

Domestic but not domesticated: A response to Marlene Tromp

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Over the last two decades food studies has become a hot field, with scholars working in history, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines to investigate the place of food and food practices in cultures near and far. This trend reflects growing interest in interdisciplinary scholarship as well as the wave of popular “foodie” culture—ranging from “Top Chef” to artisan olive oils.¹ Scholars of religion have joined in the search, looking at the role of food in a wide variety of religious traditions, from the church potluck to Christian weight-loss programs to Hindu temple banquets. A lot of this work highlights the intersection of gender and food practices, reflecting traditional links between both women and food and women and religion.²

Marlene Tromp’s essay on food and Spiritualism in Victorian Britain both reinforces and shatters much of this scholarly work. Like these other scholars, she uses a variety of perspectives on food practices, including the trinity of food questions: who cooks, who eats, and what’s on the menu? But her work uses these questions to break up a set of binaries traditional to religious studies—spiritual and material, spiritual and sensual, public and private. With a rich set of images—a séance around the dinner table, fruit falling from the ceiling, unseen teeth nibbling at an elaborate French potato dish—Tromp’s essay compels scholars in both food studies and religious studies to pursue their research with new eyes.

Once upon a time the study of religion—reflecting its roots in Christian (especially Protestant) theology—drew careful boundaries between the spiritual and the material. Religious

¹. *Gastronomica*, a journal published by the University of California Press since 2001, is a good index to the growth of the field.

². Examples include Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch, eds., *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and the Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), and Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

life, in this view, was the realm of ideas and spirits, free of material distractions. This division was often gendered, with women seen as either too embodied to be truly spiritual or too spiritual to be any value in the real world. In recent decades scholars in religious studies—informed in part by anthropology—have paid more attention to material objects and material practices in religious life, showing that such objects and practices are an essential part of religious life.³ Here Tromp shows that Spiritualism was, despite its name, very material in practice. Food validated Spiritualism by demonstrating the spirits' materialization. There is nothing more material, more embodied, than food. This spiritual use of material food became an important part of Spiritualism's practice.

If religion was traditionally opposed to the material, it strongly rejected the sensual. In the eyes of many Protestant theologians and scholars, sensualism was at best a distraction and at worst a path to perdition for the unwary soul. The bland diets of northern Europe can be traced to this distrust of the senses. Tromp's Spiritualists, however, embraced food's sensual, even erotic, nature. The spirits provided not meat and vegetables but fruit and flowers—delicacies, possibly rare and expensive, and often frankly sexual. They enjoyed elegant food, including French dishes, and indulged in wine and beer. Spiritualist practice, Tromp suggests, did not conflict with the sensual enjoyment of food. This apparently clashes, however, with many Spiritualists' rejection of meat and alcohol as substances that dull spiritual sensitivity.

Victorian religion, like the rest of Victorian culture in the United States and Britain, also drew a boundary between public and private. Men, according to this "separate spheres" arrangement, ruled the public realm, including business and politics, while women ruled the home, responsible for nurturing the children and providing the food. On the surface, Victorian

³. Colleen McDannell laid much of the groundwork for this scholarship in Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Spiritualists followed the rules. Theirs was a domestic religion, practiced largely by women in the home. These practices often took place, appropriate given the important role of food in Spiritualism, around the dining room table. They drew people, Tromp argues, closer to home (3). They also, however, drew women into the public. Tromp describes Spiritualism's public events as well as its domestic gatherings, highlighting the important role of food in creating that public space. Ann Braude goes further, arguing that involvement in Spiritualism often led women into abolition, suffrage, marriage reform, and other public movements.⁴ Spiritualism was, argues Tromp, the "yoking of domestic and disruptive" (7).

Spiritualism is not unique in its food practices; there are echoes in the Christian Eucharist, as Tromp shows, but also in Hindu and Vodou feasts. Many of these practices, including some understandings of the Eucharist, involve some form of sacrifice and exchange—the worshipper feeds the god or spirit in exchange for a gift or blessing. Eating in Spiritualism does not appear to have the same role; it demonstrates materialization rather than representing a gift exchange. To unpack this further, it might be useful for Tromp to contrast Spiritualism's food practices with other traditions.

I would also be interested to hear a bit more about the menu for these Spiritualist meals. The foods Tromp mentions—fruit, wine, a fancy French potato dish—are richly symbolic. Fruit is both delicate and sexual, and wine is intoxicating. These foods also represent class aspirations. In northern climates like Britain, fruit was rare and expensive. Beer was more common than wine (or at least good wine). French cooking (before Julia Child) was most common among those with personal cooks. These stories of Spiritualist food suggest that its practitioners (and

⁴. Ann Braude, Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

possibly the spirits) were or wanted to be perceived as refined, as upper class. Does this fit with other aspects of the Spiritualist movement? Do we know what working-class Spiritualists ate?

These questions about exchange and class suggest the richness of Tromp's research. She has revealed a religious practice that was domestic but not domesticated, with parallels and contrasts to other religious food traditions. It challenges many assumptions about religion, food, and gender.