

Response to “Eating, Feeding, and Flesh: Food in Victorian Spiritualism.”

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Marlene Tromp’s fascinating paper “Eating, Feeding, and Flesh: Food in Victorian Spiritualism” continues her fine work on spiritualism, here focusing exclusively on the meaning of food in the work of nineteenth-century female Spiritualists. Tromp’s historical research is meticulous and her analysis elegant and judicious, recognizing as it does the uneven developments and conflicted political meanings of food practices associated with Spiritualism vis-à-vis its women practitioners. “Eating, Feeding, and Flesh” asks the question, “Why did they need communion in the séance?” and astutely points out that most Spiritualists “emerged from traditions in which the Eucharist was a fundamental aspect of the religious experience.” Tromp notes that the use of the communion in Spiritualist meetings illustrates that “the physical act of eating—sometimes wine and bread as the body and blood of Christ, sometimes shared feasting, sometimes by physically feeding or being fed by materialized spirits . . . foregrounded a parallel between the body and the sanctified bread” (1). Tromp’s main argument is that because Victorian gender ideology resulted in women’s deep involvement in the preparation and symbolic display of food, the “manipulation of food and drink in the séance” allowed female Spiritualists some “control over both the landscape of the sacred and their bodies—especially significant in countering perceptions of women’s bodies as passive spiritual receptacles” (1).

But if the end of the Victorian period saw female spiritualists subversively using their culinary skills not only to reach out to departed spirits but also to bring political and

economic power back to the oikos, the domestic sphere, it should also be remembered that the nineteenth century began with the likes of other bizarre renditions of this kind of feminist spiritual activism, if you will. Like the Spiritualists, Millenarians and radical socialist feminists depended upon and manipulated, often in astonishing new ways, the connections between women, the spirit, and food. Between 1793-1815, the span of the Napoleonic Wars, twenty of the twenty-two harvests in England failed and food riots abounded at the same time that a wave of spiritual women (Spiritualists?) entered the public sphere (James K. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982], 69). For example, Prophetess—and lower-class servant—Joanna Southcott received thousands of pages of manifestations from a Spirit (of God). It is not improbable that Southcott cooked as part of her duties as servant, but, in any case, it is no surprise that her Spirit repeatedly warned her of earthly famine and seemed to supply the answer: Joanna's body would supply the sustenance and breast milk for the coming Shiloh who would save England from alimental and spiritual hunger. Similarly, Scotswoman Luckie Buchan, who claimed that she was the Holy Spirit, led and *served* a host of followers, for in the Buchanite community eating itself was communal and egalitarian: everyone ate the same food at the same table while Buchan either served the meal or "was employed in directing others to do so" (J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979], 35). After the French Revolution, St. Simonians reacted against social hierarchy and lower-class malnourishment by, in part, proclaiming "the advent of the Mother" and the "building up [of] the new heaven and the new earth" ("St. Simonism in London by Fontana and Prati, Chief and Preacher of Saint-Simonism in London," London, 1834; qtd

in Taylor, "Woman-Power" 127). According to radical socialist feminist Eliza Sharples, who was associated with the Saint Simonians, the Messiah's second coming would initiate an era of political republicanism with equality, and food, for all ("The Second Person of the Trinity" *The Isis* 39.1 (Dec 15, 1832): 611-17). Sharples associated this political Christ with Isis who had "fruit hanging round her neck, emblematical of giving nourishment to all the earth." Perhaps implying her own bounteous nurture of spirit and flesh, Sharples went by the pseudonym Isis and explicitly publicized her belief that the Christian sacrament was borrowed from the pagan celebration of Isis that included eating the "body of ceres" in the form of bread ("To Correspondents" *The Isis* 12.1 (Apr 28, 1832) 190-91. At mid-century, in response to her concern that women were "starving" (*Cassandra*) for something to do, and picking up on the Saint Simonian's belief in a female savior, Florence Nightingale mused about the possibility of the nineteenth-century producing a female messiah, while throughout her adult life she herself received from a Heavenly Spirit repeated manifestations and sustenance to combat her own "starvation."

Tromp's essay, then, makes this scholar realize that the female Spiritualists she examines were intensely involved in a spiritually and politically symbolic mediumship, much like the Christ figure for whom they serve as an alter-ego, and much like the very food that, under their miraculous provenance, becomes a medium for spiritual and bodily sustenance. As Levi-Strauss has shown, food that is cooked (mediated) *is* a sign of the humanization that culture (and women) brings to the individual body and the body politic. I would suggest that the women Spiritualists were at least subliminally aware that they were fulfilling not only the place of the priest/prophet when they served communion, as Tromp suggests, but also the place of Christ, the mediator for frail human flesh.

Indeed, the female Spiritualists' miraculous transformations of the raw into the elegant cooked is, perhaps, the real sacrament that Christ's resurrection only symbolizes, as Eliza Sharples intimates. After all, Christ's transformation of a handful of cod into a supper for thousands *was* the sign that he was God. In fact, might the sacrifice of Christ's body, figuratively signified by the communion of bread and wine, perhaps merely be a myth that attempts to mimic the sustenance the female body naturally and inherently provides in pregnancy and childbirth? Did the female Spiritualists, like their nineteenth-century radical and millenarian forebears, understand that their very bodies were ineluctably and simultaneously the producers, mediators, and essence of spiritual and alimental sustenance, and, in that respect, did they suspect that they were not just the Angels in the House—they were god?