

## Woolfin' it Down

As Mary Beton leaves a rich and glorious luncheon at Oxbridge, she begins to entertain the idea that it must, in fact, be spring rather than October, at that “time between the lights when colours undergo their intensification and purples and golds burn in window-panes like the beat of an excitable heart.” (16). Before the climax of Mary’s orgiastic vernal fantasy can be reached, however, a plain broth soup calls her back to mundane reality. This meal at Fernham interrupts the lush and lyrical prose in the preceding section with a new voice, one less imaginative, less developed, less inspired, and unmistakably dull. By subverting her characteristic style, Woolf gives a practical demonstration of the state of women writers and embeds her first point on the nature of women and fiction: that the mind and body are interdependent and the systematic denial of privileges to women has prevented them from becoming the great writers they are capable of being.

Woolf’s virtuosic syntax disappears when she enters the great dining hall. Her ebullient sentences are replaced by short, curt, declarative phrases that lack the artistry and vigor of the rest of the essay. The leaping compound and complex sentences of the preceding scene are replaced with “Dinner was ready. Here was the soup. It was a plain gravy soup” (17). The meal is devoid of flavor or character, and Mary’s thinking follows it down to a base level where nothing beyond the banal necessities is expressed. The same sentence, “Here was my soup” (17), is repeated nearly word for word, suggesting that the same tired meals will produce the same tired, bland ideas. The partridges of the day’s luncheon are described with a four-clause sentence because they inspire the artist in Mary to

high and nimble thought, just as the men who have been eating this food for centuries have been inspired.

Few adjectives are employed to describe this meal. The essay has been, up to this point, rich and vibrant with description which comes to an abrupt halt in the dining hall at Fernham. Mary's diction becomes decidedly more pedestrian and even repeats the same telling word—"plain." The color words that do appear are lean and hungry: a "cheapening" of the food in the pitiful marketplace; the chairs are "scraped" back. The diction shows a need for good nourishment by the things that it lacks. The prunes are described as an "uncharitable vegetable" (18), just as no one has been charitable in matters of women's education. The biscuits are "dry... to the core" (18), and so cannot be expected to invite rich and ripe prose. After the meal is over, the hall is "emptied" (18), rather than cleaned, like the purses and banks and libraries of women have always been. Besides conjuring an image of a dark sooty hovel, even the wording of "coal-miners doubtless were sitting down to less" (18), enforces the theme of poverty. Rather than say that the scholars have "more" than coal-miners, Mary says that they have "less." This small distinction ensures that there is no pride to be taken in their meal.

The images in this section contrast sharply with the lush, quick, exciting dash through the flowered field which preceded it. The image of "rumps of cattle in a muddy market" (17), is certainly unappealing but even more than that it is overwhelmingly dull. It is easy to see why one cannot write a great work of fiction after eating this meal because there is simply nothing to say about it. For lunch, instead of sprouts "curled and yellowed at the edge" (17), Mary had eaten those "foliated as rosebuds but more succulent" (10), and though she suggests it was the verse of Rossetti, it is obvious that this spectacular meal has prompted the imagination and lyrical beauty of the springtime fantasy.

The next image, that of the prune, is as shriveled and miserable as the financial history of women's colleges. The prunes are the organs and blood of a miser, cold and bitter and selfish. There is

no doubt here that she is referring to a man, or men as a species, like “Mr. —— [who] won’t give a penny” (20), to help establish an institution of higher education for women. A stringy heart clearly doesn’t belong in the twilit garden, but the miserly man is also a foil to the female scholar. They are both old and live an austere life, but while the man is pinched, she is humble. While he is crabbed, she is invested with dignity, and the scholar’s “great forehead” speaks to the wisdom the man is jealous of and unwilling to foster. So Fernham’s prunes are not only uninspiring as the rest of the meal, they are symbolic of the travesty that is the funding of women’s colleges.

These techniques give an impression far beyond the explicit statement that good food and good writing are bound up together. Though the scene focuses specifically on the meal, it is more broadly representative of the first necessary consideration on the topic of women and fiction. Woolf says that “Heart, body, and brain [are] all mixed together” (18). Since women have never had anything so exciting or delicious as the luncheon at Oxbridge to stimulate the writer in them, they have not written. Because women have not, until very recently, had the liberty to improve their minds with education, they have not had the success of educated men. And when a woman is given the same circumstances and opportunities as her male counterparts, she will naturally demonstrate that she is their equal.