All lovers of Jane Austen, the most knowledgeable as well as those who have just discovered her, will have much to learn from these modest, searching, and wonderfully perceptive essays.

Prof. Richard Cronin, University of Glasgow

This volume presents an exhilarating and insightful collection of essays on Jane Austen – distilling the author's deep understanding and appreciation of Austen's works across a lifetime. The volume is both intra- and inter-textual in focus, ranging from perceptive analysis of individual scenes to the exploration of motifs across Austen's fiction.

Full of astute connections, these lively discussions hinge on the study of human behaviour – from family relationships to sickness and hypochondria – highlighting Austen's artful literary techniques and her powers of human observation.

Jane Austen: Reflections of a Reader by (the late) Nora Bartlett is a brilliant contribution to the field of Jane Austen studies, both in its accessible style (which preserves the oral register of the original lectures), and in its foregrounding of the reader in a warm, compelling and incisive conversation about Austen's works. As such, it will appeal widely to all lovers of Jane Austen, whether first-time readers, students or scholars.

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Cover image: Woman Reading, Portrait of Sofia Kramskaya by Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887).

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7. Food in Jane Austen’s Fiction

All of Jane Austen’s novels end with weddings, sometimes with multiple weddings. Each of her heroines becomes, in the end, a bride. The road that leads to marriage is always so full of suspense that even when we are reading for the tenth time we reach the denouement with relief: she has landed him at last. What we never see is the bride becoming, as all will have to, the mistress of her husband’s household. ““Catherine would make a sad, heedless young housekeeper, to be sure’’, worries her mother, in Northanger Abbey, about her eighteen-year-old daughter’s approaching nuptials (II xvi 258). But we never see Catherine burning the toast, nor her young husband Henry good naturedly feeding it to the dog. However, this reticence contrasts with the amount of detail we are given, in all of the novels, of the domestic lives of the other characters, of the heroines’ parents and sisters and friends—and enemies. If we hardly ever see any of the heroines bending over anything more demanding than a tea table or a coffee pot, we see others, usually but not always women, involved in providing more substantial meals, occupied in trying to make people eat, occasionally trying to keep them from eating. Food, in the world of these novels, is not only for sustaining people in health and comfort. It has other purpose as well, other meanings.1

These six great novels full of wit and romance and class conflict, are also full of food, of people eating and refusing to eat. Along with the dance floor, and those morning visits which took up so much of her characters’ time, the dinner table is the place where Jane Austen’s men

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and women meet, talk, look at each other, and listen; and, of course, where they eat.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen’s most popular novel, the early meeting which takes place between the Bennet family, with their five daughters who are so in need of husbands, and the well-off Bingley party that will provide husbands for two of them, is soon followed by a raft of morning calls, evening card parties and dinners. Within two weeks of the first meeting, Elizabeth, the heroine, can remark to her friend Charlotte Lucas, that her sister Jane, who has already fallen in love with nice Mr. Bingley, “‘has dined in company with him four times’” (I vi 25). The Hertfordshire neighbourhood the Bingleys have moved to is a sociable one. Elizabeth’s mother, of whom more later, boasts that “‘we dine with four and twenty families’”, meaning not that her table has room for fifty, but that there are twenty-four families living nearby whose social rank makes them suitable dinner companions for the Bennets (I ix 48). The Bingleys, who have a house in London and who, as the novel progresses, we see doing practically nothing but dining out, are not impressed: their own social connections are presumably too many to count.

Early in the novel we see Elizabeth as a guest at the dinner table in the Bingleys’ rented country house, failing a social test. She has been seated next to Mr. Hurst, the husband of one of the Bingley sisters, ‘a man of more fashion than fortune [...] who lived only to eat, drink, and play at cards [...] when he found her prefer a plain dish to a ragout, he had nothing to say to her’ (I iv 17; I viii 38) When I read the last sentence as a child, I was puzzled by it, and for many years after: what was a ‘plain dish’, what was a ‘ragout’, why did it matter? I could, however, tell that it did matter, and that I was meant, I think, to approve Elizabeth’s taste and to despise Mr. Hurst’s. The novel was describing one sort of social distinction, observed by Mr. Hurst, while endorsing another, embodied in Elizabeth. Without knowing quite what is happening, we are led, as readers, to side, in that little exchange of values, with Elizabeth; we, too, reject the ragout.

And something more than that is happening, too, I think, and I want to look at one of Jane Austen’s other novels to help us see it better. We’ll come back to that ragout, and despicable Mr. Hurst, later; I want to move to *Sense and Sensibility*, an earlier and slightly less popular novel, in which two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood,
also, like the Bennet girls, in need of a husband, move from Sussex to Devonshire, and are introduced to a lively social circle which includes a fat, jolly, gossipy, vulgar (but also very decent, very good-hearted) elderly woman called Mrs. Jennings. Food has provided Mrs. Jennings with much enjoyment—“how [we] did stuff’’, she chortles, describing a day spent picking luscious mulberries on another character’s estate (II viii 223)—and when Mrs. Jennings manages to persuade the two Dashwood sisters to accompany her to her London house, she also tries to feed them up. On the journey, Mrs. Jennings was ‘only disturbed that she could not make them choose their own dinners at the inn, nor extort a confession of their preferring salmon to cod, or boiled fowls to veal cutlets’ (II iv 182). Later, when Marianne has a broken heart, Mrs. Jennings hopes that some sweetmeats and olives, or dried cherries, or a glass of especially good fortified wine, will cheer her up (II viii 220; II viii 224). Again here, though this time the character is far from dislikeable, there is the contrast between the hearty eater who is seen as slightly comic, and the heroine, presumably not comic, shaking her head and, if not exactly refusing to eat, refusing to take any positive pleasure in eating. The girls won’t say whether they like salmon better than cod. Why not? It seems almost rude.

I could multiply examples of this lack of appetite among Jane Austen’s heroines, and I want just to think about it a little with you. Throughout the novels, though occasionally the heroines get hungry, they never say so, and though they do eat, to be polite, they are never shown having any relish for food. The characters who are shown taking an interest in eating are always comic, often vulgar, and sometimes, like Mr. Hurst, positively beastly. I find this fascinating. Jane Austen’s satirical eye is attracted by any exaggeration, so her heroines usually avoid extremes of any kind, and are lampooned when they do not avoid them: Catherine’s reading of Gothic novels in Northanger Abbey, Emma’s snobbery, Marianne’s “‘passion for dead leaves’’ in Sense and Sensibility, are all treated as jokes (I xvi 101). So, perhaps, their very moderate appetites for food, displaying no exaggeration of any kind, are simply a form of admirable self-control? Perhaps.

This might be the moment to talk about what is called conduct literature or courtesy literature, handbooks of advice on topics from dress to marriage choices that were written for young people, especially
women, and read by them, for centuries, from ancient times. Those self-help articles published in the twenty-first century on ‘how to walk in high heels’ and ‘why French women don’t get fat’ are contemporary examples—it’s still going strong. In the eighteenth century, with the rise of circulating libraries and the growth of a literate middle-class reading public which included many women, these books of advice to the children, especially the daughters, of upwardly mobile families were widely disseminated. In 1788, when Jane Austen was thirteen years old, the Reverend John Trusler, a London clergyman, published a famous work, *The Honours of the Table,* ‘for the use of young people’, a book about table manners. In it, among suggestions that it was not a good idea to sit too near or too far from the table, eat greedily, lean elbows on the table, pick one’s teeth before dishes are removed, scratch, spit or blow your nose at the table, and that one should refrain from ‘smelling the meat whilst on the fork before you put it into your mouth’, more particularly, he remarks that ‘eating a great deal is deemed indelicate in a lady; (for her character should be rather divine than sensual)’. The advice not to spit was aimed at both sexes, the advice not to eat heartily aimed only at ‘ladies’. We do not know whether the Austen family owned a copy of the Reverend Trusler’s book, but we do know that Jane Austen had read some of this conduct literature, and we can also be sure she found some of what she read in it funny. We can make that assumption because the little fragments of writing that she produced as a child and as a teenager and read aloud to her family, all of which are satires of the books she had read, contain some satirical allusions to the high-flown feminine behaviour advocated by those courtesy books.

One of these fragments in particular, *Lesley Castle* of 1792, satirizes feminine attitudes to food. Like *Sense and Sensibility,* *Lesley Castle* has two heroines. One of them, Charlotte, is the only one of Jane Austen’s heroines who actually does any cooking. Indeed, she is obsessed with cooking, and with food. *Lesley Castle* contains a much cruder version of the opposition in *Sense and Sensibility* between ‘sensible’ Elinor and

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2 John Trusler, *The Honours of the Table or, Rules for Behaviour during Meals with the Whole Art of Carving* (London: Literary-Press, 1788), https://wellcomecollection.org/works/qszhwdv8/items?canvas=1&langCode=eng&sierraId=b21526199

3 Ibid., p. 17.

4 Ibid., p. 7.
‘sensitive’ Marianne. Charlotte, the cook, is the sensible, practical one, contrasted with her romantic sister Eloisa. Eloisa is in love, about to be married, but her fiancé is melodramatically thrown from his horse on the eve of the wedding. Eloisa’s shock turns her face, the food-obsessed Charlotte remarks, ‘as White as a Whipt syllabub’; but Charlotte is distressed not by Eloisa’s suffering but because all the cooking she has been doing for the wedding feast will now go to waste. “Good God [...] what in the name of Heaven will become of all the Victuals?”’, she exclaims as her sister sobs and faints (Letter II 146). And Charlotte and her mother agree

that the best thing we could do was to begin eating them immediately, and accordingly we ordered up the cold Ham and Fowls, and instantly began our Devouring Plan on them with great Alacrity. We would have persuaded Eloisa to have taken a Wing of Chicken, but she would not be persuaded. (Letter II 147)

Eloisa continues true to the memory of her lost fiancé, and to the norms of feminine sensibility. Weeks later, she is still pale and silent, still unable to eat, too sad to consume ‘even a pidgeon-pye’ (Letter VII 165). With the juxtaposition of the two sisters here, Jane Austen is laughing, heartless though it may seem, at both, and at the distinction, implicit in the conduct books and other literature of sensibility, between people feeding themselves and feeling. Here, as in those ‘how to be a lady’ books, those who eat cannot feel, those who feel cannot eat. In Lesley Castle it is a romp, a burlesque, not to be taken seriously, the work of a teenager who finds most adult behaviour screamingly funny, and lampoons it beautifully.

But in the later novels, too, heroines who are struggling with feelings, especially feelings they cannot express, secret feelings, starve themselves: Marianne in Sense and Sensibility, Jane Fairfax in Emma, Fanny in Mansfield Park, Anne Elliot in Persuasion, all weep secretly and grow thin. This romantic opposition between emotion and appetite, particularly among women, continues into literature of the later nineteenth century. The Brontë sisters’ heroines starve themselves, too, to dramatize their unhappiness. If they cannot have what they want, these heroines refuse to want anything else, especially food. In Wuthering Heights, Catherine Earnshaw starves herself to death, and when her creator Emily Brontë,
herself died at thirty, her coffin was said to be the narrowest the local carpenter had even made, ‘narrower than a child’s’.5

But Jane Austen, though closer, I think, to the Romantic movement than is often recognized, was not a romantic, and did not identify with her characters’ passions as Emily Brontë did. For her, both sense and sensibility, both reason and emotion, matter, and when her heroine Marianne recovers her health and her senses, she blames herself for her weeks of self-starvation: ‘Had I died,—it would have been self-destruction’, she tells her sister, very soberly, after her recovery (III x 391). Elinor, her sister, who has been nearly as wretched as Marianne throughout most of the novel, does not allow herself the luxury of such showy acts of self-harm. She always politely clears her plate, and on one occasion she philosophically downs the fine old wine that is meant to alleviate Marianne’s heartache, reflecting that she, too, has a broken heart, and might as well try it as a cure.

This motif, in which the romantic heroine is someone who does not have an appetite, is further complicated when we read Jane Austen’s letters, which often display her own straightforward pleasure in food. ‘You know how interesting the purchase of a sponge-cake is to me,’ she writes to her sister, and to her brother at sea she writes, ‘Rostock Market makes one’s mouth water, our cheapest Butcher’s meat is double the price of theirs’.6 She grew up in a country parsonage full of children, her siblings and the young boys whom her father taught, and it seems reasonable to imagine lively and talkative and satisfactory mealtimes. In her city life, in the unsettled years in which she lived with her family in lodgings in Bath and Southampton, she welcomes a snack of toasted cheese, and looks forward to being able to ‘drink as much wine as I like’.7 When she and her mother and sister, and the female cousin who lived with them, settled in the cottage in Chawton which would be her final home, Jane Austen was in charge of providing the breakfast. Not, I emphasize, of cooking it—do not imagine her with spatula in hand. Like her heroines, she prepared, it is thought, nothing but coffee and tea, just possibly toast, but she was responsible for making sure breakfast was on the table, and for the small, all-female, family’s supplies of tea, coffee

6 Letters, pp. 128; 229.
7 Letters, pp. 110; 251.
and sugar—all expensive, imported commodities. Her own relationship to food seems to have been fairly enthusiastic, so it is interesting that her heroines are so very refined in their appetites.

One thought I have had about this is that perhaps the mature novels are not so different from the juvenile works as we often think, and that, as in Lesley Castle, both the heroine figure and the housekeeper figure, both the Biblical Mary and the Biblical Martha, as it were, are being satirized, in the later novels as well. Perhaps when Elinor swallows Mrs. Jennings’s fine old Constantia, the novel is showing her to be more truly sensible, and more courteous, than when she and Marianne are conducting themselves in the ultrafeminine, unsensual style recommended by the courtesy books, and refusing to give the kind-hearted old lady the satisfaction of knowing whether or not they like the salmon she’s bought them!

There is no doubt, though, that the ‘housekeepers’, those who provide the food, are very often the target of Jane Austen’s satire, as in the case of Mrs. Jennings’s housekeeping. We should remember that all these fictional women are well off enough to employ servant housekeepers to whom they give the orders for meals, though the Austens themselves, in the country parsonage in Steventon in which Jane Austen passed her happy childhood, did not employ such a person and Mrs. Austen must have spent much of her time in and around the parsonage kitchen. Mrs. Jennings’s housekeeping displays generosity, and hospitality, and genuine care for others, but it has a somewhat limiting effect on her imagination. Here is her description of Delaford, the hero, Colonel Brandon’s, well-endowed country estate, where eventually both sisters will find their happiness: “Delaford is a nice place [...] a nice old fashioned place [...] with the best fruit-trees in the country and such a mulberry tree in one corner! [...] Then, there is a dove-cote, some delightful stewponds [...] A butcher hard by in the village” (II viii 223). It is hard to miss that almost all the amenities she admires are not to do with architecture or the beauty of the countryside, but with food. The dovecote is there to provide the household with the pigeon pie a sensitive heroine shouldn’t eat, and the stewponds are to ensure a regular supply of fresh fish at a time when fish transported from the sea were liable to arrive stinking and uneatable.
Mrs. Jennings’s warm-hearted doings can be compared with those of other busy housekeepers, and one interesting contrast is with *Pride and Prejudice*’s Lady Catherine de Bourgh, in her own way much more vulgar than Mrs. Jennings despite her noble birth. Lady Catherine is shown inquiring after Charlotte’s chickens and her pigs, and on the occasions when she ‘condescends’ to take any refreshment in the parsonage ‘does so only for the sake of finding out that Charlotte’s joints of meat were too big for her family’. An interest in food this minute is seen as intrinsically ridiculous, and Lady Catherine, *grande dame* though she is, is a fool. But such obsessive, absurd interests in domestic minutiae, in food, clothing, shelter or health, these preoccupations always struck Jane Austen as funny, and she found myriad ways in which to present them. We see obsession with food in particular in two vastly different characters, Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park* and Mr. Woodhouse in Emma. In both novels the obsession renders them comic, in utterly contrasted ways.

Mr. Woodhouse, the heroine’s father in *Emma*, is a man older than his years, a hypochondriac, with what the eighteenth century called nervous complaints. He lives a mild, regimented life ruled by ‘habits of gentle selfishness’ (I i 6) which include regular tea drinking with a group of old ladies of his acquaintance, but though he is hospitable, and generous, continually sending gifts of food to his poorer neighbours, food is a problem for him, indeed a danger:

He loved to have the cloth laid [...] but his conviction of suppers being very unwholesome made him rather sorry to see anything put on it [...] ‘Mrs. Bates, let me propose your venturing on one of these eggs. An egg boiled very soft is not unwholesome, [...] you need not be afraid—they are very small, you see—one of our small eggs will not hurt you. Miss Bates, let Emma help you to a little bit of tart—a very little bit. Ours are all apple-tarts. You need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here. I do not advise the custard. Mrs. Goddard, what say you to half a glass of wine? A small half glass—put into a tumbler of water?’ (I iii 23–24)

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8 ‘Mr. Darcy looked a little ashamed of his aunt’s ill breeding’ (II viii 195) when she tells Elizabeth that she is welcome to play the piano in the servants’ quarters.

9 ‘Now and then, they were honoured with a call from her Ladyship, and nothing escaped her observation that was passing in the room during these visits [...] if she accepted any refreshment, seemed to do it only for the sake of finding out that Mrs. Collins’s joints of meat were too large for her family’ (II vii 190).
The reader is relieved to know that ‘Emma allowed her father to talk—but supplied her visitors in a much more satisfactory style’ (I iii 24).

*Mansfield Park*, written just before *Emma*, presents us with Mrs. Norris, who is both one of the great villains of literature and a finely tuned comic figure. A parson’s widow, she has finagled her way into a dominant role at her sister’s home, Mansfield Park. Mrs. Norris enjoys penny-pinching, others’ pennies as well as her own. More than once we catch her shooing the poor and hungry away from the door of Mansfield Park, and she is driven almost insane by the thought of the good living which is going on in the parsonage which was once her domain but is now occupied by the gourmand Dr. Grant and his easy-tempered, high-spending wife. But the real outlet for her passion for economy is shown in her talent for scavenging. She has a genius for accumulating free gifts. After the Mansfield Park family makes a visit to a much grander household at Sotherton Manor, Mrs. Norris is described in the carriage that takes them home with her lap “full of good things”: a small heather plant, a large cream cheese, pheasants’ eggs (I x 123). “What else have you been spunging?” her niece teases her, and Mrs. Norris begins one of her hypocritical parades: “it is a cream cheese, just like the excellent one we had at dinner. Nothing would satisfy that good old Mrs. Whitaker [the housekeeper], but my taking one of the cheeses. I stood out as long as I could, till the tears almost came into her eyes, and I knew it was just the sort that my sister would be delighted with” (I x 123). The reader sees through this, and knows that no one but Mrs. Norris will ever see any of that cream cheese, and here we witness an intriguing variant of the delicate relationship between women and food—Mrs. Norris is never greedy or demanding for herself, oh no, but for others...

*Mansfield Park* is the only one of the novels in which eating is shown in anything but genteel circumstances. Fanny, the young heroine, has been sent away to Mansfield Park as a child from her large, indigent family in Portsmouth, and when she returns to Portsmouth as a young woman she is shocked by the squalor with which she was once, presumably, at home; shocked also to find herself disgusted at her family’s food, and their table manners:

Betsey’s eating at table without restraint, and pulling every thing about as she chose [...] (III x 472)
[Fanny’s] eyes could only wander from the walls marked by her father’s head, to the table cut and knotted by her brothers, where stood the tea-board never thoroughly cleaned, the cup and saucers wiped in streaks [...] (III xv 508)

the half-cleaned plates, and not half-cleaned knives and forks, [...] After being nursed up at Mansfield, it was too late in the day to be hardened at Portsmouth. (III xi 479)

Anyone who has read *Mansfield Park* and recalls how badly Fanny is treated there will be offered food for reflection: conditions at Portsmouth must be truly dreadful. In the eighteenth century, food in urban areas, for the lower middle classes to whom Fanny’s family belongs, was uneven in quality, often spoilt before it was sold, and often adulterated with products that included white lead, sulphuric acid and the ash of human bones. City milk was legendarily bad, brought up from the country and sold by milkmaids from open pails in the dirty street, or, later, the product of badly housed and badly fed urban cows who lived in conditions similar to our battery hens. At Portsmouth, the milk we see Fanny struggling to drink is ‘a mixture of motes floating in thin blue’ (III xv 508).

Food habits in *Mansfield Park* are so harshly depicted as to be almost beyond comedy. In the other novels, housekeepers who are better off and more competent than Fanny’s mother are satirized because all they are interested in is opulence and display. Mrs. Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice*, assumes the world will overlook her drawbacks as a mother and a wife because she can offer ‘two full courses’ at a family dinner, and because her daughters are brought up fashionably, without being taught to cook (I xxi 135). She sneers because their neighbours, the Lucas girls, might be ‘wanted about the mince pies’ (I ix 48). But surely the lack of housewifery in the Bennet girls’ education is a metaphor for the other, more serious lacks, for the younger girls’ bad manners, and most importantly, for fifteen-year-old Lydia’s never having been taught that safe sex, in Georgian England, comes after marriage and not before.

Another housekeeper much given to display is the new bride, Mrs. Elton, in *Emma*, whose life in Bath and Bristol had led her to think herself a fashion leader. She boasts that the everyday fare provided by her housekeeper is always good enough for her guests, and she offers catering advice to all and sundry, even to the formidable Mr. Knightley. Barding in on his plans for a strawberry picnic, she preens,
‘by the bye, can I or my housekeeper be of any use to you with our opinion?—Pray be sincere, Knightley. If you wish me to [...] inspect anything—’ ‘I have not the least wish for it, I thank you,’ is his dry answer.10 (III vi 386)

But nothing can stop Mrs. Elton:

‘Well—but if any difficulties should arise, my housekeeper is extremely clever.’ ‘I will answer for it, that mine thinks herself full as clever, and would spurn any body’s assistance.’ (III vi 386)

Not only revealing of the two characters through dialogue, this little passage suggests the intimacy of the relationship between the proprietor of the household and the paid servant housekeeper. Mr. Knightley, that defender of women, is here defending his housekeeper’s independence as much as his own.

Scattered throughout the novels are warmer kinds of comedy which deal with food, and chime better with the wholehearted attitudes in the letters. The Christmas scene in Persuasion, where the picture of ‘tressels and trays, bending under the weight of brawn and cold pies, where riotous boys were holding high revel, the whole completed by a roaring Christmas fire’ (II ii 145) is almost Dickensian, and in the same novel there is the astonishing hospitality of the poor sailor family, the Harvilles, who want not only to feed but to house huge numbers of complete strangers in their tiny lodgings: ‘They were only concerned that the house could accommodate no more; and yet perhaps by “putting the children away in the maids’ room, or swinging a cot somewhere,” they could [...] [find] room for two or three besides’ (I xii 122). These scenes of family warmth and hospitality are deepened for the reader because we see them through the wistful eyes of Anne Elliot, whose own family life has been so cold and loveless. This sort of framing is characteristic of Jane Austen: the reader watches every scene, participates in it, through one of the heroines.

I would like to take you through a day of eating with Jane Austen. Georgian mealtimes, and indeed Georgian meals, were different from ours, and a partial source of my own interest in this topic was my

10 The long dash at the end of Mrs. Elton’s last comment is often placed by Murray’s editorial team to indicate an interruption, suggesting that Knightley comes as close as a gentleman could to cutting her off.
confusion when I was first reading Jane Austen at what seemed to be the strange hours at which, in the different novels, meals were taken. Though Jane Austen famously took as her topic ‘3 or 4 Families in a Country Village’, it seemed to be the case that, for each different village, often for each family, meals were on a different schedule.\(^{11}\) Looking at these differences helps us to appreciate that Jane Austen’s world is a bigger one than is sometimes thought.

You will not be surprised to learn that, even in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, fashionable life went with late hours. When Elizabeth Bennet leaves her own completed breakfast, about 9 o’clock of a September morning, the three-mile walk to Netherfield finds the Bingley party, and Mr. Darcy, the high-fashion set, still at breakfast. Elizabeth is a fast walker, but this has to take an hour, so the Bingleys must breakfast at 10 at the earliest. As does Mary Musgrove, the young mother with aristocratic aspirations in *Persuasion*, and the Londoners, Henry and Mary Crawford, in *Mansfield Park*. Country people like Mr. Knightley in *Emma*, and probably Emma and her father too, little influenced by city life, kept rather early hours, at least in summer. But in all of Jane Austen’s mature novels the main action starts in the autumn and, almost always, is completed over the course of a year. What we need to remember is that, as autumn and winter came on, almost every household would want to spare expense on candles. Large country households probably kept bees, as Cassandra Austen did, to provide wax as well as honey, but few households could keep enough bees to provide all the candles needed through a long winter. In the winter of 1810, wax candles cost one shilling and a penny per pound in London, and an urban working family might go through more than that in a week—how many more must have been consumed at a great country house like Mansfield Park! Therefore, unless absolutely necessary, breakfast would wait, at that time of the year, until full daylight eliminated the need for candles, rarely occurring before 9 o’clock and often delayed until 10. People often rose earlier and accomplished what work they could, probably using lanterns outside and tallow candles indoors. At Chawton, Jane Austen practised the piano for two hours before breakfasting with her family, and in London she sometimes shopped before breakfast.

\(^{11}\) *Letters*, p. 275.
Georgian breakfasts were light for the most part, tea and coffee and chocolate to drink, sweet and plain cakes and toast to eat (continental visitors were delighted by British toasted bread, which apparently was not eaten much abroad). But the early (9:30) breakfast which follows the ball at Mansfield Park, and sends two strong young men off to London, and the boastful breakfasts of General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* probably both echoed the plenty of an earlier era and prefigured, in their variety, the heartier breakfast of the Victorian period. The *Northanger Abbey* meal is early, too, because they are travelling from Bath down to the country, but General Tilney worries his timid teenage guest, Catherine, half to death, by his predatory fussing: ‘his continual solicitations that she would eat, and his often-expressed fears of her seeing nothing to her taste—though never in her life before had she beheld half such variety on a breakfast-table—made it impossible for her to forget for a moment that she was a visitor’ (II v 157). This is a lovely play on the General’s inability to make anyone feel ‘at home’ and an indicator that there was more on that table than toast.

With breakfast the ‘morning’ began, as for most of us, but with the difference that the morning did not end, as it does for us, with lunch, but with dinner, and dinner, which had once, in the mid-eighteenth century, taken place about the middle of the day or even earlier, by its end took place at a time which could vary, and does in Jane Austen’s novels, between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. Not until later in the nineteenth century did lunch come into fashion. The word ‘luncheon’ occurs once in these novels, and once also occurs its variant ‘nuncheon’, and both times refers to a catch-as-catch-can meal taken at an inn. In the increasing gap between breakfast and dinner there would be either, and this most often seems to be the case, nothing at all (don’t feel too sorry for them, wait until you see what they ate for dinner) or what the food historian Maggie Lane calls ‘the meal with no name’ a meal we see several times in Jane Austen’s novels, once when Mary Musgrove snacks on a little cold meat, once at Mr. Knightley’s on the strawberry picking day, but most grandly at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy’s elegant country house in *Pride and Prejudice*, when the social chill between the warring Bingley and Bennet ladies is thawed a little by food:
The next variation which their visit afforded was produced by the entrance of servants with cold meat, cake, and a variety of all the finest fruits in season [...]. There was now employment for the whole party; for though they could not all talk, they could all eat; and the beautiful pyramids of grapes, nectarines, and peaches, soon collected them round the table. (III iii 296)\(^1\)

Eating, here, is a welcome distraction; conversation was running out. The combination of meat, cake and fruit is something which may strike us as odd, but which is the staple of this odd snack: meat, in particular, as the well-off ate much more meat than bread or vegetables, and the acidity of fruit was believed, in eighteenth-century medical theory, to counteract the ‘alkaline’ character of meat. Everyone who could afford it, in this period, ate vast quantities of meat. When the diarist James Woodforde, ‘Parson Woodforde’, totted up his yearly expenses, the bill for meat was something like forty times the bill for flour, and even when allowances are made for the difference in price per pound of meat and grain, the proportion does not greatly change.\(^1\) It is no wonder than so many wealthy Georgians flocked to spas seeking a cure for gout.

We have seen people socializing over breakfast and over this nameless meal, but there is no doubt that the social meal of the day, then as now, was dinner. Dinner takes place, in Jane Austen, any time between the early hour preferred by Emma and her father, about 3 p.m., and the fashionable 6:30 p.m. favoured by the Bingley sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*. The ideal dinner Mrs. Bennet schemes for Mr. Bingley must have ‘two full courses’. Courses succeeded each other, as they do today, but in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England, in what was called the ‘French style’ of dining, the first course, consisting of large and small dishes carefully spread on a substantial, probably oval or circular, cloth-covered table, was visible to diners as they entered the dining room. Part of the splendour, the meaning, of any formal dinner, was in

\(^{12}\) Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen and Food* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1995), p. 35: ‘During Jane Austen's lifetime, in a domestic context, refreshments would be offered without giving them any name [...] As the meal had no name, it is not surprising that it had no fixed hour but was offered whenever guests appeared’.

the careful arrangement of dishes. Mrs. Frazer’s *The Practice of Cookery* (1791) contains a diagram of the layout of the table form.

Note the prevalence of meat dishes, though sweet dishes often appeared also. Dinner would typically begin with a soup, served out by the host. Soup was eaten, and dishes removed, before the guests proceeded with the rest of their eating. This could take a long time; I’ll say a little more
about that in a moment. The second course, if it is like the dinners Parson Woodforde ate with his friends, might consist of slightly ‘lighter’ food: fish cakes, pasties, macaroni, and perhaps some sweet tarts and milk puddings. Though not necessarily: sometimes the pièce de résistance was saved for a second course—a swan once, for Parson Woodforde, a swan that had been killed three weeks before it was eaten. When the cloth was removed after the second course, the table, often bare now so that the gleaming mahogany could be seen, was laid with ‘dessert’, finger food, including fruit and nuts and dried fruit.

You may be interested to know that, aside from the host and hostess, who sat at the head and foot of the table as often still today, and sometimes a strategically placed ‘principal guest’ who would be seated by the hostess, the Georgians practised what was called ‘promiscuous seating’, that is, a scramble for places. That is why Frank Churchill, in *Emma*, finds himself so often next to her, because he’s grabbed the seat he wants. That is probably why poor Jane Fairfax, his secret love, gets icier and icier to Emma, and has less and less appetite for her own dinner. And your dinner partner, if you were a lady, was important, because ladies, even if they were not themselves of the ‘divine type’ who preferred not to eat, did not, conventionally, help themselves to dishes but were helped by the gentleman next to them, or by the hostess if you could catch her eye—we remember Emma side-stepping her papa and helping her guests to the fish and the chicken. This, of course, is the context in which Mr. Hurst lost interest in Elizabeth. Hoping to help her to a ragout, and perhaps slosh a little extra onto his own plate as he did so, he found she only wanted the ‘plain dish’. The ragout, like the Italian or French dishes of the same name is a highly seasoned dish. The ‘plain dish’ might have been undressed meat, indeed probably was. That prissy little Miss Elizabeth Bennet has spoilt her partner’s chance to have an extra helping, as well as, probably, her own. One imagines him devoting himself to his plate, watching for other opportunities to swoop, while Elizabeth slices her ‘plain dish’ into smaller and smaller pieces in order to look occupied. There are only six people around this dinner table; that two of them do not talk and one does not eat must be hard to avoid noticing.

The first course would be eaten, or grow cold, and was then taken away by servants, and a new cloth laid for the second course. In *Emma*
we see a dinner party at the home of the nouveaux riches Coles, who are not used to giving dinner parties to the gentry, and Emma’s and Frank’s lively conversation is disrupted by ‘the awkwardness of a rather long interval between the courses’ (II viii 235). The pair are unable to resume gossiping until ‘every corner dish was placed exactly right’ (II viii 236). No doubt Emma’s servants, and even Mrs. Bennet’s servants in Pride and Prejudice, are more used to handling the shift of courses. It is not only parsimony that stops the snobbish Elizabeth Elliot from inviting her sister’s family to dinner in Bath, but an unwillingness to have even a sister see the way in which her reduced establishment there would manage such details as the change of course.

In Pride and Prejudice, dinner is usually a lively affair, too lively, as Elizabeth is more than once forced to watch her family’s embarrassing misbehaviour and its effect on Mr. Darcy and the Bingleys. But dinners in the other novels are often long and dreary. Frequently, the period before the drinking started for the men, and the ladies escaped to the drawing room to wait for tea, could be longer than two hours, and when we know this we see how ghastly some of the duller dinners must have been. In Sense and Sensibility, ‘though not much in the habit of giving any thing’ (II xii 262), the rich and selfish young Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood do give a dinner to the equally chilly Lady Middleton: ‘The dinner was a grand one, the servants were numerous, and everything bespoke the Mistress’s inclination for shew, and the Master’s ability to support it. [...] no poverty of any kind, except of conversation, appeared—but there, the deficiency was considerable’ (II xii 265–66).

We see equally lifeless family dinners in Mansfield Park where the adult children of the household sit sullenly, awed by their elders’ formidable silences: as Fanny explains it, ‘“There was never much laughing in his presence [...] I cannot recollect that our evenings formerly were ever merry, except when my uncle was in town”’ (II iii 230). Sir Thomas is solemn but well meaning. General Tilney, in Northanger Abbey, is a bully whose mere presence spoils every mealtime. Here, we see him at home in the Abbey: ‘General Tilney was pacing the drawing-room, his watch in his hand, and having, on the very instant of their entering, pulled the bell with violence, ordered “Dinner to be on table directly!”’ (II vi 169). From these grim meals it is a relief to turn even to Mrs. Bennet’s gabbling or to the dinner at Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s
where we see Mr. Collins take ‘his seat at the bottom of the table, [...]’

and looked as if he felt that life could furnish nothing greater’ (II vi 184).

Dinner, of course, was not the end. There was tea to follow, and tea,

taking place less than two hours after the completion of the two-hour
dinner, often involved cakes and sweetmeats. And if the evening was

long enough, tea could be followed by supper. In the opening chapter of
Emma, Mr. Woodhouse, having slept since dinner, wakes for tea. That

evening, with only Emma and her father and Mr. Knightley, there is

perhaps no supper, and supper does not figure at the Bingley house

either, as they dine so late, nor do the mean Elliots seem to feature

suppers at their elegant lodgings in Bath. Nor does Lady Catherine, nor

the Bennets at home, nor others who aspire to fashion. Dinner is getting

later, supper, an eighteenth-century staple, is going out of fashion in

the early years of the nineteenth century. But Mr. Woodhouse, who

would have in his youth eaten dinner even earlier, ‘loved to have the

cloth laid [for supper], because it had been the fashion of his youth’ (I

iii 23–24), and Emma is, as always, happy to see her father happy (one

of her most endearing characteristics). So she serves suppers, especially

when friends come to play cards: in the scene we have looked at, when

Mr. Woodhouse and his daughter struggle over whether or not their

guests should be endangered by eggs and apple-tarts, and in the scene

with which I would like to close, which is the lovely

Christmas reunion

of Emma, her sister and the Knightley brothers, the evening when we

see Mr. Woodhouse indulging in his favourite pastime of eating gruel.

For anyone who, like me, grew up on Dickens and the Brontës, gruel

has had a rather bad press as a means of starving paupers to death.
Growing up in America, indeed, I had no idea what gruel might even
be made of, and thought of it as a thin soup, possibly with a few weevils
floating in it for protein. But, as I am sure you know, gruel is a very
thin oatmeal porridge, consisting of oatmeal, water, milk and salt. This
is the ‘discourse in praise of gruel’ by Mr. Woodhouse and his equally
hypochondriac elder daughter, observed with affectionate amusement
by the Knightley brothers and Emma—and by us, the readers:

The gruel came and supplied a great deal to be said—much praise and
many comments—undoubting decision of its wholesomeness for every
constitution, and pretty severe Philippics upon the many houses where
it was never met with tolerably. (I xii 108; I xii 112)
Those of you who know the novel well, know that the gruel, in this instance, leads to a family argument, but I am sure that in most cases it leads to good digestion and a pleasant night’s sleep.