

# Warm and Comfortable: Portrayals of Food as a Social Scaffolding Tool in British Literature

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the political, social, and moral role food has had historically as portrayed through literature by performing a close reading and contrastive analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century British novels *Emma* by Jane Austen and *Miss Marjoribanks* by Margaret Oliphant. By examining these texts in the context of the field of food studies, the aim is to highlight the role of food as a social scaffolding tool. This exploration brings to the fore how literary analysis is a relevant tool which can add to the field of food studies by helping understand the evolution of how food has been used and perceived historically in society.

## Introduction

From the snacks we choose while watching or reading to the more ritualized meals consumed during weddings, food has a strong role in the mundane and exceptional of the human experience. Food production, distribution, preparation, presentation, and consumption influences not only human society, but the entire ecosystem in which humans live on a global scale. Archeologist Frances Reynolds' research of Babylonian civilization is a good example of how written references to food can provide a very prolific avenue of research. Reynolds explicitly expresses how "most knowledge about Babylonian food and drink derives from Akkadian texts, rather than archeological sources." By studying these texts, reinforced by further archeological evidence, Reynolds can infer the environment, climate, trade, demographics, and social roles in ancient Babylon (171-182). Reynolds' research serves to highlight how food can be a treasure trove of information for a variety of disciplines. And yet, the need for a multidisciplinary and intersectional approach to the study of food has only been acknowledged in recent years. In *Conversations in Food Studies*, Colin R. Anderson et al. point out food studies' interdisciplinary nature but remark on how scholars from various disciplines who contribute to it do not always work collaboratively across disciplinary boundaries (14). In *Feminist Food Studies: Intersectional Perspectives* Barbara Parker et al. also explain the need for an intersectional approach, considering how food has a role in shaping and experiencing "various forms of oppression and privilege including [...] gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, religion and age" (1). In *Intersectionality and Food Studies*, Psyche Williams-Forsion and Abby Wilkerson agree in seeing food as a "powerful tool for analyzing almost any kind of issue" including "gender, race and class" which "intersect with food in almost every way" (8). Williams-Forsion and Wilkerson take advantage of the intersection between African American studies and food studies to better explore the "real, complicated nature" of the former:

“When we move from thinking of food as unraced, unclassed and unfettered by the binds of sexuality and physicality and therefore socially equal, to discussions of food as an inherent part of the social inequality of our lives.” (11) Perhaps it is food’s inherent link to society and its apparent polyvalence that was behind the sudden interest in a more structured development of food studies as its own research field around the turn of the century. Marion Nestlé and W. A. McIntosh, two of the groundbreaking researchers in the field, point out in “Writing the Food Studies Movement” how in the years between 1996 to 2006, food studies went from a single study program at New York University to an international academic field (167). Ken Albala (*Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*) also highlights the field’s quick expansion. He considers it to have achieved a “critical mass of professional academics” from a variety of fields (Albala xv). This perspective clashes with Nestle and McIntosh’s perception of a lack of a food studies “canon” or “core reading list.” (Nestle and McIntosh 168).

In their book *Literature and Food Studies* Amy L. Tigner and A. Carruth present literary texts to portray and transmit food cultures and practices. They also “help structure them” (6), turning food into a social scaffolding tool; a mechanism that can reinforce social dynamics and bonds. This thesis will focus on exploring how this is achieved in two key works from English literature through a close reading of Jane Austen’s *Emma* and Margaret Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks*. These two texts portray middle-high class social interactions set in England, in which food has relevance to social interaction. These similarities are no coincidence, in her article “Emma in the 1860s: Austen, Yonge, Oliphant, Eliot.” June Sturrock considers Oliphant to have taken “Emma as her originating text for *Miss Marjoribanks*: several of her critics comment on this” and “*Emma* was the Austen novel Oliphant admired most” (331). A comparative analysis of these texts, approached from a Food Studies perspective, is expected to

highlight the differences of how food is present in these texts —its preparation, presentation and consumption— which will help answer the following research questions: How is food used as a social scaffolding tool to reinforce, generate or fight social structures and bonds in these texts? What does a comparative analysis of food portrayal in these texts provide to the field of food studies?

These issues are explored in five chapters. Chapter one presents in more detail the idea of food as a social scaffolding tool, that can help build and sustain social structures. Chapters two and three each perform a close reading of the texts, reinforced by secondary sources. The aim is to highlight what kind of information does food portrayal in the text adds to it, with a particular focus in social structures. Chapter four delves into the similarities and differences between the examples and tries to explain the reasons why they might exist considering their individual context. The final chapter summarizes the findings of the research and addresses some of the limitations that have been brought forward, providing productive suggestions for further research.

### 1- A Brief Overview of Food's Role in Literature.

In literature, food often shines in giving form to social and political realities. Food can be a way to express and help realize social ideas. The kind of food a person or social group consumes, its cultivation, origin, preparation and the way it is eaten can help make and break social bonds or reinforce those already present. It can express a particular political idea or denounce an injustice. This is shown from very early on in western literature. Gaius Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon*, written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, features Trimalchio, a former slave turned shipping mogul who offers a dinner party in which he advertises his new wealth by presenting his guest with an extravagant array of courses. Wild boar, suckling piglets, boiled calf... The food is served by slaves reciting their master's poetry, dancing and singing. Even the meat is carved in complex, choreographed ways. All these excessive elements coalesce into a proclamation of the host's new social and economic primacy. Trimalchio's feast, however, does more than reinforce his social position, it also serves as a way for him to express his worldview and his character. William Arrowsmith's "Luxury and Death in the *Satyricon*" explores how through these excesses, the text presents food consumption as a symbol of *luxuria* "the end of satiety [in] constipation" and equates *luxuria* to "death, extinction of the rational will" (309). Trimalchio's feast celebrates his newfound economic primacy, and by partaking in the excesses of *luxuria* his guests not only accept Trimalchio but validate and reinforce his social status and values. One in which excessive, irrational consumption of food resources is not only positively viewed but encouraged or perhaps even necessary when it comes to being socially relevant.

Petronius' text does not reveal if these excesses are at someone else's expense, yet there are plenty of historic instances in which the excesses of privileged social classes do come at someone else's expense. In "The Political Economy of the Potato" David Lloyd research shows how in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, "improvement" of farming or

“the capitalist rationalization of agriculture” lead to the consolidation of smaller plots of land to create sizable landholdings to establish “labor-extensive grain farming and grazing”(312). This resulted in the eviction of small-holding tenants and further subdivision of the remaining plots into tiny parcels “without apparent logic and certainly not [an] attempt at consolidation” to the “horror of modernizing foreign observers” (312). It also led to further popularize potatoes as a crop, since *cottiers* — small land owners who moonlighted as farmhands for the larger, consolidated farmlands— only needed “to purchase or borrow seed potatoes and a spade to lay down a crop” (312). There is a clear distinction between the capitalist approach of agriculture as a means for profit—a commodification of food— and the *cottiers*’ one, which revolves around food security. This fundamental difference in approach to food production was an important factor of the social division in Ireland. In his book *National Revolutionaries in Ireland* Tom Garvin points out that “The real enemy of the Irish rebel was not the British soldier or police but the reformer and the continuing steady adjustment of Irish society to commercialized, capitalist, modern civilization.” (4). By allowing a measure of food security, Irish cottiers’ minifundist approach to potato cultivation became a powerful economic and social resistance tool.

Food might not always be at the core of social conflict, but it regularly pops up as a means of both oppression and resistance. In his memoir *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, the author describes how as a slave living in 19<sup>th</sup> century Virginia he would often be denied proper sustenance, and would not see taking food from his master’s larder as a theft:

“[I]t was a question of removal--the taking his meat out of one tub and putting it in another; the ownership of the meat was not affected by the transaction. At first he owned it in the tub, and last he owned it in me.” (128)



The fact that slaves could not sell the food they would take from their masters should make clear that the aim was sustenance, not profit. Yet the response from the landowners as described by Charles Ball —another 19<sup>th</sup> century former slave turned author— in his memoir *Fifty Years in Chains* was to plant corn, sweet potatoes and other basic food staples “near the houses. I afterwards learned that this custom of planting the corn and potatoes near the house of the planter, is generally all over Carolina. The object is to prevent the slaves from stealing, and thus procuring more food than, by the laws of the plantation, they are entitled to” (135). Lack of food security resulted also in the cultivation of gardens or “patches” (137) in which slaves grew potatoes and corn —often hidden from their masters’ eyes— in a way very similar to what the Irish were doing at the same time across the Atlantic. By securing their own, independent, sources of food, both oppressed communities deny food as a tool for punishment and reward which could be used by their oppressors to defuse social resistance.

2- Socially Entertaining: Food in *Miss Marjoribanks*.

In Margaret Olliphant's novel *Miss Marjoribanks* food is easily recognizable as a social scaffolding element. After furthering her education through a continental progress through Italy and France, the titular protagonist returns home to her widowed father, who in her absence has achieved a certain social prominence by putting together "men's dinners" (12). Soirees in which his choice of dishes —particularly his sauces— are much celebrated by his peers. At the very beginning of the novel, and even before Lucilla Marjoribanks returns home, Nancy, Dr. Marjoribanks cook, raises the point that Lucilla's food preferences might clash with her father's:

[S]he returned again to the table, where her master ate his breakfast, with a presentiment. "If you please, sir," said Nancy, "not to give you no vexation nor trouble, which every one knows as it has been the aim o' my life to spare you, as has so much on your mind. But it's best to settle afore commencing, and then we needn't have no heartburning. If you please, am I to take my orders of Miss Lucilla, or of you, as I've always been used to? In the missus's time," said Nancy, with modest confidence, "as was a good missus, and never gave no trouble as long as she had her soup and her jelly comfortable, it was always you as said what there was to be for dinner. I don't make no objection to doing up a nice little luncheon for Miss Lucilla, and giving a little more thought now and again to the sweets; but it ain't my part to tell you, sir, as a lady's taste, and more special a young lady's, ain't to be expected to be the same as yours and mine as has been cultivated like. I'm not one as likes contention," continued the domestic oracle, "but I couldn't abear to see a good master put upon; and if it should be as Miss Lucilla sets her mind upon messes as ain't got no taste in them, and milk-puddings and stuff, like the most of the ladies, I'd just like to know out of your own mouth, afore the commencement, what I'm to do?" Dr Marjoribanks was so

moved by this appeal that he laid down his knife and contemplated the alarming future with some dismay. "It is to be hoped Miss Lucilla will know better," he said. "She has a great deal of good sense, and it is to be hoped that she will be wise enough to consult the tastes of the house." (24)

It must be highlighted that this is the only possible point of conflict raised when discussing Lucilla's return home. To be able to assume her social role inside the household, his father makes manifest that she must acquiesce to the household's food preferences. To Dr. Marjoribanks it is a real concern that Lucilla's arrival might spoil the social event and prestige his dinners have brought. In "The Flat Heroine: Flat Character and Agency in Miss Marjoribanks" Hope Rogers argues that Lucilla recognizes immediately that the issue is not food, but what food represents (703-704). This is illustrated by what Rogers considers to be one of Lucilla's "catchphrases": "my object in life is to be a comfort to poor papa" (Oliphant 31). She further argues that the repeated expression of this idea when discussing food choice and preparation for her father's dinners with Nancy is the way in which she convinces the cook to relinquish her culinary authority (Rogers 704). Lucilla understands that food is a means to an end, in this case the satisfaction her father derives from the social prestige a successful dinner provides. This is a perspective shared by others in the text, as shown by the "curious speculations afloat as to the effect upon the house, and especially the table, of the daughter's return" (Oliphant 12). Carlingford society is also aware of what is at stake. Yet, even though Lucilla's filial devotion is the more manifest of her motivations in how she performs her social responsibilities, she is also keenly aware of the opportunities she can create through food centered social events. Even before her first successful dinner happens, she has a mind to organize an "impromptu luncheon" (40). An informal event which she sees as "an opportunity too valuable to be left

unimproved" (41) and reflects on how different it is in comparison to a traditional luncheon, in which genders are separated with men barely having time for it and married women too busy supervising their children's eating to properly enjoy it (39). There is also a less explicit reason for Miss Marjoribanks to set up such a luncheon, and that is to evaluate her cousin Tom's position as a social peer:

"Do go away," Miss Marjoribanks said, in her straightforward way. "You can come back to luncheon if you like;—that is to say, if you can pick up anybody that is very amusing, you may bring him here about half-past one, and if any of my friends have come to call by that time, I will give you lunch; but it must be somebody very amusing, or I will have nothing to say to you." (52)

Tom's judgement on who is amusing ends up creating a social faux pas that illustrates the social importance of properly choosing who you break bread with, even in an informal setting. The suggestion by Tom's company that some men are devoid of soul scandalizes both Lucilla and her other guest, Miss Bury, bringing an abrupt ending to the meal: "Miss Bury, if you will not take anything more, I think we had better go upstairs" (57). The incident is important enough that Lucilla does not fail to address it with others even before they have heard of it, to make sure she puts her own spin to it. "I want to tell you, in case she should say something, and then you will know what to believe" (60) Lucilla warns Mrs. Chiley before recounting the incident. Throughout the book there are many instances in which the plot develops around the dinner table, part of the reason for that is that these gatherings are where Lucilla can better manifest and exert her agency and social power. In her article "Redesigning Femininity: *Miss Marjoribanks'* Drawing-Room of Opportunity" Andrea Caston Tange agrees with the fact that Lucilla sees these events as her opportunity to reinforce and shape social bonds. She mentions how Lucilla's social influence is measured through the variety she

can provide when it comes to the “entertainment, the food, the books on the tables, the conversation, and all the guests” for her soirees (171). It is true that she makes sure of using every tool available to accrue influence, but it is worth noting that the very first thing she makes sure is a success is the food, and that her social peers only manifest concern about how the quality of the food served will be affected by her return. These facts highlight how food might not be the only ingredient for a socially successful soiree, but without proper food choice and quality the whole social construct would be brought down. This is indeed what happens towards the end of the book. After her father’s death and the Lucilla’s discovery of the financial penury in which she has been left she quickly realizes that “[a] woman may [...] do a great deal of good; but yet if she is put aside for a moment, there is an end of it” (Oliphant 482). It is this realization which leads to a change on her approach on how to use food to achieve social status.

"But if it had been the poor," said Miss Marjoribanks, recovering her spirits a little, "they could not help being the better for what one did for them. They might continue to be as stupid as ever, and ungrateful, and all that; but if they were warm and comfortable, instead of cold and hungry, it would always make a difference. " (483)

Sturrock sees Lucilla’s focus and devotion to “social management and social semiotics” as “the proper activity of a middle-class woman of the period” (330-331). Yet for Lucilla it is not only about her responsibilities. The text is quite candid in portraying her motivation as self-serving. She enjoys being at the center of society, the fact that she would be helping others simply is a way in which to justify her social ambition, and “regard it in a loftier light” (Oliphant 486). In the end, as was in the beginning, food becomes the tool Miss Marjoribanks wields in her quest for social status. It might have been transformed from a tool for entertainment to a tool for ministration, but the text

still puts forward the idea we advanced in Chapter 1: that food is a versatile social resource that may build and sustain bonds and affect social status both as a commodity and a necessity.

### 3- Socially Cohesive: Food in *Emma*

Mentions of food in Austen's work are rather infrequent, and when it is brought forward is often as a tool for characterization or to make a moral point. A corpus analysis of her works reveals only 77 instances of the verb eat, 104 of dine and 123 of breakfast—both as noun and verb—but only 9 and 17 for food and meal respectively (Sinclair and Rockwell). This verb-substantive disproportion suggests the idea that the object to be consumed and enjoyed is not of importance, only the action surrounding it. *Culinary Jane Austen* by Christopher Wilkes highlights how in Austen novels “food, its production, preparation and consumption, appears almost nowhere” (2). Maggie Lane does not totally agree. Her book *Jane Austen and Food* points out that food is indeed present, but when it does show up is “almost always in dialogue or reported in free indirect speech” in contrast to other novelists of the same period (3-5). Austen's novel *Emma* is perhaps the exception, since it has a very different approach to food than other Austen works. Michael Parrish Lee (*The Food Plot in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*) is one of the critics who argues that, in *Emma*:

[T]he moments in which eating enters the foreground as an object of narrative attention in its own right generate what I call “the food plot,” a kind of shadow plot—fleeting, discontinuous, and multiple—that briefly disrupts or threatens to displace the marriage plot, only to be subordinated by the marriage plot, a process that ultimately affirms the latter plot's centrality. (23)

He illustrates his argument by using Mr. Elton and Harriet's conversation about food, which is interpreted by Emma as a means to an end. She finds the topic superficial and uninteresting, yet “Emma's imagination converts the subject into a mere “introduction” to the real subject of love—to what is near the heart” (24). Lee also points at characterization as the reason for food coming to the forefront more often than not, and that the novels presents as “more interesting and complex those people who are

interested in people and marriage than those who are interested in food” (24). Tanya Lewis’ “Soup and Snobbery: Food in the Novels of Jane Austen” goes beyond that, adding a moral dimension: “Emma does not eat but instead shares food with others, which should make her morally superior to her silly father, who can talk of little other than food, but her generosity is selfishly motivated in that it is designed to elicit admiration” (1). Both Lee and Lewis do not dwell on those instances in which food operates as a social tool of its own. And yet in *Emma*, Austen creates a setting where food is also used to signal interdependency in a community and as a token of goodwill to be shared and enjoyed. Food is made relevant from the very beginning of the novel. The first item of food presented to the reader is the wedding cake (Austen 65), food designed to be shared, and enjoyed on a joyful occasion. The cake also “sets [...] the tone of Emma” (Lane, Chapter 8). Austen is once again bringing food to the front with a specific function, or two in the case of the cake: presenting the idea of a community and showing that it is a sharing, happy one. This idea of food as a bonding element is reinforced throughout the book with other examples. For example, the gifting in chapter IV of a goose from Mrs. Martin to Mrs. Goddard (Austen 73), who then eats it with her employees. There is an element of social intersectionality to this meal as Mrs. Goddard is eating with her social inferiors. The goose is gifted twice, going from Mrs. Martin to Mrs. Goddard’s employees, becoming a double stitch helping keep the social fabric whole. A more cynical reading can also be made of the acts of food sharing the book presents. Lisa Hopkins does so by unpacking the character of Mr. Knightley in “Food and Growth in Emma”, revealing some of the moral, social and economic implications of his approach to food. Shee points out how his lack of liquidity is not an issue when it comes to preserving his social position because of his largesse with food: “in the case of the apple he sends to Mrs and Miss Bates, it is at the expense of his own consumption



[and] reputation” (63). Hopkins also mentions how his strawberry party enables him to “appear publicly as squire for the only time in the novel, foregrounding Mr. Knightley social position in the context of the text through his involvement in food production (63). Hopkins sees this very same trait of “largesse” in Emma’s offer of “some arrow-root of a very superior quality” to Jane Fairfax as a way of finding “a belated *rapprochement*” (63). Wilkes agrees with this conclusion, seeing Emma’s own instances of “largesse” as a straightforward “method of domination of those she chooses not to like” (14). Both authors use the word largesse when talking about generosity that has a social, surreptitious intent. But Emma is not the only character in the novel who codifies social interaction through food. Mr. Woodhouse’s obsession with food as a negative counterpart to medicine, portrayed in his judging and policing of others’ food intake, reinforces the idea of food as a tool in interclass social interaction:

“Not only are his actions blatantly conditioned by the class differential between himself and those whose food intake he polices, thus becoming oblique markers of his status (...) but they also function as very clear reflectors of his own prejudice.” (64)

Food prejudices become social prejudices. Much like Trimalchio’s choice of victuals for his dinner feast in the *Satyricon* codifies a particular meaning regarding his guests and his own social status, Mr. Woodhouse codifies moral and social meaning into individual food choices. Under this light, Emma’s choice of arrowroot as a gift to Miss Bates becomes something else entirely, independently of her notable insistence that that “her intentions were good” (Austen 462). Liz Sinnamon explains how in Victorian times, arrowroot had many culinary uses, but was particularly indicated prepared as a drink for convalescing patients, or as a jelly for babies being weaned (30). Emma’s gift might very well be a surreptitious insult to Miss Bates, “most friendly note” (481)

notwithstanding, which might help explain the gift's rejection, and the particular wording chosen by Miss Bates in her reply as being "not at all in want of any thing" (481). Jane's reply asserts her agency against the gift's implication that she cannot take care of herself, adding to the list of instances in which the text provides an opportunity to the reader to derive deeper social meaning from what may appear to be a straightforward food gift.

#### 4- Socially Pervading: Contrastive Analysis

The previous two chapters have provided a textual analysis that has highlighted some of the relevant aspects of the use of food in *Emma* and *Miss Marjoribanks* that will serve as the foundation for the contrastive analysis performed in this chapter through the lens of food studies. As mentioned in the introduction, the similarities between both texts are hardly surprising if *Emma* is indeed the originating text for *Miss Marjoribanks* as argued by Sturrock. Both titular characters live in a rural part of England, oversee the domestic aspects of a state and use food—particularly social gatherings that revolve around it—to further their social ambitions. There are other commonalities to both texts beyond their main characters. Food is used in both to characterize and even cast judgement or show prejudice towards some of the secondary characters; both characters adhere to contemporary gender conventions—Lucilla going as far as to say she makes “a point of never going against the prejudices of society” (Oliphant 55)—and both exert their social influence in a way that impacts society—namely through matchmaking. Yet there is a key difference between these characters; while Emma’s final aim is to position herself in a favorable position to arrange for her own marriage to a husband with good prospects, Lucilla’s aim is to achieve social relevance for the sake of it. This is seen by how quickly she resolves to dedicate her efforts to the downtrodden she would have under her charge as the lady of Marchbank state after losing a significant amount of social standing among her peers’ society for not being able to keep up her regular Thursday dinner events (481-482). *Miss Marjoribanks* makes a point of highlighting not only the social opportunities that arise from these events, but the entertainment they provide to their guests. Lucilla is always looking for ways to please her guests: food, furniture, singing, etc. The text dedicates a considerable number of pages to describe what amounts to the trappings class privilege can afford. One may think that this lack of attentive description of dinner events in *Emma* is due to

the fact that they are of less importance than in *Miss Marjoribanks*, when the opposite is actually true. Dinner is a repeated setting in which the characters interact with each other—particularly in volume II. When Emma discusses matchmaking for Mr. Elton, Knightley’s advice is to invite him to dinner—even if his advice is meant to discourage her—; it is at dinner with Jane, her grandmother and aunt where Emma first fails to reconcile with her. One of the reasons for the unsuccessful evening was Emma’s reaction to the aunt’s “tiresome” description “of exactly how little bread and butter she ate for breakfast, and how small a slice of mutton for dinner” (193). The text may equate talking about food consumption with uninteresting superficiality—as already discussed in chapter 2—but it cannot avoid the opportunities gatherings surrounding food provide as a setting to develop the plot. This different approach to food is likely a result of the progressive commodification of food under a developing capitalist system. This change of approach alters the nature of social gatherings surrounding food. Since food is now a commodity, social standing is no longer established and sustained through hospitably sharing a needed, surplus resource. Instead, social prestige comes by providing access to less available foodstuffs traded as commodities. Fred Magdoff’s article “Food as a Commodity” attributes inequalities in food access and distribution partially to capitalism’s impulse for “generalized commodity production:”

During the early stages of capitalism, when most people still lived and worked on the land, a large portion of food was produced to be consumed locally in the rural areas and did not exist as a commodity. However, farmers near growing cities and/or near water transport shipped food to the industrializing urban centers. The commodity nature of food became much more pronounced as capitalism grew and conquered most of the world’s societies. Imperial powers brought the peasants of their colonies into the money economy by extracting

monetary rather than in-kind taxes. The need to obtain money to pay taxes began a process that converted a portion of the food produced into commodities. (16)

This change is perfectly exemplified by the case of the pineapple, a fruit that could not be grown in Europe except in greenhouses. In his book *The Pineapple, King of Fruits*, Fran Beauman examines how the fruit became “a potent status symbol in Europe” since the expense of producing a single pineapple was “extortionate, [...] matching that of a new coach.” Its status as a commodity highlighted by the fact that they were rented to be displayed by different people at different parties, with the most spectacular specimens going around “for weeks at a time” until they rotted (11-12). An expensive, hard to acquire fruit from the colonies, used as a display piece. Its value lies not on its nutritional qualities but on what it says to others about the status of its —temporary— owner.

Historians such as Ashley Jackson (*The British Empire: a Very Short Introduction*) point at the period immediately before World War I as “the high noon” (55) of the British Empire. It is not a stretch to think that the reason Austen does not pay more attention to food is because, living at an earlier stage of capitalist and Empire expansion, her attitude towards food is more focused on it being a necessity rather than a commodity. This is further supported by the fact that Austen, according to her own personal notes and correspondence, lived quite frugally and had to deal with the day-to-day practicalities of buying and preparing food. If the target audience of *Emma* as a commercial text had similar sensibilities or were looking to be informed on what those sensibilities were for the upper-middle classes portrayed in the book, it is likely that the text’s approach to food attends to those sensibilities. This is something very likely if we consider how, according to Katie Halsey’s book *Jane Austen and Her Readers*, Austen was very aware of who she was writing for from a very early age:

“Jane Austen's manuscript notebooks, written between 1787 (when she was 12) and 1792 (when she was seventeen), show her assumptions about the kind of reading community who would read her works - one which would share her concerns and point of view - and occasionally they also show the ways in which that reading community actually responded to the works.” (20)

If we consider Magdoff's proposition of food's commodification process, it is likely that in a society where most food was produced and consumed locally, food access was a binary proposition for most English subjects—you either had access to it, or you did not—and would not signal privilege, economic power or even class as strongly as in later times in history.

Margaret Oliphant, had an alternative background which might explain the different approach to food shown in *Miss Marjoribanks*. Not only was the text published in 1866—51 years later than *Emma*—but Oliphant's economical background was considerably more buoyant than Austen's, at least at the time of her death. According to *The Times*, her estate at the time of her death had a value of almost 5.000 pounds, which would amount to over 600.000 pounds nowadays (Webster). The English Empire, although far from its “high noon” was deeply involved in foreign trade. Imported foodstuffs as the ones mentioned in *Miss Marjoribanks* would be more readily available—and more familiar to the text's author—than to most of Austen's contemporaries. French “*paté*” (Oliphant 223)—*Italicized in the original*—or Hungarian Tokay (280-281), are two examples of foreign foodstuffs present in the text which can be very well considered commodities, even luxurious ones at that, bearing in mind the logistics involved in their import. This difference in economic and social realities is not only portrayed through food consumption, but also production. While in *Emma* having an orchard and growing your own foodstuffs is a sign of prominence,

social prestige and economic power (as seen through Mr. Knightley's example in chapter 3) the opposite seems to be true in *Miss Marjoribanks*. Mr. Woodburn's, who is described as having been ruined after Mr. Cavendish sister had taken off "before his very face" (Oliphant 109), lives in a house with a garden "lined on each house with greenhouses" and is "a great amateur of flowers and fruit" (173), yet his garden does not have the "homely, luxuriant, old-fashioned look of the other gardens, where, for the most part, the flowers and shrubs grew as if they liked it and were at home" (173). A fructiferous garden in this instance signals a less prestigious and economic social standing, or at least seems to be perceived as such by the text's focal observer. This would align with Magdoff's description of food production transitioning from local to external providers. Carlingford wine, as described in page 371 of *Miss Marjoribanks*, is another example of how foreign foodstuffs can accrue local prestige: "Even when he [Mr. Ashburton] had his wine direct from the growers (for naturally his own county could not supply the actual liquor), it was put in Carlingford bottles." Ashburton's transportation and distribution of externally produced wine under his own local brand has no largesse attached to it, like Mr. Knightley's gesture does, but it is revealing that this apparently random fact is inserted in the middle of a description of how much of a gentleman Mr. Ashburton is, and how everybody is in the know regarding his wealth and good sense. In contrast, Emma's reproach to Mr. Knightley comes close to questioning his good sense, and the fact that Mr. Knightley's gesture came at his own expense could very well be showing the start of that transitional moment in which local food production was becoming less of the norm and less of an indicator of social and economic prestige.

## 5- Socially Relevant: Conclusion.

This thesis aimed to explore the ways in which food can be used as a social scaffolding tool through its portrayal in *Emma* and *Miss Marjoribanks*. The close reading and analysis performed highlighted not only how this can be achieved, but the economic and social implications of how food is portrayed. It is evident that food does indeed work as a social scaffolding tool, yet the ways in which it does so can be different and change through time. This change involves different areas of interest to food studies. The texts relay quite different social perceptions regarding food production, as portrayed by Mr. Knightley's preserving his social status through his food production versus Lucilla's disdain towards Mr. Woodburn's fructiferous garden. Food distribution does also have a significant role in reinforcing social status, but the different approach shown by both texts does show a progressive change over time. Consider how locally produced foodstuffs are shared communally in *Emma*—even across class boundaries—while in *Miss Marjoribanks* imported, commodified foodstuffs serve as luxury items for the wealthier classes. Although limited by its scope, this thesis was able to identify these differences, their evolution through time and their perceived causes, showing how effective the analysis of literary texts can be as a research tool to the field of food studies. Two avenues seem of particular interest for further research. The first is exploring the inception of the food commodification process, its evolution as portrayed through time in other British literary texts, and its intersectional implications. The second would translate this thesis findings to literary texts from different cultures, to examine and contrast food portrayal in texts from different literary and cultural traditions contemporary to those present in *Emma* and *Miss Marjoribanks*. There is an undisputable moral dimension to food that is generally lost in its day-to-day role as staple. Lucilla's reflection towards the end of the book about the difference between warm and comfortable and cold and hungry might seem evident, but to those living in a



society in which food is a given, food inaccessibility and society's moral responsibility in ending it can be easily overlooked. In our current society, which uses food and food choices as a way of evaluating or expressing moral character, this can fuel discrimination. Vegans are frequently the butt of the joke for their forwardness when it comes to sharing that they follow a restrictive diet. Their food consumption is frequently a political and social statement and not only a personal preference or choice. Literary analysis is another tool to understanding how and why these kinds of perceptions came to be. It can add to Food Studies' in-depth approach to its subject which can bring to the fore the social, political and moral implications of food within a global society. It can allow society as a whole to identify the need for a more sustainable and egalitarian access to something that is essential for survival. Failure to do so might see the inception in the future of the field of Air Studies, to our descendants' detriment.

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