

Hearty or Delicate? Food and Gender in the Novels of Agatha Christie

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Abstract

This paper examines Agatha Christie's usage of food imagery in the construction of her characters' gender identities. Gender is defined as constructed and performed, rather than pre-determined and fixed. In addition, both, crime fiction and food are understood as strongly gendered phenomena. It is argued that Christie created a number of characters who use food to construct alternative and transgressive gender roles for themselves. This is especially visible in the desexualization of her two famous detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, which enabled Christie to transform the genre of the classical crime novel and eventually to introduce a female detective.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, classical crime novel, food, gender, desexualization, transgression

In 1920, when Agatha Christie published her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the genre of detective fiction was already “firmly established” and immensely popular among a growing circle of British readers (Clarke 1–2). However, a number of literary scholars have pointed out that up until the beginning of the twentieth century, the detective fiction genre had been dominated by men – the detectives in most stories were male and the stories themselves promoted traditionally masculine values, such as heroism and rationality (Scaggs 20).

Although quite a few women wrote crime fiction in the Victorian period, none of their female protagonists achieved such levels of popularity as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin. However, this trend was about to change. The number of female writers, as well as readers, rose steadily throughout the

Victorian period, and at the end of the nineteenth century more detective fiction readers were women than men (Knight 68). As a result, the crime fiction genre underwent a dramatic reconstruction: the traditionally masculine values, protagonists and settings, which characterized the original formula, were gradually replaced by more feminine ones. Agatha Christie was one of the first authors to attempt to feminize the classical Holmesian formula, and she did so not only to accommodate the taste of her growing female readership, but also to challenge the patriarchal assumptions inherent in the genre itself (Scaggs 20).

In this paper I argue that Christie was able to feminize her crime stories by creating characters who did not conform to traditional gender roles, but even more importantly by shifting the focus of her stories from the urban and public towards the private and domestic, especially towards the ultimate traditionally feminine domain: that of food and cooking. It is the aim of the present paper to demonstrate some of the ways in which food and gender are interconnected in our culture, and to show how Christie made use of her readers' preconceived notions about this interconnection in order to subvert the gender stereotypes that had hitherto dominated classical crime fiction.

Eating Gender: Performance through Food Choice

Gender is one of the crucial elements of an individual's identity. Moreover, it is an institution that is "embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations" (Risman 430). However, it has been argued that the category of gender is not predefined as a given, but rather, in Judith Butler's words, it is "performed" – and various gender identities "are continuously (re)created" and (re)negotiated through one's actions in a given social setting (Lyons and Willott 694). As Butler puts it:

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender self. (519, original emphasis)

In other words, Butler views gender identity not as permanent, but rather as temporary, made up of "acts which are internally discontinuous" (520). As such, gender remains a mere social construct, "a performative accomplishment," which is staged for the benefit of a "social audience, including the actors themselves." However, the staging of such performances can serve not only to uphold and justify the performed identities, but also to challenge and question them, or even to help achieve "gender transformation" (520). The transformation, or even deconstruction, of gender identities is made possible because "there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates [sic] the idea of gender, and without these acts, there would be no gender at all" (522). Nevertheless, despite its constructed and temporary nature, gender difference is "universally used to justify stratification" (Risman 43), and as a result it can have a profound influence on the lives of individuals. It follows that the construction of gender is a two-way process

in which individuals engage in acting/producing their gender identities and these gender identities subsequently shape the individuals (432). Gender becomes “embedded not only in individuals but throughout social life” (431).

Food and food choices play an important part in constructing, altering, or disrupting gender identities. Food is an extremely gendered phenomenon connected with the body, sex, power, patriarchy, and oppression. The association of food with gender was noted by Claude Lévi-Strauss as early as the 1960s (36–37). More recently, scholars, including Deborah Lupton, Eric B. Ross and Sidney Mintz, or Warren Belasco, have been discussing the influence of gender on food choice and eating styles. In a study conducted by Deborah Lupton, respondents were asked to decide whether different foods were appropriate for different genders, and if so, to specify which foods pertained to which gender. The interviewees almost unanimously responded positively to the first question. Moreover, in a large majority of cases the respondents agreed on whether particular foods were masculine or feminine. Feminine foods were characterized as “light, sweet, milky, soft-textured, refined and delicate” (Lupton 106), whilst masculine foods were “[h]eavy’ foods [...] those that are hard to digest, weight on your stomach, are chewy, rich or filling, or are ‘unhealthy’” (107). The two types of foods highlighted by the respondents as quintessentially feminine and masculine were sweets or candy and red meat, respectively (104). According to Eric B. Ross and Sidney Mintz, the evolution of this distinction can be traced throughout history. Prehistoric hunters, unwilling to give up the nourishing meat, kept the killed prey to themselves, leaving women to exploit vegetarian alternatives. This situation did not change even in the modern period. In the nineteenth century, English workmen consumed the bulk of the households’ stock of meat, while women were expected to rely on less nutritious foodstuffs, such as bread and jam, to feed themselves (qtd. in Belasco 51).

The distinction between masculine and feminine food has not only physiological, but also cultural and social significance. Warren Belasco observes that sweetness is traditionally connected with innocence and love, and meat connotes sex (37), and that while sexuality is acceptable, even required from men, it is regarded with suspicion in women. Consequently, in Western societies women who ate meat used to be seen as excessively sexual and immoral. To avoid the impact of meat they were advised to eat vegetables, sweets or at least disguise the taste of meat with (preferably white) sauces (50).

Meat is an extremely nutritious food, high in calories, fats, and protein, and as such it is often considered the only “real” food and meatless dishes are frequently despised. At the same time, men are seen as best suited to eat meat (50); women, children, the elderly or sick are all marked as inferior and unable to digest it. The relationship between meat and sugar in the domain of food is reflected by that of alcohol and abstinence in the realm of drink. Non-alcoholic drinks, light drinks, and coffee are associated with women (Lupton 106), while strong drinks and spirits are seen as predominantly masculine. Thus, the very nature of the foods and drinks women consume marks them as physically, and, consequently, symbolically and socially inferior to men.

The gendered nature of food and drinks is visible not only in the choice of specific food items, but also in the distribution of foodwork and in assigning the responsibility for making decisions about food. The findings of research conducted by Alan Beardsworth et al. demonstrate that in contemporary Britain “a married woman’s obligation to

produce elaborately prepared traditional meals for her husband provides an expression of her domesticity and subordination” (473). What is more, while the “tasks of preparing food still firmly belong to women” and men only rarely engage in foodwork, women “do not enjoy the power which would allow them meaningfully to control their own and their families’ food intake” (Charles and Kerr 58, qtd. in Dixey). In other words, the “choice of meals is determined by husbands’ preferences” or by “the man’s work pattern,” and the male of the house must be provided with the required meals even if the family suffers from a constrained budget (Dixey 38). On the other hand, Rachael Dixey, as well as Warren Belasco (41–43) observe that while women are frequently oppressed and restricted through their role as main food producers, this role can also become a source of power. Some women deliberately choose to dissuade men from cooking. Their kitchens become a space where they can exercise authority and “responsibility for this vital area of life can give [them] some control over the household and a sense of self-worth” (Dixey 38).

Gender in Crime Fiction: From Male Power to Female Intuition

It is evident that food and cooking are domains permeated by gender stereotypes. The same can be said about the genre of crime fiction. Up until the Golden Age, crime fiction was a predominantly masculine form dominated by the rational larger-than-life male detective hero (Knight 10, 68). However, with the rise of the classical crime novel at the beginning of the twentieth century, various feminine elements were gradually introduced into the genre (Knight 90, 99; Rzepka 145). Not only did the number of female crime authors rise rapidly, but the stories themselves started to depart from the male-centred formula developed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the prototype of a classical amateur detective, can be understood as a kind of archetypal hero figure: he is a lonely warrior, who has embarked on a quest to rid society of evil (Rowland 120). This character embodies a number of values which are – in Western society, at least – traditionally considered masculine; he is rational, independent, courageous, and confident. The setting of Doyle’s stories is masculine too. His crimes generally take place in public, in the dark streets of a big city, which are juxtaposed with the peace and order of the detective’s private study (Scaggs 48). The public nature of crime represents yet another feature that contributes to the masculinity of the Holmesian formula, as in Victorian Britain public spaces were generally considered a sphere reserved for men.

Agatha Christie’s novels, on the other hand, depict microcosms dominated by women. Her novels are populated by numerous female characters, her investigators rely on intuition, psychological insights and domestic knowledge, rather than scientific data and mathematical reasoning, and her stories are set in traditionally feminine spaces: the home and the kitchen (Rowland 120–21). Food, as an indispensable element of any household and as a domain traditionally strongly associated with women, represents one of the tools Christie employed in order to further feminize her detective novels.

Agatha Christie and Food Stereotypes

The references to food that appear in Christie's novels attest to the omnipresence of gender-based stereotypes. Her minor characters often fit into stereotypical gender roles and these roles are often reflected in their food habits. Christie exploited the contrast between the vigorous man with a healthy appetite and the fragile lady or young girl, who eats little and lightly. Her male characters can frequently be observed enjoying breakfasts of toast and marmalade, scrambled eggs, bacon, yesterday-cut cold ham, cereal, kidneys and had-dock on plentifully heaped plates, while their female counterparts seem to be content with only a piece of toast, coffee and orange juice (*A Pocket Full of Rye* 27), with weak tea (*Why Didn't They Ask Evans* 222), or they even skip food entirely (*Endless Night* 210).

Christie also made use of the traditional view of men as meat-eaters and women as sugar-eaters. While the staple of a true gentleman's diet is a Porterhouse steak (*The Mystery of the Blue Train* 263), women seem to believe that, as Ariadne Oliver, a middle-aged writer, put it, "[s]weet things [...] really give you a lot of vitality" (*Elephants Can Remember* 108). In *The Man in the Brown Suit* the protagonist Anne explains her choice of comfort food after being held captive for a couple of hours in the following way: "A man, I suppose, would have had a stiff peg; but girls derive a lot of comfort from ice-cream sodas. I applied myself to the end of the straw with gusto. The cool liquid went trickling down my throat" (223). Similarly, if afternoon tea is served in a man's household, it is accompanied by cooked sausages (*Hallowe'en Party* 54), but when the tea is served by a woman the menu includes scones with homemade strawberry jam or "little drop cakes" (*After the Funeral* 156).

The inferiority or weakness of stereotypically feminine characters is highlighted not only by their choice of "weaker" foods and drinks, but also by the fact that their eating habits resemble those of physically and socially powerless individuals, i.e. invalids and children. Not only the food that women eat, but also the manner in which they consume it closely resembles the food and eating patterns of the sick. While delicate ladies are expected to eat in bed (*Evil Under the Sun* 191), the same behaviour would indicate sickness in men (*After the Funeral* 41). Moreover, the craving for sweets typically ascribed to women parallels the same craving experienced by very young children, who often are appeased by or find comfort in candy (*After the Funeral* 11, *The Murder at the Vicarage* 51). Thus, by their assigned foodways women are rendered weak, vulnerable, childish, and consequently incapable of taking care of themselves: they become people who need to be managed by others, i.e. by men.

Similarly to children or the sick, "proper" women are expected to abstain from alcohol, as well. When women entertain each other they serve tea, coffee, cake, and sweets (*Passenger to Frankfurt* 252). Many of Christie's female characters can be seen drinking only under extreme circumstances, such as in the case of Mrs Hubbard, who was offered a glass of cognac as a remedy after fainting (*Murder on the Orient Express* 223). However, "refreshments," i.e. alcoholic drinks, represent an inevitable part of meetings between men. Alcohol-drinking rituals serve as a testing ground for traditionally masculine virtues: competitiveness and aggression. In a working-class pub, the one who manages to stand on his feet last is the winner. Failing to take part in a round of drinks or not being able to "hold

one's liquor" leads to loss of rank and subordination (Schivelbusch 171–73). Here again the idea that a woman, a person not fit to drink alcohol, is equivalent to a weak man is perpetuated. Even alcoholism, unpardonable for women, is tolerated in men. Such is the case in *Murder on the Orient Express*, where the drinking habit of the detective Mr Hardman is tolerated by the other characters and viewed as rather natural in a man (234).

Role-Reversal: Christie's Unconventional Detectives

Although Christie frequently made use of stereotypical masculinity and femininity in characterization, she equally frequently employed food to subvert the traditional notions of what a man or a woman should be like. Gender role reversal appears throughout Christie's novels. The young adventuress is one of Christie's preferred stereotype-subverting character types. Lynn, a former army nurse and the protagonist of *Taken at the Flood*, dreams of an adventure-filled life and is reluctant to settle down and become a country housewife. She tries to avoid being placed in a position of weakness by emphatically refusing to take her meals in bed like a lady (13–14). Similarly, teenager Linda rebels against the patriarchal society – represented by her extremely feminine stepmother obsessed with men and with thinness – by refusing to breakfast in her room (*Evil Under the Sun* 132). Joanna, the young and modern protagonist of *The Moving Finger*, is described as drinking alcohol: "[She] is very pretty and very gay, and she likes dancing and cocktails, and love affairs and rushing about in high-powered cars" (6), and the young adventuress Tuppence equals her male partner Tommy in intellect as well as in appetite (*The Secret Adversary* 11, 13). Similarly, in *Murder Is Easy* the young New Woman Bridget underscores her independence, courage, and intellectual capabilities by drinking alcohol, and she is annoyed when she is offered a traditionally feminine drink of tea in cups made of "dainty" china (285).

Instances of men robbed of their power through food appear in the novels, as well. In *Murder Is Easy* Mr Horton is a henpecked husband controlled by his wife and forced to do all the housework, including cooking (149). For decades, women were confined to the domestic sphere, they were burdened with the care of the household and of food supplies, and their public voices were silenced (Belasco 44). Moreover, even women's achievements within the domestic sphere were attributed to men: although women did all the shopping, cooking, serving, and cleaning, it was always the man of the house who was the "breadwinner." In professional kitchens the male cook was generally the superior one, the chef, while women were delegated to the role of helpers (47). In Mr Horton's case these roles are reversed and his invalid wife takes over power and delegates him to the feminine role of household help and cook. To reassert his masculinity, Mr Horton indulges in drink (*Murder Is Easy* 113–16).

Food as a means of gender role reversal serves as a useful tool in characterization. However, Christie used the same method in order to feminize the genre of crime fiction as such. At the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional detective stories required a male protagonist. However, the newly emerging classical crime novel attracted a growing number of female readers – and the authors, many of whom were female as well, started to feminize various aspects of their novels (see above). Nevertheless, the introduction of

a female protagonist remained problematic, as the traditional detective was placed firmly in the realm of the mind, the rational, and the masculine (Knight 99; Sayers 356).

Christie tried to overcome the masculinity inherent in the detective hero not by creating a completely female protagonist, but instead by strongly desexualizing her detectives. To do so, she exploited what Counihan labels the “possibility of destruction of gender identity” (66), i.e. she attributed stereotypically female traits to her male detective, and vice versa. First, she invented Hercule Poirot – a male character defying many of the preconceived ideas about masculinity. Later she proceeded to employ a woman as her detective. However, in the case of Miss Marple Christie also relied on the technique of desexualization in order to prevent her character from clashing with the established masculine detective formula.

Firstly, Christie drew on the dictum of traditional Western society which tells women that their identities are made up solely of their bodies and appearance (Counihan 89). Christie’s female detective, Miss Marple, is depicted as rather messy, definitely not elegant, and not in the least concerned with her looks. Poirot, on the other hand, pays extreme attention to his attire – he even sacrifices comfort for elegance (*Hallowe’en Party* 102, 126), his trademark moustache is always impeccably groomed, and his surroundings are neat and tidy. He is depicted as delicate and of fragile health, for instance when he overdresses for a short summer drive in an open car in *Dumb Witness* (44) or when he suffers from motion sickness in *Death in the Clouds* (23). What is more, Poirot does not stop at worrying about his own health and comfort; he also makes a fuss over the health of other characters, just like a mother would over her small children. When Captain Hastings complains that a cold might be coming over him, Poirot immediately adopts the role of an over-anxious nurse:

“Awfully sorry, old boy,” I said. “But to tell the truth, I’ve got such a blinding headache I can hardly see out of my eyes. It’s the thunder in the air, I suppose. I really have been feeling quite muzzy with it – in fact so much so, I entirely forgot I hadn’t been in to say good night to you.”

As I had hoped, Poirot was immediately solicitous. He offered remedies. He fussed. He accused me of having sat about in the open air in a draught. (On the hottest day of the summer!) I refused aspirin on the grounds that I had already taken some, but I was not able to avoid being given a cup of sweet and wholly disgusting chocolate!

“It nourishes the nerves, you comprehend,” Poirot explained.

I drank it to avoid argument and then, with Poirot’s anxious and affectionate exclamations still ringing in my ears, I bade him good night.” (*Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* 169)

It is significant that the drink Poirot offers is neither warm tea that a doctor might prescribe, not a shot of whiskey, a strong drink that Hastings would probably prefer, but a cup of “disgusting,” or rather feminine chocolate. Indeed, in order to reverse the gender identities of her characters, Christie relied on depicting their foodways even more frequently than on depicting their appearance.

In his approach to food, Poirot is distinctly feminine. He takes delight in delicate and ornamental food, he consumes large amounts of chocolate and other sweets, and he even prepares food himself. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train* Poirot serves food to his counterpart, an English gentleman (263), and in *Dumb Witness* he even attempts to share some of his culinary techniques with his partner, Captain Hastings. However, his effort is met with disapproval (223). Other men do not wish to discuss cooking and find it an activity unfit for males.

Chocolate – Poirot’s staple treat – has a special status among sweets, as it is not only a food, but also a drink. After its introduction in Europe, chocolate was considered the opposite of coffee, which was at that time perceived as a masculine drink. While coffee was associated with the mind, intellect, self-control, and masculinity, chocolate represented indulgence, body, pleasure, and femininity (Schivelbusch 87). Unlike in the case of coffee, the associations of chocolate have remained more or less unchanged until the present day. Today, cocoa is a drink of women and children, and especially in the Puritan Anglo-Saxon world it is seen as unfit for men (93). It is no wonder then that Poirot’s habit of drinking chocolate for breakfast is considered revolting by Hastings, a stereotypical Englishman (*Dumb Witness* 37).

Poirot’s other drinking habits are equally unconventional and un-masculine. Unlike other male characters, who believe that “[n]o gentleman is happy unless he drinks something with his meal,” be it a “good prewar whisky” or a glass of vintage wine (*The Mystery of the Blue Train* 259), Poirot avoids strong alcohol. Instead, he usually opts for non-alcoholic or light alcoholic alternatives, or an occasional cocktail (*Three Act Tragedy* 26). When Ariadne Oliver wants to ask the detective a favour, she knows exactly what selection of food and drinks to offer:

“It’s rather early to ring you up, but I want to ask you a favour.”

“Yes?”

“It is the annual dinner of our Detective Authors’ Club; I wondered if you would come and be our Guest Speaker this year. It would be very very sweet of you if you would. [...] Come and have tea with me.”

“Afternoon tea, I do not drink it.”

“Then you can have coffee.”

“It is not the time of day I usually drink coffee.”

“Chocolate? With whipped cream on top? Or a tisane. You love sipping tisanes. Or lemonade. Or orangeade. Or would you like decaffeinated coffee if I can get it – “

“*Ah ça, non, par exemple!* It is an abomination.”

“One of those sirups you like so much. I know, I’ve got half a bottle of Ribena in the cupboard.” “What is Ribena?”

“Black-currant flavour.”

“Indeed, one has to hand it to you! You really do try, Madame. I am touched by your solicitude. I will accept with pleasure to drink a cup of chocolate this afternoon.”

(*Third Girl* 9)

Clearly, Poirot’s eating and drinking preferences are distinctly feminine: he enjoys sweets, coffee, chocolate, sugary syrups and whipped cream, rather than the stereotypically masculine steaks, whisky, and beer. As a result, other male characters often underestimate or

even ridicule him. Because of his food choices, Poirot is believed to be effeminate, and consequently weak and insignificant. In *Elephants Can Remember*, Superintendent Garroway is very amused at seeing Poirot drink *sirop* of blackcurrant instead of the customary whisky and soda, and when he is later told that Poirot drinks *tisane* (“herbal tea”), he remarks: “Ah. Invalid dope of some kind” (135). The parallel between the drink choice of the feminized detective and that of the sick, which the Superintendent draws, seems as a direct reference to the above-mentioned food associations. Similarly in *Three Act Tragedy*, when Poirot asks his host, Sir Charles, for his staple “glass of *sirop*.” the request is met with incomprehension and Poirot soon discovers that “*sirop* [is] not included in Sir Charles’s conception of drinkable fluids” (26).

Unlike Poirot, Miss Marple – as a woman – cannot be depicted as completely feminine in order to fit into the detective formula. Therefore, in her case food and eating habits are used to make her conform to the masculinist requirements of a classical detective story. Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot represent opposite poles in terms of their approach to food: while Poirot tends to over-indulge in food and is famous for having a sweet tooth, Miss Marple believes in controlling one’s bodily desires and is generally indifferent to food, which is visible in her attitude to her garden – she likes taking care of her flowers, but finds growing vegetables “dull” (*Nemesis* 17). While Poirot defies Western culture’s perception that body and its passions and pleasures are set apart from mind and reason (Counihan 82) by merging a plump body and love of pleasure with exceptional intellectual capacities, Miss Marple combines stereotypically feminine methods of detection, i.e. chatter and gossip, intrigues and tricks, intuition and reminiscences, with a masculinized approach to food.

To enforce her desexualized image, Christie rendered Miss Marple’s drinking habits masculine, as well. While proper women are supposed to indulge only in non-alcoholic beverages, as is shown in *A Caribbean Mystery*, when Miss Marple is offered fresh lime juice while the rest of the party enjoy a glass of Planter’s Punch (10), Marple is not opposed to drinking alcohol in the least. When entertaining a police inspector, she does not offer him tea or coffee, but a glass of cherry brandy, which she claims to have distilled herself according to her grandmother’s recipe. However, the inspector declines, stating that he does not drink before lunchtime, and this role reversal further emphasizes the uncharacteristic nature of Miss Marple’s drinking habits (*The Murder at the Vicarage* 54).

Conclusion

In this paper I observed some of the many ways in which food and gender interact within the detective novels written by Agatha Christie. It was my aim to shed light on the methods Christie employed to break from the traditional masculinist crime fiction formula developed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Christie was an influential actor in the gradual feminization of the detective genre which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, and she eventually succeeded in introducing a female protagonist into the formula. The analysis presented in this paper explores the role of food imagery in this process of feminization. It argues that while Christie often employed food as a tool for characterization and made use of food-related gender stereotypes to construct conventional characters, equally

frequently she used food as a means of desexualizing and subsequently feminizing her two most popular detectives: Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. The unconventional eating and drinking habits of these two characters function as “stylized” acts which helped Christie to deconstruct their “seemingly seamless” (Butler 520) gender identities, and thus allowed her to gradually introduce feminine elements into what had before been a predominantly masculine genre of fiction.

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