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ARTICLE

The Foods of Love? Food Gifts, Courtship and Emotions in Long Eighteenth-Century England

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Abstract

This article rediscovers the importance of food gifts in navigating the process of courtship in England during the long eighteenth century. Studies of courtship and gift-exchange to date have demonstrated how courting couples exchanged a wide range of gifts to produce and intensify feelings of love and advance their relationships toward the altar, from garters and gloves to ribbons, rings, portrait miniatures and locks of hair. Yet the edible gift has remained conspicuously absent from this picture. The article reinserts edible tokens into the historiography of love and marriage, revealing how they operated as an indispensable and unique part of the 'gift mode' during courtship. It demonstrates how courting couples exchanged a wide range of foodstuffs from cakes and sweetmeats to game, fowl, fish, exotic fruits and home-grown produce. In doing so, the article advances the burgeoning field of emotions and material culture by demonstrating how organic or perishable items could function as powerful emotional objects, able to nourish the human body, provide a source of sensual and gustatory pleasure and elicit feelings of joy, delight, love and desire. In turn, these gifts show courtship made everyday, transacted between couples and their families, and situated in gardens and squares, shops, theatres and around a family's tea table.

Keywords: Food; food gifts; gift-exchange; courtship; marriage; love; emotions; materiality; material culture

In November 1756, the Bath apothecary John Lovell became acquainted with Sarah Harvey and her aunt Mary Smith (née Harvey), of Shaw House in Melksham.[1] John

[1] John Lovell was the son of Peter Lovell (1686–1767) of Axbridge, Somerset. Mary Smith (d. 1758) was Sarah's paternal aunt, the sister of Audley Harvey Esq. of Cole Park in

soon found that his acquaintance with Sarah had developed into 'the highest Esteem', which 'gradually improv'd into real Love'.[2] Aunt Smith discouraged the courtship and quashed his proposals owing to his insufficient fortune. Yet he remained a frequent visitor and family friend, receiving 'an exceeding fine Turkey' that year as a Christmas gift.[3] In return, he sent a keg of sturgeon, a large high-status fish typically eaten for a treat or special occasion, which he had received from a friend in London.[4] He then determinedly continued his pursuit of Sarah, resulting in him being promptly exiled from Shaw.[5] In a show of humility and attempt at rapprochement, he once again turned to gifts of food, sending Aunt Smith a 'Baskett with Two Cakes' in July 1757, followed by some produce from his father's garden. These exchanges provide a useful entry point into studying the cultural meanings of food in eighteenth-century England, as they suggest the much wider significance it held beyond simply eating it. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, 'Food is not feed.' Rather, it is a whole system of communication.[6] In particular, the role and significance of food gifts during the process of courtship represents a whole system of *emotional* communication which is waiting to be decoded by historians.

The very everyday nature of food gifts means that they have often escaped our notice in studies of courtship and matrimony. This is despite the fact, as Sarah Ann Robin notes, that they were 'likely the most common of all amorous gifts', exchanged routinely by couples and their families and not always memorialised in text.[7] By their very nature, gifts of food were transient, perishable and designed to be consumed either *by* or *with* a loved one. Their meaning and intent was therefore very different from quintessential love tokens such as gloves, garters, ribbons, rings and locks of hair which were designed to be kept, and touched, kissed and gazed upon ad infinitum.[8] Food gifts were further unique in comparison with items such as seals and silhouettes as they

Malmesbury. Mary and her husband John Smith Esq. (1703–1757) lived at Shaw House, built by John's father, the diarist and wool merchant Thomas Smith (1674–1723). See Edward Bradby, 'The Diary of Thomas Smith of Shaw, 1715–23', *The Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 82 (1988), 115–41.

[2] John Lovell to Mary Smith, Bath, 29 Nov. 1756, Wiltshire and Swindon Archives, Chippenham (WSA), 161/102/1.

[3] Lovell to Smith, Bath, 24 Dec. 1756, WSA, 161/102/1.

[4] Sturgeon 'was clearly something special', ranked above salmon and oysters and eaten as a 'treat', Joan Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England: Phases, Fads, Fashions 1500–1760* (2006), 189. Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos similarly situates sturgeon among foods of the 'landed elite', in *The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2008), 213.

[5] A poem from John addressed to Sarah's dog Dony in *c.* March 1757 reflected on his exile: 'Go on, 'till wise Experience shews, / What Good from Reformation flows. / But from such Change should'st Thou withdraw, / Thy Lot is Banishment from Shaw; / And in Disgrace to mourn too late, / When nothing shall reverse thy Fate', WSA, 161/102/2.

[6] Mary Douglas, *In the Active Voice* (Abingdon, 1982), 117; Mary Douglas, 'Introduction', in *The Anthropologist's Cookbook*, ed. Jessica Kuper, 2nd edn (London and New York, 2009), 7.

[7] Sarah Ann Robin, 'Posies, Pictures and Promises – Love and the Object: The English in the Seventeenth Century' (PhD thesis, Lancaster University, 2016), 111.

[8] On the sensory rituals surrounding courtship gifts see Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions and Material Culture* (Oxford, 2019), 69–92.

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were 'ontologically real and active' objects able to nourish and materially change the human body.[9] Given the flourishing of food history as an area of inquiry, a reappraisal of the social, emotional and material significance of food gifts in the making of marriage is long overdue.[10] This article contends that food represents a crucial component of what Natalie Zemon Davis has termed the 'gift mode' during courtship – 'an essential relational mode, a repertoire of behaviour, a register with its own rules, language, etiquette, and gestures' – which can shed new light on the mechanics of courtship in everyday life, how intimate relationships were navigated through objects, and how edible items could be harnessed as vehicles for emotional meaning.[11]

The article brings several different historiographies into conversation – chiefly histories of courtship and matrimony, food and food gifts, emotions and material culture, also extending to the senses, embodiment and the natural world. Gifts of food have occasionally featured in histories of courtship, though their appearance has been largely incidental. In her study of Tudor customs, Diana O'Hara found that 14 out of 403 couples involved in matrimonial suits in the Canterbury church courts (3.5 per cent) exchanged animals and foodstuffs as tokens, ranging from pigs, cattle, pigeons and fish, to peas, strawberries, spices and cake.[12] In her examination of the London Consistory Court between 1586 and 1611, Loreen Giese similarly found that wine was deployed as a monetary gift by courting men hoping to 'buy' a woman's love.[13] The main challenge for the church courts was determining when these items were intended as contractual symbols of marriage, and when they represented more everyday gestures of goodwill, highlighting the inherent flexibility and malleability of food as a gift. As David Cressy found in one case brought before the Durham Consistory Court in 1605, a man could take a 'kindly received' bag of apples and a piece of root ginger bitten by both parties as a symbol of betrothal, especially when situated alongside other tokens such as hair, gold coins and a ring, though a woman could just as well contend otherwise.[14] It is clear, however, that gifts of food did hold some import as a token of marriage, even if their implications have yet to be fully realised by historians.

While food gifts have not played a substantive role in histories of courtship, a significant body of work has established how food was used to create bonds of friendship and patronage between neighbours, kin, tenants and landlords, farmers and landowners, masters and servants, monarchs and courtiers.[15]

[9] David Goodman, 'Ontology Matters: The Relational Materiality of Nature and Agro-food Studies', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 41 (2001), 182–200, at 183.

[10] For an overview of the growth of the field in the wake of the new cultural history, heavily influenced by the work of structural anthropologists and historical sociologists, see Jeffrey M. Pilcher (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Food History* (Oxford, 2012), esp. pt I, Food Histories.

[11] Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (2000), 9.

[12] Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2000), 68–70.

[13] Loreen Giese, *Courtships, Marriage Customs, and Shakespeare's Comedies* (New York, 2006), 91.

[14] David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage & Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1999), 264.

[15] See for example Margot Finn, 'Men's Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution', *Social History*, 25 (2000), 133–55, at 143–4; Freya Gowrley, *Domestic Space in Britain,*

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These studies have shown how the importance of food gifts declined to some extent in the first half of the seventeenth century, with the growth of London and greater concentration of elite families in the capital, the expansion of retail and the emergence of new patterns of urban sociability. Nonetheless, as Felicity Heal posits, 'more evidence points to the flexibility of the food gift than to its inexorable decline', as a panoply of 'new gifts of the rare and delicate' came to the fore.[16] This article consequently explores the flexible meanings of a diversifying range of food gifts over the long eighteenth century, which has been pinpointed by historians as a key moment in the transformation and revitalisation of gifting practices.[17] In doing so, the article demonstrates how courtship was a key arena in which food gifts retained their vitality in creating and sustaining emotional bonds.

This research also contributes to the rapidly expanding field of emotions and material culture, extending a scholarship which has focused principally on *made* objects which were created, inscribed and preserved by humans to also encompass the organic, the transitory and the ephemeral.[18] As Joanne Begiato has urged, 'there is critical value in including all types of objects in discussions about emotions in the past', from foods to memories and smells, and even entirely imagined objects, calling on historians to be more expansive in their definitions of materiality.[19] The most recent work on landscape and environments has done just this, probing our emotional relationships with nature, land, animals and – most importantly – foodstuffs.[20] Rachel Winchcombe has emphasised the power of foods in maintaining 'emotional

1750–1840: Materiality, Sociability and Emotion (2021), 139–73; Felicity Heal, 'Food Gifts, The Household and the Politics of Exchange in Early Modern England', *Past & Present*, 199 (2008), 41–70; Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2014); Amanda E. Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven and London, 2014), 52–77; Christopher Kissane, *Food, Religion and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (2018); Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving*; Susan Whyman, *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural Worlds of the Verneys, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 2002), 23–33.

[16] Heal, 'Food Gifts', 69.

[17] Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving*, 378–80.

[18] For an overview of the state of the field see Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles, 'A Feeling for Things, Past and Present', in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, ed. Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (Oxford, 2018), 8–26.

[19] Joanne Begiato, 'Moving Objects: Emotional Transformation, Tangibility, and Time Travel', in *Feeling Things*, ed. Downes *et al.*, 235–6.

[20] For an introduction to 'human–environment entanglements' see Sasha Handley and John Emrys Morgan, 'Environment, Emotion and Early Modernity', *Environment and History*, 28 (2022), 355–61. On affective relationships with animals see Andrea Gaynor, Susan Broomhall and Andrew Flack, 'Frogs and Feeling Communities: A Study in History of Emotions and Environmental History', *Environment and History*, 28 (2022), 83–104; Ingrid Tague, 'Pets and the Eighteenth-Century British Family', *The History of the Family*, 26 (2021), 186–213; John Emrys Morgan, 'An Emotional Ecology of Pigeons in Early Modern England and America', *Environment and History*, 28 (2022), 435–52. On emotions, nature and heritage see Anke Bernau, 'Hedgerow Poiesis', *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*, 7 (2023), 119–44; Alicia Marchant, 'Romancing the Stone: (E)motion and the Affective History of the Stone of Scone', in *Feeling Things*, ed. Downes *et al.*, 192–208; Alicia Marchant (ed.), *Historicising Heritage and Emotions: The Affective Histories of Blood, Stone and Land* (2019).

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health', with items such as chocolate believed to stimulate passions such as joy and cheerfulness whilst banishing those of grief and sadness.[21] Sasha Handley has similarly shown how the milky mixture of sack posset could aid fertility and stimulate health, as well as eliciting affective states from loyalty to a monarch to love for a spouse.[22] Such work is shaped by a burgeoning new and neo-materialist scholarship in which foods possess their own active force and lively vitality as a type of matter. As living organisms and what the political theorist Jane Bennett has termed 'edible matter', foods can be treated as 'actants' which exist alongside and inside human beings – 'conative bodies vying alongside and within an other complex body (a person's "own" body)'.[23] Part of the distinctive nature of food gifts as emotional objects therefore lies in their agentic material properties and ability to *act* upon the human body, nourishing it and stimulating feelings of joy, delight, love and desire.

The article at once examines the nature *of* food as an emotional object, and the navigation of courtship *through* food. As scholars such as Christopher Kissane highlight, food is good to think with, as it provides a useful prism to reflect and refract the guiding principles and beliefs structuring everyday life.[24] In doing so, the article draws upon a wide range of source material including material objects, visual sources such as paintings and prints, and textual sources including pamphlets, medical treatises, ballads, songs, plays, periodicals, novels and trade cards. Particularly important are letters and diaries, which are especially revealing of courting practices among the middling sorts and provincial urban gentry, who set out the emotional and social significance of their gifts at great length in writing. These men were schoolmasters, apothecaries, clergymen, composers, lawyers, Justices of the Peace, businessmen, Members of Parliament and landed gentlemen, whilst the women were primarily gentlemen's daughters. These sources provide the most detailed evidence of gifts proffered by courting men, who sent the greatest number and variety of food gifts, having primary responsibility for instigating and actively pursuing a match.

The article's key questions ask: how were gifts of food used to navigate the process of courtship? What exactly distinguished sweets, meat, fish and fruit as suitable items to present to a lover? How did they vary by class, gender, across the country, over the century and through different stages of courtship? What might smelling, tasting and consuming these items reveal about the role of the senses and the body in courting rituals? And more broadly, how were organic or perishable items such as food used to communicate and materialise emotions in practice? In endeavouring to answer these questions, the article is divided into four sections which each examine particular categories of edible

[21] Rachel Winchcombe, 'Comfort Eating: Food, Drink, and Emotional Health in Early Modern England', *English Historical Review* (2023) [Early View]: https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cead065.

[22] Sasha Handley, 'Lusty Sack Possets, Nuptial Affections and the Material Communities of Early Modern Weddings', *Environment and History*, 28 (2022), 375–95.

[23] For an introduction to new materialism and its implications for emotions history see Katie Barclay, 'New Materialism and the New History of Emotions', *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*, 1 (2017), 161–83; Timothy LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge, 2017), 15; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, 2010), 39.

[24] Kissane, *Food, Religion and Communities*, 5–6.

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gift: sweet treats and snacks such as cakes, comfits and gingerbread; exclusive or rare tokens such as venison and hothouse fruits; items cultivated in a family garden or estate and shared among the families of courting couples; nutritious items designed to safeguard the health of a beloved. These are arranged broadly to follow the progress of a relationship, from the cakes and wine used as a means of flirtation to the game meats used to demonstrate masculine prowess, and the oysters deployed to show concern for the health of a future spouse.

Flirtation, sweet treats and snacks

The question of how to initiate courtship was a vexed one for many suitors, with gifts of food providing an expedient answer.[25] Many courtships began with sweet treats and snacks such as cakes, nuts, comfits and sweetmeats proffered by men to women who excited their romantic interest. In one ballad, a young damsel recounted:

> How many Sweethearts Courted me
> And always loving kind and free,
> They gave me Cakes and Kisses to[o],
> And often did Loves game renew.[26]

These edible tokens were presented by men during the earliest phases of courting games and wooing, often accompanied by kisses and wine.[27] Their material properties were important in provoking certain passions, with sweet foodstuffs believed to stimulate feelings of joy, delight and mirth.[28] The somatic and sensory delight generated by sweet gifts is evident in ballads, where female protagonists recounted how suitors used 'Custards with Cheese-Cakes and kisses' to enchant and 'betray' their senses. As this extract suggests, these foods were also believed to stimulate desire, as a 'ready right way' to reach 'the fountain of blisses'.[29] Sugar retained its medicinal uses as a nourishing food well into the eighteenth century, praised by medical writers as 'an innocent, nutritious, and healthy substance'. Nonetheless, its principal use by this period was as a preservative and sweetener, with writers highlighting the appeal of its 'sweet and obliging Taste'.[30] These sensory and material

[25] For a discussion of how best to commence a courtship see Helen Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural World of the Athenian Mercury* (Aldershot, 2003), 170–1.

[26] 'Damsels Complaint FOR THE Loss of her Maidenhead', London, 1690, English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA), 22262.

[27] 'Short and Sweet, / Or, the happy and Agreeable Wooing of / Oliver and Dorothy / Wherein is discovered the plain and Easy way to a Marriage Estate, / And how Maidens without difficulty may get Good Husbands', 1685–8, EBBA, 21064.

[28] Winchcombe, 'Comfort Eating', 21; Hannah Newton, 'Inside the Sickchamber in Early Modern England: The Experience of Illness through Six Objects', *English Historical Review*, 136, no. 580 (2021), 530–67, at 539.

[29] 'THE West-Country Wedding. Betwixt Roger the Plowman, and Ellin the Dary-Maid [*sic*]', 1671–1702?, EBBA, 21772.

[30] Frederick Slare, *A Vindication of Sugars Against the Charge of Dr. Willis, Other Physicians, and Common Prejudices. Dedicated to the Ladies* (1715); William Falconer, *Observations on Some of the*

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properties made sweet foodstuffs the ideal tokens with which to commence a romantic relationship, to be consumed whilst flirting, talking and walking together in public. The purpose of these edible tokens was not commitment, but the frisson of romance, enjoyment and sensual pleasure.

In her study of Old Regime Lyon, Julie Hardwick has demonstrated how 'walking out' in the emergent public sphere represented 'a new form of hetero-sociability', whereby couples strolled through cities, along rivers and through vegetable gardens and orchards while enjoying snacks such as biscuits and grapes together.[31] The ritual also reflected the rise of 'snacking', which 'increasingly occupied the interstices of structured eating' from the late seventeenth century onward.[32] One particularly detailed early account of 'walking out' whilst snacking is provided in the diary of the Colchester schoolmaster George Lloyd (1642–1718) in the 1670s. During the earlier and less turbulent phase of his on-again, off-again courtship with Mrs Gray, he walked out with her in Spring Gardens in Westminster after dinner, drinking wine and eating cheesecake. The following week, the couple visited St Georges Fields in Lambeth to drink cider and eat cake, staying until 8 p.m.[33] These outings provided a safe public setting in which to develop their intimacy and test their compatibility over food, without entailing any further obligation to marry.

The wealth of new urban spaces for sociability and pleasure which sprang up over the eighteenth century developed and embedded these rituals by encouraging the leisured consumption of food between mealtimes. As one pamphlet reported at mid-century, the 'New Breakfasting-Hutt near *Sadler's-Wells*' was 'crouded with young Fellows and their Sweethearts' drinking tea and coffee, repeating love songs, and whiling away the time until dinner.[34] Prints such as Thomas Rowlandson's *St James's Courtship* and *St Giles's Courtship* drew a direct line between the sensual pleasures of food and drink and the thrill of flirtation and seduction. Whilst the St James's couple delicately imbibe cups of coffee, their St Giles's counterparts carouse over a jug of wine.[35] For some gentlemen, the theatre proved a fitting location to treat women who piqued their romantic interest, amongst theatregoers enjoying wine, ham, cold chops and pasties.[36] When attempting to woo the gentleman's daughter Miss Newsome in York in February 1761, the Beverley gentleman John

Articles of Diet and Regimen Usually Recommended to Valetudinarians (1778), 38–43; Jon Stobart, *Sugar & Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650–1830* (Oxford, 2016), 29–33.

[31] Julie Hardwick, *Sex in an Old Regime City: Young Workers and Intimacy in France, 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2020), 48.

[32] Sara Pennell, '"Great Quantities of Gooseberry Pye and Baked Clod of Beef": Victualling and Eating Out in Early Modern London', in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural History of Early Modern London*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (Manchester, 2000), 228–49, at 237.

[33] Daniel Patterson (ed.), 'The Diary of George Lloyd (1642–1718)', *Royal Historical Society Camden Fifth Series*, vol. 64 (2022), 13 May 1676, 139, and 19 May 1676, 142.

[34] *Low-Life: Or One Half of the World, Knows not how the Other Half Live* (*c.* 1755), 46; Pennell, '"Great Quantities of Gooseberry Pye"', 239.

[35] Thomas Rowlandson, *St James's Courtship* and *St Giles's Courtship*, Britain, 1799, hand-coloured etchings with aquatint, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 59.533.647–8.

[36] As described in *Sophie in London, 1786: being the Diary of Sophie v. la Roche*, trans. Clare Williams (1933), 9 Sep. 1786, 133.

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Courtney (1734–1806) sat behind her for a performance of Richard Steele's sentimental comedy *The Conscious Lovers* and 'treated her' with sweetmeats to indicate his attraction. Disappointingly, the next day 'she held down her head' and deliberately passed him by 'on the other side of the street'. Four years later, Courtney again reached for the sweetmeats whilst walking out in town with a 'vastly pretty sensible agreable' young woman from Newcastle called Miss Kitty Rutter. However, he decided to drop his suit the following month owing to her insufficient fortune and overly numerous family.[37] Nonetheless, the sharing of sweetmeats had provided a momentary source of pleasure and a material means of gauging any potential romantic interest in its earliest stages, without being under any subsequent obligation to pursue it.

Sweet foods from bonbons to jellies, ices and spiced cakes were particularly highly valued for their exoticism and high price, as products of imperialism and Britain's trading empire.[38] They could be purchased from the increasing number of cake and confectionery shops in towns, especially London, where they clustered around high-end shopping districts such as St James's, encouraging customers to sit-in and engage in sociability and fashionable display.[39] In the print in Figure 1, two fashionably dressed women depart a cake shop blowing kisses at a pair of stylish dandies by the counter. They call out, 'much obliged to you gentlemen, adieu!' and 'Bye Bye! Dandies! nice Cakes!' The men subsequently realise that they are unable to pay the exorbitant sum of nine shillings and sixpence spent on treats such as sugar plums, crying out 'D––n me if I have any Brass!!' The offer of sugared delicacies could provide men with a valuable avenue for developing greater familiarity with women by treating them and engaging in flirtation and conversation. Yet in their attempts to attract women of fashion by imitating the refined tastes of the upper classes, the conspicuous consumption of simply named 'Bob' and 'Jim' has clearly extended too far. For men who *did* have the means, such tokens could be packaged in expensive decorative boxes such as crystal, porcelain and silver *bonbonnières* which turned these transient gifts into something more concrete. These offerings combined the tangible and intangible in a single token, making the romantic meanings of edible gifts more explicit through evocative depictions of the altar of love, Cupid, his bow and quiver of arrows, blooming flowers and kissing doves.[40]

[37] Susan Neave and David Neave (eds.), *The Diary of a Yorkshire Gentleman: John Courtney of Beverley, 1759–68* (Otley, 2001), 34, 101.

[38] On popular imperialism see Troy Bickham, *Eating the Empire: Food and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2020); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, 992); Bob Harris, '"American Idols": Empire, War, and the Middling Ranks in Mid-Eighteenth Century Britain', *Past & Present*, 150 (1996), 111–41.

[39] Stobart, *Sugar & Spice*, 132; Ian Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation in English Retailing, 1700 to 1850: Narratives of Consumption* (Farnham, 2014), 102.

[40] A whole collection of such trinkets is described in a satirical advertisement for stolen goods in *The Tatler*, including a silver gilt box containing cashew and caraway comfits with an enamelled lid depicting Cupid fishing for hearts, no. 245, 31 Oct.–2 Nov. 1710. For extant examples see porcelain *bonbonnière* resembling Cupid playing drums in the shape of a woman's breasts, wearing a ribbon painted 'POUR LES CAVALIERS DE CITHERE', London, *c.* 1759–70, 7.3 cm (H) × 6 cm (W), Victoria and

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Figure 1. *Dandies Sans-Sis-Sous*, London, *c.* 1819, plate mark 24.8 × 35 cm, hand-coloured etching, courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, lwlpr11995.

Nonetheless, one of the merits of edible gifts – like related perishable tokens such as nosegays – was that they did not necessarily require a substantial financial outlay, with the *Dictionary of Love* derisively noting that 'a silly girl' could easily be 'seduced by a dozen of stick-cherries'.[41] Labouring men used cakes, nuts, brandy snaps and gingerbread purchased from local feasts and fairs as a way to break the ice and commence the process of courtship.[42] In Christopher Anstey's novel *Memoirs of the Noted Buckhorse* (1756), the protagonist, a boxer, is thunderstruck with love at first sight, causing him to forget that he is already married. He presents the young lady who has inspired his passion with a pennyworth of gingerbread as a token, which she accepts with a bow. He then invites her to drink a glass of wine at a nearby inn and pledges to marry her as soon as she thinks proper.[43] In Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), the farmer Robert Martin rides 'three miles round one day' to procure the heroine's protégée Harriet Smith some walnuts after she expresses a taste

Albert Museum, London (V&A), 414:270-1885; tortoiseshell and gold *bonbonnière* with micromosaic scene, 7.6 cm (D) × 2.5 cm (H), Rome, *c.* 1800, V&A, LOAN: GILBERT.480:1-2008; porcelain *bonbonnière* in the form of Cupid and a lamb in a blooming field, with French inscription, nineteenth century, V&A, 346-1902.

[41] 'Presents', in *The Dictionary of Love. In Which is Contained, The Explanation of Most of the Terms Used in That Language* (1753), 172.

[42] John Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford, 1985), 28–9.

[43] *Memoirs of the Noted Buckhorse. In which, Besides a Minute Account of his past Memorable Exploits, That celebrated Hero is carried into higher Life; Containing some very Extraordinary Events* (1756), I, 118.

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for them.[44] Later accounts of the courtships of 'common or working people' similarly described young men using nuts and brandy snaps as 'tidings' at local feasts:

> If a young man prevails upon a young woman to accept of a 'tiding', which means accepting [a] brandy-snap and nuts, the ice is broken, and it is mostly looked upon by young and old as a kind of 'god's penny', for the girl feels laid under some obligation to him; it is a proof that they are making love to each other if not actually engaged.[45]

Much like the use of *bonbonnières* by the affluent gentry, such tokens could be sent alongside, or followed up with, tangible keepsakes such as wooden nut-crackers carved with romantic symbols such as hearts, birds, the date, and initials of the recipient.[46] These snacks and treats provided an efficacious means for men and women to socialise, engage in flirtation, arouse feelings of joy, delight and desire, test their attraction and establish a putative match.

Exclusivity, status and masculinity

Some of the most highly valued food gifts in early modern England were exclusive, distinctive or exotic items which conveyed the status and means of the sender. The lack of more mundane domestic foodstuffs in early modern gift-giving rituals has been highlighted by Felicity Heal, who notes the absence of grain, ale, beer, fruits such as apples and pears, and vegetables more generally. Rather, she writes, gifts had 'to be distinctive, in some measure marked out from the quotidian pattern of household consumption'.[47] In their work on Tudor and Stuart customs, David Cressy and Diana O'Hara both cite examples of individuals using root ginger as a token of marriage. This exotic imported spice was native to Southeast Asia and cultivated in Jamaica and other islands from the late seventeenth century, making it a singularly distinctive token of love. Other such exclusive items included spices such as nutmeg and exotic fruits such as oranges.[48]

One such exclusive gift, in the eighteenth century, was the pineapple. The delicacy was first introduced to England from its sugar colony in Barbados

[44] Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. James Kingsley (Oxford, [1815] 2003), 23.

[45] Joseph Lawson, *Letters to the Young on Progress in Pudsey during the last Sixty Years* (Stanninglen, 1887), 11. For a further example later in the nineteenth century see J. Burnley, *Phases of Bradford Life* (1889), 83. One of the most powerful surviving objects in the Foundling Museum's collections in London is a single hazelnut pierced with a hole, which may well have had some connection to the romance which foreshadowed the mother's pregnancy. See 'Token: Hazelnut, Pierced for a String or Cord': https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/object/token-hazelnut-pierced-for-a-string-or-cord-eighteenth-century/.

[46] See for example the screw thread boxwood nutcracker carved to resemble a bird sitting atop a cage, England *c.* late seventeenth–early eighteenth century, Pinto Collection, Birmingham Museums, 1965T2096; Edward H. Pinto, *Treen and Other Wooden Bygones: An Encyclopaedia and Social History* (1969), 75; Robin, 'Posies, Pictures and Promises', 126–7, 148.

[47] Heal, 'Food Gifts', 56.

[48] Cressy, *Birth, Marriage & Death*, 264; O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*, 68–70, 89–90; Heal, 'Food Gifts', 56.

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and cultivated domestically in hothouses from the seventeenth century. A single pineapple took two to three years to grow to size, with each plant yielding only a single prized fruit. The vast amount of labour and infrastructure required made this an extortionately expensive symbol of taste and status. Genteel gardeners accordingly rushed to cultivate home-grown pineapples in pineries on their country estates, with 'anyone who was anyone among the upper echelons of society' growing their own pineapples by the 1770s.[49] As the gardener John Giles wrote in his treatise on the subject, 'every gentleman of taste and fortune' was keen to cultivate this 'polite article of gardening'.[50] This included the Essex MP Colonel Isaac Martin Rebow (1731–1781), who had a hothouse installed in his Kitchen Gardens at Wivenhoe Park in Colchester in the 1760s. Between 1769 and 1771 he sent several home-grown pineapples as gifts to his sweetheart and first cousin Mary Martin (*c.* 1751–1804) and her family. In her letters, Mary praised the 'exceeding good' quality of this 'noble' fruit, which she often received situated alongside other exclusive foodstuffs such as venison, partridge and pheasant.[51] The vogue for pineapples among the aristocracy had largely abated by the 1780s, reflecting the accelerating pace and quixotic fashions of consumer society. After this period, the fruit alone was not sufficient to impress, and came to require greater scale, magnificence and grandeur.[52]

A key part of the pineapple's desirability as a gift was its 'delightful fragrant smell' and the 'excellency, fragrancy, and flavour' of its fruit.[53] One delivery received by Mary Martin in 1769 smelled 'as fine as ever I knew one', and she didn't doubt it would 'prove as good in y Taste'.[54] Another savoured by the Martin family on Christmas Day in 1770 was judged 'y highest Flavor of any we have had this latter season', with a further pineapple the following year considered 'as fine a one as ever I tasted'.[55] The taste of food gifts therefore helped to generate an emotional connection between couples by stimulating feelings of delight and gustatory pleasure. In this way, taste could operate as a type of affective currency, helping us to extend the boundaries of materiality beyond objects themselves to also encompass the various sensory and somatic rituals that they were involved in.[56] In doing so, we position objects in what new materialist scholars have figured as a reciprocal partnership

[49] See Francesca Beauman, *The Pineapple: King of Fruits* (2011); Christopher Natali, 'Was *Northanger Abbey*'s General Tilney Worth His Weight in Pineapples?', *Persuasions*, 40, no. 1 (2019): https://jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/volume-40-no-1/natali/.

[50] John Giles, *Ananas: Or, A Treatise on the Pine-Apple. In which the Whole Culture, Management, and Perfecting this Most Excellent Fruit, is Laid Down in a Clear and Explicit Manner* (*c.* 1767), 1.

[51] Rosemary Feesey, *A History of Wivenhoe Park: The House and Grounds* (Colchester, 1963), 17; Mary Martin to Isaac Rebow, 26 Dec. 1770, 28 Aug. 1771 and 1 Oct. 1771, Washington State University Library, Pullman, WA (WSU), cg134_17701226, cg134_17710828, cg134_17711001.

[52] Beauman, *The Pineapple*, 222–8.

[53] Giles, *Ananas*, 33.

[54] Martin to Rebow, 18 Nov. 1769, WSU, cg134_17691118.

[55] Martin to Rebow, 26 Dec. 1770 and 15 Oct. 1771, WSU, cg134_17701226, cg134_17711015.

[56] Begiato, 'Moving Objects', 235–6. On the sensory rituals of gazing at, touching and smelling love tokens also see Holloway, *The Game of Love*, 69–92.

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with humans, where they are able to shape us – our bodies, identities, feelings, relationships and decisions – as much as we shape them.[57] The enduring influence of the pineapple in shaping familial relationships is perhaps best illustrated in the case of one suitor who, after tasting the fruit for the first time at the home of his future in-laws in 1757, wrote to praise the profound impression it had made upon him, noting that he would 'retain that Favour' in his memory 'as long as I live'.[58]

Such exotic fruits including pineapples, grapes, nectarines and peaches were commonly gifted within landed gentry families, and served to visiting guests.[59] As Maggie Lane highlights in her work on the culinary world of Jane Austen, Mr Darcy's wealth in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is indicated by the 'beautiful pyramids' of hothouse fruits that he serves to visitors. Indeed, it is at this exact point in the novel – visiting Pemberley with her aunt and uncle Mr and Mrs Gardiner – when the heroine Elizabeth Bennet first uses the word 'love' to describe her feelings for Darcy, stimulated by food and the hospitality she has received. The scene takes on even greater significance as it is the only mealtime scene in Austen's novels 'which is described straightforwardly by the narrator as impinging on the heroine's consciousness'.[60] It was this precise social cachet that suitors hoped to channel when selecting hothouse fruits as a romantic gift. In 1773 the Norfolk parson James Woodforde (1740–1803) gifted some peaches to his love interest Betsy White, whom he had been regularly dining and taking tea with.[61] The exorbitant price of these treats is satirised in the print of a fruit shop lounge in Figure 2, where a customer looks glumly ahead at his bill of five shillings for one peach, coupled with eighteen shillings for a bunch of grapes. Exotic fruits could therefore operate as important markers of status, whilst eating and drinking together smoothed the path to matrimony as prized opportunities for conviviality and conversation.

The most exclusive food gift unequivocally associated with landed hierarchy and elite masculinity was venison, classified as the private property of landowners and banned from sale on the open market. As Heal notes, venison was 'the food of lords' in early modern England, and as such was singled out as 'the most determined, and most gift-ascribed of all items of consumption'.[62] This exclusive food gift was popularly sent as a token of courtship by aristocratic men as an indication of their wealth and status; the presence of deer indicated a deer park, and a deer park a country seat and judicious match. During his courtship of Elizabeth Jeffreys, heiress of Brecon Priory in Wales

[57] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvii; LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 8, 15.

[58] Lovell to Harvey, 6 Aug. 1757, WSA, 161/102/2.

[59] See for example the diary of Robert Lee of Binfield, where he sends grapes and peaches to his uncle Henry Alexander, Lord Sterline (1664–1739), and his younger brother William Philipps (*c.* 1708–1777), *Diaries and Correspondence of Robert Lee of Binfield, 1736–1744*, ed. Harry Leonard (Reading, 2012), 34, 139. On pineapples, peaches and melons as highly prized exotic fruits see Kate Feluś, *The Secret Life of the Georgian Garden: Beautiful Objects & Agreeable Retreats* (London and New York, 2016), 168–71.

[60] Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen and Food* (London and Rio Grande, OH, 1995), 146–7.

[61] John Beresford (ed.), *The Diary of a Country Parson, 1758–1802* (Oxford, 1978), 16 Sep. 1773, 85.

[62] Heal, 'Food Gifts', 57–8, 60; Whyman, *Sociability and Power*, 14–37.

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Figure 2. *A Fruit Shop Lounge*, hand-coloured etching, London, 1786, plate mark 24.8 × 33.7 cm, courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, lwlpr05985.

(*c.* 1724–1779) between 1745 and 1749, the barrister Charles Pratt (1714–1794) sent a side of venison for Elizabeth to consume with her family, likely procured from his family's country estate, Wilderness, in Kent. Elizabeth praised the meat as being 'prodigiously Fat & fine', with the fattest meat also held to be the most flavoursome.[63] The token was particularly important as a show of status since Jeffreys was a wealthy heiress, whereas her suitor – though high-born and well educated – was a financially straitened third son, initially leading her mother to oppose the match.[64]

The hunting of venison, and shooting of game meats such as partridge and pheasant, could further provide an indication of idealised masculine qualities such as courage, resourcefulness and strength of mind and body. Pamphlets in praise of hunting lauded it as evidence of masculine health and virility, a 'Manly Exercise' in stark contrast to the trifling effeminacy of activities such as masquerades and balls.[65] The gifting of venison could therefore gesture more widely to a man's strong constitution, vigour, and skill in horsemanship,

[63] Elizabeth Jeffreys to Charles Pratt, 8 Jul. 1749, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone (KHLC), U840/C9/30.

[64] See Peter D. G. Thomas, 'Charles Pratt, first Earl Camden (1714–1794), lawyer and politician' (2004), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press: https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22699.

[65] *An Essay on Hunting. By a Country Squire* (1733), 4–5; Monica Mattfeld, *Becoming Centaur: Eighteenth-Century Masculinity and English Horsemanship* (University Park, PA, 2017), 94–6.

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which was an essential attribute for the polite gentleman. For one young gentlewoman, the sight of her suitor astride his horse in the 1750s was 'to see him in his Utmost Perfection', emphasising to friends that he was 'remarkable for Riding vastly well'.[66] Shooting, too, was a test of polite masculinity, and of gentlemanly qualities such as coolness, composure and self-control.[67] It is thus unsurprising that some suitors triumphantly reported their successes to their sweethearts. Edward Leathes (1747–1788) was the third son of a wealthy Essex politician and landowner, and like many younger gentry sons was destined for a career in the Church. Following the end of the game-shooting season in February 1772, he proudly shared his 'prodigious' sporting success with his sweetheart Elizabeth Reading (1748–1815). She dutifully responded that 'your hand must be greatly improv'd', flattering him that ''tis well the Season is over, for you would certainly in a little time have become the dread of the whole Feather'd Tribe'.[68] Gifts of venison and game had a dual purpose for courting men as signifiers of wealth and status, and as material tokens of polite masculinity.

Exclusive food gifts reflected the genteel status and manly attributes of the sender, whilst also bestowing honour upon recipients and their families for being part of these landed networks of power. As was the case in gifting networks more widely, such tokens could be consumed in company or shared onward as a way for recipients to reinforce or elevate their own social status. After Elizabeth Jeffreys and her mother received a side of venison from her suitor Charles Pratt in 1749, they re-gifted the neck to his sister Mrs Anne Gee in Richmond, confirming the increasing interconnectedness of their two families.[69] During the 1770s, the Essex gentlewoman Mary Martin used the food gifts sent by her suitor and first cousin Isaac Rebow to host a number of 'grand' meals for friends and family. She reported her delight at how:

> I cut a very smart Figure (thanks to you) both in my Dinner, & Supper & Luckily had y Venison done just as it shou'd be, which was allow'd by every body to be y finest ever seen, & I really beleive [*sic*] Cut full an Inch & half Deep of Fat, y Wood Pigeons were likewise very fine, & just in high order.[70]

A further delivery of partridges sent alongside some pineapples was likewise used 'to Cut a Figure with' at dinner, for which Mary was 'infinitely oblig'd' to him.[71] These tokens once again highlight the flexibility of food as a gift,

[66] Georgiana Poyntz to Theadora Cowper, *c.* 1754, British Library, London, Add MS 75691.

[67] Benjamin Luke Thomas Jackson, 'Furnishing Masculinity: Men's Material Culture in Eighteenth-Century England' (PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2020), 273–329, esp. 284–5.

[68] Elizabeth Reading to Edward Leathes, Woodstock, 1 Mar. 1772, Norfolk Record Office, Norwich (NRO), BOL 2/4/3. On the timetable of the game season see Jackson, 'Furnishing Masculinity', table 5.1, 288.

[69] Jeffreys to Pratt, 8 Jul. 1749, KHLC, U840/C9/30.

[70] Martin to Rebow, 7 Jan. 1772, WSU, cg134_17720107.

[71] Martin to Rebow, 15 Oct. 1771, WSU, cg134_17711015.

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which could either be consumed by the giver and recipient (like cakes or wine) or eaten by the recipient with others, standing in for the giver *in absentia* (like pineapples or game). Such tokens are a category apart from typical courting gifts such as jewellery and personal accoutrements due to their imbrication in wider networks of hospitality and commensality, conferring power and privilege upon the individuals who sent, received and consumed them.

Familial care, households and gardens

Whilst exclusive and exotic gifts had their merits, there was also clearly enormous value placed upon the local and home-grown, particularly in an age of commerce and industry. To cultivate fruits and vegetables for friends, family and loved ones suggested a particular type of care, thought and effort invested in the recipient.[72] It also ensured the freshest quality, with senders keen to emphasise how gifts such as cucumbers had been 'taken and cut' that morning.[73] In his great treatise on landscape gardening, Humphry Repton (1752–1818) argued that fruits were 'most delicious when gathered by our own hands'. In contrast was the negligible 'care and trouble, in the package and conveyance' of goods from major commercial markets. There was a vast difference, he argued, 'betwixt the strawberries plucked from the bed, and those brought from a fruit-shop, perhaps, gathered with unwashed hands the day before'.[74] Hence a clear line was drawn between the home-grown, thoughtful and individual, and the generic and commercial, tainted by an unknown number of hands.

Fruits cultivated in a family's own garden or estate represented an offering both *from* and *of* a suitor and their kin. It is striking just how many food gifts originated with a suitor's wider family, before being directed to a woman's aunts, uncles and parents. In passing through these networks, gifts of food worked to bring two families together in advance of matrimony. At the end of 1756, the Bath apothecary John Lovell, with whom this article opened, was banished from Shaw House after refusing to curb his pursuit of Sarah Harvey. In an attempt to get back into the good graces of her aunt Mary Smith, he sent her some melons and Brussels apricots grown in his father's garden. Apricots were commonly grown in gentlemen's orchards during this period, particularly across the south of England, with Brussels apricots the most highly esteemed flavoursome variety. Melons were highly prized; once the preserve of royalty, they were now common amongst the better sorts.[75] Alongside the fruits, John included a note for Aunt Smith explaining that they were:

[72] See Sarah Ann Robin's analysis of the lawyer and politician Henry Marten's home-grown strawberries in 'Posies, Pictures and Promises', 111–12, and Freya Gowrley's work on Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby (the 'Ladies of Llangollen'), who used oranges, cheese, strawberries, geese and figs as gestures of friendship and intimacy, *Domestic Space in Britain*, 158–9.

[73] Edward Peach to Elizabeth Leathes, Sundridge, 10 May 1790, NRO, BOL 2/140/2.

[74] *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the Late Humphrey Repton, Esq., Being His Entire Works on these Subjects* (1840), fragment XXIX: Concerning the Luxuries of a Garden, 558.

[75] Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England*, 147, 300–1; Feluś, *Secret Life of the Georgian Garden*, 170.

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> a Testimony of having imprinted on my Mind a truly grateful Remembrance of all her past Favours to me, and of my continuing to bear the same Respect to her as I ever did, and that I shou'd think myself very happy if indulg'd again in the same Opportunities of shewing it, which I had before my being so unhappily, and, as I hope, quite undeservedly, exil'd from Shaw.

In light of Aunt Smith's dissatisfaction with the Lovell family's genteel credentials, it is notable that these highly valued fruits had been grown by John's father, making them 'doubly valuable' to John as a gesture.[76] Furthermore, these tokens moved through much of the family themselves, passing not just between lovers, but from his father, to John, to Sarah, and subsequently to her aunt. Gifts of food were therefore set apart from quintessential love tokens such as garters or gloves by blurring the line between courtship gifts and general tokens of goodwill. As such, they helped to unite two families anticipating a matrimonial tie, as signs of their hospitality and favour.

As dualistic items situated at the boundary between tokens of goodwill and explicit offerings of courtship, gifts of food could also be sent from women to their suitors. However, as with the proportion of courtship gifts more broadly, women's gifting was less regular and less intense in volume.[77] After the death of her first husband in 1788, Elizabeth Leathes (née Reading) rekindled her friendship with her childhood sweetheart Edward Peach. Edward was now a Justice of the Peace and had maintained his connection with the Reading family through managing the estate of Elizabeth's late grandfather Thomas Reading (1714–1768). Edward lived in the Old Hall in Sundridge, Kent, where he owned many of the local establishments including a public house, the workhouse and a nearby farm.[78] In January 1790, Elizabeth sent him a 'very excellent' turkey, a hen pheasant and a brace of partridges, 'all equally good in their kind', for which she had the 'best thanks' of her 'sincere Friend'.[79] These were seasonal gifts, with turkeys typically gifted and eaten at Christmastime. They were also particular to East Anglia, where turkeys were reared in their thousands and made to walk all the way to London to be slaughtered. Perhaps as a result, turkeys had a reputation for being tough and tasteless birds. Yet rearing and slaughtering them locally made a vast difference to the freshness and quality of the meat, and they were commonly gifted as local specialities by inhabitants of Norfolk.[80] In spring the same year, Edward sent half a dozen

[76] Lovell to Harvey, 17 Aug. 1757, WSA, 161/102/2. In his poem addressed to Sarah's dog Dony, written during his exile from Shaw House in March 1757, John gave an impression of the atmosphere at Shaw: 'airs will never do at Shaw, / Where Manners stand the reigning Law. / Nor will thy rough-hair'd, coal-black Hide, / Thy flirting airs, or City Pride / Pert Courtships, or high mounted Ears, / Gain half that Love which Dido shares', WSA, 161/102/2.

[77] As I have argued elsewhere, women also sent different *types* of gift, including pressed flowers and hand-made textiles such as ruffles and waistcoats. See Holloway, *The Game of Love*, 69, 75, 81, 88, 90, 99, 103–4.

[78] Celia Miller, *The Amiable Mrs Peach* (Norwich, 2016), 68, 76–7.

[79] Peach to Leathes, Sevenoaks, 8 Jan. 1790, NRO, BOL 2/140/2/21.

[80] Lane, *Jane Austen and Food*, 63–4; Miller, *The Amiable Mrs Peach*, 16, 19.

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pigeons as a comparably local offering, and hoped to send some lamb but 'could not find out the proper conveyance'.[81] The frequent exchange of edible gifts signalled the couple's ongoing warmth and affection toward one another, helping to rekindle and advance their romance after twenty years apart.

Other courting women similarly participated in the economy of food gifts, with the Essex gentlewoman Mary Martin sending several parcels of fish such as turbot, crayfish and flounder to Isaac Rebow in the 1770s. Isaac was her first cousin, again situating these tokens both within the realm of courtship and of familial care and goodwill. As was increasingly the case over the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Mary sourced her fish from local fishmongers rather than fish ponds ('now-a-days, all is looked for at shops', lamented William Cobbett in his *Rural Rides*).[82] Whilst Elizabeth Leathes opted for the turkeys which were particular to Norfolk, Mary selected the fish which were abundant in Essex due to their proximity to the Channel and the River Colne. When certain fish were in season, she could procure them 'at any time'. If none were available, they could be sent for directly from Billingsgate, though at the risk of inferior quality.[83] One parcel of flounder was intended for his mother, Mary's aunt, in March 1770, after Mary was 'greatly Concern'd' by accounts of her health.[84] Another, she wrote to Isaac, was 'really design'd for you, only I thought it was better to Direct them to Her, for fear of a Rumpus'.[85] A third parcel of fish was sent alongside some stockings that she had made for him, 'with which they will come very well', combining the everyday with a hand-made token more explicitly prefiguring marriage, and the care she invested in him as his future wife.[86] Her offerings of fish were particularly appropriate tokens due to their very indeterminacy as a gift, situated both within the economy of courtship and also within broader networks of exchange between family and friends.

Whilst Mary sourced her turbot and flounder from the local fishmonger, she did nonetheless enjoy popular pastimes such as bobbing for eels.[87] Fishing parties were lively occasions for sociability and conviviality, as in George Morland's sentimental depiction of an angling party in Figure 3. Such excursions could bring together mixed groups of young men and women in close proximity for sustained periods of time, therefore providing an invaluable chance to generate a romantic bond under the watchful eye of parents, friends or chaperones.[88] The Justice of the Peace Robert Lee (né Philipps) (*c.* 1706–1755)

[81] Peach to Leathes, Sevenoaks, 27 Apr. and 10 May 1790, NRO, BOL 2/140/2.

[82] *Rural Rides in the Counties of Surrey, Kent, Sussex, Hants, Berks, Oxford, Bucks, Wilts, Somerset, Gloucester, Hereford, Salop, Worcester, Stafford, Leicester, Hertford, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Nottingham, Lincoln, York, Lancaster, Durham and Northumberland, during the Years 1821 to 1832; with Economical and Political Observations* (1885), II, 254.

[83] Martin to Rebow, 8 Mar. 1770 and 30 Jun. 1770, WSU, cg134_17700308 and cg134_17700630.

[84] Martin to Rebow, 8 Mar. 1770, WSU, cg134_17700308.

[85] Martin to Rebow, 9 Jul. 1771, WSU, cg134_17710709.

[86] Martin to Rebow, 8 Oct. 1771, WSU, cg134_17711008.

[87] Martin to Rebow, 28 Aug. 1771, WSU, cg134_17710828.

[88] On angling as a sociable activity for young men and women, see Andrea Pappas, '"Each Wise Nymph that Angles for a Heart": The Politics of Courtship in the Boston "Fishing Lady" Pictures',

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Figure 3. George Morland, *A Party Angling*, Britain, 1789, 63.5 × 76.2 cm, oil on canvas, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B.2001.2.2, Public Domain CC0 1.0.

inherited his great-uncle's estate in Binfield, Berkshire, in 1736. Although a substantial distance from the coast, the area was well supplied by ponds, which were typically stocked with fish such as carp, perch, pike, tench, roach and trout.[89] In 1738, Lee ventured on a fishing expedition on his friend Mr Terry's pond in nearby Winkfield, in a group that included his love interest Molly Hopson, and her sister. At the end of their excursion, they divided the catch between Robert Lee and his friend Mr Seddon, vicar of Warfield, plus a gift for Molly's father. The token fit very clearly into his wider patterns of exchange, where he routinely exchanged locally caught fish with friends and family. In addition to the present for Molly's father, the excursion provided an indispensable opportunity for the couple to spend time together at close quarters, and converse freely both on the water and during their subsequent walk home.[90]

Winterthur Portfolio, 49 (2015), 1–28, and Feluś, *Secret Life of the Georgian Garden*, 82–90. Also see George Morland's accompanying scene *The Angler's Repast* where the group pause to enjoy a picnic lunch, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B.2001.2.21.

[89] Roger North, *A Discourse of Fish and Fish-Ponds* (1715); Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England*, 265–70.

[90] *Diary of Robert Lee of Binfield*, 31 May 1738, 128. See pp. 92 and 129 for further gifts of fish.

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Gifts of food sent to a woman's family home represented a creative way for courting men to elicit an invitation to dine. Eating and drinking together created valuable time for a suitor to converse with a woman and her family, as in the print *City Courtship* in Figure 4, where a man and his sweetheart talk whilst their families take tea. The gout-ridden father on the right echoes William Hogarth's evocation of a marriage settlement, where the two patriarchs negotiate over terms, though in this instance the young couple incline their heads toward one another and talk happily.[91] While courting the gentleman's daughter Elizabeth Jeffreys in the 1740s, the barrister Charles Pratt sent a pig as a gift to her mother. As a result, Elizabeth's mother instructed her daughter to write to Charles requesting his presence at dinner. Elizabeth accordingly entreated him 'you must come so dont be Engaged'.[92] The gentleman Edward Peach utilised a similar tactic in his courtship of Elizabeth Leathes (née Reading), sending her two fowls and a duck as a gift in the 1780s. He evidently expected that his gifts would obtain him an invitation to dinner, asking that 'if it will not be unpleasant and inconvenient to you I will with the greatest pleasure and satisfaction to myself partake of the Duck with you at three o' Clock or any other hour you most approve of. I shall call upon you some time before dinner.'[93] Following dinner, couples could then spend the evening together walking in

Figure 4. Thomas Rowlandson, *City Courtship*, London, 1785, hand-coloured etching, plate mark 21.4 × 31 cm, courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 786.01.01.01.

[91] I am grateful to Stéphane Jettot for alerting me to this comparison. See William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode*, 'The Settlement', oil on canvas, *c.* 1743, National Gallery, London, NG113.

[92] Jeffreys to Pratt, u.d. (1740s), KHLC, U840/C9/9.

[93] Peach to Leathes, u.d. (1780s), NRO, BOL 2/140/2/1.

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the garden or sitting up late talking, enabling them to converse freely and ascertain their compatibility as spouses.[94] As the prospect of matrimony became more certain, such meetings became much more frequent, with couples dining and drinking tea and chocolate on an almost daily basis as settlements were drawn up, the articles of marriage were drafted and signed and a licence procured.[95] The tea table could even provide an apposite location for a proposal, with the composer John Marsh (1752–1828) 'declaring & engaging' himself to Elizabeth Brown 'in a low voice' over drinks – much like the couple in Figure 4 – whilst their companions were 'trotting on'.[96]

Health, diet and nourishment

Food was believed to have either beneficial or detrimental effects for a person's bodily health, impacting on their digestive systems, their nerves and reproductive organs. It also directly affected their teeth in the physical process of biting and chewing it, particularly in an era of poor oral hygiene and only partial access to dentistry, where many had lost all of their teeth by their early forties.[97] Loreen Giese has revealed how some suitors in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England presented women with silver toothpicks and carved earscoops to establish a contract to marry, indicating some investment in and care for their physical health.[98] Engraved fruitwood or bone apple-corers or scoops carved with romantic symbols such as hearts and the recipient's initials remained popular gifts crafted by labouring suitors into the eighteenth century. These represented particularly thoughtful tokens as they enabled a beloved to continue eating raw apples after losing their teeth, through scraping out the soft flesh.[99]

One particular foodstuff defined the later stages of courtship, as a beloved sweetheart looked sure to attain the status of wife: the humble oyster. Oysters

[94] Robert Lee notes walking in the garden with Molly Hopson 'before & after dinner', 25 May 1738, *Diary of Robert Lee of Binfield*, 127. Also see the courtship of Captain Henry Smith (1723–1794) and the tailor's daughter Sarah Hurst (1736–1808) where he regularly visited to dine, take tea, and sit up talking, May 1761, in *The Diaries of Sarah Hurst 1759–62*, ed. Susan C. Djabri (Stroud, 2009), 204–5.

[95] Neave and Neave (eds.), *Diary of a Yorkshire Gentleman*, 82, 147.

[96] Brian Robins (ed.), *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752–1828)* (Stuyvesant, NY, 1998), 20 Oct. 1774, 113, 126.

[97] On food, diet and health see Joanne Begiato, *Manliness in Britain, 1760–1900: Bodies, Emotion, and Material Culture* (Manchester, 2020), 68–100, and Winchcombe, 'Comfort Eating'. On the emergence of dentistry as a vocation see Colin Jones, *The Smile Revolution in Eighteenth Century Paris* (Oxford, 2014).

[98] Giese, *Courtships, Marriage Customs*, 134–5.

[99] See Fruitwood apple corer, eighteenth century, Opus Antiques: https://www.opusantiques.co.uk/product-page/an-18th-century-apple-corer-love-token; Sycamore apple corer engraved with a heart and the date, eighteenth century, Wilkinsons Auctioneers, lot 126: https://www.wilkinsons-auctioneers.co.uk/product/126-14; Sheep shank bone apple corer or cheese scoop carved with the initials N. W. A. within a heart, and the date 1748 within a circle, England or Wales: https://www.collinsantiques.co.uk/cgi-bin/item-details.pl?itemID=12220; also described in Margaret Lambert and Enid Marx, *English Popular Art* (1951), 21; Pinto, *Treen and Other Wooden Bygones*, 84, pl. 80.

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could be purchased for as little as twelvepence a peck (for around twenty-five), rising to three or four shillings a barrel.[100] The most sought-after and expensive varieties were 'the best green native Colchester', and 'Exceeding fine' Pyefleet oysters from Pyefleet Creek in Essex, with proprietors advertising their services to the 'Nobility, Gentry, Tradesmen and Others'.[101] Echoing the emphasis on the hand-picked over the commercial discussed above, such traders stressed that their oysters were picked 'fresh from the Beds' on fixed days, did *not* pass through Billingsgate, and came in branded barrels to guarantee quality. Usefully for courting couples, they could be shipped across the country from oyster warehouses, which often offered free local delivery, or purchased from street sellers, fairs and markets.[102]

Oysters possessed a twofold power in provoking feelings of lust and desire, with pretty oyster girls objectified for their sexual availability, and oysters themselves (alongside other shellfish such as crabs, crayfish and lobsters) renowned for their aphrodisiac properties.[103] The Colchester schoolmaster George Lloyd may have hoped that the lustful qualities of oysters would help to secure his engagement to his beloved Mrs Gray in 1677. She had already informed him in August that 'all things were at an end' between them, but he 'writt an answer' and opted not to send it, deciding that the subject was better broached in person. He travelled to London to propose in October, purchasing a carnelian ring and barrel of oysters as tokens. The act of sharing the oysters would have provided valuable time to repair their broken relationship, potentially reignite their bond by stirring sexual desire, and show his care and investment in safeguarding her physical health. For a short period, at least, it worked, with Lloyd staying over with her 'all night' the following month.[104]

The highly nutritious and 'strength-restoring' properties of oysters made them a particularly apposite choice for nourishing a future wife.[105] In this sense, as Jane Bennett suggests, the emotional power of food as a type of object

[100] See the print *Twelve Pence a Peck Oysters*, The Cries of London, 1688, etching, British Museum, London (BM), L,85.23.

[101] Draft trade card of the fishmonger Sarah Bonwick of 77 Queen Street, Cheapside, London, BM, Heal,63*1.

[102] For the shipping of oysters by the barrel see draft trade card of Clarks Shell Fish Warehouse of Soho Square, Heal, BM, 63*2; Draft trade card of John Rawson, barrelled oyster purveyor of Holborn, BM, Heal,63*12; Draft trade card of T. Howell, fishmonger of Minories, BM, D,2.1223; Draft trade card for Pedley Junior's Oyster & Shell Fish Warehouse, Covent Garden, BM, Heal,63*11; Draft trade card of J. Burt, fishmonger of Islington, *c.* 1820, BM, Banks,63*4.

[103] For oyster girls being propositioned by men see the trial of Elizabeth Mordant for pickpocketing, 16 Oct. 1723, t17231016-54, and the trial of Thomas Cash, Mary White and Margaret Boyl for pickpocketing, 23 Apr. 1718, t17180423-49, Old Bailey Online. For oyster girls in visual culture see the prints *Molly Milton, the Pretty Oyster Woman*, *c.* 1787, hand-coloured mezzotint, BM, 1935,0522.1.109, and *The Fair Oysterinda*, London, 1736–75, BM, 1872,0713.11. On aphrodisiacs see Jennifer Evans, *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2014), 90–108.

[104] 'The Diary of George Lloyd', 22 Oct. 1677, 270.

[105] 'When strength-restoring Oysters are in prime; Or in plain English, it was Winter-Time', George Alexander Stevens, *Distress upon Distress* (1752), 45; Drew Smith, *Oyster: A World History* (Stroud, 2010), 37–9.

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arises from how it 'modifies the human matter with which it comes into contact', mutually transforming both the eater and eaten.[106] In October 1790 the gentleman Edward Peach sent a barrel to the widow Elizabeth Leathes to aid her recovery from illness, noting they were 'esteem'd very nutritious' and in 'no ways improper for you at this time'.[107] He asked her to 'give me leave to be your Physician' and in addition to the oysters recommended that she consume a 'Neck of Mutton made into Broth' with 'a Turnip or two'.[108] Mutton ranked highly in tables of the most nourishing foods, with meat broths known for their therapeutic properties. Lighter-coloured vegetables such as parsnips were viewed as lighter and therefore easier to digest, coming highly recommended by medical writers for their nourishing properties.[109] This exchange was only a month before the couple's wedding, which took place on 25 November 1790, and so enabled Edward to begin caring for Elizabeth akin to a spouse.

The Derbyshire cotton-trader Joseph Strutt (1765–1844) took a similar approach during the illness of his sweetheart Isabella Douglas (1769–1802) in the spring of 1791. Her indisposition and the fear of losing her made him realise, he wrote, just how much he loved her. As a result, only her 'compleat restoration to health' could secure his future happiness. Joseph's investment in Isabella's ill health, and the lengths to which he was willing to go in order to ensure her recovery, worked to underscore his devotion as a future husband. To his mind, similarly to Edward Peach, the most nourishing foods available were meat and oysters. The former were considered heating foods which warmed and enlivened the body, shaped by the older humoural model and advocated by medical writers throughout the eighteenth century.[110] Yet a woman's personal tastes were also important, both in the arena of courtship and in discourses on diet and health.[111] Since Isabella did not like meat, Joseph opted to send a routine delivery of oysters by the barrel, writing:

> I have not heard lately whether your Oysters came regularly & whether you have enough of them – if they do not, or are not good, & you still prefer them, I desire I may know that I may order you some immediately from London; remember you are no longer to treat me with ceremony on this score.[112]

[106] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 40, 51.

[107] Peach to Leathes, Norwich, 8 Oct. 1790, NRO, BOL 2/140/2/35.

[108] Peach to Leathes, 17 Oct. 1790, NRO, BOL 2/140/2/36.

[109] George Cheyne, *An Essay of Health and Long Life*, 2nd edn (1725), 25–6; George Cheyne, *The Natural Method of Curing the Diseases of the Body, and the Disorders of the Mind* (1753), 55; John Hill, *The Old Man's Guide to Health and Longer Life: With Rules for Diet, Exercise, and Physic*, 6th edn (1764), 17, 41–2, 47; David Gentilcore, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe: Diet, Medicine and Society, 1450–1800* (2016), 40, 129.

[110] Evans, *Aphrodisiacs*, 90–100, 107.

[111] See for example George Thomson, *Orthomethodos Iatro Chimiche, or the Direct Method of Curing Chymically. Wherein is Conteined the Original Matter, and Principal Agent of all Natural Bodies* (1675), 26; William Forster *A Treatise on the Causes of Most Diseases Incident to Human Bodies, and the Cure of Them* (1745), 18.

[112] Joseph Strutt to Isabella Douglas, Derby, 17 Apr. 1791, 18 Mar. 1791 and 8 May 1791, Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham (BCA), MS3101/C/E/4/8/23–5.

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The strength of his commitment was evinced by the lengths to which he would go to procure her suitable foodstuffs, despite his distance from the coast meaning that there were often 'none fit to eat'. Through food, he declared his desire to 'sit by ... watch over ... wait upon' Isabella in matrimony. He advised that she 'do anything which will contribute to the ease of your mind, or the strength of your body' – through his food gifts, Joseph endeavoured to do the same.[113]

Conclusion

This article has sought to restore the critical importance of food gifts in navigating the path to matrimony in England during the long eighteenth century. In the absence of any a priori symbolic association with love or romance, the emotional meaning of food gifts was shaped by a number of factors, including their rarity, exoticism, freshness, nutritional properties, where they had been grown, by whom, and *with* whom they were consumed. Personal tastes were also important, and the desire to show knowledge of and attentiveness to a recipient's preferences. These tokens are so significant because they represent an entirely unique category of courtship gift, one hitherto neglected by historians, set apart from the garters, gloves, hair, ribbons and rings which have typically been used to distinguish courting behaviour. Through them, we see courtship made everyday, inextricably bound up in the webs of exchange which bound human beings to one another and to the natural world. This was not food eaten to *live*, but utilised as a powerful material means of communication, a vehicle for status, identity and emotion, and the creation of interpersonal bonds.

If melons, turkeys and fish can all constitute emotional objects, what does this suggest about where the boundaries of affective meaning begin and end? The article has endeavoured to demonstrate why we must extend our definition of materiality beyond man-made or machine-made objects, and beyond extant objects preserved in archives and museums, to also include foodstuffs and other perishable or organic items from the natural world. In doing so, we recognise how more ephemeral or transitory items also had important emotional meanings, which continued long after they ceased to exist in any tangible sense. The foodstuffs exchanged during courtship had the power to stimulate love, lust, joy, sensory delight and gustatory pleasure. They could function as gestures of humility, generosity and friendship, and signal thought, effort and familial care. These affective meanings would have looked noticeably different in other contexts, such as in the tokens exchanged between friends, family members or neighbours, demonstrating the cultural and emotional flexibility of food as a gift.

Food gifts further represent unique tokens of courtship as they could be given with the intention of being *consumed* with a loved one, thereby creating further opportunities for intimacy through walking, talking and dining together. They help to illuminate how courtship could be initiated, and the range of spaces in which it was situated: in public gardens and squares, the grounds and ponds of country estates, at fairs or wakes, in theatres, confectionery shops and around a tea table. Such items underscore the continuing importance of

[113] Strutt to Douglas, Derby, 18 Mar. 1791, 17 Apr. 1791 and 5 Jun. 1791, BCA, MS3101/C/E/4/8/23, 24, 26.

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families in shepherding along successful courtships, through hosting suitors for tea and chocolate, inviting them to dine and sharing the bounties of their gardens or estates. By paying close attention to such gifts, we can reconstruct a whole intangible system of feeling, and intrinsic part of the gift mode, which gave structure and meaning to the social and emotional process of courtship.

Given the centrality of food and food gifts in navigating the rituals of courtship, it is fitting therefore that food also symbolically and practically marked the change in a couple's status from suitors to spouses. Following their nuptials, couples informed their wider friends and family of their marriage by writing to them and distributing slices of the bride cake – a fruit cake decorated with almond and sugar icing – through the post.[114] One tale published in the periodical *The Connoisseur* accordingly figured the whole process of courtship through cake, in a dream purportedly inspired by a slice of the bride cake sent by a newly married couple. In the dream, courting couples crowded into the Temple of the God of Marriage, which was 'covered with a great number of Cakes of different shapes and appearance'. Some cakes were embellished with 'glittering toys' representing the potential rewards of marriage, including a fine house and a coach and six. In the Temple, couples approached the altar and applied to Cupid to gift them a cake. In one sense, the cakes represented virtuous femininity, with the 'most elegant' cakes with the 'sweetest ingredients' costing the largest sum of money. In another, they embodied marriage itself, with some women reaching the altar only to trade their 'plain' cake for a 'much more glittering' alternative.[115] Through cake, courtship comes full circle, from a suitor's opening gambit to a material signification of matrimony. The edible gift emerges as an unparalleled system of emotional communication, at once a symbol and the very literal food of love.

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[114] For example, Elizabeth Reading spent £1 2*s.* 6*d.* on her wedding cake in 1774, which she distributed alongside letters to her friends and relatives. Miller, *The Amiable Mrs Peach*, 13; Elizabeth Raffald, *The Experienced English Housekeeper, For the Use and Ease of Ladies, Housekeepers, Cooks, &c* (1786), 'To make Almond-Icing for the Bride-Cake', 265. On the cementing of the wedding cake as a central aspect of marriage rituals during the nineteenth century see Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Oxford, 2012), 122–3; Simon R. Charsley, *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History* (1992); Lucy Cory Allen, 'Classing Enchantment: Rethinking Social Identities with the Material Culture of Weddings in England, 1836–1914' (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2021), 175–219.

[115] *The Connoisseur*, no. 45, 20 Nov. 1755, 214–15.

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