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“JADED APPETITE” AND “PERVERTED TASTE”

The Food Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Anti-Sensationalist Critics

Sarah Frühwirth

Introduction

Food and literature have many points of similarity; so many, in fact, that Maggie Kilgour was induced to state “[r]eadin... eating” (1990, 9). But what do these two seemingly very different cultural practices have in common? For one thing, both reading and eating involve the transgression of the boundary between inside and outside – that is, the incorporation of foreign substances into the body. As Pamela K. Gilbert has pointed out, “[o]ne eats to incorporate that which one lacks into oneself, to become sufficient to oneself, unified once more, but what one eats then is not only changed into one’s own substance, but in fact changes that substance in turn” (2003, 67). The same holds true for reading. When we read a text, we metabolize its contents and are subsequently changed by it: “[T]he text is a substance that enters the reader and has an effect on him or her” (ibid., 66). The reader incorporates the text’s ideas, norms, and values – that is, the reader’s perception and way of thinking are changed through the act of reading.

Moreover, reading like eating has an effect on our physical body as well. Just as the ingestion of rotten food can lead to bodily reactions like nausea, fever, sweating, chills, and an increased heart rate, books (especially those of the sensational kind) can call up a similar arsenal of symptoms. The nineteenth-century sensation novel received not only its name because it dealt with subjects considered highly sensational in Victorian Britain, like adultery, bigamy, and murder, but also because it was thought to elicit (dangerous) bodily reactions – ‘sensations’ – in its readers (see Casey 2006, 4). Indeed, many contemporary nineteenth-century critics concurred that the sensation novel’s sole purpose was “Harrowing the Mind, Making the Flesh Creep, Causing the Hair to Stand on End, and Giving Shocks to the Nervous System” (“The Sensation Times” 1863, 193).

From time immemorial, both food and literature have been the focus of a wide range of anxieties since both can be the conveyors of dangerous contents. The anxieties revolving around food and literature reached a climax in the nineteenth century, which not only produced new forms of fiction that were considered a threat to public morality, but also new technologies that enabled scientists to make a detailed analysis of the components of common foodstuffs and reveal their potential harmful effect. When Fredrick Accum published his “Treatise on Adulterations of Food, and Culinary Poisons” in 1820, in which he exposed the widespread use of poisonous additives in common foods and drinks, he sparked off a veritable food adulteration panic that lasted for many...
decades to come, ultimately resulting in the passing of the Sale of Food and Drugs Act in 1875, which prohibited the selling of food containing injurious ingredients.

The panic reached its peak approximately in the middle of the century, roughly at the same time when sensation fiction was at the height of its short-lived popularity. Due to the near simultaneousness of public discourses on the harmful effect of poisonous food additives and the pernicious nature of sensation fiction, it is hardly surprising that discourses on food and discourses on the sensation novel used a similar vocabulary and not unfrequently borrowed phrases from each other. Not only was the critical discourse on sensation fiction imbued with metaphors of eating and ingestion, but also discourses on food adulteration practices sometimes availed themselves of sensational language for dramatic effect. In 1860, an anonymous author published an article in the *Cornhill Magazine*, in which the threat of food adulteration is refigured as a lurking fiend who waits in the shadows for the right moment to assault his innocent victim:

> THERE is a certain ugly little monster of most insidious habits, and endowed with the power of rendering himself invisible, of assuming a variety of forms and shapes, and of being almost ubiquitous. He not only infests our clothes... but he is to be found concealed in most of the articles we consume, whether food or drink.... At breakfast he lies hidden in the milk-jug, the butter-dish, and the tea or the coffee pot; at dinner, in the sauces, in the cayenne, in the beer, and even in the bright red wine with which we would cheer ourselves; while, at night, the rascal often hides himself in the tumbler of punch, which so many are accustomed to take, and regard in the light of a composing draught.... The name by which this strange, disgusting, and poisonous demon is known, is—ADULTERATION.

“Adulteration, and Its Remedy” 1860, 86

As has already been pointed out, the widespread fear of imbibing potentially dangerous contents was by no means limited to food and drink, but also extended to literature. In the nineteenth century, the sensation novel became the focus of many critical anxieties. On the face of it, the critics’ adverse criticism of the genre centred on sensation fiction’s morally deviant plots, which involved crimes and other moral and social transgressions and therefore were supposed to pose a threat to public morality. However, many of the anti-sensationalist reviews written in the nineteenth century clearly not only display fears for the reading individual, but also for society at large. Like eating, the practice of reading sensation fiction was perceived to be an act of transgression, because its contents not only challenged the boundaries between inside and outside, but also of in-group and out-group. Therefore, this chapter intends to show that eating and food metaphors in the context of sensation fiction not only served the purpose of discrediting the genre with the readers (by metaphorically linking it to food adulteration practices), but can also be seen as an expression of more wide-ranging, deep-rooted social and cultural anxieties regarding the disintegration of the social body.

**Sensation Fiction and Its ‘Culinary’ Critics**

Many modern-day as well as a number of nineteenth-century critics credit Wilkie Collins’s 1859 novel *The Woman in White* with having inaugurated the transient age of sensational writing. The novel's overwhelming success entailed a great number of attempts at imitation, which led to a flooding of the literary market with sensation novels and created the impression of the entire obliteration of more realistic modes of narration. The fact that the sensation novel was quickly gaining ground and became a literary force to be reckoned with soon became a thorn in many a critic’s flesh and gave rise to lively discussions between critics and advocates of the genre, culminating in a
sermon preached by the Archbishop of York, in which he animadverted against sensation novels. The majority of these anti-sensationalist criticisms is characterized by a highly emotional, exaggerated, and metaphorical rhetoric, which frequently verged on the sensational itself. Besides using the language of disease and contagion, many critics employed food and eating metaphors in their exploration of the sensation phenomenon and their attempts to disparage the genre. Given the fact that the reading public’s ‘appetite for sensation’ culminated at the same time when the food adulteration scare was at its height, the critics’ adoption of the rhetoric of treatises on food adulteration, by which means they equated the dangers of sensation fiction with those posed by culinary poisons, was a clever move to achieve their object, namely curbing sensation fiction’s popularity with the reading public and restoring the status quo of the English fiction market.

Many critics bemoaned the fact that, owing to new modes of literary distribution, books, which had formerly been carefully selected by astute authorities on the ground of their moral and intellectual value and had only been made accessible to the public after passing strict scrutiny, could now be easily accessed by anyone without the necessary discernment. While the increasing number of periodicals and circulating libraries – as well as rising literacy rates, technological improvements, and the elimination of certain taxes – certainly contributed to make books cheaper and more accessible to readers, it cannot be denied that these developments also gave rise to an unprecedented commodification of literature, in the process of which books were no longer judged by their intrinsic value, but rather by the amount of copies they sold (see Allan 2013, 88–9):

Seemingly cut adrift from the dictates of taste and discrimination, literature entered a free-market economy, governed only by the law of supply and demand. Within this climate, the act of reading… is refugured, by the critics, as an appetite, even an addiction, that the new mass readership cannot, or will not, control.

Ibid., 90

The critics’ reaction to this supposed abasement of literature to a commodity was twofold. Besides attacking the sensationalists’ alleged mercantile attitude towards writing that made them “supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply” (Mansel 1863, 483), they also passed censure on the general reading public, whose “jaded appetite” and “perverted taste” (Greg 1860, 405) had created a demand for sensation fiction in the first place. Although many sensation novelists defended themselves against the charge of being “caterers for the public taste” (“Philosophy of ‘Sensation’” 1862, 340), there were others, like Mary Elizabeth Braddon or Rhoda Broughton, who freely admitted to their business-like attitude to writing. When the sales figures of her 1880 novel Second Thoughts, which unlike her previous bestsellers was low in sensational content, fell short of expectations, Rhoda Broughton wrote a letter to her publisher George Bentley, in which she tells him of her resolution to return to more provocative subjects in her next publications: “[S]ince the public like it hot & strong, I am not the person to disoblige them… to a public accustomed to absinthe, ginger beer is naturally not palatable” (quoted in Heller 2013, 14).

However, the sensationalists’ readiness to appease their readers’ “hunger after the most diseased, unholy, and extravagant excitement” (Greg 1860, 400) was regarded as an unscrupulous exploitation of a naive and susceptible (since largely female) readership by many critics, a situation which they intended to remedy through careful indoctrination. As Vercelloni points out, “gastronomic and aesthetic taste are characterized by the same basic ambivalence” (2016, 1) – that is, they are both natural and acquired at the same time. Although “taste is a natural faculty, an integral part of our biological constitution”, it is nevertheless also “adaptable, variable and subject to influence” (ibid.). Although some critics emphasized the futility of disputing matters of taste, as the anonymous
author of an article in the *Westminster Review*, who, though dissatisfied with the contemporary turn in literature, declared that “[t]here is no accounting for tastes, blubber for the Esquimaux, half-hatched eggs for the Chinese, and Sensational novels for the English” (“Belles Lettres” 1866, 269), the majority of critics obviously did not take the proverb “De gustibus non est disputandum” literally, but rather held the opinion that people’s taste in literature should be subject to critical examination and, if necessary, refinement.

Their concept of taste was clearly informed by the ideas of eighteenth-century philosophers, like Kant and Voltaire, who had a very clear notion of what constituted ‘good’ taste and what did not and advocated the view that defects in aesthetic taste could and, if possible, should be refined. For instance, Voltaire claimed that the proverb “there is no disputing taste” only holds true for gastronomic taste, whereas aesthetic taste could be improved (see Vercelloni 2016, 11), an opinion in which he was not alone. Also Kant was an enthusiastic advocate of a “purification of taste” (Howes 2016, viii). As Howes points out, for Kant “the judgment of taste – as related particularly to the fine arts – had to be disinterested, universal, necessary and pure, which is to say impermeable to pleasure and need” (ibid.), a maxim that for many critics clearly stood in contrast to the practice of reading sensation novels. Many nineteenth-century critics who objected to sensation fiction especially deplored the fact that sensation novels were primarily written for amusement and that readers, once hooked by sensational writing, inevitably craved for more.

In their discussions of sensation fiction, many critics assumed this patronizing stance of their forefathers by indicating that they (the critics) commanded a healthier taste in literature and had a more refined idea of what constituted proper and wholesome literary nutriment for the general reading public. As Pamela K. Gilbert has pointed out, many a nineteenth-century critic and reviewer presented himself as ‘critic-as-doctor’ or ‘critic-as-policeman’ to the readers, who “sets him- or herself up as a buffer between the law-abiding, healthy but vulnerable public and the subtly adulterated goods of the criminal, diseased vendor of popular fiction” (1997, 27). The prevailing opinion among literary critics was that the Victorian readership should not be left to rely on their own better judgement when it came to choosing books worthy of their perusal, but should rather depend on established critical authorities that only had their best interest at heart and did not try to lure them into buying wicked books just for the sake of selling as many copies as possible:

[W]hile the vicious tendency of the reading is being diffused over the land, those who possess a sounder judgment and a healthier taste should, for the benefit of the community at large, discourage their [sensation novels’] circulation as far as their influence extends.

“Philosophy of ‘Sensation’” 1862, 344

In order to discourage people from continuing to read sensation fiction, conservative critics called up a whole arsenal of arguments, attacking the genre on both moral and literary grounds. One characteristic of sensation fiction critics frequently found fault with was its alleged stereotyped nature. Despite the now pervasive opinion that nineteenth-century sensation fiction could boast of a wide formal and thematic spectrum, sensation literature, at the time of its first appearance, was generally considered to be a very formulaic genre that perpetuated the same stereotypes over and over again. Many nineteenth-century critics felt that both plot and form of sensation novels were uninspired and merely followed an established (since lucrative) pattern, similar to the way a cook follows a cooking recipe, a very general notion which was also taken up in a satirical 1864 article in the *Dublin University Magazine*:

Serve us not Gaskell, M’Intosh, or Ferrier,
Such as may make us wise, but scarcely merrier.
Jaded Appetite” and “Perverted Taste”

Insipid Burney—Edgeworth’s placid tales—
So stored with dowdy prudes and moral males;
Such charming men, who blend both love and prayer,
Who sigh and die like Redclyffe’s languid Heir.
This diet fade can’t suit the general wish;
Sensation finds Cayenne to spice the dish,
Sprinkles some lunacy, fierce oaths, mistrust,
And peppers high, with murder or with lust.

“Sensation! A Satire” 1864, 86

Although it remains unclear whether the anonymous satirist indeed intended to deride sensation fiction’s routine storylines, or whether he or she actually meant to satirize the arguments invoked against sensationalism by anti-sensationalist critics, this satirical piece of writing aptly condenses a number of objections raised against sensational writing and couches them in the typically exaggerated, metaphorical (food) rhetoric used by conservative critics. Despite the fact that the author’s attitude towards sensation fiction remains indistinct, he or she makes it very clear that the sensation novel was hailed as a welcome change by nineteenth-century readers, who were obviously ‘fed up’ with romantic and realist writers, from whose compositions, as an anonymous author put it, one “should as soon expect sensation… as from an apple dumpling” (“Philosophy of ‘Sensation’” 1862, 344). As Belasco points out, “[c]uisines are… distinguished by their ‘flavor principles’ – a distinctive way of seasoning dishes” (2008, 18). This – in a metaphorical sense – obviously also holds true for different genres of fiction. While realistic modes of writing were frequently described in adjectives connoting a lack of flavour, sensation fiction was usually associated with (exotic) spices, like curry, cayenne, and pepper. Although many literary critics concurred that “a change of books is as needful as a change of diet” (Paget 1868, 299), a statement which once again affiliates critics with doctors or “dietary advisers”, they obviously did not welcome the reading public’s turn towards novels written in the sensational vein, because they did not constitute a balanced ‘reading diet’, and feared that those invariably ‘highly spiced dishes’ could permanently spoil their appetites for more wholesome food.

The sensationalists’ practice of using “the same poisonous condiments to season every dish” (“The Literature of the Streets” 1887, 55) was by no means the only point of criticism launched against the literary demerits of sensational writing. According to several anti-sensationalist critics, many sensation novelists reverted to serving their audience “thin champagne” instead of “sound old ale” (“Sensation! A Satire” 1864, 86) not only because the reading public demanded such ‘light’ entertainment, but rather because their lack of literary prowess prevented them from producing more “solid food” (Mansel 1863, 485). They suggested that, if sensation novels were stripped of their stock plot ingredients, no one would care for the literary effusions of the writers of the sensational school due to their lack of eloquence, observation skills, and their inability to flesh out characters and scenes in vivid detail:

We do not gulp down the evil in them for the sake of the admirable skill that depicts it, or the splendour of the scenery amid which it occurs. On the contrary, we swallow the poorest of literary drivel—sentiments that are adapted to the atmosphere of a Surrey theatre—descriptions of society which show the writer’s ignorance of society—style the most mean or the most inflated—for the sake of the objectionable subjects they treat.

Oliphant 1867, 261
But the critics did not attack sensationalism only on literary grounds. Besides enumerating the shortcomings and demerits of sensation fiction, they also pointed to the harmful effects it could have on readers who indulge too often in the pleasures of such exciting reading material. Despite the exaggerated rhetoric of the critics, however, there can be “no doubt that the anxiety displayed in many reviews was real rather than feigned” (Allan 2013, 86). Many critics were convinced that sensation novels, which they considered to be “the worst form of mental food”, must also have “a deteriorating effect on the mind” (Austin 1870, 424). Not only did they fear that sensation fiction’s stock plot ingredients – murder, adultery, and madness – could lead to a widespread moral corruption, but they also deemed the genre’s characteristic feverish, galvanic style, which aimed at ‘electrifying’ its readers’ nerves by “carry[ing] the whole nervous system by steam” (Mansel 1863, 487), to be highly deleterious.

The Victorian readership, which largely consisted of women, was assumed to be highly excitable and vulnerable, and many critics considered it their duty to voice their concerns regarding the disastrous consequences the reading of sensation novels might entail. The necessity felt by nineteenth-century critics to inform the general public about the potentially harmful effect of certain kinds of books went hand in hand with a similar trend in nutrition studies, in which the nutritionist emerged as the ultimate authority to cure people of their ‘wrong’, and frequently harmful, needs:

> Individual people could no longer know or recognize their ‘natural needs’. These could only be recognized with the help of experimental science, and with the help of new kinds of specialists, the nutritionists. The classification of different foodstuffs, and the analysis of their usefulness or uselessness to the human body, no longer followed the properties which could be recognized by taste or sight (e.g. red or white meat, raw or cooked, fresh or spoilt food, etc.). This marked a decisive rupture with the older tradition of dietetics. False or wrong needs could now be explained as resulting from ignorance. They could be ‘cured’ only with the help of the right kind of instruction.

_Gronow 1997, 8_

Like the nutritionists, many nineteenth-century critics considered it their duty to do educational work. Since many people had already accepted the idea that food could have an adverse effect on a person’s physical constitution, they evoked these already established insights when alleging the adverse impact the reading of sensation novels might have on the readers’ minds and intellectual faculties:

> We are conscious that the food of the body influences the health of the mind… But we do not recognise with like readiness and in the same way the effect of the foods of the mind on the mind and its health… Common foods and drinks must be healthy in order that the material of the body may be good; and the impressions which enter the body by the senses, the foods and drinks of the mind, must also be healthy in order that the mind may be good.

_Richardson 1889, 148_

Besides voicing their alarm concerning the Victorian readership’s health and purity of mind, critics also expressed disquietude about the ill effects the reading of sensation novels might have on their readers’ physical condition. In 1855 – a few years before the generic dawn of the sensation novel – Alexander Bain published his influential book _The Senses and the Intellect_, in which he proposes a nexus between psychological and physiological processes. His premise that the human mind and body are not entirely independent of each other was eagerly taken up by many of his
contemporaries and also found its way into the critical discourse surrounding sensation novels. From the concerns voiced by anti-sensationalist critics it becomes obvious that they firmly believed in a link between people’s minds and bodies and that the soundness of the one was inextricably bound to the other. Given their belief in sensation novels’ potential to undermine their readers’ soundness of mind, it is hardly surprising that they also saw cause for alarm for the reading body:

Reading, so long a virtue, a grace, an education, and, in its effects, an accomplishment, has become a downright vice,—a vulgar, detrimental habit, like dram-drinking; an excuse for idleness; not only not an education in itself, but a stumbling-block in the way of education; a cloak thrown over ignorance; a softening, demoralizing, relaxing practice, which, if persisted in, will end by enfeebling the minds of men and women, making flabby the fibre of their bodies, and undermining the vigour of nations.

“The Vice of Reading” 1874, 251

Food, Sensation, and the Dissolution of Social Boundaries

Apart from attacking the aesthetic shortcomings of the genre and uttering their concern for the reading body, food rhetoric also proved to be a highly effectual and convenient way of voicing a wide variety of extra-literary anxieties (see Allan 2013, 96). The fact that “eating is the activity which first demarcates the boundaries between inside and outside, and yet perennially destabilizes them” (Gilbert 1997, 20) is one possible explanation for the critics’ frequent recourse to the language of food and eating when expressing their disquietude about the disintegration of traditional social boundaries by the subversive forces supposed to be inherent in sensational writing. As the above quote from Gilbert shows, eating is essentially transgressive since it invariably involves the incorporation of ‘Other’ substances into the body, which change the individual’s body and might even harm it. But not only does food blur the boundaries between the individual and its surroundings, contingently posing a danger to the eating body’s constitution, certain types of food and drink, besides being a potential threat to the individual, were also considered to be a threat to society. The fact that conservative critics frequently linked sensation fiction to these supposedly injurious foodstuffs can be considered a tacit expression of their fear that the sensation novel could be a vehicle for the spreading of ideas that might lead to the dissolution of the established social order.

Since in the nineteenth century “[a]lcohol became the focal point of many anxieties, whether they concerned social and economic changes or shifts in values and behavior” (Phillips 2014, 173), it is hardly surprising that anti-sensationalist reviews also frequently employed the language of alcohol and addiction: “Reading, especially addictive reading, had become a social problem of real concern. The rhetoric of this conclusion obsessively equates reading with stimulants, dram-drinking, opium-eating, and drugs. The reader’s appetite for reading grows; the reader wants more and more books” (Leckie 1999, 112). Like sensation fiction, the excessive consumption of certain types of alcohol was considered to be “a danger to the moral and physical health of the drinker and a menace to society” (Phillips 2014, 181), a notion which gave rise to numerous temperance movements, whose object was to cure people of the filthy habit of drinking. By imbuing their criticism with references to alcohol, critics established a semiotic link between the two social evils of alcohol abuse and sensation fiction. The readers of sensation novels were considered to be in a state of “moral intoxication” and the effect produced by sensation fiction was frequently likened to the “brutalising, enervating effect of dram-drinking” (“Aunt Anastasia on Modern Novels” 1867, 310). The fact that alcohol abuse and dram-drinking were mainly associated with the working class is of particular importance here since its metaphorical use by the critics demonstrates that they not only feared the addictive quality of sensation fiction, but also apprehended that the reading of sensational
texts might entail an adoption of lower-class practices and sentiments by more genteel readers, which in the long run might contribute to the blurring of class boundaries.

Despite the fact that “[t]aste was an ideal means for making social distinctions” (Gronow 1997, 9), it cannot be denied that it is also community-building. This becomes especially obvious when looking at the concept of ‘commensality’, the practice of eating together and sharing food: “According to the concept of commensality, sharing food has almost magical properties in its ability to turn self-seeking individuals into a collaborative group” (Belasco 2008, 19, original emphasis). Before the advent of sensation fiction, there existed a neat distinction between reading material for the upper and the lower strata of society. As Belasco points out, “all groups have an identifiable ‘cuisine’” (ibid., 15, original emphasis) which distinguishes them from other groups. In pre-sensational times, this axiom also pertained to literature. While more genteel readers had used to read lightly spiced novels of the realist kind, lower-class readers had mainly imbibed in ‘highly spiced’ penny fiction. The sensation novel, which borrowed ingredients from both forms of fiction, constituted a mixture of these originally distinct flavourings which appealed to members of all social classes alike. Many critics obviously feared that by ‘sharing’ the ‘meal’ of sensation fiction, a sense of community could be established between readers of different social classes, which eventually might lead to an eradication of social distinctions.

Although sensation fiction was an inherently middle-class genre since it was “[w]ritten by middle-class authors, addressed (in the main) to middle-class readers and published in middle-class journals” (Pykett 1994, 9), it could not divest itself of the seedy reputation it had gained due to its roots in penny fiction. Because of its development out of a genre intended for the barely literate proletariat and the fact that it retained certain features of its predecessors, the sensation novelists’ stories of murder, intrigue, and lust were considered to be a mere revamping of penny stories originally intended for the lower classes:

This is a highly-seasoned dish of tainted meat that has been already contrived and served up for a kitchen dinner by the great chef of the kitchen maids, and is now brought upstairs for the delectation of coarse appetites in the politer world.

“Kitchen Literature” 1864, 404

By appealing to masters and servants alike, sensation novels, like food, created a link between the two domains of the kitchen and the drawing room, passing from the hands of lower-class individuals, who ‘prepared’ and ‘served’ them, to the hands of middle- and upper-class consumers.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon probably is the author who provides the most direct link between penny fiction and sensation literature, since she began her career as a writer of weekly penny bloods and also continued to write in this genre after she had already established herself as a successful writer of sensation novels. This notion is also reinforced by many contemporary critics, who hold Mary Braddon accountable for sensation fiction’s unprecedented success with middle- and upper-class readers. In an anonymous review of seven of her works published in the North British Review in 1865, the reviewer states that although there had been bloodthirsty tales written in the vein of Lady Audley’s Secret (Braddon’s most famous work) before this particular novel’s publication, Braddon was one of the first authors to polish them for perusal in polite society and, therefore, “may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” (“Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon” 1865, 205).

The concern that “‘worthless’ mass culture masquerades as valuable elite culture” (Allan 2013, 90) in the shape of the sensation novel and could thereby easily ‘poison’ the minds of the more refined members of society was also taken up by the author of an unsigned article in
“Jaded Appetite” and “Perverted Taste”

The Living Age by means of a simile, which, despite its inadvertently comic tone, has an undercurrent of serious alarm:

A pleasant writer in one of the magazines this month pictures an exquisite gentleman to whom everything upon his daintily appointed breakfast table is uneatable. “Did you ever,” asks his doctor, who is breakfasting with him, “try a red herring?” Here is a glorious idea, here is an absolutely new sensation to be got; the faithful serving-man is despatched immediately to Fortnum and Mason’s for a red herring. He goes to a chandler’s shop in a back alley to buy the herring, and his master eats the whole of it with utmost relish. There are some fastidious novel-readers to whom one of Miss Braddon’s stories may have, in this way, the relish of a penny herring out of the back alley.

Mrs Wood and Miss Braddon” 1863, 99

This anecdote, which compares the quality of sensation fiction with the nutritional value and tastiness of “a penny herring out of the back alley”, gives testimony to the reviewer’s concern about the infiltration of ‘low’ literature into the spheres of high life. The unsuspecting gentleman (who, of course, represents the supposedly naïve Victorian readership) who sends his servant to an exclusive store is instead served a meretricious herring from a backstreet stall and, in the firm belief that he is served something of exquisite quality, eats the cheap herring, which can be understood of his absorption of proletarian views and values through his consumption of lower-class literary nutriments.

Food for Revolution

Besides betraying concern about a probable corruption of the more genteel classes through ‘coarse’ subjects originally intended for the lower classes, many critics also feared that sensation fiction’s subject matters, which apart from the obvious crime and mystery plot also frequently included the motif of class ambivalence and mobility, might lead to unrest and resentment within the lower classes and spark off a revolution,

first, by eroding the poor’s perception of the upper classes as different from themselves in kind, rather than merely in degree, and secondly, by leading the reader to believe that it is possible for him or herself to become upwardly mobile, thus possibly leading to envy and resentment if the reader’s hopes are disappointed.

Gilbert 1997, 38

This fear is reinforced by the critics’ implied allusions to another revolution, namely the Indian Mutiny of 1857, through certain types of food. According to Belasco there is a strong “connection between food and memory”, since “particular foods [have the ability] to spark off powerful personal recollections and associations” (2008, 25). Although certain articles of food can invoke feelings of nostalgia, especially when they bear a connection to happy moments of one’s childhood, foodstuffs with negative connotations can evoke memories that are “distinctly sour” (ibid., 28), which is why even a casual encounter or mentioning of them can force a person to vividly relive past traumatic experiences. Therefore, it may be argued that the semiotic link between sensation fiction and spices and dishes typically associated with India is a tacit expression of the critics’ fear of the revolutionary potential of sensational reading material, but at the same time can be considered a clever rhetorical device that forced the readers of their reviews to make a mental connection between sensation fiction and past traumatic events.
The close connection between food and revolutionary sentiments also becomes obvious when looking at the alleged cause for the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny. According to nineteenth-century popular belief, the Indian Mutiny had broken out in consequence of a controversy surrounding religious dietary restrictions. The introduction of a new kind of gun, the Enfield rifle-musket, required the Hindu and Muslim soldiers to open the cartridges, which were allegedly greased with lard and tallow, with their teeth, which constituted a violation of religious guidelines. Although the Indian Mutiny was a rather short-lived affair (a peace treaty was signed in 1858), it nevertheless left deep scars on the British collective memory. Due to the biased media coverage of the events in India, the atrocities that were reported to have been committed by the Indians against the peaceful and unsuspecting British colonizers soon assumed exaggerated proportions, thereby reinforcing the idea of the Indians’ brutishness and hence the legitimacy of the no less brutal reprisal by the British army. The topicality of this historic event also becomes apparent in a wide range of sensation novels, many of which contain references to the colonial setting of India, but there are also a great number of contemporary anti-sensationalist reviews that demonstrate how deeply rooted the latent fear of an insurgency had become among the British people due to the cultural trauma created by the sepoy rebellion a few years earlier.

The widespread use of food metaphors that bear a clear relation to India in anti-sensationalist reviews can be considered as a reverberation of the recent, traumatic events in India and, at the same time, can be regarded as an oblique warning against an iteration of the revolution on British soil instigated by the working classes. As Pamela K. Gilbert points out, “the lower classes and the indigenous populations of the colonies had much in common in terms of their roles in supporting the industrial capitalism of empire” (1997, 49), a link that obviously also did not escape the notice of nineteenth-century conservative critics and gave them cause for worry. The critics’ manifold references to sensation literature in terms of spices and dishes that were imported to Great Britain from the British colonies of India are indicative of their fear of a concomitant importation of revolutionary sentiments that could provoke a working-class riot and lead to a breakdown of the established English class system. Apart from comparing the addictive potential of sensation literature to the danger of addiction posed by opium (a drug effectively linking India – the place of cultivation of the opium poppies used for the production of the drug – with members of the working class, the chief consumers of that particular drug), many critics employed vocabulary evocative of Indian cuisine, like ‘curry’ or ‘cayenne pepper’, in their discussion of sensation fiction.

The increasing doses of “cayenne in the literary curry” (“Mrs Wood and Miss Braddon” 1863, 100) – that is, the growing number of incidents revolving around criminal and moral transgressions – were a thorn in the critics’ flesh, not only because they were supposed to be indigestible by the Victorian readership, who were used to a more ‘wholesome’ reading diet, but also because their strong flavour had the potential of concealing the subtler and more dangerous ‘ingredients’ of sensation fiction. According to the anonymous author of an 1860 essay on food adulteration practices, curry and cayenne were frequently carriers of poisonous contents like “[r]ed oxide of lead” or “[b]isulphuret of mercury, or cinnabar” (“Adulteration, and Its Remedy” 1860, 95). By referring to sensation fiction in terms of these ‘tainted’ spices, anti-sensationalist critics not only gave a vivid description of the unwholesome effect of sensation literature on its readers by likening it to the indigestion experienced by consumers of strongly spiced Indian food, but also gave their readers a tacit reminder of the recent events in India as well as the dangers the dissemination of subversive, sensational reading material might pose to the maintaining of clear-cut class boundaries.
Conclusion

Although it appears haphazard at first sight why the language of anti-sensationalist critics was permeated with such a variety of references to food and drink, a closer look reveals how skilfully and deliberately they were employed by critics to sway their readers’ opinions. By making use of the same stereotyped food-related expressions over and over again but imbuing them with different meanings, they created a web of associations targeting myriad fundamental human fears. Their vivid use of imagery, emotional and hyperbolic language, as well as their use of sarcasm and analogies, all prove to be elaborate and effective rhetorical strategies that work on a universally human level and demonstrate that their use of eating and drinking metaphors is the result of careful calculation. After all, the intake of food is a practice all humans share and can relate to and is “central to the construction of subjectivity” (Costantini 2013, 81). Moreover, as Mary Douglas points out, food, when used idiomatically or metaphorically, can convey a great number of social messages about “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transaction across the boundaries” (1972, 61) and can assume a plethora of meanings “including gender, class and racial ones” (Costantini 2013, 81), making it a dynamic and powerful discursive tool. The critics’ efforts to expose and suppress the subversive potential of sensation fiction to all appearances came to fruition before long since the genre of sensation literature sank again into obscurity soon after its heyday in the 1860s and 1870s. But, despite the eagerness with which some late-Victorian reviewers proclaimed the death of the sensation novel, it soon became obvious that its influence and fascination persisted long after its formal demise. As put by Philip Waller, the sensation novel did not become extinct but rather exploded into myriad literary subspecies (see 2006, 667), all of which retained some of its significant features, granting it a vibrant afterlife that is hardly surprising given the fact that the intensity of the human craving for excitement and sensation is only matched by the basic need for food and cannot be appeased by moral reasoning, but must always be assuaged one way or another.

References

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