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# STARVATION IN VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS FICTION

*By Tara Moore*

IT MAY SEEM THAT Christmas literature, with its glorified descriptions of overflowing tables and conviviality, has no place in a discussion of that other extreme, starvation. However, much of the nineteenth-century literature containing narratives of Christmas speaks directly to national fears of famine. Starvation entered the print matter of Christmas first as part of a social argument and later as a concern for the abiding national identity that had become intertwined with Christmas itself and, more symbolically, Christmas fare. Writers including Charles Dickens, Benjamin Farjeon, Augustus and Henry Mayhew, the creators of *Punch*, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon authored Christmas pieces that showcase literary reactions to the developing issues of hunger throughout their century. This essay offers an overview of the treatment of starvation in the Christmas literature of the nineteenth century.

Christmas publishing intensified in the first decades of the nineteenth century, but it was only later with the dawn of the revitalized Victorian Christmas that a social message of middle-class charity took precedence. December had developed as a publishing focus due to the success of the annuals of the 1820s and 1830s. These volumes, with their prominent engravings and aristocratic editors, were seen as conspicuous markers of status that could be displayed year-round as table books. Following an 1840s upsurge of seasonal print matter that taught specifically Christmas benevolence, authors began to take advantage of the high demand for festive narratives now required for holiday leisure reading. The scene was set by such periodicals as *Punch*, which became a mouthpiece for Douglas Jerrold's demands for benevolence.[1] *Punch* would continue this ardent appeal until Jerrold's death, and, even without him, the pages of December *Punch* issues might offer insights into the workhouse Christmas. Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* carried a message similar to Jerrold's to an audience eager to placate its own feelings of guilt during a season in which indulgence and poverty clashed in print. Subsequent contributions to the developing market in Christmas literature show that 1840s Christmas books often contain a rhetoric of social reform, specifically noblesse oblige, that urges the middle classes to reach out to the poor. While such rhetoric is political in nature, Henry and Augustus Mayhew couched a uniquely aggressive attack on the Corn Laws in their Christmas novel for the 1846 holiday season. Although the Christmas literary market expanded after the 1860s, the percentage of narratives dealing with issues of the hungry decreased. Christmas consumerism caused publishers to begin selling presentation editions, non-seasonal narratives marketed as Christmas books. Despite the turn away from the mid-winter narrative, Christmas authors like Benjamin



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Farjeon continued the appeal for social reform in still more graphic ways. By the end of the century, Mary Elizabeth Braddon would revise the well-known blend of starvation and Christmas fare to suggest that expatriate English cannot hope to sustain their ethnic identity unless they feed upon the rituals of a constructed Englishness.

Most scholarship on starvation in the nineteenth century approaches the topic by way of the self-effacing disordered eating habits of Victorian women, but not all hunger falls into this category. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Gail Turley Houston, Paula Marantz Cohen, Deirdre Lashgari, and Ann Krugovoy Silver, among others, have developed the scholarly discourse linking female self-starvation with patriarchal oppression. As Silver notes, anorexia was first formally recognized as a disease during the Victorian period (3). The often undiagnosed female eating disorders in literature symbolize the way "society starves women . . . and women internalize that dis/order as self-starvation" (Lashgari 141). Alongside the overpowering evidence of hungry women, it bears keeping in mind that other cultural extreme, Queen Victoria's considerable girth and consumption, to which discourteous street ballads of the hungry 1840s proudly pointed as an indicator of national prosperity (Munich 52). The economic conditions, Corn Laws, and Poor Law reforms that caused ballad writers to make such an outrageous comparison became common topics in the mid-century social novel.

Authors writing during the early years of Victoria's reign have left memorable images of starvation to commemorate what they saw as societal and political failures. In her unpublished dissertation, Sumangala Bhattacharya recognizes that "[h]ungry people haunted the cultural imagination of 19th-century England" (1). For example, when the corpulent Mr. Pickwick meets Jingle in Fleet Prison, the former scam artist summarizes his future prospects in his typically disjointed manner: "Nothing soon – lie in bed – starve – die – Inquest – little done-house – poor prisoner – common necessaries – hush it up – gentlemen of the jury – warden's tradesmen – keep it snug – natural death – coroner's order – workhouse funeral – serve him right – all over – drop the curtain" (Dickens, *Pickwick* 562–63; ch. 42). Gail Turley Houston notes the irony in Dickens's writing production during 1837 when his work on the food-saturated *Pickwick Papers* overlapped for eleven months with that of *Oliver Twist* (15), perhaps the most memorable starvation text of the 1840s.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) both argue against Malthusian political economy within a discourse of want (Bhattacharya 3–4), and pamphlets joined this debate. In J. Lhotsky's *On Cases of Death by Starvation and Extreme Distress among the Humbler Classes, Considered as One of the Main Symptoms of the Present Disorganization of Society* (1844), the author scorns the heartlessness of Malthusian logic by quoting medical descriptions of starvation and inanition, those deplorable safety-valves of over-population.[2] He also recounts newspaper reports about deaths by starvation, including a mother who threw her starving month-old infant into a river when she could no longer nurse it, an old man refused food by work house guardians, and a "black man who lay howling for six days in a manger of one of the lanes of London" until he was taken to a hospital and died (Lhotsky 23). While "death from starvation" makes for a shocking headline, systematic research data explains the more common progression from hunger to death. As a community's stamina and resistance weakens, not only infectious diseases but digestive diseases gain a foothold when desperate people begin eating rancid or indigestible items (Mokyr and Ó Gráda 20–22). Lhotsky's 1844 piece estimates the number of mendicants in London to be 40,000, and he points out that the middle classes must visually encounter signs of starvation since "[d]rooping, emaciated half-naked men, lying on the steps of some church,

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or on the footpath, with the inscription in chalk, or on a bit of paper, 'I am starving,' are of daily occurrence" (19). The chalk texts voicing an exposed man's hunger are as transient as the lives of these men. The chalk letters continue to express a hunger that may have silenced the exhausted beggar, but only until the vulnerable chalk medium is itself washed away.

Christmas books annually took up the cause of the hungry poor within a developing rhetoric of benevolence. The growing commercialism of Christmas highlighted the society's taste for conspicuous consumption, but it also brought to light the segment of the population unable to feed themselves, let alone take any part in ostentatious displays. Christmas books are all about the machinations of economy. In her comparison of Christmas books by Dickens and Benjamin Farjeon, Michelle Persell notes that "the ethos of charity is dependent upon the unequal distribution of wealth, an economic state none of [Dickens's] Christmas books seriously seek to undo" (453). Persell's observation applies to the subsequent flood of Christmas books containing festive narratives. Rather than radically reworking class hierarchies to prevent future hunger, the nostalgia-laden Christmas books for the most part return to an eighteenth-century paternalistic approach to aiding the destitute.

### *Consuming Wealth or Consuming Bread: Exposing English National Identity in the "Hungry Forties"*

WRITING AS THE BROTHERS Mayhew, Henry and Augustus Mayhew published a Christmas book for the 1846 Christmas season, the same that first saw Charles Dickens's *The Battle of Life*. *The Good Genius That Turned Everything into Gold, or, The Queen Bee and the Magic Dress: A Christmas Fairy Tale* is one of the Christmas books which does not mention Christmas at all after the title page. The Mayhews set *The Good Genius* as an Eastern fantasy romance and only introduce a Christian message in the epilogue. Throughout the narrative, however, the Mayhews teach a Protestant work ethic that they present as the safeguard to home and nation. The text appears five years before Henry Mayhew began his social reporting and research, and it offers Mayhew scholars a photograph of the well-known social critic's early liberal ideology before prolonged contact with the London poor educated him still further. Starvation and feasting appear in this Christmas book as the variegated consequences for contrasting uses of wealth and authority. The contemporary debate about the Corn Laws lies just under the surface of the Christmas book, as bread and hunger inform the political nature of the Mayhews' allegory.

In keeping with the 1840s Christmas book emphasis on feasting, *The Good Genius* tells the story of a man who, despite the fairy at his disposal, repeatedly finds himself in need of food. The authors make access to food an allegorical reward for the type of responsible, warm-hearted leadership Carlyle applauds in *Past and Presents*. The novel's moral economy condemns to starvation characters that put the display of wealth above family priorities and, by clear extension, the national family. The fanciful narrative, illustrated by George Cruikshank, describes the rising fortunes of a simple woodman, Silvio. A fairy gives Silvio a goatskin coat and promises that when he wears it, she will appear and fulfill his wishes. The working-class man first requests the funds to provide an opulent dinner for the philanthropic Princess Amaranth, then he asks for a palace in which he can woo Amaranth and feast her father, King Vejez, and, finally, he wants a kingdom of his own after he elopes with Amaranth. Their wedding procession emblematically broadcasts a theme of provisions and plenty, and Silvio and Amaranth commence a life of feasting and frivolousness at court. After six years

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of the oppressive taxation needed to support the feasting, Silvio's citizens rebel, and the former woodman, his queenly wife, and their daughter are left homeless and hungry without the security of the magic coat. The now earnest Silvio regains his coat and his kingdom and reaches out to reconcile his family with his father-in-law, whose country has been rocked by famine. Silvio promises to end the famine, but, once again, he loses access to the coat, and King Vejez nearly burns Silvio at the stake before the fairy arrives and causes the ground to burst forth with ripe crops.

The longing for bread is the underlying desire in the book, one that is complicated by issues of policy: taxation, tariff, and agricultural troubles. The year that *The Good Genius* was published saw Anti-Corn Law League success at long last. Though post-dated 1847, *The Good Genius* was reviewed by the *Athenaeum* in December 1846, and the English at home were worrying that their government was spending more resources on the outreaches of the Empire than on their own domestic needs.[3] Within the context of Christmas fiction, the Mayhews create this allegorical world to depict the continuing troubles of a near revolutionary England. A real fear of starvation and a preoccupation with bread resonates in the politics of the early nineteenth-century's varying Corn Laws, which began appearing in 1815 and were not repealed until 1846. Alon Kadish writes, "The law was intended to encourage the continuation of a high level of home production of corn thereby avoiding the danger of famine (and consequent instability, riots, etc.) and the strategic disadvantage of dependence on foreign supplies in time of war" (xi). Of course, many felt that the laws themselves were the quickest route to famine, and references to potential famine in England and the real example of famine in Ireland repeatedly appear in tracts and speeches made by politicians opposed to the Corn Laws. For example, in a speech given on 19 February 1839, Lord Brougham paints free trade as "the best possible security against famine" (Brougham 174). *Punch* issues from the early 1840s contain image after image of ragged, hungry peasants, both Irish and English, looking to politicians to ease their suffering. The failed harvest of 1845 merely exacerbated the fears of starvation within England's borders.

Corn Law discourse – parliamentary speeches, pamphlets, and rhetorical fiction – emphasize the English dependence on grain, specifically wheat, and ridicule what they call the tax on bread. Member of Parliament Charles Fitzwilliam explains the rationale of the Corn Laws: "The object of the law of 1815, was to keep the average price of wheat at, or as near as possible to 80s. a quarter, below which it was stated by the witnesses, and admitted by the committee of the House of Commons, in 1814, that wheat (supposing the existing rents to be continued) could not be produced in England" (Fitzwilliam 213–14). Fitzwilliam then goes on to regret his initial support of these tariffs. The Anti-Corn Law League rallied around the injustice of taxing English bread:

> I know of no country where a tax has ever been directly levied upon the bread of the people. I have travelled in the dominions of Mehemet Ali himself; and I can bear testimony to the fact, that there is no bread tax in Egypt, and I know of no worse government than that. We know of the extremities to which some despotic governments are reduced for revenues . . . Nor would you have a tax upon bread in this country, if it had been levied directly, and if it had been understood by the people who pay it. (*Report* 40)

Here the League draws on differences of national identity in an argument for free trade: the despotic Egyptian government surpasses the British government in this one regard, to

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Britain's shame. The Brothers Mayhew would join in the free trade argument so popular among progressives of the early 1840s.[4]

Even before the formation of the Anti-Corn Law League, wheat bread had become a food signifying Englishness. Transported convicts demanded wheat bread in New South Wales, where maize was the more prevalent cereal (Pickering and Tyrell 9). James Wilson contributed to the Corn Law debates in his book *Influences of the Corn Laws, As Affecting All Classes of the Community, and Particularly the Landed Interests*, in which he calls wheat "the chief and first necessary of life" (114). The English preference for wheat precluded them from farming or otherwise turning to the significantly cheaper foreign market of rye, which had ceased to be a favored cereal in England in the early eighteenth century (Wordie 45). Food historian Amy Bentley notes that groups will riot over only certain foods, and scholars link the inciting food item to groups' senses of identity (182, 186). White bread had become a sign of Englishness, and the prohibitive price of this emblem of Englishness caused an atmosphere of a smoldering food riot.

A more specific response to the Corn Laws appears in the Mayhews' portrayal of the allegorical nation/city in King Silvio's absence: a social democratic government replaces him and styles the nation as "the Happy Family" (Mayhew and Mayhew 127).[5] The quick succession of "Prime Brothers" fails to bring about a stable harmony as contrasting parties toy with a bread tax: one Prime Brother enacts a bread tax and the next, a baker, repeals it for fear that "in a short time, there must be a famine in the land" (Mayhew and Mayhew 127). The carelessness with which the Prime Brothers enforce the bread tariff demonstrates obvious personal biases that parody the landowning policymakers. These officials maintained the Corn Laws from 1815 until the Anti-Corn Law League incited the working and middle classes to demand the repeal.

In a genre more associated with the Ghost of Christmas Present's overflowing cornucopia, the Mayhews design a visually contrasting scene: a starvation parade. Since his people are starving and his son-in-law has failed to provide the plenty he promised, Vejez plans an execution parade "more like one of feasting than of death" (Mayhew and Mayhew 179). The procession has a festive air, and the hungry citizens celebrate the perverse holiday:

> After [dancing girls], were men dressed as reapers, and dancing as at a harvest feast, while some of them carried bundles of mildewed straw, and others rusty sickles . . . Succeeding these, came a train of empty waggons, drawn by lean oxen, and carrying husbandmen, who rested on their broken winnowing forks, whilst others walked by their side with empty corn measures, and unfilled sacks; and, like the others, they, too, were followed by a banner, on which again was written, "IN SEVEN DAYS PLENTY SHALL REIGN IN THE LAND." (Mayhew and Mayhew 179–80)[6]

The parade celebrates emptiness and want. Just before the morbid revelers roast Silvio as the product and the main dish of this corrupt feast, his wife and the fairy arrive and magically bring about a harvest in a matter of moments.

The allegory shows the emptiness of England's larder; portents of an English famine on top of the Irish one assaulted readers' senses in print media. The Mayhews make a financial statement, encouraging people to turn to industry as a constructed national characteristic and a chance to survive the challenges of economics. The perverse starvation parade depicts a nation that has lost the all-important focus on the domestic family. Vejez, like many a father in Byron's Turkish tales, has lost his favorite daughter and, by extension, his home priorities.

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His national home must suffer. In this way, the home/nation metaphor works in reverse, as the nation's distress depicts the ruler's domestic trouble.

This early work of fiction shows Henry Mayhew teaching an ethic of strong families and strong domestic nationhood, altogether an isolated sense of national identity that rejects the pulls of a globalized government in the interests of plenty at home. Christmas books of the 1840s represent bountiful Christmas meals that celebrate a mythic heritage of English identity portrayed as an idealized security. The "hungry forties" saw mass emigration in England as failed crops and blights at "home" caused a disintegration of many kinship circles as well as the crumbling of faith in England's ability to provide. In 1849 Henry Mayhew would turn to the solo work for which posterity best remembers him; the "Labour and the Poor" series in the *Morning Chronicle* would later lead to his unfinished, independent project *London Labour and the London Poor* (Humpreys 20–25). He carried sensitivity to the health and living conditions of the urban poor into his investigations of their work and hunger.

The Mayhew brothers use a Jewish character to illustrate another danger of foolish consumption: Ben Bajo, the royal barber, temporarily possesses the magic goat skin jacket, and he uses its power to accumulate a hoard of gold that he refuses to spend. Ben Bajo sees the gold as a safeguard against penury in his old age, and he daily "feast[s] his eyes upon them, and counted them over and over, [as] he fancied that thieves might come, and finding the one would seek the other; and so he would be left to starve, after all" (Mayhew and Mayhew 110–11). In his greed, the "mad Miser" refuses to spend his gold to feed himself and his young wife, and he "stinted himself and Gordiflonna of almost the common necessaries of life . . . for his jaundiced eyes now saw gold in everything, and even eating bread was devouring money" (Mayhew and Mayhew 112). When Gordiflonna unwittingly returns the jacket to Silvio, Ben Bajo goes mad at its loss, and he becomes a self-destructive monomaniac who begins to hoard scraps of food in the places where he once hid his gold. Eventually "mildewed crusts, and pieces of dried meat, and broken sweetmeats, and clots of rice, made a heap nearly as large as his treasure once did" (Mayhew and Mayhew 132). Ben Bajo eventually starves rather than eat his foodstuff-treasures, and thereby comes to the fate against which his greed had initially led him to provide.

The Mayhews' allegory exhibits a heavy-handed treatment of Ben Bajo, but the authors use this one character to reenact the complexity of the Corn Law debate. Ben Bajo represents the extreme opposite of Silvio's monetary errors because Ben Bajo hides his gold in caches throughout his house: in the cellars and in the hearth. His sees his home as a bank against the troubles of old age instead of as the setting of an economy of love, a term the Mayhews usually capitalize. Ben Bajo's monomania also relates to the extremes of consumption harped on in free trade rhetoric. Ben Bajo is both sides of Britain: he hoards like the capitalist manufacturers, and he starves like the poor industrial and agricultural laborers. The Mayhews cycle suffering back onto the causal figure when they depict the self-consuming danger of the Corn Laws destroying the body of Ben Bajo. They invert the food spectrum so that the greedy character is punished with a Dantesque *contrapasso*, a fitting, reversed retribution.

The Brothers Mayhew set their allegory about English life and industry in a fantasy world of Orientalism, but the ambiguous Eastern setting only scarcely conceals a preoccupation with England and the English food crisis. In addition to a repeated focus on bread and especially corn, Cruikshank's final illustration reveals the Spirit of Industry in the form of an Englishwoman. Her pale skin and blonde hair suggest a European identity. The Spirit wears

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a medieval English dress, holds a reaping hook, and stands beside a sheaf of corn. Even in the final image, then, the illustrator revisits the controversial English issue of cereal and industry.

The Corn Law threat filled many with dread of a famine the Mayhews imagine through fiction. In his study of the repeal of the Corn Laws, J. R. Wordie hypothesizes that, had the Corn Laws lasted into the 1850s and 1860s, England's cereal market could have triggered a famine (50). Thomas Carlyle calls the Corn Laws "*in*defensible," and his discourse on food in England echoes in the Brothers Mayhew's allegory. Carlyle writes, "[t]o whom, then, is this wealth of England wealth? Who is it that it blesses; makes happier, wiser, beautifuller, in any way better? . . . In the midst of plethoric plenty, the people perish; with gold walls, and full barns, no man feels himself safe or satisfied" (11). Much of Carlyle's rhetoric in *Past and Present* incorporates the fear of starvation in a land overrun with tariffs and obstructions to pure labor.[7] Carlyle tells the moving story of parents who have killed their children "to defraud a 'burial society' of some 3£..8*s*. due on the death of each child" (9). Carlyle satirizes the parents' choices as they wonder, "now Tom being killed, and all spent and eaten, Is it poor little starveling Jack that must go, or poor little starveling Will?" (10). According to Carlyle, unrelieved starvation pushes people to depravity, and he blames the Unworking Aristocracy for benefiting from tariffs without finding relief for the struggling working classes. Silvio was open to the same charges while he depended on taxes to fund his own sumptuous feasting, and the Mayhews' allegory predicts a rebellion not unlike the one Carlyle senses in the "fever warmth" of working and middle-class unrest due to Corn Law-related privation.

The pages of *Punch* depict many images of starvation in this period, and the newspaper points a finger at government policy. The "radical heterogeneity" and the timely element of the periodical differentiates this genre from the novel form I have been discussing (Beetham 12). Where novels use constructed allegories, periodicals can emblematically connect politics to the domestic scene. A *Punch* caricature from January 1843 entitled "Royal Nursery Rhymes" depicts Queen Victoria dressed as Mother Hubbard. Victoria has found her cupboard filled with only empty plates entitled "Tariff" and "Income Tax," and her muscular, anthropomorphized bulldog looks up at her with a discontented expression. Other dogs prowl in the periphery. The image epitomizes a distrust of the state and is just one of many periodical images depicting the fear of starvation.

When *Punch* blends starvation with Christmas print, the comic newspaper adopts a scathing rhetoric that prompts readers to take action to satisfy the hungry. Such articles and poems are balanced by the many other messages contained in the patchwork of a periodical. The indulged reader can quickly scan past these tugs at the middle-class conscience should she wish to. Pieces like "A Corporation Carol for Christmas" remind aldermen to give largesse even as those stereotypically gluttonous men feast. The workhouse regularly features in *Punch*'s treatment of Christmas, its presence a shameful reminder to readers that "Christian England" only feasts its poor one day out of the year ("Christmas Day" 257). The novel form tacitly suggests allegories between the hungry character or nation and the situation of England; *Punch*, however, preaches charity outright. Mark Lemon printed Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" in its 1843 Christmas issue "despite its unseasonal message" (Altick 12), but the timely blending of Christmas consumerism of the moment and piteous working-class conditions (hunger and overwork) in the poem successfully initiated what would become a common perspective in the periodical. Six years later in 1849, *Punch* would run a similar poem, "The Shops at Christmas." Like Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present, the

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poet visits the brimming shops full of "Crystal sugar, candied citron, clotted currants, raisins sunny," but the journalist pauses to describe a hungry family intentionally ignoring the shop windows because they cannot buy the food (250). The spectacle has been denied them, and they slink by on the margins of the Christmas scene.

Most of the Christmas books of the 1840s deals with ideas of plenty, food, and especially the construction of a national identity through a supposedly revived heritage in English dishes and customs. In actuality, the heritage had to be bowdlerized and otherwise altered for middle-class Victorian consumption. By setting their so-called *Christmas Fairy Tale* in the magical East, the Brothers Mayhew distance their readers from the fiction, but they invest the story with English controversy. The Eastern tale functions as an allegory for English families and government. Like the more recognizable misers of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and *Cricket on the Hearth*, Silvio learns to value the middle-class ideology of home and becomes involved in the communal dance as "Friend and Father."

Unlike other Christmas novels, *The Good Genius* exposes starvation in a way that is wide-ranging and shockingly unavoidable. The Mayhews do not confine their portrayal of starvation to an allegorical child the way Dickens does in the figure of Want in *A Christmas Carol*. They imagine an entire nation wracked by famine. Dickens presents a more concentrated image: at Scrooge's request the Ghost of Christmas Present opens his robe and gives birth to Want and her brother Ignorance. The juxtaposition of the jolly Christmas god of the marketplace and these degenerate, pinched forms epitomizes the lesson of Christmas noblesse oblige. Want's public birthing process symbolizes Dickens's consistent Christmas argument that the starving are concealed just beneath the social patina of English middle-class institutions. In *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* the malnourished "full-fledged beast-waif," as Harry Stone calls him, is "strongly allegorical" as a chastisement against society's callousness, but he is not a mere symbol like Want and Ignorance (Stone 463).[8] Like Richard Kelly and others, Gail Turley Houston reads Dickens's hungry childhood in his subsequent fiction, and she writes, "the author was, I believe, sensitive to the ways the structures of society impinge on the individual body" (11). Houston's study follows the theme of hunger in Dickens's works, arguing that even as he asserts "the unnaturalness of expecting one class to starve so that another class might gluttonize, the same Dickensian novel naturalizes the expectation that women must starve for the good of the community" (13). The Christmas novel sidesteps Houston's gender argument, but Christmas fiction by Dickens and others appeals to an affluent, well-fed audience on behalf of the poor.

Dickens's discussion about starvation veers away from the purely emblematic when Alderman Cute of *The Chimes* offers his political opinion unasked: "There's a certain amount of cant in vogue about Starvation, and I mean to Put it Down" (Dickens, *Chimes* 110; ch. 1). Dickens clearly attacks politicians' policies throughout the novel. In the ensuing tale, Trotty Veck takes in the hungry and harried Will Fern and makes a spectacle of watching him eat a poor dinner: "And never did spectators at a city dinner or court banquet find such high delight in seeing others feast" (Dickens, *Chimes* 131; ch. 2). Like the readers of Christmas books who enjoy the spectacle of meals so often visually described, Trotty and Meg watch with delight, themselves consuming the visuality of others eating. The poor man's hunger is allayed to the satisfaction of his spectators. Dickens temporarily subverts the traditional description of Christmas fare in this unlikely simple meal of tea and bacon. The novel closes on a spontaneous dance at which hot punch is served, but no other scene of feasting outdistances that meager dinner Trotty serves his new acquaintances.

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In contrast to Christmas books' typical scenes of individualized hunger, the Mayhews' text expands the threat of starvation to the national level. Safely set beyond English borders and overlapping with the genres of fairy tales and Turkish tales, *The Good Genius* depicts the utterly English fear of starvation due to mismanaged government. A tale about finding contentment in home, *The Good Genius* teaches that family reconciliation, not conspicuous consumption, is the ideal in which the English readership desires to see itself reflected. Ben Bajo's starvation occurs even while he is surrounded by wealth, and Christmas book authors repeatedly remark on the juxtaposition of full Christmas shops and underfed people. While other texts contain token symbols of starvation, there is nothing as macabre in the first decade's worth of Christmas books as the Mayhews' starvation parade.

Benjamin Farjeon's Christmas book *Golden Grain*, however, approaches the Christmas rhetoric of noblesse oblige in a more socially candid manner. In *Golden Grain* the protagonist, an Anglican pastor, sees the difference socially responsible people can make; the middle-class Silvers adopt an orphan and raise her to be a model angel in the house while that child's twin sister, Blade-o-Grass, grows up on the streets and only accepts middle-class ideology after her child dies. Blade-o-Grass is still to a certain extent a hungry child herself, and she repeatedly refers to hunger's destructive effects on her body and her mind. Within the limits of Farjeon's text, the only way to combat starvation is to find benevolent middle-class patrons.[9] The story's opening invokes an economy of benevolence that Farjeon may well have hoped would be the result of his own writing: "If ever so little good results from these words of mine, if but a seed is sown, if but a little sympathy is roused to action which otherwise would have lain dormant, I shall be amply repaid" (Farjeon 10).

Like Dickens, Farjeon places his tale of starvation in an urban setting. Peter Wood explains that threats to health and morality "became more obvious in an urban context and consequently [poverty in] towns and cities were given increasing attention as the century progressed" (11). The rural working class may have been poorer, but they fared better than the urban poor (Wood 20–21). It is telling that Dickens's only truly pastoral Christmas book, *The Battle of Life*, is the only one in which hunger and the fear of being destitute has no place. While the countryside had its workhouses and hungry tenants, it also had a tradition of family networks, less aggressive rents, and relics of the paternalistic system. This perception plays out in the Christmas canon as well. Catherine Gore's 1845 Christmas book *The Snow Storm* introduces a mentally and physically handicapped twelve-year-old who benefits from the paternalism of rural, middle-class neighbors who offer food and catechisms. Jock lives with his mother on the charity of the parish. He may at times have a half-empty stomach, but middle-class characters consistently offer aid and expressions of responsibility for the boy's welfare. In the economy of Christmas fare, urbanites like Blade-o-Grass are far more likely to starve.

### *Christmas Food and Identity*

SCENES OF CHRISTMAS HUNGER contrast sharply with the plentiful depictions of food that embellish December and January print materials. *Punch* creators frequently attribute Englishness to Christmas foods that are beyond Blade-o-Grass's reach. For example, a butcher removes his beef and plum pudding from his shop window because, he reasons, such unmistakable symbols of Englishness must offend foreigners walking by ("Too Civil" 226). Elsewhere *Punch* records that plum pudding and porter have been sent, like an infusion of new

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English troops, to reinforce the Crimean front ("Seasonable" 27). The foodstuff both adds to the soldiers' bodies and to their ties to the English identity. Since the 1980s, food theorists have been reading the inextricable link between food and identity (Scholliers 7). Starving Victorians could not hope to consume the standard Christmas fare unless they applied for charity. Some went to the workhouse, where, by the 1840s, the culture's sensitivity to Christmas benevolence had so softened the Guardians that they began providing just enough ritual food for a one-day "feast." British society had decided that even the poor deserved to take part in the celebration that had become the marker of English ethnicity. Whether or not the working class had been participating in the standard Christmas dinner ritual on its own is difficult to say because of a lack of records, but it seems that the cost of prescribed provisions would prohibit a cross-class performance of the festive meal.

Christmas coffee table books have mistakenly attributed the standardization of the Victorian Christmas meal to the lavish depictions of food in Dickens's first and best-loved Christmas book. The Christmas meal had been disseminated through print materials long before *A Christmas Carol*, but it is clear that the *Carol* lent an extraordinary push to the role of print in the standardized Christmas.[10] Book reviews of Christmas books would recap the feast scenes in Dickens's early Christmas books as a way of introducing less canonical texts of the genre, even those published decades later. The scene in which Scrooge's room turns into a larder is perhaps among the most memorable displays of Christmas food. The piles of foodstuff that meet Scrooge's eye when he encounters the Ghost of Christmas Present do not reflect the international flavor so often found in depictions of the twentieth-century Santa Claus, but rather emphasize an English food market:

> Heaped up upon the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chesnuts [sic], cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* 79; ch. 3)

The spirit's inventory marks his cornucopia as ethnically English as interpreted by a London market.[11]

It is well established that *A Christmas Carol*'s conversion narrative is one based on Scrooge's dawning appreciation for commodity culture, his "economic revelation" (Jaffe 28; Cox 922). If a conversion narrative is based on a changing identity, then the food in *A Christmas Carol* contributes to Scrooge's alteration. Indeed, his conversion is marked by his first act as a changed man via that "reified version of peace on earth and goodwill to men – a giant turkey" (Heady 14). It is noteworthy that Scrooge indicates his conversion in his relinquishment of the incorrect Christmas food, such as his pre-visitation gruel, for the proper food markers of a Christmas Englishness, represented by his gift turkey and the "Christmas bowl of smoking bishop" he shares with Bob Cratchit on Boxing Day (Dickens, *Christmas Carol* 123; ch. 5).[12]

The novel also reveals the stress of employing food to mark one's ethnic and class identity. The schedule of the Cratchits' Christmas morning shows that the majority of the family stays at home to prepare the food that will "presumably fulfill both the physical and spiritual needs of them all" (Cox 923). These foods furthermore nourish the family's constructed version of Englishness. The menu acts as a test, and Mrs. Cratchit and her

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child assistants feel the stress of being up to the mark on their performance as cooks of the Christmas dinner. The small goose passes the test since "one small atom of a bone" remains on the plate, and the whole family vocally assesses the small plum pudding.

Imagine a Christmas inspector checking off each of the standard dishes, noting at the bottom of the evaluation that the Cratchits had only the minimum amount. Natalie Kapetanios Meir's work on Victorian dining taxonomies confirms that "as the nineteenth century progresses, there is a movement toward increased specificity of proper [dining] methods and, accordingly, less tolerance of deviance" (134). What Meir calls the "iterative narrative" of Christmas dining was established very quickly through the periodical press which seemed to inevitably resort to the festive meal as a means of satisfying the need for Christmas print material.[13] The Christmas reader has been taught to evaluate the festive board. Dickens's narrator circuitously expresses what "[a]ny Cratchit would have blushed to say": that it was "a small pudding for a large family" (Dickens, *Christmas Carol* 88–89; ch. 3). The narrator plays the role of the Christmas inspector by noting the lack of food, and, while Mrs. Cratchit might find relief in the fact that her meal has passed middle-class muster, the narrator's sympathetic candor leaves room for readers to doubt the meal's total success as a marker of class identity. Moreover, the fuss made over a few leftover morsels suggests that this is an uncommon event at the Cratchit table where some of the family must often go hungry. Nonetheless, the holiday meal qualifies as far as the Cratchits are concerned, and they congratulate themselves on their presumed station in the English middle-class celebration of the holiday.

If a slippery slope of hunger at Christmas can jeopardize a family's constructed identity within the middle class, then starvation symbolism might also expose anxieties about the ethnicity of middle-class Christmas celebrants. One late century children's Christmas book contains an emphasis on sumptuous descriptions of dishes not uncommon in children's literature. Authors of books for children seem determined to fit as many well-detailed feasts into their narratives as possible, as any reader of C. S. Lewis's, J. K. Rowling's, and Brian Jacques's children's series could attest.[14] *The Christmas Hirelings* is Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Christmas contribution to children's literature, and the slim volume similarly exalts the place of food in a narrative intended for children. In this case, however, the child characters' consumption of Christmas fare dictates their incorporation a mythic English identity.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, well known as one of the eminent writers of sensation fiction, also played a role in the production of Christmas literature throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.[15] Braddon wrote *The Christmas Hirelings* for children. In the story a proud baronet hires three youngsters to make his Christmas merry. In the days leading up to Christmas, the baronet begins to suspect that the hirelings are his own grandchildren, the children of his estranged daughter who lives on a meager annuity in France. The children's interaction with the English Christmas focuses on the abundant foods that have long marked festive literature. Consuming these foods and learning English table manners sates these expatriate children on a heritage of English ethnicity they are otherwise in danger of losing. Throughout the short novel a rumbling of hunger and potential starvation signifies the children's existence on the edge of Englishness.

Much of the Christmas ritual in *The Christmas Hirelings* is performed through food. For example, before anyone suggests hiring children the baronet, Sir John Penlyon, drearily comments on his boredom with the Victorian Christmas ritual:

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> "It was all very well for a miserly old churl like Dickens's Scrooge to break out suddenly into kindness and joviality, after a long life of avarice. Giving away turkeys and drinking punch were new sensations for him. But for us, who have been giving away turkeys and putting our sovereigns in the plate for nearly fifty Christmas Days! You can't expect me to be enthusiastic about Christmas, Adela, any more than you would expect me to hang up my stocking when I go to bed on Christmas Eve." (Braddon 13; prologue)

Note that the jaded baronet rightly interprets Scrooge's conversion through the "new sensations" associated with proper Christmas foods. As Sir John's speech suggests, Braddon's Christmas book isolates a class-based discourse in the consumption of Christmas fare. Since food is taken into the body and made one with the body, it follows that food can become a vibrant, if symbolic, transmitter of identity. It is not uncommon for people to use foods' signs to "demarcate their own and the other group" (Scholliers 8). As food theorists do not tire of saying, "you are what you eat."

Naturally sensitive to the vulgarity of overindulgence, the two female hirelings repeatedly attribute childish greed to their brother Laddie, a characteristic that marks him as a danger to his family and his nation. To underscore Laddie's uncontrolled stomach, Sir John makes a cannibal joke about Laddie's preference for food over people. Greediness at the table is another food taboo, one that earns little boys the non-English reputation of the colonized, "uncivilized" cannibal. At issue in this language of consumption is the anxiety that hungry English boys can break English taboos and become, through forbidden greed, the likeness of the ethnically outrageous Other, even the feared cannibal. Laddie's ostensible greediness is most likely the result of his family's poverty. Note that only the male child is permitted to express extreme hunger within the baronial walls: his sisters have already learned the pattern of female self-starvation from their sacrificing mother. He even defends himself against this charge by saying that everyone who is hungry must love dinner (74; ch. 7). Laddie's characteristic hunger signifies a larger anxiety about the disinherited, dislocated English family. How can an expatriate family expect to sustain their consumption of Englishness and the old sustenance of kinship?

Meals become a space in which difference becomes apparent as the children reveal their home diets and attest to their poverty. Laddie nearly cries when he first sees the baronet's breakfast table because he knows that his absent mother's breakfast is so poor by comparison (Braddon 45; ch. 4). When Laddie and his sister consider their imminent homecoming, they show that food has become a standard by which they judge their poverty: "We shall have rice puddings some days, and potato soup some days; but not always fowls, and tarts, and cream, and junket, like we do here" (Braddon 74; ch. 7).[16] Their home life will be quite the reverse, and, instead of rich foods, they will revert to dining on small portions of bland foods that do not satisfy their childish appetites. In fact the children recognize that their devoted mother curbs her own eating so that her children will have more to eat.

The text reveals a fear that the hireling children are not English. They do not look English. They speak some French, although their English mother prevents their mingling with French children. The genteel children's party brings up the hirelings' differences when an aristocratic child calls Moppet's French bob "ugly." Moppet retorts by attacking the guest's mother's weight: "I shouldn't like my mother to be as fat as yours, or as red" (Braddon 55; ch. 5). The neighbor reacts to Moppet's physical stigmatism as French Other, and the poorer girl strikes back with a class-based retort. The hungry mother's physique cannot compare to the larger

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woman's, because she has just enough money to keep herself and her children decently genteel. They live on puddings, milk, and bread, not the invigorating beef so dear to the Victorian constitution. The children's references to their home meals illustrate that their portions are not enough to fatten anyone, let alone keep Laddie from being hungry much of the time.

By making many of the hungry characters children, authors project adult fears on the more pitiable frame of the helpless orphan. Unlike Dickens's Want and beast-waif of the 1840s, fatherless Laddie and Moppet at least possess the ingenuous knack of being able to play and offer their own child-portion of love. However, they all represent threats to fluctuating notions of national identity. Readers are asked to consider what happens when children fail to learn the characteristics of the dominant perceptions of national character. Like other cultural identities, the prevailing notions of Englishness were only ever one generation away from extinction. As Laura C. Berry explains, "children are crucial to mediating anxieties about hungry others because the representation of endangered children allows the transformation of powerful adult appetites into the pitiable needs of an innocent (and therefore socially pure) victim" (5). Because children must be inscribed with emblems of national identity, they are also most vulnerable to falling through the gaps of instruction. Blade-o-Grass missed this instruction entirely, and must begin her education in middle-class ideology – complete with doses of self-help and moral catechisms – as a young, grieving mother. The beast-waif has much to make up because of time on the streets, and Laddie and Moppet must learn what their economic isolation on the French coast has cost them. Their time at the table educates them. As Deborah Lupton argues, the family meal becomes a site of the "construction and reproduction of the contemporary 'family,'" a place where hierarchies as well as emotional and financial dependencies are taught (38). At issue in Braddon's narrative is the disintegration of kinship identities and, by extension, national identities.

During the course of their Christmas hosted by their baronet grandfather, the hungry hirelings fatten up and reclaim their English heritage through their participation at the table. The youngest hireling was born in India and raised in France, but, through a participation in the English rituals of Christmas, Braddon reconciles the expatriate child with her ethnic heritage. The new Moppet is described as a "Lady Bountiful of two feet high" (Braddon 64; ch. 6). By the end of the Christmas holiday the once hungry child has been educated in the noblesse oblige expected of the wealthier classes at Christmas, and, through taking part in the feasting of the poor schoolchildren, her relationship to food and her identity are entirely altered.

Throughout the century, characters in Christmas literature join the starvation parade depicted so perversely in the Mayhews' *The Good Genius*. If Christmas literature seeks to correct a mishandled economy, it is through the curious currency of food. Food-wealth can be redistributed without undermining class relationships, as the first signs of Scrooge's Christmas conversion attest. Nonetheless, the middle-class Christmas celebration is hardly comparable to Bakhtin's carnival, that "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). Instead, writers of Christmas literature repeatedly reinscribe the holiday with order by parceling out food as a marker of class. The narratives of Christmas actively engaged with a receptive Victorian culture, and, as Farjeon's introductory remarks prove, authors saw themselves invested with a social ideology the readership needed to hear. Bakhtinian corporeality does have a place at the Christmas table, since Christmas literature routinely describes pinched, flawed, and emaciated bodies. The annual argument for Christmas benevolence is inextricably linked to the middle-class reader's physical sense

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of satiation. A secondary, more cynical trope of December periodicals is the overindulged celebrant who can barely move on Boxing Day because of the heavy meals he has consumed. Such an article could pose a vicious taunt for a hungry reader, but a hungry reader is expected to take part in neither the reading experience of the holiday nor the feasting. The overindulged character is instead a critique of the pampered reader who is compelled to feed the poor off his own body, to share the contents of his satiated stomach with the real, emaciated, half-naked men who can only speak for themselves through the transitory medium of chalk messages.

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## NOTES

1. Altick has identified "How Mr. Chokepear Keeps a Merry Christmas" as a product of Jerrold's socially conscious pen (189). In the pre-*Christmas Carol* narrative, a selfish, successful businessman celebrates the traditional Christmas rituals without the climactic reunion and conversion scene that would come to characterize subsequent Christmas literature.
2. Lhotsky quotes *Dictionnaire des Sciences Medicales* to great graphic effect: "If hunger is much prolonged, it is accompanied by a flattening of the abdomen, and a general weakness and lassitude; the respiration and circulation decrease, as well as the animal heat . . . The urine becomes unnatural, acrimonious, acid, and oft-times converted by the cold into a jelly" (2–3).
3. Christmas books routinely appeared for sale in late November or early December of one year and were printed with the date of the subsequent year. Thus reviews of a novel could seem to appear the year before a book was dated.
4. The Mayhews' novel is not the only allegorical text with a free trade rhetoric. Martineau wrote *Dawn Island, A Tale* (1845) "in the cause of Free Trade" (123). Set on a Pacific island, the tale depicts a British captain's education of an island people. Much of the dialogue resembles the treatises on free trade as the captain teaches the unhappy people, who have been sacrificing their children as a spiritual tax to the gods. The captain promises that commerce and free trade will bring about happiness, and he assures the people that they will come to enjoy mimicking the English way of life. Although both texts argue for free trade, the Mayhews harness the Christmas reading encounter to prescribe a staple construct of the English national character: the genius of Industry.
5. A similar current events theme appears in the character Will Fern in Dickens's *The Chimes* when, in the lengthy dream sequence, Will applies to a self-styled paternalistic member of Parliament, demanding help for the hungry, ill-used working class: "give us better food when we're a-working for our lives" (Dickens 156; ch. 3). Of all of Dickens's Christmas books, *The Chimes* depicts the hungriest, poorest characters, and the author uses them to express a rhetoric of social reform.
6. Within the Mayhews' narrative, the starvation parade parallels the wedding procession of Silvio and Amaranth which takes place shortly after Silvio acquires his nation. This celebration, not unlike the Great Exhibition that would be held in 1851, exhibits the different trades with pride. Some of these trades are food based – coffee, sweetmeats, pancakes – and the retainers are "chucking 'em away, as if they cost nothing"; others are technology based – lace-making, weaving, tinning, and whitewashing (76). The plenty and technology seen in the wedding parade contrasts the empty jars and carts in Vejez's parade later in the narrative.
7. For more on starvation in Carlyle's work, see the introduction to Berry's *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel*.
8. *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* refers to the waif as "creature," "savage thing," and "baby-monster." The child is Redlaw's only companion because the child alone cannot be touched by Redlaw's cursed gift of memory eradication. Dickens creates in the child a symbol of humanity that has lived without the sweet influence of human kindness. The beast-waif is not the type of child an

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English reader would care to claim as representative of the idealized middle-class character. This is the anti-Tiny Tim. Dickens attempts to set up a being devoid of the romanticized national culture. This is, of course, impossible, since national character is merely a myth in constant flux. Instead Redlaw sees the child devoid of the qualities he respects in his fellow Christmas celebrants, and the child presents the threat of the type of indigent Englishperson being created on the streets. The waif shows the vulnerability of the entire nation by taking the weight of judgment on his own ragged person.

9. A real life Blade-o-Grass might have overcome the cultural stigmatism against workhouses and opted for indoor relief if she could prove she belonged to the parish and if space remained after the disabled, aged, and orphaned had been housed (Wood 99). She could have also turned to one of the many London charity refuges. Her Anglican friends offer her some outdoor relief, but it is not enough to stave off the constant threat of hunger. Despite the Poor Law Commissioners' intentions, self-help dogma and Victorian mindsets about the deviance of poverty meant that neither indoor nor outdoor state relief after the Poor Law of 1834 seemed capable of lifting the mendicant out of her cycle of poverty and hunger.
10. Traditionally, boar's head had long been the centerpiece of Christmas feasting for those who could afford it. Jane Austen's Christmas and Twelfth Night tables held the vestiges of this dish in the form of cold souse (pork soused in brine), turkey, and venison (if the diner owned a deer park) (Hubert 32). Goose was still a traditional Michaelmas meal at the turn of the century, although seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poems detailing Christmas feasts often list goose alongside beef, capon, pig, and minced pies. Turkey consumption at Christmas during the late eighteenth century grew, and the over laden turkey coach from Norwich became a common illustration in December print materials. Hervey, in his 1836 book detailing the recent standardizations in the national Christmas identifies the prevalence of Norfolk turkey, brawn, Dorking fowls, and roast beef in the Christmas Eve marketplace (166). In illustrations, the iconic plum-pudding replaced the dramatic boar's head of previous centuries.
11. During Christmas Present's tour of the London marketplace, Dickens reverts to his habit of anthropomorphizing food items. The chestnuts become "jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors," and the Spanish Onions are "shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish Friars; and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by" (Dickens, *Christmas Carol* 82; ch. 3). The non-English onions are marked as slightly dangerous as they pose the clichéd threat of Catholic seduction.
12. Kelly identifies "bishop" as a "Christmas punch made by pouring hot red wine over ripe bitter oranges, and then adding sugar, cloves, and cinnamon. The name of the drink comes from its purple color, like that of a bishop's cassock" (123 n. 2).
13. Meir defines the "iteritive narrative" according to the narrative theorist Gerard Genette: it is an often repeated, general description that underscores the universality of the custom or habit (134).
14. Each of these twentieth-century authors also mark their characters' identity through the foods they eat. Lewis's talking beasts feast the Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve on hearty English dishes like bacon, porridge, and onions; Harry Potter's pumpkin juice signifies his body's immersion in the wizarding world; and Jacques's animal characters enjoy numerous detailed vegetarian meals that commend the infinite variety of communal living.
15. Like Thackeray, Thomas K. Hervey, and Dickens, Braddon proved herself adaptable to the demands of the lucrative Christmas market. Now best known as the author of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd,* Braddon also edited *Belgravia* and would have overseen the periodical's Christmas offerings as they appeared in the Christmas and January numbers of the periodical. Braddon also contributed Christmas ghost stories to other periodicals' Christmas numbers over the years, and she edited *The Mistletoe Bough,* a yearly Christmas annual.
16. Even children of families with more disposable income than Mrs. Morland would not have expected to eat Christmastime treats throughout the year since children's diets were highly regulated in the Victorian period. Boarding school menus and child-rearing handbooks emphasized the importance of feeding children old bread, old potatoes, mutton and simple puddings (Freeman 214–15). Freeman

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cites the work of the Victorian Dr. Spock, Pye Henry Chavasse, who wrote about children's diets around the middle of the century, and whose recommendations for mutton, old bread, milk, and rice puddings remained the standard advice for the rest of the century (Freeman 211).

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