

“A Study in Starvation”: The New Girl and the Gendered Socialisation of Appetite in Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book*

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Towards the end of Sarah Grand’s third novel *The Beth Book: Being a Study of the Life of Elizabeth Caldwell Maclure, A Woman of Genius* (1897), the artist Gresham Powell shows his friend Arthur Brock a portrait of a pretty but frail young woman with cropped hair, calling it “a study in starvation” (513). Powell’s description of the novel’s female protagonist could in fact be applied to the narrative itself; for, at its most fundamental level, the text constitutes an allegorical diegesis on the subjection of *fin-de-siècle* female appetites—both for gustatory satisfaction, and for personal autonomy. This fictional autobiography charts the life of Beth Caldwell, Grand’s emblematic New Woman, following her from her childhood in Ireland and Northern England, her young womanhood and unhappy marriage spent isolated in the English countryside, through to her adult success as a feminist orator and “woman of genius” in London. Beth is an exemplar; her pedagogic narrative shows how the New Woman (or girl-becoming-woman) must be divested of bodily appetite, and transcend the hazards of physicality in order to gain the moral authority required of her. The gendered socialisation that this unformed, even polymorphously perverse, character undergoes throughout the course of the narrative transforms her from a rebellious, highly appetitive (though caring and generous) child, who displays many conventionally “masculine” characteristics, to an appropriately feminised and self-abjuring object of the male romantic gaze; indeed, she ultimately becomes a version of the idealised Angel in the House, or “Old Woman”, so reviled by Grand. When Grand’s supposedly radical New Woman is read alongside the heroines of earlier, iconic Victorian female starvation narratives, a remarkably similar trajectory becomes apparent, as childhood appetites are suppressed and/or punished in the young woman. Beth becomes another example of the wasting heroine—a popular nineteenth-century trope that was often mobilised in opposition to, or as a reaction against, the widespread equation of female fleshliness with inappropriate or dangerous sexuality. This thematic is reproduced, as Helena Michie notes, in the work of some of the greatest women writers of the Victorian period: “Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontës, and even George Eliot use plumpness in their female characters as a sign of a fallen nature” (22). In this instance, Grand’s putative feminism in fact endorses an earlier, and persistently pervasive, model of the feminine renunciation of appetite.

Even within the context of the nineteenth century’s focus on morality and its relation to the consumption of resources (including but not limited to foods), Grand’s preoccupation with the question of appetency and its effects is significant and complex. Heather Evans has previously addressed the food ethos articulated in Grand’s 1900 novel *Babs the Impossible*,¹ and a chapter of Evans’s 2004 (as yet unpublished) doctoral dissertation on *The Beth Book* argues that the novel “suggests that knowledge of cookery and gastronomy could empower a woman, much as could literary talents” (ii). While, like Evans, I see the functioning of “disruptive appetites” (6) in Grand’s novels as crucial to an understanding of her feminism, and agree that an in-depth study of these is overdue, Evans’s reading of *The Beth Book* remains somewhat problematic for me. There are two key differences in my analytical approach to the text. First, unlike Evans, I see the primary importance of the narrative as residing in Beth’s development throughout the novel. My emphasis is on the evolving nature of the protagonist, whereas Evans characterises Beth as a somewhat fixed (though complex)

being, taking her childhood food-centred rebellions as grounds for the ostensible subversiveness of the adult “Woman of Genius”. What Evans sees as Beth’s static hybridism, a mixture of “conservatism and revolution, of servility and independence” (158) is, I think, more an indication of the pronounced character transformation Beth undergoes in the course of her narrative and life journey.² The second divergence, borne of the first, is my emphasis on the last sections of the novel, particularly the romance ending that “even Victorian readers must have felt the impulse to groan [at]” (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction* 97). Evans is, I believe, correct in agreeing with scholars who have argued that Grand’s emphasis on Beth’s domestic abilities and her ultimate submission to romance ideology act as “a palliative against the popular charge that the New Woman was an unsexed and unsympathetic creature bereft of the womanly impulse to nurture” (Evans 194); yet her final defence of the “ambivalent” ending, which most feminist scholars have struggled with, is unsatisfying:

Grand hints that Beth’s alimentary deprivations are the price the New Woman must be prepared to pay in the pursuit of a potentially generative community.... Grand’s New Woman claims for herself the right to address her own needs, “to follow her own bent,” until such time as she is presented with an opportunity to commit herself to an individual who strives towards the high moral standards she sets for herself. (197-99)

Similarly, Evans’s assertion that “[Grand’s] yoking of Beth’s cooking with writing...reinforces the rebellion implicit in feminine epicureanism” (158) seems unable adequately to explain Beth’s pronounced loss of both self-determination and creative *jouissance* once a man in need of nurture enters her sphere. Thus, while Evans views Grand’s four main novels as a cumulative assertion of women’s right to appetite (Evans 2), I argue that a closer analysis of *The Beth Book*, and in particular, an examination of the romance ending, does not bear out such a reading, at least as regards this particular text.

Evans’s work is nonetheless significant for its pioneering recognition of the centrality of food and appetite to Grand’s polemical novels, and provides a stimulating contribution to the persistent and vigorous debate around claims made by feminist scholars since the 1970s pertaining to the extent of Grand’s radicalism. While Grand was viewed in her time as one of the most revolutionary of the New Woman writers, and many scholars continue to champion her courageous forthrightness on issues such as, for example, venereal disease and Rational Dress, others have noted the strong underlying strains of conservatism that run through her work (see, for example, Angelique Richardson). This innate conservatism is, I believe, clearly evinced in *The Beth Book*, as conventionally Victorian notions of romantic reward for feminine self-sacrifice are given narrative form through the trope of the heroine’s management of her appetite. Grand’s stated adherence to the principles of the social purity movement³ underpins her strong opposition to what she views as the easy and unthinking—and sometimes gross and deliberate—indulgence of physical appetites. Her overarching feminist vision clearly exhibits the influence of Victorian notions of womanliness and of what Lyn Pykett calls “the proper feminine”, which finds expression in the final incarnation of her heroine.

As a child, however, Beth definitively rejects Victorian notions of propriety: she both *eats* and *acts*. From the outset, it is clear that Beth is an intelligent and cerebral child (her creativity and enquiring mind constituting her innate “genius”), but also ruled by her appetites. When we first meet her, she already displays an ardent hunger for knowledge and experience, and her bodily needs are almost as pressing. Further, she has no qualms in

satisfying them. At this stage of life, Grand suggests, hungering and eating are both healthy and natural. Like servants and men, children are figured in the dichotomous hierarchy as animalistic, closer to “nature” than to “culture”, and therefore ruled by appetite. What adults perceive as greediness and insolence is in fact Beth’s form of childish rebellion against the restrictions imposed on the satisfaction of her appetite.

After the death of her father, Beth’s impoverished family go to live with Uncle James Patten.⁴ A parody of genteel “masculinity”, he is a corpulent yet miserly bully who, foreshadowing Beth’s husband Dan, stands as representative of the cumulative ills of the “Old Man” and the patriarchal system. Like the other greedy adults in the novel, his gross indulgence of his appetites—both alimentary and sexual—is manifested physically; he is a “great stout man ... [with] a big, fat, white hand [and] a very soft voice, which contrasted oddly with his huge bulk” (89); he is later described as having a “fat voice” (113). Hypocritical and self-indulgent, he is strongly reminiscent of the miserly, food-denying school owner Mr Brocklehurst of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), who justifies the starvation of the girls under his care thus:

‘You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying... Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children’s mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!’ (*Jane Eyre* 54-5)

However, unlike the young Jane, Beth consistently and publicly undermines her would-be tormentor, using her wits and audacity to challenge his hitherto-untested power over his wife and servants. Her first exchange with the patriarch occurs as soon as Beth and her family arrive at Fairholm, his estate, as he reluctantly apportions refreshments to the travellers. Beth draws the (adult) company’s attention to the discrepancy between his own generous proportions and the paltry amount he metes out to his dependants:

‘I was just thinking I had never seen anything so big in my life.’
 ‘*Anything!*’ Uncle James protested. ‘What does she mean, Caroline?’
 ‘I don’t mean this slice of cake,’ Beth chuckled. (90)

In contrast, the young Jane Eyre “chokes down her burnt porridge in silence” (Michie 23); and when her paltry portion of bread is stolen from her, she swallows her remaining half-mug of coffee “with an accompaniment of secret tears, forced from me by the exigency of hunger” (*Jane Eyre* 52). Rather than speak out, Jane tries to “forget the cold which nipped me without, and the unsatisfied hunger which gnawed me within, [and] delivered myself up to the employment of watching and thinking” (42). Clearly, then, Beth is a far cry from the model Victorian girl—or woman-in-training—for whom the injunction to be seen and not heard was in fact a preparation for an adult life of serving, and not eating. At this stage Beth has more in common with George Eliot’s “uncommonly cute” girl-heroine Maggie Tulliver, whose powerful intellect, passionate nature, and strong appetites are forces with which Maggie struggles throughout her girlhood and into young womanhood—ultimately, of course, with catastrophic consequences.

Beth’s propensity to speak with her mouth full also irritates Uncle James profoundly, for it is a double transgression—Beth not only speaks and eats, but worse, she does so simultaneously. She lacks all the essentially feminine characteristics of self-muting, self-

denial, and social grace already internalised by fledgling Angels such as Polly (later Pauline) de Bassompierre, the delicate, hypersensitive child of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), whose adoration of 16-year-old Graham Bretton manifests itself in an ardent desire to serve him:

She selected a portion of whatever was best on the table, and, ere long, came back with a whispered request for some marmalade...Graham was shortly after heard lauding her to the skies; promising that, when he had a house of his own, she should be his housekeeper, and perhaps—if she showed any culinary genius—his cook...I found Graham and her breakfasting *tête-à-tête*—she standing at his elbow, and sharing his fare: excepting the marmalade, which she delicately refused to touch; lest, I suppose, it should appear that she had procured it as much on her own account as his. She constantly evinced these nice perceptions and delicate instincts. (*Villette* 26-7)

In contrast, Beth sees herself not as a hostess- or wife-in-training, but as a guest, and therefore entitled by the rules of hospitality to help herself to her wealthy uncle's food. Here we begin to see hints of Beth's self-confessed greediness: "shovel[ing] some spoonfuls of pudding into her mouth very quickly...she finished...dropped her spoon onto her plate with a clatter, leant back in her chair, and sighed with satisfaction" (103).⁵ In contrast to Maggie Tulliver's anguished guilt after unthinkingly consuming the last of the jam puff without offering it to her brother Tom (Eliot 50), Beth's casual voracity is a mark of her disdain for the conventional weapons of disapproval and mocking utilised by those in power; and her sensuous revelling in bodily gratification, the kind of dopamine-induced satisfaction that can be likened to the post-orgasmic state, mocks Victorian propriety and the denial of pleasurable corporeality. The evident delight Beth takes in the satisfaction of her bodily appetites again differentiates her from other Victorian child-heroines, such as Christina Rossetti's Laura of *Goblin Market* (1862), for whom the temptations of food are clearly figured as sexual and moral danger. As Helena Michie observes of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), "Eating, even little girls' eating, is identified with the Fall... Eating in *Alice*, then, is not merely sexual, but fatal" (27-8). Conversely, Beth's childish appetites are figured as healthy and innocent, even advantageous; and this serves, as Grand no doubt intended, to make her adult sacrifice all the more striking.

At Fairholm, Beth continues her appropriation of patriarchal power using food-related strategies. When Uncle James attempts to confiscate Beth's pudding as punishment for her insolence, she "accidentally" upsets it over him before escaping to the kitchen, where the female cook bestows on Beth a "big cheesecake from a secret store" (98), despite the warnings of the suspicious coachman. Beth and the cook have together circumvented masculine attempts to deny the bodily pleasure of the pudding, and the "secret store" indicates that the cook's sequestering of household food resources for her private use is an ongoing practice. This is the first of a number of incidents that form a feminine conspiracy of food appropriation throughout the novel, involving various friends and servants.⁶ This is an important motif that recurs into Beth's adulthood, although it is primarily a phenomenon of childhood and early adolescence. Joan Jacobs Brumberg asserts that "secret eating was not unknown among those who subscribed to the absurd dictum that 'a woman should never be seen eating'" (170). Here, conspiratorial feasting enacts a sense of unobserved feminine community, masked from masculine attention precisely because it operates at the level of the domestic and quotidian. Its participants nourish each other and themselves; the covert meals act as an outlet for Beth's rebellious refusal to submit to pleasure denial in the name of

femininity and propriety, an impulse which is actively asserted during her early years but becomes increasingly subdued as her socialisation continues, culminating in her near-death from self-starvation.⁷

For feminist readers, these feasts engender a vicarious pleasure deriving from the subversion of socio-historical food practices, wherein dominant males control food resources and women merely prepare it for the nourishment and pleasure of men. Food, as Carole Counihan and other sociologists have noted, represents power in its most basic form, and hunger is “a stark indication that one lacks the ability to satisfy one’s most basic subsistence need” (Counihan 7). This hierarchy of food is reproduced at Fairholm, with Uncle James suspiciously guarding his hoard. His remarkable hypocrisy and meanness towards the servants—“You must make what you have do. People are much healthier and happier when they do not eat too much” (96)—evoke in the reader a sense of conspiratorial triumph in Beth’s and the cook’s abilities to evade his restrictions (107); thus, we become complicit in the female conspiracy surrounding food.

After leaving Uncle James’s house, Beth develops a friendship with another servant, Harriet, who teaches her to cook, and this relationship, too, is fostered through cheesecake and shared intimacies (123-4). The two revel in the clandestine excitement of reading a popular women’s magazine together, the imaginative pleasure that comes of recipe-reading, and finally the satisfaction of satiating their invigorated appetites: “[T]hey ... became so hungry over the recipes for good dishes that they frequently fried eggs and potatoes, or a slice stolen from the joint roasting at the fire, and feasted surreptitiously” (128). The feminine conspiracy here extends to class, and eating functions as a denial of patriarchal dictates of social segregation. Here, again, is the innocent enjoyment of bodily pleasure that is found in the satisfaction of a corporeal craving; and again, the sense is that such indulgence is permitted, if not condoned, since the actors are a child and a servant.

It is around this time, however, with the changing fortunes of the family (who have been politely ejected from Fairholm), that Beth—now approaching adolescence—first begins to learn self-denial. With this, the evolving New Woman enters another stage of her development: “They were to have dinner at four o’clock, but no luncheon, for economy’s sake. Beth was hungry too, but she would not confess it. What she had heard of their poverty had made a deep impression on her, and she was determined to eat as little as possible” (118). The deprivation is not limited to food: denied schooling, Beth must now focus on learning to ignore her own needs so that her brother, Jim, may receive a gentleman’s education. She initially resists this development, but the reallocation of resources is inevitably engineered by her mother, a bastion of Old Womanhood, who eventually succeeds in convincing Beth to contribute the endowment left to her by her great-aunt towards Jim’s upkeep and education. She does so by using the seductive rhetoric of heroic self-abnegation so effectively utilised by the patriarchy to similar ends:

‘The dear old lady left you the money because she believed you would do some good with it,’ [Mrs Caldwell] resumed. “For the good of mankind.” Those are her own words, and I do think that is rather your line, Beth; and what greater good can you do to begin with than help your brother on in the world? To spend the money on him instead of on yourself would be a really fine, unselfish thing to do.’

Beth’s great grey eyes dilated; the prospect was alluring. (223-4)

Here, the language of seduction is employed to describe Beth's emotional arousal, indicated by her dilated eyes (more usually associated with romantic or sexual excitement). The "alluring", if limited, power of moral choice captures Beth's imagination; the New Girl is learning the Grandian virtue that will characterise her as a woman. Grand clearly intends here to demonstrate Beth's innate moral strength. In so doing, however, she unconsciously reinscribes the conservative discourse of self-sacrifice—ironically, the discourse that Mrs Caldwell herself utilises to ensure the effective neutering of Beth's appetites. The sense of injustice Beth initially feels as she relinquishes her own share of the family resources echoes a passage in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Rose, a young unmarried woman living with—and cooking for—her rapacious brothers, watched over constantly by her mother, exclaims in a brief outburst:

It's always so—if there's anything particularly nice at table, Mamma winks and nods at me, to abstain from it, and if I don't attend to that, she whispers, 'Don't eat so much of that, Rose, Gilbert will like it for his supper'—*I'm* nothing at all...In the kitchen—'Make that pie a large one, Rose, I dare say the boys'll be hungry;—and don't put so much pepper in, they'll not like it I'm sure'—or, 'Rose, don't put so many spices in the pudding, Gilbert likes it plain,'—or, 'Mind you put plenty of currants in the cake, Fergus likes plenty.' If I say, 'Well Mamma, *I* don't,' I'm told I ought not to think of myself—'You know, Rose, in all household matters, we have only two things to consider, first, what's proper to be done, and secondly, what's most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house—any thing will do for the ladies.' (57)

The adolescent Beth learns the same hard lesson as Rose Markham: whilst appetite—for food or knowledge—is excusable, if not particularly agreeable, in little girls, the onset of puberty inevitably brings an education in sacrifice—often imparted by one's mother.

At this point, Beth's characterisation undergoes an important development: she begins poaching from her uncle's estate in order to feed her mother and sisters, thus taking a highly transgressive step in her mission to obtain a fair share of the resources controlled by the patriarchy. Simultaneously, however, she continues to practise self-denial of food. Again, this is intended as an indicator of virtue; but at this stage Beth still has a healthy attitude towards food:

'You always dream nasty things; I expect it's your inside.'
'What's that to do wi' it?' said Harriet.
'Everything,' said Beth. 'Don't you know the stuff that dreams are made of? Pickles, pork, and plumcake.' (158)

Beth recognises food's importance in fostering mental and spiritual, as well as bodily, health. Her realisation of the nurturing power of food occurs around the same time as her awakening romantic awareness, and leads her to woo the object of her attention, Sammy, with a whiting that (typically of her tomboyish nature) she caught herself. When she serves it to him "on toast, all hot and brown", Sammy exclaims "What a jolly girl you are, Beth!" (177). The moment of mutual appreciation is only temporary, however, as Sammy's appetite overcomes him whilst Beth grapples with a sense of unfulfilled artistic longing:

She stood leaning against the doorpost...restless, dissatisfied; but not knowing what she wanted.

When Sammy had finished the whiting, he remembered Beth, and asked what she was thinking about. (178)

As Beth attempts to explain her sense of creative frustration, the artless Sammy refuses to validate her poetical abilities; he sees her only as a cook. The encounter ends with a violent onslaught from Beth that drives Sammy away.

The episode highlights the distinctly dualistic nature of Beth's character at this point in the narrative, a dualism that reflects the gendered demarcations that pervaded Victorian conceptions of sexual identity. In many ways a model Victorian female, Beth is clearly naturally nurturing, taking great pleasure in providing food and comfort to those she loves or feels pity for, and continually repressing her own appetites to satisfy those of others. Domestically, she is highly capable: "Beth took charge of the housekeeping as soon as they arrived, made tea, arranged the groceries in the cupboard, and put the key in her pocket" (196). However, she can also be aggressive and a physical bully, as Sammy discovers, and is highly intelligent, with an acerbic and irreverent wit. She is a natural leader, and takes an active, rather than a passive, role in her relationships and activities. As she moves into young womanhood, however, these masculine behaviours are modified and subdued—through the influence of her mother, who represents the "old" societal dictates; but also by Beth herself, who becomes increasingly aware that, as the Victorian advocates of the separate spheres maintained, femininity and moral purity go hand in hand. Her self-denial is now practised not for the sake of others, but for feminine propriety. In this, she again displays affinities with Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, who struggles throughout her short life with the self-denial demanded of her. Unlike Beth, however, Maggie never successfully represses the illicit appetites and desires that cause her such anguish, and, perhaps inevitably, the consequences are disastrous.

Thus, although Beth will happily engage in yet another female relationship that centres on food and secret feasting, this time with a younger girl of her own class, she is now increasingly aware of the myriad coded meanings of a display of feminine appetency—even with another girl—and modifies her behaviour accordingly:

[Charlotte] returned with chicken and ham, cold apple-tart and cream, and a little jug of cider.

Poor Beth, accustomed to the most uninteresting food, and not enough of that ... found it difficult to restrain her tears at the sight of such good things. She ate and drank with seemly self-restraint, however; it would have lowered her much in her own estimation if she had showed any sign of the voracity she felt. (269)

The passage contrasts markedly with Beth's earlier ostentatious devouring of her pudding; it is a pivotal moment in the awakening of her feminine subjectivity and her transformation from voracious, appetitive child to etherealised and food-denying woman.

The narrative now enters another phase, signalling the acceleration and institutionalisation of Beth's conditioning. In response to a playful episode of cross-dressing, Beth's mother decides to send her to a boarding school. Here, the acquisition of a gendered subjectivity turns on the negative figuration of characteristics collectively agreed on as unladylike. Primary among these is appetency. A feminine etiquette of eating is practised, though here, as at Beth's home, there is never enough food for the girls: "'What do you do when [the sugar] is done?' said Beth. 'Do without,' was the laconic rejoinder" (288). To request more is unbecoming for a woman, Beth learns, and, to these girls-becoming-women, would place the offender on the same degraded level as the music mistress, "Old Tom":

“She is a greedy old cat! She likes eating! You can see it by the way she gloats over things, and she’s quite put out if she doesn’t get exactly what she wants. Fancy caring! It’s just like a man; and that’s why she’s called Old Tom” (288). The equation of appetite and coarse masculinity here alerts us to the presence of the authorial voice in these somewhat superficial characters.⁸

The girls must also train themselves physically to adhere to the rules of polite society, or face being ostracised:

If a new girl drank with her mouth full, ate audibly, took things from the end instead of the side of a spoon, or bit her bread instead of breaking it at dinner, she was set down as nothing much at home, which meant that her people were socially of no importance, not to say common.... The consequence of this high standard was an extremely good tone all through the school. (293)

Such scenes reinforce Ann Heilmann’s assertion that “Faced with feminine role expectations, [girls] learned to abandon their childhood resistance as tomboyish, unfeminine, inappropriate behaviour” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 30).

When Beth leaves school at 16 she is “fastidiously refined” (*Beth* 321), and is married almost immediately (as was Grand). Dan Maclure is the novel’s main male character, and his despicable nature is clearly signposted by his rapacious appetites: for women, social status, and especially food. Dan is a consummate villain, in a particularly Grandian sense. Initially charming, he reveals himself to be an ignorant, gluttonous and cruel man, not only a bigamist but also a vivisectionist. Significantly, Dan is a military doctor, and thus active within two of the greatest patriarchal institutions of the Victorian era; he represents the deep distrust of the male medical establishment Grand acquired during her own unhappy marriage to a military doctor (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 27).

Upon her marriage, Beth enters a new phase of enforced fasting: “It surprised her to find that what he had to eat was a matter of great importance to him. He fairly gloated over things he liked, and in order to indulge him, and to keep the bills down besides, she went without herself; and he never noticed her self-denial” (340). Beth is initially tolerant, blaming Dan’s lack of restraint on his sex: over-eating is, after all, a particularly masculine trait. Here we see the emergence of the adult Beth, as the protagonist’s views and behaviours begin to align themselves with those of the author.

As more of Dan’s character is revealed, however, he becomes increasingly appetitive, and begins to show himself as the intemperate, childish rogue the canny reader always suspected he was. He judges women’s value by their ability to satisfy his appetites; after serving leftovers, Mrs Jeffery is dismissed as an “old trout” who won’t have the pleasure of receiving Dan and his friends again (364). Once again, men are portrayed as having insatiable appetites, with the power to both consume and reject not just food, but the women with whom its provision is associated. It seems that Dan, like Beth’s brother Jim, is destined to follow Uncle James’s example in becoming a repulsive physical manifestation of the excessive indulgence of appetite. Grand devotes a long paragraph to describing, with a mixture of pity and revulsion, the effects of his intemperance: “Dan...was looking somewhat bloated and blotched. His wonderful complexion was no longer so clear and bright as it had been; the red was redder and the white opaque. A few more years and his character would be seen distinctly in the shape of his face” (480).⁹ Like the child Beth, Grand has reduced the

gluttonous symbol of patriarchy (and, through Dan, the medical and military establishments) to “a ridiculous spectacle in his impatience...and a sad one in his sensual satisfaction” (480). As Beth matures into an enlightened New Woman, her reaction to the excesses of the men around her is one of motherly pity; both Beth and Grand see these men as children who have been allowed to damage themselves through overindulgence. Whilst they must be, to some extent, responsible for their fate, the real culprit is pathological appetite: “Alfred Cayley Pounce [Beth’s childhood sweetheart] would succumb to his nerves, Daniel Maclure to his tissues; the one was earning atrophy for himself, the other fatty degeneration. Beth was right. The real old devil is disease, and our evil appetites are his ministers” (480).

Clearly, such characters function as examples of the human potential for self-corruption, and the moral atrophy that Grand sees as symptomatic of a society that thoughtlessly indulges masculine appetites. But if such men are to be pitied, a woman who eats like a man is a different matter altogether—she is, in fact, an aberration, and an object of scorn. Elaborating further on her gendered morality of appetite, Grand provides a portrait of an ethically bereft female: Bertha, the live-in patient with whom Dan Maclure commits adultery. Whether or not a reference to Charlotte Brontë’s sexualised madwoman was intended, it is clear that Grand’s Bertha is a woman of highly dubious morality who is willing to use her sexuality for her own ends. The similarity of the names, Beth/Bertha, suggests that the latter functions as an example of the spiritual disfigurement that can occur without the courageous virtue—and the ability to refuse appetite—possessed by the heroine. Bertha’s wantonness is evidenced by her love of meat: Beth points out that in her time with them, Bertha has doubled the butcher’s bills (422).¹⁰ Here again, we find in Grand’s novel echoes of Charlotte Brontë. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe is scathing of a painting of a voluptuous Cleopatra, attributing what she perceives as her monstrous fleshliness—she later describes the Cleopatra as a “slug” (287)—to a particular love of meat: “She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher’s meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh” (*Villette* 223).

Grand’s preoccupation with the visible effects of alimentary consumption on the body—and particularly on female attractiveness—is again foregrounded. The reader is told that Beth’s regimen, “enjoined on her by her mother in her early girlhood as a solemn duty...had entailed much self-denial in matters of food and drink, quantities being restricted, and certain things prohibited at certain times, while others were forbidden altogether” (422). As an appetitive woman who takes what she wants when she wants it, be it steak or another woman’s husband, Bertha is doomed to eventually inhabit a physicality as degraded as her morality. Ultimately, Grand establishes a causal link between carnivorousness and the loss of femininity, telling the reader that Bertha has a “masculine stride in her walk, and a deep, mannish voice” (396). Bertha, like Old Tom, is an example of failed socialisation; unlike Beth, she has never managed to repress those contaminating masculine appetites that cause the degeneration of feminine purity, and can eventually be read on the body.

Beth’s narrative, however, stands as the exemplary paradigm for the transcendence of the old degenerative order. Leaving Dan and moving into a flat in London, Beth experiences a period of intellectual freedom as she continues to evolve into the model New Woman. This section, more than any other, displays some of the elements of radical feminism for which Grand was known in her own time, and which many modern scholars have emphasised. However, this perceived subversiveness is negated by the conservative discourse of conventional romance underlying the novel, which reaches its apogee in Beth’s self-

starvation and the author's subsequent reward: a relationship with an idealised hero-figure, Arthur Brock.

Installed in her simple attic room, Beth's lack of appetite is emphasised, as Grand continues to differentiate her from her profligate husband: we are told that "Sometimes, when she felt she could afford it, she had a hot meal at an eating-house for the good of her health; but she scarcely required it...so long as she could get good coffee for her breakfast and tea for her evening meal, she missed none of the other things to which she had been accustomed" (491). Beth no longer feels any desire for food, and eats merely out of necessity. Her lack of appetite stands in marked contrast to the love of food and cooking that she displayed as a child. As she evolves into the New Woman, cooking becomes a duty to be fulfilled for the sake of loved ones, and in this lies its only pleasure. Beth is at one point repulsed by some raw meat, but prepares it for Arthur "none the less carefully for that" (504); clearly, this squeamish woman is quite different from the child who traps, skins and cleans her own rabbit, before preparing it with an onion sauce and lovingly garnishing it with rolls of bacon for her mother and sisters (157). Beth's newfound asceticism is reflected in the simple foods she eats: "bread and butter, eggs, sardines, salad, and slices of various meats bought at a cook shop and carried home in a paper" (491). Again, Beth is characterised as being appetitively antithetical to Dan, who has a tendency to overindulge in rich, extravagant dishes such as *vol-au-vent*. She is now well on the path to a mature Victorian femininity, displaying the delicate abstemiousness of so-called "Old Women" such as, for example, the ladies of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853), who associate lack of appetite with gentility, or Maggie Tulliver's Aunt Glegg, who illustrates the correct integration of the discourses of womanly respectability and gustatory forbearance:

'I never *did* eat between meals, and I'm not going to begin. And I hope you've not gone and got a great dinner for us—going to expense for your sisters, as 'ud sooner eat a crust o' dry bread nor help to ruin you with extravagance...A boiled joint as you could make broth of for the kitchen,' Mrs Glegg added, in a tone of emphatic protest, 'and a plain pudding, with a spoonful o' sugar and no spice, 'ud be far more becoming.' (Eliot 59-60)

Beth sometimes shares her simple meals with Ethel Maud Mary, her landlady, who is conspicuously working class; this friendship, formed over "hot toast and watercresses" (492) eaten in Beth's attic room, strongly recalls the times spent feasting in the kitchen with Harriet. The emphasis here, however, is not on the acquisition of forbidden luxuries from men's stores, but the sharing of women's own resources, however meagre, with other women. The novel, then, momentarily envisages a female Utopia of restrained and simple pleasures, class-inclusiveness, and the fulfilment of professional and artistic potential. Beth's acquisition of her own room, for which she herself pays rent, is a symbol of her newfound intellectual freedom.¹¹

This period of Beth's life is an important phase in the development of the New Woman, but Grand views it as precisely that—a phase, only ever intended as a stepping stone to the "higher calling" of marriage ("Should Married Women Follow Professions?" 124). Critics have pointed out that *The Beth Book* would have constituted a much more radical critique of the limitations imposed on women if it had ended after Beth's triumphant oratorical success, thus avoiding the awkwardness of Grand's concession to conventional romance.¹² The addendum eventually sees Beth (now around her mid-twenties) settled into a rural cottage awaiting her "Knight", the mysterious horseman she conflates with Tennyson's

Lancelot, whose regular glances as he rode past had succoured Beth during the depression her marriage induced. As Ann Heilmann observes, quoting Du Plessis, “[Some critics argue that] as Beth moves from self-affirmation to self-sacrifice, writing to nurturing, the feminist quest plot is superseded by a romance plot which ‘offers the conciliations and closures demanded by the femaleness of the artist’” (*New Woman Strategies* 83). For all that Beth uses her time in London to contribute to the feminist cause through her writing, thus demonstrating her ability to represent women’s interests in the public sphere, when a man requiring nurturance enters her life she does not hesitate to abandon her professional activities in order to nurse him. In her article of 1899, “Should Married Women Follow Professions?”, Grand is unequivocal about her belief that the ultimate goal of the New Woman’s life should always be marriage and motherhood, and that, once attained, the sum of her energy and attention must be devoted to these enterprises:

Hers is the most important business in life...there can be no higher calling, none richer in self-sacrifice, nobler or more ennobling. The new woman’s ideal of life makes altogether for the sanctity of marriage and the perfecting of home... [T]hat woman is neglectful of her best interests who goes out in the world to work when she can get a nice man to do the work for her. (124-5)

Again, Grand mobilises the rhetoric of heroism to glorify women’s self-sacrifice for the sanctity of family.¹³

When Arthur, an American artist, becomes a tenant of the adjacent attic room, Beth’s friendship with Ethel Maud Mary is effectively ended, as narratorial attention shifts to focus completely on the developing romance plot. When Arthur becomes ill, Beth enters the final and most difficult stage in her journey to New Womanhood. Her self-sacrifice in order to nurture Arthur becomes the litmus test of her moral tenacity, and she undergoes a trial-by-fire to determine whether she is worthy of the ultimate reward—a romantic relationship.

Virtually destitute, Beth must once again “do without” in order to care for others. Her health declines as her patient recovers, and immediately after the unsuspecting Arthur leaves to complete his recuperation in the countryside, she swoons away from starvation and exhaustion, on the brink of death. Throughout this section of the novel, Grand describes at length and in sympathetic detail Beth’s suffering for want of food, simultaneously emphasising the heroic nobility of her sacrifice. Her struggle with the demon of her appetite climaxes in a passage in which, racked with hunger, Beth passes a restaurant:

[Beth] was tormented by the desire to go in and eat enough just for once. Visions of thick soup, and fried fish with potatoes, and roast beef with salad, whetted an appetite that needed no whetting, and made her suffer an ache of craving that could scarcely be controlled...[but] she would rather die of hunger than spend two precious shillings on herself while there was that poor boy at home.... Beth got no farther than the counter. (507)

Beth succeeds in the absolute abnegation of self and appetite. Now a truly Victorian heroine, she epitomises Michie’s assertion that “[w]eakness, pallor and rejection of food are signs of transition in the refined heroine” (16).

Barely surviving on Arthur’s stale crusts soaked in water, Grand tells us, “This mess reminded her of Aunt Victoria’s bread-puddings, and the happy summer when they had lived

together, and she had learned to sit upright on Chippendale chairs” (507). To a modern audience the passage reads as an alarming exercise in denial and an attempt at self-indoctrination, as though Beth wishes to repress all memory that she ever possessed an appetite or found sitting on stiff-backed chairs uncomfortable. In addition to her self-education in endurance and abjuration, Beth continues to “practise pious frauds” on Arthur, assuring him that she eats well enough herself whilst she watches him enjoy the “dainty little feast[s]” she prepares (508). The façade remains in place until his departure and Beth’s dramatic near-death.

The starvation narrative that brings the novel to its emotional climax clearly suggests that feminine sacrifice for love is both heroic and romantic. The fact that men—even desirable and worthy men such as Arthur—neither notice these sacrifices nor make the same sacrifices for women, and are not expected to, reflects a fundamental tenet of Grand’s gender ideology: at the current moment in the history of the sexes, men cannot be held to the same standards as women. Like children and the lower classes, they are more vulnerable to the forces of appetite and lack the moral development of the adult New Woman; therefore, it is she who must go without. It is her duty, as mother of the race, not only to educate those less enlightened than herself, but also to nurture them—even if at the expense of her own health.

In order to make the notion of such dramatic sacrifice more appealing, it is couched in the comfortingly familiar language and form of romance. Thus, the wasting heroine is eventually rewarded for her ordeal. Both Grand and her protagonist ultimately succumb to the seductive and entrenched ideology of romance that, as many theorists have argued, reinforces the subjection and objectification of women: “Such plots are the bearers of ideology that reinforce societal strictures against female self-determination.... *The Beth Book* grafts a romance ending upon a quest plot, and the fruit thereof is at best bitter” (Doughty 189-190). The uneasy thematisation of the romance plot is perhaps most apparent in the motif of the Arthurian Knight that Grand appropriates from Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1842). As she gazes from her dining room window and the prison of her unhappy marriage, the mysterious horseman’s appearance is heralded by lines from the poem that echo in Beth’s mind as her heart leaps: “[H]is face ... was the face of a man from out of the long ago, virile, knightly, high-bred, refined.... It was as if he recognised her; and she felt herself as if he had seen him before, but when or where, in what picture, in what dream, she could not tell” (432). The sentimentally inclined reader’s hope that Beth may eventually find her own knight is satisfied by the (now contentious) final passage of the novel, as Tennyson’s lines again reverberate through Beth’s soul:

The words had come to her as the interpretation of an augury, the fulfilment of a promise. It seemed as if she ought to have known it from the first, known that he would come like that at last, that he had been coming, coming, coming, through all the years.... He was not the Knight of her dark days, however, this son of the morning, but the Knight of her long winter vigil—Arthur Brock. (527)

The promise being fulfilled is that of the author to the reader. It constitutes a reassurance that, despite her childhood transgressions and seemingly threatening sense of independence, the adult New Woman acknowledges that her happiness must ultimately lie in the successful fulfilment of wife- and motherhood. As Teresa Mangum observes: “In many ways this part of the plot seems to be offered as proof that the New Woman retains the qualities of womanhood her critics feared she had lost, the abilities to nurture others and to sacrifice herself to others’ needs” (189).

While Sarah Grand never intended to radically undermine existing hegemony or to destabilise the founding ideology of separate spheres, her work nonetheless displays elements of subversiveness. In *The Beth Book*, the child protagonist is figured as a cynosure of defiance and self-governance; yet, by its conclusion, the heroine displays no sign of this provocative individualism. The child proto-feminist is conditioned by her author-mother to become a woman worthy of marriage and children: a paragon of devotion and self-sacrifice. Grand's maternal metaphysic is manifested in a gustatory schema of morality wherein indulgence and denial function to distinguish between child and adult, masculine and feminine. Grand is driven to subjugate and purify the evolving female subject, and the corporeal temptations of food are the means by which she tests her protégé's achievement of true womanliness. A paradigm of retrograde feminism is established through the narrative arc of the heroine: Beth moves from self-governed appetency, engineering the reallocation of food resources and demanding fulfilment of her bodily needs, to the self-attenuating refusal of those needs. The narrative, which rewards Beth's self-renunciation with romantic fulfilment, serves as a reminder of the ideological ambivalences inhering in *fin-de-siècle* feminism, and the pressure many authors felt to enact conciliatory literary gestures towards a wary readership in need of reassurance that the New Woman was, after all, womanly.

The Beth Book, then, provides an important insight into the complex belief system of one of the most controversial of the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman authors. While the novel has been criticised by both contemporary and modern commentators for its technical faults and polemical style, further analysis suggests that even the "lesser" works of this era, such as *The Beth Book*, may be significant for our understanding of the tensions and articulations within the New Woman debate.

Notes

¹ "'Nor Shall I Shirk My Food': The New Woman's Balanced Diet and Sarah Grand's *Babs the Impossible*." *Nineteenth-Century Feminisms* 4 (2001): 136-49.

² As Teresa Mangum has noted, "The transition from childhood to 'wifhood' is strongly marked by changes not only in Beth's circumstances but also by changes in her character" (164).

³ Angeliqne Richardson defines the primary goal of this group as "the elimination of . . . sexual exploitation of women and girls" (249). Richardson and Willis have also observed that "the sexually repressive attitudes of the social purists were not a million miles away from the earlier evangelical commitment to separate sphere ideology and the cult of domesticity" (Introduction 9), an insight that applies particularly to Grand.

⁴ The name Patten contributes to the characterisation of this patriarch as unnaturally effeminate: pattens, elevated overshoes worn to protect the wearer's shoes from mud and refuse, were still in use into the early twentieth century, but had generally ceased to be worn by men in the eighteenth century, as decorative embroidery in need of protection became a feature of feminine, rather than masculine footwear (McNeil and Riello 101).

⁵ This image recalls the young Victoria at table: "The political diarist, Thomas Creevy, M.P., reported on seeing the eight-year-old princess opening her mouth 'as wide as it can go . . . She eats as heartily as she laughs, I think I may say she gobbles'" (Lytton Strachey qtd. in Munich 48).

⁶ Grand herself displayed a kindly, if condescending, attitude to servants and the working classes, and it is clear that, like most of the upper-middle class, she viewed them also as childlike: naturally appetitive and in need of a firm yet gentle hand to guide and contain their baser instincts.

⁷ Interestingly, a similar scene in *Jane Eyre* constitutes a brief hiatus in Jane's extended childhood malnourishment: following a public humiliation by Mr Brocklehurst, a famished Jane and Helen Burns are given tea, toast and seed-cake by the kindly Miss Temple in her private room; despite the meagreness of the meal, "We feasted that evening as on nectar and ambrosia" (63). However, in contrast to Beth's glee at getting away with having more, and better, pudding than she had already been given, this covert meal—a much-needed, but temporary, reprieve from starvation—serves to underline the severe deprivation the girls and women endure, the fact that they have no choice but to consume food in secret, and the difficulty of daily survival in a patriarchal institution. Even the cook, the aptly named Mrs Harden, refuses to show any mercy when Miss Temple asks for enough bread and butter for three to be sent to her room: "Mrs. Harden, be it observed, was . . . a woman after Mr. Brocklehurst's own heart, made up of equal parts of whalebone and iron" (63).

⁸ There is a clear sense that the author approves of the moral and social patterning to which the pupils are subject. Occasionally, however, narratorial outbursts betray the frustration one imagines the headstrong teenaged Frances Bellenden Clarke (as Grand was then known) might have felt: "[T]hey were restricted to such a severe propriety of demeanour that it almost seemed as if the object were to teach them to walk without betraying the fact that they had legs" (302). This authorial intrusion (and confusion) reflects not only Grand's interest in the cause of Rational Dress for women, but also an underlying ambivalence regarding the appropriate socialisation of women, and to what extent natural instincts must be curbed to produce a thinking, yet feminine, New Woman.

⁹ Grand makes repeated reference throughout *The Beth Book* to the notion that the effects of the excessive indulgence of appetites could be read clearly on the body. She thus aligns herself with Victorian studies of physiognomy, based on the idea that moral traits were betrayed by physical (especially facial) characteristics.

¹⁰ As Joan Jacobs Brumberg points out, "No food (other than alcohol) caused Victorian women and girls greater moral anxiety than meat . . . Doctors and patients shared a conception of meat as a food that stimulated sexual development and activity" ("Appetite as Voice" 166).

¹¹ As Susan R. Gorsky has pointed out, Sarah Grand recognised the artistic value of a room of one's own 35 years before Virginia Woolf's famous treatise; and Ann Heilmann has observed that a woman's private room is often "a space of female interiority", arguing that Grand encodes Beth's attic as "the locus of individual and artistic rebirth" (*New Woman Strategies* 105). If, however, through "parental interference or romantic attachments, [female protagonists] exchange their rooms (signifying independence) for domesticity and marriage, they almost inevitably lose their foothold in public life" (Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction*, 179). This is precisely the turn that Beth's narrative eventually takes.

¹² See, for example, Du Plessis and Doughty.

¹³ The above passage is strikingly reminiscent in tenor of the mid-Victorian conservative advocates of the ideology of separate spheres, such as Sarah Stickney Ellis's somewhat grandiloquent proclamation that "surely it is worthy of our best energies—our most fervent zeal—our tears—our prayers—that we may so use our influence, and so employ our means, as that those whose happiness has been committed to our care, may partake with us in the mansions of eternal rest" (356).

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