “The Speckled Band” Holmes describes her as having “frightened eyes, like those of some hunted animal” (308). Comparing women to scared animals supports the nineteenth-century belief that “women were passive, dependent, weak, [and] emotional” and men were “active, independent, strong, rational” (Rose 14-15). Mrs. Hudson is not described or compared to a scared animal, but she is described as constantly serving the needs of Holmes and Watson. This places her in a passive role despite being a landlady and “a businesswoman in her own right” (Cooke 14). Just as Holmes would have likely learned about the curried mutton through traditionally masculine avenues – scientific exploration

and food consumption – he exhibits traditionally masculine characteristics, especially compared to the passive and dependent women who surround him throughout the canon.

The scientific way Holmes thinks about the curried mutton relates to Kestner's observations of Holmes regarding "women as does a scientist" within the canon (35). Before Miss Mary Sutherland in "A Case of Identity" has even walked through the door to 221B, Holmes is standing at the window observing her behavior. Mary is described as nervously looking at the window, moving back and forth while "her fingers fidgeted with her glove buttons" (226). Like a physician, Holmes tells Watson that he has "seen those symptoms before" and diagnoses Miss Mary Sutherland on the spot with "affaire de cœur" – or an affair of the heart – simply because of the way she moved along the pavement (226). "A Case of Identity" is not the only time Holmes scientifically regards women. In "A Scandal in Bohemia," Holmes observes and talks about Irene Adler like a scientist performing a scientific study. To better understand Adler and discover the hiding place of a photograph, Holmes decides to follow her and perform an experiment. Confident with his understanding that "when a woman thinks that her house is on fire, her instinct is at once to rush to the thing which she values most," he tricks Adler, using a plumber's smoke rocket, into thinking her house is on fire (201). As Holmes recounts how Irene Adler exposes the hiding place of the photograph, he says, "She responded beautifully" as if she were a test subject in an experiment of his design (201). For Holmes, everything is about logic and reason. His knowledge of curry does not feminize him just as his knowledge of women shows he is more scientific than empathetic.

Sherlock Holmes's culinary knowledge is carefully orchestrated in a way that does not threaten Victorian masculinity. On the outside, knowing about the consistency and



spice level of curried mutton seems to suggest Holmes has a connection with the domestic. Upon further investigation, this knowledge could have been gained through traditionally masculine means: consumption of food either from a housekeeper or a gentlemen's club. British imperialism meant most housekeepers had housekeeping books or cookbooks that contained simple curry recipes. Gentlemen's clubs served curry because colonial officers and civil servants who had spent time in India grew to enjoy the dish. Even the way Holmes treats and observes women as scientific objects throughout the canon solidifies his masculine status. Holmes is correct, the curried mutton does hold "immense significance" (415). The curried dish is not only a clue to the missing racehorse, but a clue to better understanding Holmes's relationship with Victorian masculinity and imperialism.

Whereas Holmes's culinary knowledge was primarily obtained through consuming food prepared by others, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple uses domestic culinary knowledge likely gained through participation in food preparation to solve cases and subvert gender norms. If you were to create a detective who was opposite to Holmes in almost every way, you would have Miss Marple. Holmes is a professional detective who fits the model of Victorian masculinity. Miss Marple is an elderly spinster and amateur sleuth associated with traditionally feminine activities such as knitting, gardening, and sharing gossip over tea. Even the hustle and bustle of Holmes's London flat is replaced by Miss Marple's deceptively sleepy village of St. Mary Mead. The oppositions do not end there. The Holmes canon paints most women as passive and dependent, assuming roles such as elderly housekeeper or tragic young victim. Agatha Christie "creates competent, bold, and adventurous female characters" going as far as

placing them “in the role of murderer” with women making up half of her perpetrators (Maslin 105). Miss Marple’s “preoccupation with traditionally domestic tasks such as gardening and knitting, coupled with her self-effacing demeanor” work to “highlight and value underrecognized female roles and skills” (Maslin 105) while also providing her with specialized knowledge used to solve cases that leave a former head of Scotland Yard puzzled.

In “Killer Cupcakes,” Kalikoff recognizes the role “cooking and baking serve as crime-solving practices” in the contemporary work of Joanna Fluke, Diane Mott Davidson, and Nancy Pickard (70). An important distinction here is that Kalikoff notices that cooking and baking provide amateur sleuths with implicit crime-solving skills. Learning to recreate recipes is a practice in interrogation and sifting through evidence rather than jumping to conclusions (69). Likewise, Franks points to similar examples of female sleuths learning “creative thinking, dedication, reliability, stamina, and a certain willingness to take risks” through cooking that implicitly prepares them to solve crimes (4). Even though Christie was publishing novels before the authors mentioned in Kalikoff and Franks’ work, Miss Marple expands this idea of cooking providing skills to catch crooks by explicitly using culinary knowledge to solve murders. It is Miss Marple’s use of culinary knowledge that, as Kalikoff says, “values the daily domestic skills of women who cook, bake, serve, and eat” (74). It is suggestive that these skills, often seen as only applicable in the home, “apply to the world beyond the kitchen” and acknowledge the inherent value of traditionally feminine knowledge (Kalikoff 74). This is how Miss Marple complicates gender roles within detective fiction. Her knowledge of how to bake and decorate an English trifle is used to identify a murderer and help her intellectually

compete with men in Christie's novels as well as other male detectives like Sherlock Holmes. Holmes may solve cases using a deduction method "founded upon the observation of trifles" (Doyle 253), but Miss Marple has literally observed trifles.

This famous trifle appears in "The Tuesday Night Club," the title story of *The Thirteen Problems* and Miss Marple's print debut in 1927. The short story collection centers on a group sharing an evening at Miss Marple's home who decide to "each [present] a detection puzzle to be solved by the rest of the group" (Maida and Spornick 109). The group consists of six individuals: Sir Henry Clithering, the former head of Scotland yard; Raymond West, a writer, and Miss Marple's nephew; Joyce Lemprière, an artist; Dr. Pender, a local doctor, and clergyman; Mr. Petherick, a solicitor; and finally, "Miss Marple presiding" from her armchair (Maida and Spornick 109). Sir Henry Clithering presents the first puzzle involving the death of a wife after a meal consisting of tinned lobster, salad, trifle, bread, and cheese that left her husband and her companion sick. The case was not suspicious until a deciphered message from a blotting pad the husband had used before the dinner was found: "Entirely dependent on my wife. . .when she is dead I will. . . hundreds and thousands" (Christie, *Tuesday Night* 7). Most of the group believes that the husband killed his wife for inheritance money. When Sir Henry Clithering shares that the husband only received £8000 and not the hundreds of thousands that were suggested by the deciphered message, the theory is dropped. Miss Marple is not so easily fooled. She understands that the "hundreds and thousands" were referencing the poisoned trifle topping served to the wife and not an amount of money to be collected after her death.

Like Holmes and the curried mutton, my next question was how Miss Marple would gain this culinary knowledge. Would she have learned about hundreds and thousands from eating trifles at tea or baking trifles herself? This distinction is important to me because if Miss Marple only learned about trifle decoration through eating trifles it would be like Holmes, who only learned about curry through consumption. Understanding food only through its consumption seems like a masculine way of knowing compared to culinary knowledge gained from active participation in food preparation, which would signify its direct connection with domesticity and femininity. Although nowhere in Christie's work is Miss Marple explicitly described cooking for herself, there are a few clues we can draw from to better understand why she would know that "cooks nearly always put hundreds and thousands on trifle" (14). One of the most prominent clues is the frequency with which Miss Marple takes on and trains young women to work in domestic service. Between *A Pocket Full of Rye* and *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* it is revealed that Miss Marple takes in girls from St. Faith's Orphanage and tries "to give them a good training" (*Pocket Full* 107). Amy, Clara, Alice, and Gladys (all from St. Faith's) were taught "how to wait at table and keep the silver and everything like that" in preparation for going on to better-paid jobs in larger homes (Christie, *Pocket Full* 107). Miss Marple is quite involved in the training of these young women, and regardless of her physical ability to participate in activities such as keeping the silver, Miss Marple oversees their actions, giving input and advice. Even when Miss Marple begins to need more assistance and hired women – such as Cherry Baker and "Faithful Florence" – from the Development or Hire Purchase she is very particular about how they complete their domestic tasks. For example, Miss Marple felt that Cherry,

despite being “a quick and efficient cook,” needed a bit more supervision when it came to washing dishes (Christie, *Mirror Crack'd* 6-7).

Other than the many young women who come in and out of Miss Marple's care, there is no mention of any other domestic staff including a cook. Miss Marple would not have been wealthy enough to pay for a full-time cook. Although she does have enough to hire part-time help, her nephew Raymond steps in financially when full-time assistance is needed (Christie, *Mirror Crack'd* 8). Given she is in a household of one, and not of middle-upper or upper-class standing, Miss Marple likely would know enough to train young women such as Gladys to cook simple meals. These lessons could have come from Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* (1770) or Mrs. Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* (1861). Cookery and household management books became popular during the nineteenth century since more wives were staying at home and learning to run their households (Broomfield 106). We do not know how old Miss Marple is since her physical description and age change from novel to novel, but she would likely have been growing up while Mrs. Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* was still popular. Interestingly, Mrs. Beeton's trifle recipe mentions garnishing the trifle with “small coloured comfits,” otherwise known as hundreds and thousands (Beeton). Trifle could have been a part of Miss Marple's lessons since it was “a popular dish, i.e., a dish of the people, more apt to be present at family celebrations and children's parties than...on restaurant menus” (Davidson 808). Perhaps Miss Marple would know that cooks commonly place hundreds and thousands on trifles for decoration because she had instructed Cherry, Amy, Gladys, Alice, or Clara to do it herself.

Knowledge of popular trifle toppings does not outwardly seem to threaten normative gender roles of a rural English village, but like a trifle, Miss Marple's traditionally feminine baking knowledge has layers to it. Holmes's knowledge of curried mutton first appears to push against traditional ideas of gender, but upon further investigation, his culinary knowledge is reflective of his Victorian masculine identity. Miss Marple's culinary knowledge works in reverse. Her specialized knowledge regarding trifles allows her to solve a murder that Sir Henry Clithering – former head of Scotland Yard – had not initially been able to solve himself. Not only does she outsmart Sir Henry Clithering, but she also solves a puzzle none of the men in the room understand. Agatha Christie places “power in the hands of a normally marginal figure, the spinster, who systematically undermines blustering males” (Mezei 109). Culinary knowledge regarding trifles would not have been publicly gained like Holmes eating curry in a gentlemen's club for lunch since trifles were “a dish of the people” not often found on restaurant menus and was prepared for small family or community gatherings (Davidson 808). This incredibly specific, domestic gained, and traditionally feminine knowledge of trifle decorations “takes the patriarchal notion of the trivial and transforms it” (Makinen 54). Having Miss Marple outsmart men like Sir Henry Clithering – men who are highly educated, in higher social standing, and in more public positions of power – with domestic culinary knowledge highlights, values, and lends credibility to feminine skills (Maslin 113).

It is important to note that Miss Marple not only outsmarts all the men in “The Tuesday Night Club” but Joyce Lemprière as well, who despite being the only other female character, does not share Miss Marple's domestic culinary knowledge. Before the

group begins sharing stories, Joyce brags, “I bet I could beat you all at this game. I am not only a woman – and say what you like, women have an intuition that is denied to men – I am an artist as well. I see things you don’t. And then, too, as an artist I have knocked about among all sorts and conditions of people. I know life as darling Miss Marple here cannot possibly know it” (Christie, *Tuesday* 4-5). Miss Marple simply replies, “I don’t know about that, dear” (Christie, *Tuesday* 5). Joyce suggests that participating in an interesting and artistic life has given her knowledge Miss Marple could not gain by remaining at home in her private domestic space; however, Joyce's limited knowledge of common English baking leaves her in the same position as the rest of the men in the group – unable to solve the murder. Contrary to her opening comment, the experienced and artistic Joyce Lemprière is not intellectually superior to elderly Miss Marple despite her knocking “about among all sorts and conditions of people” outside of St. Mary Mead. Intellectual capacity in “The Tuesday Night Club” has nothing to do with class, gender, life experience, and/or background, but it has everything to do with “feminine ways of knowing” (Maslin 113). Though Joyce does not realize the “hundreds and thousands” are talking about the trifle topping, she is still a modern woman of independence. She is not passive, weak, or emotional like the women portrayed in the Holmes canon. Miss Marple’s ability to outsmart everyone in “Tuesday Murder Club” using traditional English baking knowledge of trifles legitimizes domestic culinary knowledge. Baking is no longer a feminine trifle, but an important and valuable skill that can be used to solve a murder.

Is there a detective who pulls from both masculine and feminine areas of knowledge? Yes: Hercule Poirot. However, for him to be successful, Christie had to

create a detective “whose abilities were not bound to traditional images of male power” (Ackershoek 121). Essentially, a male detective can gossip, interact with domestic help, and love sweet “feminine” foods only if he is not an Englishman. Mary Anne Ackershoek does a wonderful job pointing out that Marple and Poirot’s success comes “not through a Holmesian social empowerment but through disempowerment” (121). Marple experiences disempowerment as a spinster and Poirot as a Belgian in post-World War I England. Their “otherness” means they are treated with condescension and sometimes contempt, but “it is in this error that they turn to their advantage, triumphing not so much *over* their perceived shortcomings as *because* of them” (Ackershoek 121). I would argue that Poirot holds even more of an outsider status than Miss Marple. Her feminine knowledge is not unusual. Yes, she uses it in a way that places her intellectually ahead of the retired head of Scotland Yard, but as an English spinster, no one would question her knowledge of trifles. Poirot, however, is described multiple times as “a small, funny little foreigner” who Christie intentionally sets “outside the upper-middle-class British milieu” (Gill 53). During the interwar period Belgian refugees were seen as “simple and pleasant like children, rather vain and conceited about their appearance” (Kushner 11). Rather than letting this narrow-minded view of how Belgians were depicted, Poirot plays on his outsider status. It is his foreignness that allows him to cross traditional gender lines and use both masculine and feminine knowledge to solve mysteries.

One example of Poirot using his outsider status is in “The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding.” Poirot asks if it is permitted “that [he] congratulate the cook on [the] marvelous meal” (27). Secretly, Poirot is anxious to talk with the cook to see if he can discover why he found an infamous ruby in his slice of Christmas plum pudding. Rather



than coming right out and asking about the ruby, Poirot is playing up his foreignness by asking if it is permitted to talk to the domestic staff. He probably could have just talked with the cook after the meal, but seeking permission from his British hosts signals his foreignness and presumably places his British hosts at ease. Mentioning he wants to talk with the cook about the delicious meal rather than the ruby also works to keep the thief – who is also at the dinner table – at ease. It might have been suspicious if Poirot was seen with the domestic staff after the meal, but something as simple as seeking permission from his hosts no longer makes his actions seem questionable. When Poirot meets with the cook, he begins by expressing gratitude for such a delicious meal “with an extravagant foreign gesture,” raising his hand to his lips, kissing it, and wafting it to the ceiling (27). Asking for clarification on British norms and complimenting the cook on a “good English meal” (27) places Poirot in a better situation to discuss the ruby in the plum pudding than if he had outright asked.

It is Poirot's status as a foreigner that allows him to have more feminine-coded knowledge regarding food and housekeeping. Poirot does receive disapproval for his knowledge of cooking and his foreignness. However, the fact Poirot is Belgian makes it more acceptable for him to be “prissy” and “diminutive” compared to a detective like Holmes (Bernthal 103). Whereas “Doyle indisputably aligns Holmes with manliness by linking his character to” science, logic, and reason “all elements gendered masculine in the nineteenth century” (Kestner 29), Poirot directly engages with “things thought to threaten an increasingly sensitive English masculinity” (Bernthal 106). Take knowledge of curry, for example. When a potentially suspicious curry dish appears as a clue for Poirot in *Dumb Witness*, it is not his “first step in a chain of reasoning” that leads him to

solve the mystery (Doyle 415). Poirot understands that “curry would mask the taste of a drug”; however, he cannot be sure of its significance until he has talked with everyone related to the mystery, both family members and household staff alike (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 197). In the end, it is studying the character and the psychology of each family member through interviews and village gossip that leads Poirot to determine who the killer is. Instinct, gossiping, and befriending domestic staff are some feminine-coded activities that seem to threaten the “sensitive English masculinity” of a character such as Sherlock Holmes.

Just as Poirot disrupts gender norms through his success as a professional detective using his foreign status and interest to participate in gossip as a means for gaining information, he is directly associated with food preparation unlike Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes. Poirot does not explicitly use his knowledge of household food to solve a murder – such as Miss Marple and the trifle. Instead, his ability to cook and host puts investigators and suspects at ease, as in *Death in the Clouds* (84) and *Evil Under the Sun* (278), which typically leaves them sharing important information related to the case (Baučeková 123). For example, in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, Poirot serves “a good porterhouse steak,” “a tankard of something worth drinking,” and an apple tart with a jug of cream to an informant who divulges information regarding a prime suspect of the case (*Blue Train* 271). Since Poirot is mentioned employing only two butlers/valets – George and Curtis – throughout the thirty-odd novels he appears in, it can be assumed Poirot prepared the food himself. Due to Poirot's meticulous manner and incredible neatness, even if the food was brought in by a caterer it would have been prepared under his watchful supervision. Thanks to Poirot's friend and occasional partner Hastings we know

that “a speck of dust would have caused [Poirot] more pain than a bullet wound” (*Mysterious Affair* 23). Heaven knows how much pain Poirot would suffer from an improperly cooked meal! Poirot is even described as hosting small gatherings and parties. When hosting a gathering in *Elephants Can Remember*, he walks around, serving coffee and pastries to his guests. The specific domestic and culinary knowledge needed to host and cook for guests is “never possessed by the official investigators” in Christie's novels “who are predominantly masculine”; it is reserved for Poirot (Baučeková 124). Like Miss Marple, we do not know where Poirot would have learned about food. In “Four and Twenty Blackbirds,” Season 1 Episode 4 of *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, it is mentioned that he learned to cook from his mother. This is never confirmed in Christie's novels. Poirot could have learned to host and cook from his mother, or perhaps their family had a cook and he spent time in the kitchen learning from them: Nevertheless, these scenes where Poirot is described as cooking and hosting are important because they set him apart from Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes, neither of whom are ever described cooking.

Just as we can learn a great deal about Sherlock Holmes from observing the meals and food he is described eating, Poirot's preference for consuming fine and delicate foods further complicates gender norms in detective fiction. Poirot takes “delight in delicate and ornamental food...consuming a large amount of sweets,” traditionally regarded as inappropriate for men (Baučeková 106). Throughout Christie's novels, he develops a habit of drinking chocolate, which was seen as a very feminine habit of consumption (106). Even in *The ABC Murders* when Poirot and Hastings begin discussing cases as if “were ordering a dinner at the Ritz,” Poirot tells Hastings he only wants “the cream of crime...something *recherché* – delicate – *fine*” (Christie, *The ABC* 4). When pressed by

Captain Hastings to explain what he means by “the cream of the crime” Poirot expresses his desire for “A very simple crime. A crime with no complications. A crime of quiet domestic life...very unimpassioned – very *intime*” (Christie, *The ABC* 15). Domestic, simple, delicate, fine: these are not typically terms used to describe traditionally masculine eating habits or characteristics. When compared to Hastings’s desire for a “red-blooded murder” – since robbery and forgery are “rather too vegetarian” (14) – even Poirot’s ideal mystery is “distinctly feminine” (Baučeková 106).

Despite Poirot’s connection with more feminine attitudes, food preferences, and investigative methods he does not completely abandon the scientific approach to food that would be more in line with the culinary attitudes of Sherlock Holmes. In “Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds,” Poirot leaves behind domestic culinary knowledge for a forensic science approach to food. In an attempt to gain a family inheritance, a young nephew dresses up like his uncle and eats at his uncle’s normal establishment, the Gallant Endeavour, to deceive the police about the correct time of death, but as Poirot discovers the young man forgot to “eat like his uncle” (265). After comparing the autopsy report of the deceased uncle with information gathered from the waitress who worked that evening at the Gallant Endeavour, Poirot concludes the man he saw at the restaurant and the dead man could not possibly be the same person. Not only did the autopsy reveal the stomach contents to be very light – compared to the heavy meal of thick tomato soup, beefsteak, kidney pudding, and a blackberry tart described by the waitress – but if the man had eaten blackberries that night his teeth would have been stained and “the corpse’s teeth were not discoloured” (265). This forensic or scientific way of thinking about the nephew’s meal causes the reader to set aside Poirot’s more feminine attitudes and behaviors and see him

as a more stereotypical masculine detective. The analysis of the autopsy report and observation of unstained teeth are more in line with Holmes's thinking about the consistency of curried mutton.

Placing Poirot's culinary knowledge between Sherlock Holmes's and Miss Marple's is significant because it shows how a professional male detective can use domestic knowledge to solve mysteries, but to escape traditional ideas of masculinity he must maintain an outsider status. As a Belgian living among the middle- and upper-class English, Poirot does not need to conform to either Victorian or emerging inter-war ideologies regarding masculinity. He "consciously chooses ignorance of British codes" (Berthnal 107). He provides "a critical reflection on the idea of masculinity itself" suggesting a male detective can cordially interact with domestic staff to gain additional insight regarding a case, serve traditionally feminine foods at gatherings, and think about food scientifically when reading an autopsy report. None of this takes away from the success Poirot experiences as a detective. Like Miss Marple, he illustrates "a new form of empowerment for the detective, one deeply rooted in female experience" (Ackershoek 121). Bringing together both masculine and feminine characteristics, Poirot's culinary knowledge is not so much a bridge between Holmes and Marple as it is a fusion of the two detectives.

This fusion would suggest that like powdered opium in a dish of curried mutton, Sherlock Holmes dissolves as a new detective is created. In actuality, Holmes never disappears. Even as this research has sought to critique and break apart Holmes it simultaneously acknowledges his central role in detective and crime fiction. In his article, "Holmes and the History of Detective Fiction" Merrick Burrow explains how Holmes

“has become a seemingly permanent fixture in the landscape not only of crime writing, but also of television and film adaptation, fan fiction and graphic novels” (Burrow 27). Moving forward, I would be interested in analyzing how contemporary female detectives in TV series mirror Holmes’s Victorian model of masculinity through their connection with food, specifically extending the analytical work of Carolina Miranda and Barbara Pezzotti’s “Bridging the Gap? Investigating Food and Identity in Transnational Television Series.”

Miranda and Pezzotti analyze the Danish-Swedish crime drama *Bron/Broen* (2011) as well as its English-French remake *The Tunnel* (2013) and the American remake *The Bridge* (2013). They argue that “by showing what and how these detective duos eat (or do not eat), these TV series portray interesting incidents in which individuals/nations bond through food” (Miranda 161). Miranda and Pezzotti analyze how food creates a bridge between the Swedish main character, Detective Saga Norén, and her Danish partner/cop, Martin Rohde. Bridges are a recurring theme in *Bron/Broen*. The show begins with a body appearing on the Øresund Bridge, directly over the dividing border between Sweden and Denmark. It turns out the body is composed of two different women. The waist and up belongs to a Swedish politician and the waist down belongs to a Danish prostitute. This is the event that forces Saga Norén and Martin Rohde to work together. Miranda and Pezzotti highlight the role bridges play in the show by pointing out a scene where Martin invites Saga to stay for their family dinner. He explains they’re eating hash, clarifying, “It is the same as Swedish hash.” This is an attempt on Martin’s part to find common ground through food “in spite of the differences between the Danish and Swedish cultures” (167).

Even though this shared meal of Swedish hash creates a bridge between Martin and Saga, Saga's relationship with food seems to create a bridge between her and Sherlock Holmes. In Season 1 Episode 2, the audience sees Saga eating something resembling a meal. She sits on her kitchen counter eating straight from a bag of chips. A small container of blueberries and an avocado lie next to her. She eats the avocado like an apple after peeling off the skin. As she reads from a book, she occasionally dips a coffee mug into a pot on the stove and then drinks the contents. Whether it is coffee or soup or something else entirely we have no idea. It is as if Saga asked herself, what is the quickest and most effective way to eat something? "Eating and drinking are not rituals bringing order" to Saga's life, they are merely a way "to fuel [her] body" (Miranda and Pezzotti 166). Miranda and Pezzotti suggest that food for Saga "represents nothing more than a basic need" (166). While this might be true, Saga's relationship with food can illustrate a severing between the contemporary female detective and the domestic sphere.

In a way, contemporary female TV detectives have circled back to a Holmes model of interaction with food preparation and consumption. It is not difficult to imagine Sherlock Holmes dipping a cup into a pot of soup for a meal if he were left without Mrs. Hudson. Saga's eating habits are not the only thing reminiscent of Holmes. Her inability to process social cues reflects this as well. Just as "Holmes...[regards] women as does a scientist" (Kestner 35), Saga sees others and the world through a lens of logic and reasoning – attributes, as Gillis states, that are associated with masculinity (69). It would be interesting to compare Saga's relationship with food to other hardboiled female detectives from series such as *Vera* (2011), *Prime Suspect* (1991), *The X Files* (1998), or *Poker Face* (2023). I would like to place Miranda and Pezzotti in conversation with

Hynynen's "Food and Gender in Crime Fiction" since the article "examines how the female characters' relationship with food and their eating habits contribute to the creation of a gender identity and their position as detective figures in crime novels" (63-64).

Hynynen's work is enlightening, but due to the article's length, the analysis is limited to examining the work of authors Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, Dominique Sylvain, and Fred Vargas, published during the 1980s and 1990s. Hynynen's argument could shed light on more contemporary female detectives in TV series.

"It was while I was in the carriage, just as we reached the trainer's house, that the immense significance of the curried mutton occurred to me" (Doyle, "Silver Blaze" 415). How significant could curried mutton be? This research has worked to illustrate that not only curried mutton, but trifles, blackberries, and a peeled avocado are incredibly significant clues that signal to larger ideological meanings regarding gender, class, and identity. Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot's ability to solve murders using domestic culinary knowledge and traditionally feminine skills critique and challenge Holmes's masculine methods of deduction more than his own culinary knowledge regarding curry does. Although recently, eating habits and food choices of contemporary female detectives on TV have begun to reflect Holmes more closely. They have left the kitchen and no longer use culinary knowledge from Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* (1770) or Mrs. Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* (1861) to catch murderers. Their jobs keep them busy, so they choose fast food and store-bought cakes over cooking a meal and making trifles. If hardboiled detectives such as Saga continue to reflect Holmes-like characteristics, we will be left with fewer cooks and more chemists.



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