INFORMATION TO USERS

The most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this manuscript from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.
‘Formal feeds’: The Victorian dinner party

Scarpitta, Annette, M.A.

Rice University, 1990
RICE UNIVERSITY

‘Formal Feeds’: The Victorian Dinner Party

by

ANNETTE SCARPITTA

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

[Signatures and names of committee members]

Houston, Texas

April 1990
Copyright

Annette Scarpitta

1990
'FORMAL FEEDS': THE VICTORIAN DINNER PARTY

by

Annette Scarpitta

ABSTRACT

The Victorian dinner party mirrors the era's middle- and upper-class societies. Against a backdrop of rapid change, the firmly structured ritual brought new opportunities for social advancement, especially for the nouveaux riches. A myriad of advice manuals responded to the newcomers' need to match financial prosperity with social achievement. However, a group of critics that lamented the ritual's de-humanization, excess, and pomposity opposed these writers, public and private, who celebrated the splendor and refinement of the dinner party. The reformers' antidote was simplicity, sincerity, and enjoyment. Critics and advocates continued this debate throughout the period 1830-1885. Writers of fiction joined in the debate as they created pivotal dinner party performances. By 1885, those who argued for simplicity had been routed by champions of more relaxed but still elaborately ritualized "formal feeds."
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

## PART ONE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>THE SETTING, 1830-1859</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>THE SCRIPT, 1830-1859</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>THE PLAYERS, 1830-1859</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>THE PERFORMANCE, 1830-1859</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## PART TWO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>THE SETTING, 1860-1885</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>THE SCRIPT, 1860-1885</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>THE PLAYERS, 1860-1885</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>THE PERFORMANCE, 1860-1885</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION 113

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 118
INTRODUCTION

The Victorian dinner party offers an excellent means for examining the intricacies of the era’s middle- and upper-class social life. The ritual entailed a complex set of rules and procedures that extended far beyond the act of eating. Its framework was indisputably rigid, but within that structure was a versatility that reflected the personalities, values, and income levels of the participants.

Secondary sources on the dinner party are frustratingly incomplete. Anthropological works that analyze the communal eating process tend to be ahistorical and fail to integrate the uniqueness of the Victorian dining experience. Other sources geared toward a popular audience focus on Victorian material culture, describing antiquarian details such as food, furniture, plate, and silver. This study focuses on neither social anthropology nor material

---


culture, but on social history. Although social historians have offered volumes of works--many in the last twenty or so years--only a few have given more than cursory attention to the dinner party, and even then, the discussion is limited. The present work will evaluate the role of the "formal feed" within the context of a rapidly changing social climate.

The ritual itself consisted of several distinct phases: arrival and reception; the "going-in" procession to dinner (according to social rank); the dinner itself; the adjournment of the women to the parlor, where the men eventually joined them for coffee and tea; entertainment ranging from music to drama to literary readings to games; and departure. Throughout the two to three hours of the party, conversation was crucial and would be a major determinant of the success of the evening.

---


As is noted in Chapter VII, Isabella Beeton used the term "formal feeds" in an undated letter (Nancy Spain, Mrs. Beeton and Her Husband [London, 1948], 68).

This phase was not mandatory.
The setting also helped establish the tone. Ornamentation was either excessive or simple depending on the values and goals of the entertainers.

Serving style varied: In the older, more traditional à la française method, most of the food—including a roast to be carved by either host or "honored" guest—was on the table and passed by the diners; in contrast, the à la Russe style—which became increasingly common from the 1850s—moved the food (and the already carved meat) to the sideboard, from which it was handed around by servants. The latter method freed the table to display an array of desserts, ornaments (including the multi-tiered epergne), and flowers, if desired.

One writer has estimated that "a modest dinner of the middle sort for a dozen people consisted on an average of twenty-six to thirty dishes"; even if this seemingly exaggerated figure were accurate, it is important to consider that diners were not expected to eat everything that was offered to them. Food served included a choice of soups, fish, at least one joint and one fowl, casseroles, cooked vegetables, desserts, fruit, cheese, and savories. Each course

---


7Burton, The Early Victorians at Home, 161.

8Well-organized households displayed neatly written menus (sometimes in French) for diners to review before the meal commenced. As such, a guest could know what to expect as each course was presented.

was accompanied by the appropriate wine.

A literary critic has recently defined the Victorian dinner party as a "highly conventionalized performance at which a select group meets to eat and talk in a setting clearly designed to emphasize their high social status . . . ."\textsuperscript{10}

This social goal is accurate for those who wished to display themselves and their possessions. For the nouveaux riches in particular, the event offered a "direct road to obtaining a footing in society";\textsuperscript{11} they strived to match their newfound wealth with membership and prestige in a suitably respectable social circle.

Others de-emphasized the role of status at the dinner party. They deplored the pretentiousness and demanding rules and regulations entailed in the ritual (referred to here as the "blueprint of expectations")\textsuperscript{12} and pleaded for more simplicity, sincerity, and enjoyment. Both sides thus having established their grounds between social refinement on the one hand and simplicity on the other, the stage was set for a heated debate that ensued throughout the Victorian age.

This study is divided into two time periods: 1830-1859 and 1860-1885.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10}Or, as in part of this work, their "respectable" middle-class status. Dunstan, "The Missing Guest," 5.

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Manners and Tone of Good Society . . . .} (London, 1879), 83. Original emphasis.

\textsuperscript{12}Davidoff, \textit{The Best Circles}, 17. For more on the blueprint, see Chapter I.

\textsuperscript{13}Recent works have indicated other periodizations, arguing that specific years marked pivotal turning points in social, economic, or political developments. These factors are less relevant when evaluating the dinner party; further, the scope of this
A contrast will be made between the two eras, noting sources of change as well as those of continuity among diners and their ritual. This process provides an opportunity to examine which aspects remained consistent and which were influenced by outside change.

An undertone of the performance aspect of the dinner party is reflected in the chapter titles; chapters within each of the two periods present a different perspective: Chapters one and five, "The Setting," offer backgrounds of the social climate; chapters two and six, "The Script," survey critical essays and etiquette books; chapters three and seven, "The Players," examine personal writings; and chapters four and eight, "The Performance," analyze key dinner party scenes in novels and novellas. Each chapter contains representatives from both sides of the central debate between the schools of social refinement and simplicity. In some cases, a synthesis of the two sides presents itself in a model dinner party.

study is necessarily limited.
CHAPTER I

THE SETTING, 1830-1859

In 1859 the anonymous author of The Habits of Good Society declared that "a dinner-party is the main institution of society in this country."¹ Ten years later Arthur Helps, a close friend and adviser of Queen Victoria, estimated that in one evening, 2,500 dinner parties would be held in London.² Neither of the two statements were unreasonable at that time. A wealth of literature attests that, for better or for worse, the dinner party was a primary indicator of Victorian culture.

As late as 1830, however, such powerful statements would not have been ventured. The rise of the Victorian dinner party parallels the rise of the middle classes, which was made possible largely by new opportunities resulting from the Industrial Revolution and especially from vastly accelerated rates of both

¹The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook for Ladies and Gentlemen (New York, 1868), 343. The author undoubtedly meant High Society. I have retained the original spelling and punctuation for quoted passages. Throughout most of this work, Society is used to connote not only the tightly knit circles of the upper class, but also the upwardly mobile circles of the upper middle class.

population increase and urbanization. The growth of a wide range of professions contributed to an overall rise in the standard of living.

A new middle-class life-style evolved largely because of the removal of the workplace from the home, a process facilitated by the growth of suburbs and new systems of transportation. The result was a demarcation of "public" and "private" spheres, both physically and ideologically. Whereas the public sphere represented the dynamic but uncertain world of business and money-making, the private sphere of the home symbolized a haven of "comfort, stability, and morality." Perhaps the most significant result of this separation of spheres was that they became gendered: The harsh public sphere was predominantly male, while the private sphere was indisputably female. During the fluid transformations of the early Victorian period, "manliness and femininity . . . were constantly being challenged and reworked both in the imagination and in the

---


5Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago, 1987), ??
encounters of daily life."\(^6\)

The concept of the home was closely aligned with internal values. A number of writers urged middle-class women—"the pillar of our nation's strength"—to awaken to their pivotal moral role in the home.\(^7\) The evangelical movement, first begun in the late eighteenth century, played a major role in moral reform, but historians have differed as to how influential it was. F. M. L. Thompson has addressed the heart of the issue: While admitting that "religion was at the centre of middle-class lifestyles," he questioned "how typical or normal was its penetration to the core of domestic life."\(^8\) This "penetration" was exemplified by questioning the frequency of daily bible-readings or morning prayers, but one can go further by asking how far, if at all, religion penetrated into dinner parties.

\(^{6}\)Ibid., 181 (quotation), 450. *Family Fortunes* is by far the best work to date on the role of gender during the period.

\(^{7}\)Sarah Stickney Ellis (1810-1872) was a particularly ardent reformer in this area. See *The Women of England . . .* (New York, 1843), especially 6 (quotation), 14; and *The Wives of England . . .* (New York, 1843).

\(^{8}\)Respectable Society, 251. Some of the approaches historians have taken: In their discussion on moral reformers in the 1830s such as Sarah Stickney Ellis and Ann Martin Taylor, Davidoff and Hall argued that "religion was a given part of their intellectual framework but no longer occupied centre stage" (*Family Fortunes*, 181). The authors provide an excellent analysis of both the evangelical and moral reform movements in their work. See Part I, Religion and Ideology. Harold Perkin argued that the moral revolution was "traditional puritanism in a variety of mutated forms, some of them surprisingly secular and, at least in the philosophical sense, hedonistic" (*Origins*, 281). Finally, Thompson merged the two movements in referring to "the moral revolution of evangelicalism . . . launched in the closing years of the eighteenth century and reaching its greatest influence in the early Victorian years" (*Respectable Society*, 250).
For those families who accentuated their own rising position in society, the emphasis was most likely on the material rather than on the spiritual; but for those whose religious values weighed heavier, the case was undoubtedly different.

Respectability was not merely an external matter but "an internal disposition. It meant having a good self-image, a sense of one's self as a self-respecting being." At the same time, however, "dressingrespectably and keeping up respectable appearances helped to sustain this." As such, it seems that respectability could justify lavish expenditure at the dinner party.

The style in which Victorians entertained and their goals in doing so depended, first, on income levels, and second, on values. Of the "layers upon layers of subclasses" within the middle class, this study will be concerned only with those in the middle and upper levels. Incomes for these diners are difficult to specify and have been disputed among historians, but both Patricia Branca and Joan Perkin have estimated that upper-middle-class members--disproportionately few compared to the rest of the class--earned annually three hundred pounds and up. Thompson has emphasized the importance of examining specific indicators of consumption to estimate into which economic

---


10Ibid.

11Thompson, Respectable Society, 173.
bracket a family fell. These signs included type and neighborhood of home, number of servants, and—he might have added—how frequently dinner parties were held.13

There were two major facets of middle-class values: virtuous simplicity and social distinction. The first reflected a beneficent self-image that took pride in moral goodness, hard work, and self-help.14 For diners of this "militant middle-class consciousness," the theory translated into parties in which simplicity, sincerity, and enjoyment were goals.15 Further, most of them disdained what they saw as ostentatious excess and greed in the opposing camp.

Those who adhered to the second facet of middle-class values found ways to reconcile their love of splendor and materialism to the moral code. According to a historian of eating habits, "To be rich and successful was your God and your country's reward for services. Your worldly possessions . . . pointed out how good you were."16 Seen from this angle, the distinction between the material and the moral blurs; both seemingly disparate qualities might well have coexisted.

13Thompson, Respectable Society, 174-75. The consensus for frequency of dinner giving is once a month for the middle class, and once a week for the upper class (Burnett, Plenty and Want, 62; Burton, The Early Victorians at Home, 157; and Frank E. Huggett, Life Below Stairs: Domestic Servants in England from Victorian Times [New York, 1977], 94).


15Curtin, Propriety and Position, 54 (quotation).

16Pullar, Consuming Passions, 180.
within the same group or even the same individual. What distinguished the two was the extent to which they adhered to one side or the other. Did morals come before all else? Was ostentation frowned upon? Or was their participation in conspicuous consumption—and social competition—so great that it superseded all else? For the latter group, the dinner party was often an opportunity for parading one’s material acquisitions and for emulating the upper class.¹⁷

With a vast literature of advice manuals at their disposal, many members of the middle-class took pride in the fact that, by adhering to a strict code of etiquette, their entertainments were respectable. For the middle layers of the middle class, it has been suggested that the guidebooks represented little more than "fantasy-wish fulfillment";¹⁸ but the upper middle class might actually profit from the advice solicited in making their way up the social ladder. Behavior at a dinner party could be crucial for a candidate, and manuals offered suggestions ranging from specific table manners to overall demeanor. In short, many of these social aspirants were willing to learn and follow the rigorous code of behavior to gain access to higher circles.

¹⁷Middle-class preconceptions of upper-class "extravagance, indulgence, frivolity, and excess" was not always accurate, as is demonstrated in chapters three, four, and seven in simple, unaffected dinner parties of many elite hostesses (Thompson, Respectable Society, 58 [quotation], 67; Burnett, Plenty and Want, 167).

¹⁸Curtin, Propriety and Position, 45.
Participants in this process often overlapped the middle and upper classes. It will be easier, therefore, to refer to them as the nouveaux riches. This group—upon which much of this study focuses—will be defined as those members of either the upper middle class or of the upper class who had recently acquired enough money to lead active and somewhat fashionable social lives.19

As the numbers of nouveaux riches grew, the small, tightly knit circles of High Society, predominantly in London, found themselves inundated with "a flood of applicants that threatened to overwhelm the [exclusive] life-style itself."20 In the eighteenth century, "London in ‘the Season’ was the literal meeting place of the only real ‘class,’ the finite group of personal friends, rivals, acquaintances, and enemies . . . ."21 Consequently, a new system of rules and regulations for gaining admission and ultimate acceptance into Society—a "blueprint of expectations"—was created in the 1820s and used throughout the Victorian era.22

---

19 This term will be used notwithstanding the fact that some members in these categories had long been accepted and established in their social circles. An example is the Shaw family in North and South, discussed below in Chapter IV.


22 Davidoff, The Best Circles, 17. See also Curtin, Propriety and Position, 148; and Thompson, Respectable Society, 109-110.
The grave importance of sociability had long been apparent. As early as 1720, "Society was a matter as serious as politics or any war." With the restructuring of the system in the 1820s, however, the Victorians distinguished themselves by reaching the "highest stage of refinement, development, and rigidity" in their conduct of social affairs. Unlike the politics or wars governed by men, it was women who were deemed the "semi-official leaders" and "arbiters of social acceptance or rejection." Women's primary responsibility was in the care of their family and the management of their households, which included the supervision of a number of servants, depending on finances. With the renewed emphasis on Society, however, "the centre of women's existence was not just the home but the home as a basis for social life." Financial status earned by the husband would not go far without the social status that wives might bring, sometimes through their family lineage, but increasingly through their endeavors in the system to gain respectability, be it in the best circles or in self-contained, upper-middle-class circles.

The impact of industrialization—most notably, the appearance of new and

---


22Davidoff, *Best Circles*, 16 (quotations); Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington, 1982), 8; and Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, 234.

23Davidoff, *Best Circles*, 73.
expanding middle classes—brought confusion and uncertainty to the traditional system of social hierarchy. 27 Accordingly, to better control admission standards, elite circles that had in the eighteenth century held their functions at promiscuous sites such as Vauxhall and Ranelagh gradually moved them in the 1830s and 1840s to the private sphere of the home. 28 Although these events ranged from afternoon tea parties for women to evening balls and dances, the dinner party was the most prestigious invitation one could receive or offer. 29

The system itself involved four major steps: introductions, calling, invitations to social gatherings, and finally, either rejection or acceptance into a new social network. Reciprocation of calling and invitations was mandatory. Each phase involved the rules and regulations of proper etiquette, which were to be followed by the applicant with precision and care; to disregard them could result in being ignored or purged from the desired circle. 30 Accordingly, behavior at the dinner party and at the dinner table in particular could be crucial to joining a desired circle.

A specialized blueprint applied to the dinner party. As important for "judges" to observe as what was said and how much etiquette was mastered was

27 Ibid., 23, 41.
28 Ibid., 47; Curtin, Propriety and Position, 148.
30 Davidoff, Best Circles, 37-58; Curtin, Propriety and Position, especially 148-49.
how well one handled oneself overall. Newcomer hostesses were particularly scrutinized: Every detail was noticed, from physical manifestations such as ornamentation, food, and servants; to more latent indications such as selection of guests, general conversation, and ease with which each phase of the ritual was executed.

The implications of dinner party invitations for members of the nouveaux riches could involve the security of a man’s career as well as his and his family’s social status. An invitation from employer to employee (or, if the employee were bold enough, vice versa) might easily improve their working relationship and could greatly improve future prospects. According to Davidoff, “what happened in . . . dining-rooms and drawing-rooms was related to decisions taken in . . . offices and board rooms.”

Women’s vital role of hostess cannot be overlooked. Many published guides, whether household manuals or etiquette books, addressed women directly in how this role was to be executed. More recently, in discussing upper-class women, Michael Curtin has pointed out that

> It was as a hostess that the fashionable lady achieved her apotheosis. Combining the lady’s domestic base with her aspirations to wider influence, hospitality offered her the opportunity to give to a broad audience the moral and sociable

---

31Davidoff, *Best Circles*, 32, 73 (quotation); Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 283. An example is discussed below in the case of Emma Cadbury (Chapter III).
lessons she supposedly taught her family.\textsuperscript{32}

Other historians have focused specifically on the political wife and how her hostessing influenced the political realm. Pat Jalland, for instance, has argued that "a number of political careers were enhanced . . . because . . . wives were good hostesses capable of making interesting conversation and helping guests to mix easily."\textsuperscript{33}

Historians, social anthropologists, and literary critics have all speculated on the stark contrasts of the Victorian dinner party. Although the event was held within the confines of the private sphere of the home, the rooms used for the ritual were clearly of a semi-public nature. Guests were carefully selected to be honored with hospitality from the private sphere but were themselves representatives from the public sphere who served as witnesses to the host family's growing wealth and status. From an anthropological perspective, the dinner party was a glorified ritual of the primal act of eating, in which all participants shared the food in a communal manner. The Victorians, however, had a "thicket of etiquette" to protect them from getting too close.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Propriety and Position, 251. See also Frankle, "The Genteel Family," 195.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Pat Jalland, Women, Marriage, and Politics, 1860-1914 (Oxford, 1986), 194 (quotation); Esther Simon Shkolnik, Leading Ladies: A Study of Eight Late Victorian and Edwardian Political Wives (New York and London, 1987), especially 60-61. See also below, Chapter VII.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Curtin, Propriety and Position, 148.
\end{itemize}
priggish behavior, at least in the public eye, precluded them from thinking of their status-raising dinner parties as anything but primal.

The Victorian dinner party provides an excellent opportunity to examine middle- and upper-class culture. It was a ritual that the participants took seriously, and its intricate web of rules were binding, especially for those whose social status was unstable. Seen from this viewpoint, the dinner party was a microcosm of both middle- and upper-class Society. Many in the new middle classes, and the nouveaux riches in particular, became obsessed with a drive for social esteem, and the dinner party provided an ideal way of proving their respectability to themselves and to their world.
CHAPTER II

THE SCRIPT, 1830-1859

In response to the rising importance of the dinner party, a disparate cast of writers emerged to offer advice and commentaries. In these works, our central debate appears: One side advocated strict rules of etiquette, emphasizing the necessity of proper form and behavior; and the other side repudiated the ostentatious artificiality that the first side bred, instead endorsing simplicity, sincerity, and enjoyment. The advocates of strict formality celebrated the dinner party and the opportunities it offered for social refinement and elevation. The etiquette book was their bible; in most cases, it was written by and for the middle classes. Although social historians have accused authors of advice manuals of commercial opportunism,¹ the fervent convictions with which their counterparts wrote cannot be denied. The identity of these "critics" covered a broad span: from an altruistic female Christian preaching benevolence and goodwill, to an egocentric male gastronomist concerned with how best to enjoy a good meal.²

¹See, for example, Curtin, Propriety and Position, 46; and Branca, Silent Sisterhood, 12-16.

²Gastronomy is, according to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, "the art or science of good eating"; a gastronomist, or gastronome, "implies that one has studied extensively the history and rituals of haute cuisine." (See epicure in Webster's.)
For the gastronomist Thomas Walker (1784-1836), the condition of dining in early-Victorian England was reaching tragic proportions. In *Aristology, or the Art of Dining*, first published in 1835 as a series of articles in his seven-month journal, *The Original*, Walker pleaded with his fellow male, middle-class diners to abandon their pretentious dinner-giving styles and adopt one of simplicity. He drew a sharp contrast between the actual condition of dinner parties and what should be done to improve them.

Walker covered every minute aspect of the dinner party. He, like so many other writers to be examined here, realized that details could determine the success or failure of the event. Details also reflected attitudes and characteristics of host, hostess, guests, and the society of which they were a part.

According to Walker, the host must make guests feel comfortable in order to reach the ultimate goal of the dinner party, enjoyment. Elements to consider included proper lighting, temperature, ventilation, and table size. Serving style was also important: Walker found the new *à la Russe* method—which necessitated servants serving each guest—to be a tedious waiting ceremony that constantly interrupted conversation. Servants, he felt, only aggravated an already

---


grim situation:

I am rather a bold man at table, and set form very much at
defiance, so that if a salad happens to be within my reach, I make
no scruple to take it to me; but the moment I am espied, it is
nipped up from the most convenient into the most inconvenient
position. That such absurdity should exist amongst rational beings,
and in a civilized country is extraordinary! 5

His solution was to set everything out on the table for each course. Such an
arrangement would enable guests to assist one another, without servants
interfering. Walker's simple dining style included a simple menu. For the main
course, he suggested "turbot and salmon, with doubles of each of the adjuncts,
lobster-sauce, cucumber, young potatoes, cayenne, and Chili vinegar." 6 The table
setting should likewise follow a simple style, and large centerpieces such as
epergnes were to be astutely avoided:

At table, intercourse is prevented as much as possible by a huge
center piece of plate and flowers, which cuts off about one-half the
company from one another, and some very awkward mistakes have
taken place in consequence, from guests having made personal
observations upon those who were actually opposite to them. It
seems strange that people should be invited, to be hidden from one
another. 7

5Ibid., 6.
6Ibid.
7Ibid., 16.
Not surprisingly, Walker found the upper classes most guilty of this and similar breaches of good "aristology." Accordingly, he argued that the "vulgar rich" were "the very last class worthy of imitation." Later in the work, he explained why: "In general, the richer the host, the duller the entertainment . . . because expense is lavished in the wrong direction, without taste, or invention, or rational end."

One of the most important aspects of the dinner party, of which Walker was well aware, was the guests. The host should carefully consider what kinds of guests to invite and whether they would get along well together. As for number, Walker preferred a party of six or eight: "For complete enjoyment a company ought to be One; a sympathizing and drawing together, listening and talking in due proportions—no monopolists, nor any ciphers."

Significantly, Walker was a bachelor and preferred the freedom from constraint that all-male dinner parties offered. Women's presence, he believed, only restricted the enjoyment and conviviality that were the keystones of a good dinner. Men generally understood principles of aristology far better than did

---

8 Walker coined the terms aristology and aristologist himself, the first being the art of dining, and the second, one who studies or practices it. He adopted the terms from the Greek word for dinner, Ariston (ibid., 1). From here forward, the terms and their derivatives will be used without quotation marks.

9 Ibid., 9.

10 Ibid., 48.

11 Ibid., 13 (quotation); 20.
women:

Gentlemen keep more in view the real ends, whereas ladies think principally of display and ornament, of form and ceremony—not all, for some have excellent notions of taste and comfort; and the cultivation of them would seem to be the peculiar province of the sex, as one of the chief features of household management.\textsuperscript{12}

Walker has thereby stereotyped women into two distinct groups: tasteless, overly formal pests; and ideal household managers, such as were described in many household manuals. The first was the enemy of aristologists; the second, a tolerable presence at best. It is no wonder that Walker preferred dinners at exclusively male reform clubs to those in a private home.\textsuperscript{13}

In spite of his disillusionment at what he considered the pathetic condition of aristology, Walker was hopeful for its future. Just as "simplicity and convenience" had "triumphed" in the dress of 1835 compared to that of 1750, he argued, so too in time would the same change occur in dining habits.\textsuperscript{14}

Fortunately for him, Walker would not live to experience what would surely have been disappointment in this hope. He died suddenly of pulmonary apoplexy in January 1836 at the age of fifty-two.

Both Elizabeth Whately and Samuel Smiles added to Walker's argument that Society was too pretentious. For the devout Whately, whose work first

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 9-12.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 27.
appeared in 1847, Society was not only shallow but also laden with religious hypocrisy. Further, manners, instead of developing naturally from the heart, were becoming no more than a series of rules that led to conformity and an "artificial smoothness" throughout Society. The result was the destruction of "individuality of character":

Society has become like a smooth-shaven lawn. The inequalities have been rubbed down, till one may almost know beforehand, what will be said on any given subject in conversation. To skim lightly over every topic, ... to weed away every thing like natural animation or feeling, gives to society what some persons call smoothness and grace, others, monotony and vapidity.

Clearly, these were effects of the new codified system of social life—the blueprint of expectations. The nouveaux riches in particular were striving so hard to obey the system in order to gain acceptance into new circles, that their humanity was being sacrificed, and they were behaving as automatons. Whately's writing was an exposure of this deplorable condition of artificiality and a reminder to use virtuous middle-class qualities such as piousness and human kindness. Although she did not specify so herself, this issue applied directly to the dinner party.

Samuel Smiles' best-selling Self-Help (1859) expressed the same concerns

---

13Whately was married to the theologian Richard Whately, who became the unpopular Archbishop of Dublin in 1831 (Kunitz, British Authors of the Nineteenth Century, 651-52).

14Elizabeth Whately, English Life, Social and Domestic, in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century ... (London, 1851), 124.

15Ibid., 122.
as Whately and Walker, but from a different angle. Whereas Whately's work focused on morals and religion in society and Walker's work, on aristology, Self-Help addressed the specific problems confronted by members of the upwardly mobile classes. Often, the price they paid for conforming to the blueprint of expectations was high:

We keep up appearances, too often at the expense of honesty; and, though we may not be rich, yet we must seem to be so. We must be "respectable," though only in the meanest sense—in mere vulgar outward show . . . . What waste, what misery, what bankruptcy, come from all this ambition to dazzle others with the glare of the apparent worldly success we need.  

Like Whately, Smiles believed that courtesy must be sincere and not contrived. It was an internal quality emanating from "right-heartedness and kindly feeling," and as such belonged to "no exclusive rank or station." Not only was this brand of sincere courtesy desirable, he argued, it was also necessary: Without it, the benefits of "much industry, integrity, and honesty of character" were ruined. Thus, Smiles called for the flourishing of middle-class virtues such as thrift and hard work on the one hand and sincerity and courtesy on the other. A dinner party using this formula, like those of Walker and Whately, would call for simplicity and sincere hospitality in which the host(s) looked after the guests

---


19Ibid., 369. 

20Ibid., 368-69.
comfort.

One writer who supported the strict demands of the social system was Charles William Day. His *Hints on Etiquette* sold 12,000 copies between 1834 and 1837; in 1849, its twenty-sixth edition appeared. The work covered a broad scope: from the anxiety of the nouveaux riches in aspiring to new social circles, to the crucial role of etiquette in that process, to specific "hints" for improvement at the dinner party.

Whereas most writers of etiquette manuals focused on London Society, Day recognized the need to educate provincial newcomers of the expectations of the "best society":

It would be absurd to suppose, those persons who constitute the upper ranks of the middle classes in London are ignorant of the regulations here laid down;—but in the country (especially in the mercantile districts), where the tone of society is altogether lower, it is far otherwise . . . .

Day proceeded to explain why the strict rules of etiquette were necessary to those aspiring to climb higher on the social scale. He began with his own definition of etiquette:

Etiquette is the barrier which society draws around itself as a

---

21 For an interesting synopsis of a lawsuit this former painter brought against the publishers of the *Science of Etiquette* in 1837 for plagiarism, see Curtin, *Propriety and Position*, 52.

22 Ibid., 40.

protection against offences the 'law' cannot touch,—a shield against
the intrusion of the impertinent, the improper, and the vulgar . . .

Many unthinking persons consider the observance of Etiquette to
be nonsensical and unfriendly, as consisting of unmeaning forms,
practised only by the silly and the idle; an opinion which arises
from their not having reflected on the reasons that have caused
certain rules to be established, indispensable to the well-being of
society, and without which, indeed, it would inevitably fall to pieces,
and be destroyed.\footnote{Ibid., 9. Original emphasis.}

The latter observation directly contradicted Whately's argument cited earlier.

Etiquette, for Day, was like a well-oiled piece of machinery that worked perfectly
when used by a skilled operator. If Society were, as Whately put it, a "smooth-
shaven lawn," then Day's etiquette machinery was the lawn mower.

Day went on to guide his newcomers "through the intricacies of
conventional usage,"--as if he were their friend--but only after assuming that their
manners (including those advocated by Whately) were inadequate:

Shopkeepers become merchants, and mechanics manufacturers;
with the possession of wealth they acquire a taste for the luxuries
of life, expensive furniture, and gorgeous plate; also numberless
superfluities; with the use of which they are only imperfectly
acquainted. But although their capacities for enjoyment increase, it
rarely occurs that the polish of their manners keeps pace with the
rapidity of their advancement: such persons are often painfully
reminded that wealth alone is insufficient to protect them from the
mortifications a limited acquaintance with society will entail upon

\footnote{Ibid., 10. Original emphasis.}
the ambitious.26

Day argued that manners must be in top form at the dinner party, where every aspect of etiquette would be under careful scrutiny. The occasion was the most important and difficult test a debutant would undergo because it included the act of eating and its accompanying intricacies of manners. This aspect of the dinner party was the supreme revelation of true character:

Nothing indicates a well-bred man more than a proper mode of eating his dinner. A man may pass muster by dressing well, and may sustain himself tolerably in conversation; but if he be not perfectly 'au fait,' dinner will betray him.27

In instructing his readers how to be "perfectly 'au fait" at a dinner party, Day was extremely candid. A newcomer's every movement at the dinner table would be observed and must be carried out with precision. Day provided a series of solecisms, or faux pas, that were to be scrupulously avoided:

NEVER use your knife to convey your food to your mouth, under any circumstances; it is unnecessary, and glaringly vulgar.

Making a noise in chewing, or breathing hard in eating, are both unseemly habits, and ought to be eschewed.

26Ibid., 11.

27Ibid., 32. Original emphasis. Similarly, a reviewer wrote in 1851 that "the parvenu, be he never [sic] so rich and magnificent, cannot escape detection at table" ("Soyer's Modern Housewife, or Ménagère," Fraser's Magazine XLIV [August 1851], 208).
Do not pick your teeth much at table, as, however satisfactory a practice to yourself, to witness it is not a pleasant thing.\(^{28}\)

For Walker, who was "rather a bold man at table," these dictums would only have promoted the pretentiousness he so deplored. This is not to say he necessarily would have advocated the faux pas described by Day; only that the comfort and enjoyment of guests were tantamount to all else. Rules for their behavior only encumbered his maxim of simplicity.

By acknowledging the anxiety that the nouveaux riches felt and the awkwardness that their behavior revealed, Day underscored the importance of the dinner party as an opportunity for others to closely inspect the newcomer. This was a far cry from the relaxed setting of Walker’s prescribed dinners. Because Day knew the tense situations that dinner parties could entail, he prepared newcomers with guidelines he thought would help them and eventually render them "easy and confident in society."\(^{29}\)

One work that compromised the views of the opposing schools of simplicity and sincerity on the one hand and rigid formality on the other was The Habits of Good Society (1859), by an anonymous male. Like Smiles’ and Whatley’s works, Habits advocated both moral character and the need for courtesy. In the manner of Smiles, the work argued that the (predominantly

---

\(^{28}\)Ibid., 28 (first quotation), 29 (second quotation), 30 (third quotation). Original emphases.

\(^{29}\)Ibid., 72.
upper) middle classes had dignity and respectability of their own. Circles should admit newcomers based on "agreeable manners, social talents, and elevated character." Exclusiveness was eschewed as "vulgar." Climbing the social scale seemed easy enough, as such, and was apparently free from the obstacles that Day's newcomers encountered. In a moral tone reminiscent of Whately and even Ellis, the writer of Habits maintained that "true politeness comes from the heart, and this being good, the rest will follow." There were even familiar tones of Smiles' self-help maxim:

It is in the power of every man to create . . . [good society] for himself. An agreeable and polished person attracts like light, and every kind of society which is worth entering will soon and easily open its doors to him and be glad to have him in his circle.

Democratic and moralistic though the tone of Habits may seem at first, a closer examination returns us to the significance of the term polished. The writer, who believed that "a dinner-party is the main institution of society in this country," regarded the ritual in part, as did Day and so many others, as an opportunity to judge participants, especially newcomers. Consequently, the "polish" demanded by Society would be necessary for the newcomer to achieve

---

30Habits of Good Society, 31.
31Ibid., 30.
32Ibid., 270.
33Ibid., 30. Original emphasis.
34For a discussion of the term, see ibid., 24-25.
success. Like Day, the writer of Habits believed that table manners were crucially important; he held that "however agreeable a man may be in society, if he offends or disgusts by his table traits, he will soon be scouted from it, and justly so." The writer then gave a satiric, step-by-step description of "polished" table manners, using those of an unpolished man as behavior to avoid.

Again, just as the writer seemed to be adhering to one school of thought, he advocated qualities of the other one. In many instances, the writer's criticisms of dinner parties echoed those of Walker twenty-four years earlier. After complaining of "a huge epergne between me and the rest of my fellow-creatures, . . . an irritable, solemn host at one end, and a most anxious hostess at the other," a "friend" of the writer further lamented about

the most labored attempts at conversation all round, in a dark room with a servant perpetually thrusting something across my shoulder, exciting each time a fresh alarm of a shower of sauce or gravy . . . . --really is this society?"

Walker had expressed the same complaints; his words seem to overlap the passage above:

No wonder that such a system produces many a dreary pause, in spite of every effort to the contrary, and that one is obliged, in self-defence, to crumble bread, sip wine, look at paintings, if there are any, . . . or, lastly, retreat into oneself in despair, as I have often

---

35Ibid., 291.

36Ibid., 342 (first quotation); 342-43 (second quotation).
and often done.\textsuperscript{37}

Had he lived until 1859, Walker would have been appalled to find the conditions he so deplored at dinner parties still thriving. He had challenged someone to reform the system of dinner giving, in what seemed to be a desperate appeal:

Let us hope that some daring and refined spirits will emancipate us from such barbarous thraldom, and that we may see a rivalry of inventive genius instead of the present one of cumbrous pomp.\textsuperscript{38}

No such spirits emerged. By 1859, the dinner party had become institutionalized and was a critical rite of passage for upwardly mobile classes in gaining entry into desired circles. Notwithstanding pleas from writers such as Walker, Whately, and Smiles, a simplification of the ritual might diminish the respectability of the host and hostess. It seemed that the grander the display, the higher the esteem for the household—or, more accurately, for their wealth.\textsuperscript{39}

That, at least, was what the signs examined so far would seem to indicate. But what were the attitudes of the ritual’s actual participants? Were they as rigidly formal as the etiquette books insisted they be, or did they agree with the writer of \textit{Habits}, that “never was a more solemn torture created for mankind

\textsuperscript{37}Walker, \textit{Aristology}, 17.

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{39}Walker had lamented the financial hardships and anxieties that dinner parties could incur (ibid., 48).
than these odious dinner parties"? Their impressions were recorded in memoirs and correspondence, which will be examined next.

---

*Habits of Good Society, 342.*
CHAPTER III

THE PLAYERS, 1830-1859

If the writers of the "script" of the dinner party reflected on the overall significance of the institution to their society--what it meant, what opportunities it might bring, or what was wrong with it--the individual "players" interpreted in personal writings what a specific dinner party was like and how it impressed them. The scope of the dinner party broadens when this private dimension is added. No longer is the event a mere ritual to be evaluated; it is a gathering of hungry, anxious, delighted, or miserable human beings. In spite of different approaches used in public and private writings, however, many of the same issues were addressed: How an ostentatious (or "stupid") dinner--executed according to the blueprint of expectations--differed from a dinner of simple enjoyment; what the role of hospitality was; and the importance of good conversation to the outcome of the ritual.

Class remained an important variable. Many of the writers of "public" works already examined had criticized nouveaux-riches tendencies toward superficiality, and some upper-class private writers echoed them, even resenting
the newcomers' intrusion into Society.\(^1\) Conversely, the importance of middle-
class morality had been emphasized by the school of simplicity in public writings;
similarly, qualities such as piety and hard work figured prominently in dinner
party scenes described in some nouveaux- riches, upper-middle-class memoirs.\(^2\)

Emma Cadbury (1811-1905), for instance, gave dinners for her husband
and his colleagues after Birmingham business meetings, held next door to their
home. This gesture combined Christian good-will--they belonged to a Quaker
community--and the work ethic: The rewards of hard work were reaped
immediately by a good dinner.

Cadbury was a young, middle-class housewife who confronted the
responsibility of providing these dinners shortly after her marriage, in 1837.
According to Cadbury's daughter Emma Gibbins, who edited her mother's
memoirs, the gatherings were

a very formidable affair to the young housekeeper, who was
unaccustomed to any entertaining outside the simple hospitality of
Friends, whereas her husband, besides being fifteen years her
senior, had lived abroad, and mixed in general society.\(^3\)

---

\(^1\)For examples of such private writings, see Memoirs of Edward and Catherine
Stanley, ed. Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (London, 1880), 247; and The Reminiscences
of Lady Dorothy Nevill, ed. Ralph Nevill (London, 1907), 99-100. See also below,
Chapter VII.

\(^2\)In addition to writers discussed here, see also The Diaries of Edward Pease;

\(^3\)Records of the Gibbins Family . . . , ed. Emma Gibbins (Birmingham, 1911),
Appendix I, 264.
Cadbury's efforts did not go unnoticed: "the guests proved themselves true gentlemen by their kindness and courtesy, and plainly showed their gratitude for the trouble taken for their comfort." For husbands like Cadbury who worked themselves into prosperous positions, the assistance of a wife in providing such dinners could be crucial. Further, her husband's prior experience in "general society" required Cadbury to learn about domestic and social duties at an accelerated rate and, it seemed, with little or no guidance. Such predicaments confirm the need that women had for advice literature.

The memoirs of a provincial, nouveau-riche male, John Izzard Pryor (1774-1861), provide a strong contrast to those of Cadbury. Pryor, a Hertfordshire brewer, referred to many dinner parties, all of which he thoroughly enjoyed (and none of which he was responsible for organizing). He noted details of the events, but not in the critical vein of Walker. Rather, the details seemed to serve as evidence for how enjoyable the evening was and—one might add—how much he enjoyed his new life in higher circles.

The dinner party Pryor recorded in most detail was one in 1852 hosted by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton in honor of the American minister, Mr. Lawrence.

---

*Ibid.

Pryor would have made a good model for Smiles: He had a "hearty respect" for money because he earned it by "hard work, sober judgment, and thrift" (Gerald Curtis, *A Chronicle of Small Beer: The Early Victorian Diaries of a Hertfordshire Brewer* [London and Chichester, 1970], 214).
Pryor wrote about the evening with great precision: He even included a mishap with transportation to the event, which resulted in his and his wife’s late arrival at ten minutes until eight o’clock, twenty minutes after dinner was to be served. Such precious details were probably thought too mundane for other writers to record; few such accounts seem to have survived in published sources. Pryor’s description is remarkably complete:

We found the company all assembled in the drawing room and all ready to go into the dining room. We made our apology and were soon ushered into the splendid dining hall. The party consisted of thirteen. We had a very nice dinner, all carved by the butler at large sideboards, no joint or dish appearing on the table, but being handed round by a number of servants in splendid livery. A bill of fare had previously been handed round the dinner table. The length of the table was brilliantly lighted, plateaus and dishes for the dessert being intermixed with the lights. Wines of a variety of descriptions were continually handed round, the champagne being excellent. The dessert was not equal to the dinner, the grapes and apricots not being quite ripe. The coffee ice was very good. On my left hand was Mrs. Reid and on my right, the son of the American Minister. We were much pleased with Mr. Lawrence whose physiognomy is particularly good and conversation very engaging. On joining the ladies in the drawing room coffee was handed round. Afterwards our host amused the company with a species of mesmerism . . . . We left soon after half past ten.¹

Pryor included details on every phase of the ritual, from arrival to departure.

Clearly, his first à la Russe dinner did not disturb him, unlike others previously examined; but he did—like Walker and company—appreciate the merits of good lighting, good food and drink, and good conversation. In Pryor’s other accounts

¹Ibid., 60-61.
of dinner parties, the focus was not so much on what was served as how much he enjoyed himself due to good company and good conversation.⁷

In general, young women were most likely to notice details of dinner parties. Not only did they record features of the event such as those described by Pryor; they also considered details such as specific food served, whether they felt at ease, tense, or even claustrophobic; and how their dinner partner impressed them. No doubt many of these observations—especially material aspects—provoked a comparison with how they gave their own dinner parties. Another common element in young women’s memoirs was their frequent reference to certain dinners as "stupid."⁸ In most of these instances, this remark served at least in part as a subconscious awareness that the machinery of Society—the "lawn mower"—was dominant, perhaps at the expense of enjoyment.

The letters written by Elizabeth Gaskell in the early years of her marriage and literary career provide rich details such as those just described.⁹ Although at times the letters relayed the impression of a wide-eyed, giddy newcomer, Gaskell became increasingly wary of vulgarity and pretentiousness in Manchester’s

---

⁷Ibid., 76, 81, 83, 89, 172, 207-08.

⁸This remark was also made by men. For example, Anne Thackeray Ritchie quoted her father, William Makepeace Thackeray, as calling one 1854 dinner party "exceedingly stupid" (Letters of Anne Thackeray Ritchie, ed. Hester Ritchie [London, 1924], 61).

nouveaux-riches Society, and called at least one 1838 dinner "stupid."¹⁰ In later years, as she attended more dinner parties after achieving literary success, she recorded far fewer details about dinner parties other than who was there and, sometimes, what was discussed. Gaskell was then no longer a newcomer; she was firmly established within and accustomed to Society.

Although Gaskell hardly represented the norm among middle-class women, she and her household exhibited commonalities with "ordinary" counterparts. For example, she wrote apprehensively in 1848 about her small dinner party as "a domestic to-do," lamenting, "I wish myself well thro' it."¹¹ Gaskell even revealed rare evidence about how her servant felt about company; she described her as "very much frightened at 'company' . . . as to her cook-duties . . . ."¹² This apprehension on the part of mistress and servant alike is reminiscent of Emma Cadbury--a more typical example of a nouveau-riche housewife.

Apprehensive though the women described thus far might have been, still they experienced little difficulty in moving from their middle-class origins to higher social circles. The blueprint of expectations was in operation, but it functioned smoothly, and the newcomers’ behavior seems to have been at least

¹⁰Ibid., 23 (quotation), 261.
¹¹Ibid., 63-64.
¹²Ibid., 209.
acceptable.

The diary of Lady Charlotte Guest, later Schreiber (1812-95), provides an excellent vantage point for examining the transition from middle- to upper-class circles. Lady Charlotte's social status was unusual in that she was born into a wealthy gentry family but married a provincial, nouveau-riche ironmaster and M.P., Josiah John Guest. This marriage, along with an ill-reputed second marriage of her mother, excluded her from London Society. Lady Charlotte deplored the lower social circles that confronted her. Nouveaux-riches dinner parties were especially repulsive to her, such as this one in 1834 at the home of Alderman Thompson, ironworks owner and M.P.:

It was such a dinner, so stupid, so hot, that at last I nearly fainted. Conceive the horror of seeing a fat woman sit opposite to one in a yellow gown, and an amber cap with red flowers, and the still greater horror of that fat lady claiming to be an acquaintance . . . . The men sat late, and I did not get home til past eleven."

Not long afterward, Lady Charlotte accelerated her efforts to "get into Society."

Gradually, Lady Charlotte summoned the courage to hold dinner parties and other entertainments for those members of the best circles that would dine with her and her husband. The affairs were well received, and encouraged her

---

13One woman, for example, would neither introduce her to a valuable gentry connection nor dine with her (Lady Charlotte Guest: Extracts from Her Journal, 1833-1852, ed. The Earl of Bessborough [London, 1950], 39-40).


15Ibid., 29.
to pursue her goal. Lady Charlotte's characteristic combination of apprehension and determination was well apparent on the hectic day of her first London dinner party, held in 1834. In a rare convergence of two disparate characters—the anxious hostess and the pretentious gastronomer—Lady Charlotte went to see Louis Eustache Ude to pick up some ornaments for her dinner table:

The celebrated Professor of Gastronomy was very wrath with us for coming precisely at his dinner hour, and scolded us most unceremoniously, but by dint of talking louder than he, I obtained what I wanted.  

Clearly, the one was concerned only with dining by his own high, irrevocable standards, while the other used dinner as a tool for climbing the social scale. Even after Lady Charlotte admitted the next day her success of the night before, she still considered the necessary ritual "the stupidist thing in the world"; she hardly valued the art of dining as would any gastronomer.

In spite of her success as hostess of occasional entertainments, obstacles remained to achieving her goal. Lady Charlotte knew firsthand that "in this aristocratic nation the word trade conveys a taint," and determined to overcome the prejudice for the sake of her children.  She never forgot her own aristocratic origins and was convinced that she deserved to be ranked at the very top of Society. "My blood," she wrote in 1839, "is of the noblest and most

---

58Ibid., 27.

59Ibid., 133. Emphasis added.
princely in the kingdom, and if I go into Society, it must be the very best and first."¹⁸ Thus, Lady Charlotte resolved to succeed, notwithstanding the long, humiliating process it entailed. Curtin has pointed out accurately that "she had never sought simple pleasure or sociability from Society—which indeed gave her neither—but rather status."¹⁹ Not even after she eventually reached her goal did she enjoy herself in Society.²⁰

Lady Charlotte would probably have agreed with Whately that Society was "a smooth-shaven lawn" or with Day's implication that the etiquette machinery, when used properly, was like a lawn mower. Although she resented the system for snubbing her—a born aristocrat—she expressed no need to change it, unlike its fervent critics. Rather, she assumed it was a necessary part of life. In fact, she probably would have supported its fundamental structure, which allowed established people to judge who to admit into their circles. Lady Charlotte would not have tolerated the "horror of that fat lady" in the circles she eventually entered.

Character judgment at dinner parties appeared in a number of memoirs. Even if the diarists and correspondents did not hold such influential positions within their social circles as to determine which newcomers to reject or accept,

¹⁸Ibid., 89.

¹⁹Curtin, Propriety and Position, 80.

²⁰Guest, Lady Charlotte Guest, 131.
the process of judging another based on their behavior at a dinner party is
relevant in itself. While some people’s evaluation focused on how proper or
"respectable" the newly introduced person acted, others covered a wider range,
looking also for human traits and suspected signs of artificiality. Clearly, the
approach taken depended on the character of the judge. Maria Edgeworth, for
example, was an open-minded, outgoing woman who strongly disliked
pretentiousness and who admired warmth, sincerity, and good conversational
skills. At one dinner party, she detected contrived sincerity; at another, she
compared a man possessing "invaluable sincerity" with a woman whose "hard
working affectation looked so ugly beside him . . . ."21

Harriet Martineau was more bitter and critical of those around her. She
was particularly scathing of a dinner partner she had in the early 1830s:

He talked excessively fast, and ate fast and prodigiously, stretching
out his long arm for any dish he had a mind to, and getting hold of
the largest spoons which would dispatch the most work in the
shortest time. He watched me intently and incessantly when I was
conversing with anybody else . . . . I believe I have never met with
more than three men, in the course of my experience, who talked
with women in a perfectly natural manner; that is, precisely as they
talked with men: but the difference in Brougham’s case was so
great as to be disagreeable.22

---

21Maria Edgeworth: Letters from England, 1813-1844, ed. Christina Colvin

22Ibid., 447, 509.

(London, 1877), 311.
Besides harboring resentment toward others on a personal level, Martineau adhered to Society's expectations, codified in the system of etiquette, and condemned anyone who did not. The pace in which her partner dined was much faster than the norm; the system demanded a smoother rendering of the dining ritual.

Anna Maria Wilhelmina Pickering was another harsh judge. In her assessment of the painter Sir Edwin Landseer, she conceded him "amusing but not a man for whom one could feel much respect." Landseer's discussion of snorting prompted this conclusion. The choice of such a crude topic at an upper-class dinner party may have been a sign of the difficulty those with middle-class origins faced when socializing with upper-class gentry. The chances were good, however, that Landseer well knew the inappropriateness of his topic and raised it for mere shock value. Nouveaux- riches celebrities such as Landseer tended to get by in Society with following fewer prescribed rules from the blueprint. Their fame and accomplishments alone acted as a passport to Society.

The memoirs of Lady Eastlake, wife of the president of the Royal Academy, offered a different evaluation of Landseer. Although she found him "vulgar" when she first met him at a dinner party in 1846 before her marriage, he later became a welcome visitor to her home. At an 1851 dinner party given

\[\text{\textsuperscript{30}}\text{Memoirs of Anna Maria Wilhelmina Pickering . . . , ed. Spencer Pickering (New York and London, 1904), 257.}\]
by the Eastlakes, Landseer was the guest of honor. Lady Eastlake happily
reported on both Landseer's "delightful" stories of the Queen and on "plenty of
droll, lively conversation, particularly between Landseer and Mulready."25 Walker
and company would have appreciated the enjoyment that Landseer and the party
in general rendered.

Eastlakc loved dinner parties and loved life; accordingly, she often
admired rather than criticized people she met. She--like so many others already
examined--knew the value of a good conversationalist and often assessed people
on that basis alone.26 After a dinner party she attended in 1845, Eastlake
reflected on why she considered one man's conversational abilities the best in
Edinburgh:

[The conversation was] . . . so easy, so happy, full of meaning and
full of play, showing such multifarious reading and such a simple
mind. And then always the best of Christianity beaming through
all, the intellect always making the hearer feel his superiority, and
the goodness taking off the fear of it.27

Here was the ideal guest of Walker and company: a good conversationalist--
interesting and good-willed--and one who promoted simple enjoyment for the

25Journals and Correspondence of Lady Eastlake, ed. Charles Eastlake Smith,
Vol. I (London, 1895), 266.

26For examples of Eastlake's praise for good conversationalists or for dinner
parties that had good discussions in general, see ibid., 45, 194, 213, 242, 264, 266-
67, 278, 322.

27Ibid., 154.
entire party. Further, although he most likely belonged to the upper class, the man described by Eastlake certainly would have gained the approval of the middle-class moralists because of the simplicity and Christianity that "beamed" through him.

Eastlake was basically cheerful and optimistic, but she nonetheless recognized the pretentious side of dinner parties that the critics deplored. In describing such an evening in 1846, she noted that "If there are what people call 'stupid dinner-parties,' I certainly agree with them."28 Her major complaint about the evening was its lack of conversation.

But such pathetic dinners were more the exception than the rule with Eastlake, due largely to the interesting people she encountered. In 1842, when she moved with her family to Edinburgh as a young woman, Eastlake expressed gratitude for the assets of her new social circle: "The society to which we have hitherto been admitted is very fascinating: perfect ease, much spirited conversation, . . . and hearty welcomes make altogether a delightful whole . . . ."29 One year later, Eastlake remarked that "delightful" hosts "have done a great deal of good in Edinburgh by knocking down much exclusiveness."30 Unfortunately, she provided no hints as to how this was achieved.

---

28Ibid., 184.

29Ibid., 31.

30Ibid., 63.
The theme of humor at dinner parties is apparent in Eastlake's memoirs, which are refreshingly vibrant in this area. Eastlake loved to laugh; at one party, she remarked that "[a dinner partner] made me laugh, till I was almost shocked to hear myself . . .," and, at another, a witty guest had "the table roaring and the sideboard shaking." Given the level of her enjoyment and the high quality of her circles, Eastlake herself probably was a very likable person and an affable dinner guest. Not even the stress of hostessing a dinner party dulled her pleasure; Eastlake expressed a preference for receiving rather than visiting guests because "the very excitement of anxiety is pleasing."

Lady Eastlake and other good-natured upper-class women were luckier than most. Already well established in the best circles, they were less likely to experience the apprehensiveness of their nouveaux- riches or middle-class counterparts. In general, they were not disturbed by what many saw as restrictive rules and regulations, which came naturally to them. Whereas Lady Charlotte reluctantly participated in the dinner-giving system to achieve her goal of attaining a higher social status, Lady Eastlake thrived on the pleasures that dinner parties brought her. For one, the event was a rigorous social duty; for the other, an enjoyable gathering.

As suggested earlier, memoirs broaden our picture of the dinner party by

---

31Ibid., 43 (first quotation), 154 (second quotation).
32Ibid., 160.
emphasizing the subjective element. Consider the wide range of opinions and
goals among players as disparate as Cadbury and Pryor, Gaskell and
Martineau, Guest and Ude, and Eastlake and any of the others. Social status as
equally as gender and personality determined how different they were not only in
everyday life but also in how they behaved and what their expectations were at
the dinner table.
CHAPTER IV

THE PERFORMANCE, 1830-1859

The novel offers yet another perspective on the dinner party. Whereas the public writings analyzed the mechanics of the formal feeds and their effects on society, and the private writings offered glimpses of specific dinner parties and how they were perceived by various players, the dinner party in Victorian fiction combined script and players into complete performances. This chapter and a later one will examine different kinds of fictional players and what the dinner parties in which they participated were like. Although a dinner party scene is but a fragment of the novel as a whole, the ritual often serves an important role in both plot and character development and can, for our purposes, stand alone as a performance in its own right.

Sarah Stickney Ellis, the moral reformer of the early Victorian period whose nonfictional works have already been cited, wrote fiction to advance her cause. In "Dangers of Dining Out," one of the temperance novellas comprising Family Secrets, Ellis depicted a dinner party that began conventionally but that ended in chaos—all because of a moral downfall. The newlywed heroine, Eleanor Stanley Bond, had been accustomed in her family to respectable dinner parties in which the number of men and women were more or less equal. She was therefore surprised when her husband, Frederick Bond, wanted their first dinner
party as a married couple to consist only of male guests. It was with much reluctance that Frederick allowed Eleanor to include as guests her sister and a friend, to assist her.¹ Innocent, devout, and duty-bound Eleanor took great pride in preparing for the event. The Bonds' home was in "the most genteel part of town," and "there had been no want of money or thought bestowed upon its furniture . . . ."²

When the evening of the party arrived, Frederick deemed the arrangements "perfect": "his dinner was excellent, his wines were approved, and when the ladies rose to leave the table, he seemed to have nothing left to wish for beneath the sun."³ Of the dinner itself, we learn nothing more, and may assume that all performances of the players were executed according to the blueprint of expectations. It was after the ladies' departure, however, that husband's and wife's blueprints differed dramatically. Eleanor and the women expected the men to join them before too long, at which time there would be coffee and tea served, and piano music performed. Frederick, however, was accustomed to a bachelor's life-style, in which he often had dined out at his club

¹Eleanor had servants to assist her; it is assumed that her sister and friend would help in the planning of the evening as well as to provide company for her during the dinner.


³Ibid., 13.
and indulged liberally in alcoholic beverages. The dinner party, after the women withdrew, was a continuation of that life-style; the men became exceedingly drunk. Meanwhile, the women were left waiting for a very long time, hearing "peals of laughter from the dining-room below."* Eleanor appealed to her footman to inform the men that tea was being served, but to no avail. The men gradually entered the drawing room, but as rude drunks, not respectable gentlemen. Even the servants shed their prescribed roles as they stood by laughing at the men's antics. Only the women retained their roles, being highly distressed and humiliated in their helplessness.

Significantly, Ellis described the dining room at the end of the evening and not at the beginning. Because the preparations were "perfect," the reader could well imagine how the room looked beforehand, besides which, such a description would not advance Ellis's purpose in exposing the atrocities of drunkenness. The appearance of the room the morning after the party was described dramatically, becoming part of Ellis's own theatricality. As Eleanor entered the room, she saw

One dying lamp was still smoking, and crackling in its socket. The rest had burned themselves out. The flowers she had gathered and arranged the day before, were withered, and strewn upon the floor. Glasses had rolled from their places, and pools of wine lay black upon the table. Chairs were heaped together in strange confusion; and in one part of the room the carpet was torn from the boards, as if some heavy substance had been violently dragged along the ground. It was a sickening sight, to one who knew that

all this was the result, not of accident, but of premeditated
grossness and excess.5

Prophetically, the dinner party represented the vice, corruption, and decay of
propriety that was to dominate Frederick’s life for the remainder of the story. It
was only when Eleanor’s life was at stake that his moral consciousness revived
and that he successfully renounced alcohol forever. It may be assumed that from
then on, the dinner parties the couple gave were respectable, with a more equal
number of men and women present.

In choosing to introduce the theme of disgraceful drunkenness at a dinner
party, Ellis acknowledged the importance of the ritual in Society. Readers were
expected to be shocked that such a scandal would occur at what was intended to
be a respectable dinner party. Further, the stark contrast of the two opposing
aspects of the evening—one male, one female—clearly relayed Ellis’s moral
message and promoted her conviction that the seat of morality lay with women
and that it was their duty to promote it in their own domestic sphere.

Whereas Ellis’s work—reflective of the mood of the 1830s and 1840s—used
the dinner party to help convey her message of the need for moral reform, the
remaining three works to be examined in this chapter—all appearing in the 1850s
—included performances of the ritual to convey a sense of the changing social
scene, especially of middle-class attitudes toward themselves and, in one case,

5Ibid., 19-20.
toward the upper class.

In the 1857 novella *A Shabby Genteel Story*, William Makepeace Thackeray used a dinner party to develop both plot and characters, inundating the scene with his distinctive blend of satire. The story finds the pretentious and arrogant Mr. Brandon conceding to accept the invitation of "the vulgar [middle-class] family with whom he lodged." The party totaled eight: Mr. Brandon; Mr. Fitch, another border, in love with Miss Caroline; Mr. Swigby, the host's friend who "rides his horse, and has his five hundred a year to spend . . . ."; and Mrs. James Gann, the host and hostess; the two misses Macarty, Mrs. Gann's daughters from a previous marriage; and Miss Caroline, Mr. Gann's sixteen-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, in love with Mr. Brandon. Thackeray depicted the dinner party as a theatrical performance, even providing a diagram not only of the seating arrangement but also of where the food and drinks were situated on the table.

Like the Bonds' dinner party, the ritual began according to the blueprint of expectations—in this case, with the "going-in" to dinner—and eventually veered off course. The description of Mrs. Gann being escorted to dinner by Mr. Brandon is strikingly similar to the obese woman with the yellow gown and the


'Ibid.
amber cap with red flowers who had so repulsed Lady Charlotte.  

[H]e had the honour of conducting Mrs. Gann (dressed in a sweet yellow mouseline de laine, with a large red turban, a ferronnière, and a smelling-bottle attached by a ring to a very damp, fat hand) to the "office," where the repast was set out.  

The use of French in the description is significant: Words or phrases of the language—sometimes poorly constructed—were often used by members of the middle classes who sought to elevate themselves over their monoglot neighbors. In the above passage, the use of French enforced the air of arrogance that Thackeray sought to convey. The words themselves were intended to relay elegance and superiority; their meanings, however, only reinforced the gauche mentality of the participants.  

The theatricality of the dinner party was such a vital element that for some of the meal, Thackeray wrote in script form. Clearly, he too saw the ritual as a performance. The dinner-table conversation reflected the players' pretentiousness: Mr. Brandon recounted "stories about half the nobility," Mrs. Gann conversed "knowingly" about the opera, and Mr. Gann told "how he had

---

8See above, Chapter III.

9Thackeray, A Shabby Genteel Story, 31.

10Mouseline de laine signifies only a wool muslin gown (muslin being one of the cheapest fabrics), and a ferronnière, according to Webster's Third International Dictionary, is "a pendant jewel worn (as by women in fifteenth-century Italy and early nineteenth-century England) in the middle of the forehead." Because the story takes place in the middle of the nineteenth century, this would seem to imply that the fashion was outdated when Mrs. Gann wore it.
been to Vauxhall when the princes were in London.""¹¹ Such fraudulent proclamations continued until Miss Caroline made a late entrance, due to her helping the cook with the pudding. From then, Thackeray’s theme changed from class to gender; the abuses of Caroline from her step-mother and step-sisters lead to "the poor little thing" leaving the table abruptly, with the sympathetic and admiring Mr. Fitch following soon after.

Besides the Miss Caroline incident, another deviation from the conventional dinner party script came at the end of the ritual, as the men sipped port and gave toasts in the old tradition.¹² Gann was insulted when Brandon mistook his pronunciation of "air" for "hair"—it was, after all, an affront to both his character and to his claim to be a gentleman. The host then refused to continue his requisite performance. Accordingly, "the conversation became vapid and dull," and the ritual reached a sour and awkward conclusion.¹³

Thackeray’s unexpected ending contains an important message. To him, it was only through such exaggerated performances—in which each player was responsible for executing his or her own role—that the dinner party could retain its liveliness. Without that environment, the ritual became what he considered

¹¹Thackeray, Shabby Genteel Story, 32.

¹²Thackeray distinguished between the younger and older generations of Brandon and Gann, respectively, by noting that only Gann followed the practice of toasting. Ibid., 37.

¹³Ibid., 39.
ordinary, resulting in "vapid and dull" conversation. Thackeray himself—who called at least one dinner party he attended "exceedingly stupid"—clearly disliked that atmosphere, and belongs in the Walker camp. Perhaps most significantly, Thackeray's description of the scene as a theatrical event—including a script with stage directions—clarifies dynamics at work in all dinner parties, fictional and nonfictional alike, from conversation topics to diners to food and drink.

Emily Eden (1797-1869) tempered her novels with realism rather than with satire. An invalid spinster, sister of Lord Auckland, and a Whig hostess, Eden was a member of the upper class who believed that "polished manners and intelligent conversation are desirable," but that, failing those qualities, "goodness of heart is the next best thing."14 Appropriately, this viewpoint can serve as an acknowledgment of the merits of both sides of the debate between the critics of the dinner party, arguing for more sincerity and "goodness of heart"; and the advocates, who deemed "polished manners" imperative for acceptance into higher circles.

In The Semi-Detached House (1859), the young but elite Lady Blanche Chester and her husband, Lord Arthur Chester, gave a dinner party after Lord Chester returned from a long absence. Among the guests were Captain and Mrs. Hopkinson, the middle-class landlords with whom the Chesters shared a

"semi-detached house." After receiving the invitation, the "uncultured but goodhearted" Mrs. Hopkinson hesitated as to whether she would accept, thinking back to dinner parties she had attended in which she felt ill at ease. Her principal concern was that she was overweight ("I can’t dine out, I’m so fat"),15 but she also worried about a series of possible scenarios:

There is the butler, and all those footmen, they put me out; and they will snatch away my plate before I have finished; and there will be strangers who will wonder where Lord and Lady Chester picked up such a vulgar old woman; and then my face will become quite red . . . .16

These lamentations bring to mind social critics such as Walker and the writer of The Habits of Good Society who condemned servants for their obtrusiveness.17 Further, as a "stranger," Mrs. Hopkinson would qualify as the kind of newcomer that etiquette manuals counseled regarding the importance of every aspect of behavior. Although it was unlikely that Hopkinson had read any of the manuals (she was older, with set ways, and not seeking social elevation), the woman was clearly aware of the significance of her lower status by her anticipation that her face would "become quite red" out of shame.

The invitation having been accepted by the Hopkinsons, the dinner party

---

15Eden, The Semi-Detached House, 173. If Lady Charlotte’s and Thackeray’s insults toward obese middle-class women were any indication of the norm, Mrs. Hopkinson was justified in worrying about her weight.

16Ibid., 174.

17See above, Chapter II.
was a pleasant surprise for the worried old woman. Contrary to her preconceived notions of upper-class entertainments, the "quiet kindness" and "unaffected gaiety" of her hosts "put her quite at ease," and "her delight was great." Her only crisis of the evening came when the footman caught his "great gold tag" in her mantilla, but "no harm" was done. The potential disaster was overcome successfully; Mrs. Hopkinson conceded later that because she was seated next to her amusing and flattering host, the butler and footmen "lost their terrors." The dinner was a success for all, giving "general satisfaction" and plenty of enjoyable conversation. Doubtless, both critics and advocates of the dinner party would have approved.

Perhaps if Eden had a message about Mrs. Hopkinson's role at the dinner party, it was that middle-class preconceptions of upper-class entertainments were exaggerated, and that not all members of the upper class were as ostentatious and condemning of their lower-class counterparts as was believed. Simplicity, sincerity, and enjoyment, as we have seen from memoirs, could well be elements of upper-class dinner parties. At entertainments of the status-seeking nouveaux riches, however, the case could well be different, as Thackeray demonstrated in

---

\(^{10}\) Eden, The Semi-Detached House, 177.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 178.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 177.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 178.
A Shabby Genteel Story.

The 1855 novel North and South, by Elizabeth Gaskell, provides a contrast between established upper-middle-class and nouveaux- riches households and, for our purposes, shows how their dinner parties differed. The story finds the heroine, Margaret Hale, first living with her Aunt Shaw and cousin Edith in their upper-middle-class, London home; she later moved with her parents from their country parsonage home to the industrial northern town of Milton (Gaskell's fictitious name for her own hometown of Manchester).

 Appropriately, the novel opens with a dinner party at the Shaws' home. The occasion was the honoring of Edith's upcoming marriage to a well-off naval officer, Captain Lennox. The bride had originally objected to her mother's plans because the groom was expected to arrive in town the same evening, but when she learned that her mother "had absolutely ordered . . . extra delicacies of the season," the spoiled child succumbed. By implication, the seasonal food—which might have included game, fish, sauces, or desserts—was not often ordered in the Shaws' household, but Mrs. Shaw evidently considered the occasion important enough to indulge in such provisions.

The glimpses that the reader gets of the dinner, however, indicate that the evening was no different from any other gathering of the social circle. The six or so invited couples were "the familiar acquaintances of the house; neighbors whom Mrs. Shaw called friends, because she happened to dine with them more
frequently than with any other people . . . . "22 Clearly, Gaskell recognized the
dinner parties in Mrs. Shaw's community as inevitable social intercourse
necessitated by the blueprint; sincerity and warmth that would merit the term
friendship was absent.

The dinner party itself reflected the shallowness of the participants (with
the exception of Margaret). The meal was seen from Edith's perspective:

She contented herself by leaning back in her chair, merely playing
with the food on her plate, and looking grave and absent; while all
around her were enjoying the mots of Mr. Grey, the gentleman
who always took the bottom of the table at Mrs. Shaw's dinner
parties, and asked Edith to give them some music in the drawing-
room.23

Not surprisingly, Edith's response to the "performance," after the women
withdrew from the table, was to take "a peaceful little after-dinner nap."24
Gaskell might have added that "all around her were pretending" to enjoy the
mots of Mr. Grey; the sincere enjoyment prescribed by Walker and others was
lacking.25 Notwithstanding, most of the party played their required roles by
affecting enjoyment.

After dinner, a deviation from the usual sequence of events was produced

---

22 North and South (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, and other cities, 1970),
36.

23 Ibid., 36.

24 Ibid., 35.

25 Walker had warned against having one person dominate the conversation, as
Grey had done. See above, Chapter II.
with the appearance of the groom’s brother, Henry Lennox. He had informed Mrs. Shaw beforehand that he would be unable to attend the dinner; it is likely that he purposely avoided it. In an after-dinner discussion with Margaret, he demonstrated his awareness of the blueprint of expectations. He observed that "There are forms and ceremonies to be gone through, not so much to satisfy oneself, as to stop the world’s mouth, without which stoppage there would be very little satisfaction in life."\textsuperscript{36} In yielding to "the world’s mouth" (a term which suggests the primary importance of one’s own social circle), participants chose the world of propriety advocated by the etiquette writers, at the expense of the sincerity and genuine enjoyment that critics in the Walker school had deemed so essential. Both Mrs. Shaw and her regular guests were so absorbed in their world that they probably were unaware of the choice they had made. And self-absorbed Edith slept through it all.

The circle to which we are introduced in Milton displayed similarities to as well as differences from its London counterpart. The representative nouvelle-riche household there is headed by the obstinate Mrs. Thornton (like Mrs. Shaw, a widow), mother of the millowner and Margaret’s eventual love interest, John. Also like Mrs. Shaw, Mrs. Thornton was well trenched in the dinner-giving system, which required that dinners be exchanged on a regular basis. In Milton, however, entertaining was more cumbersome because it was more fiercely

\textsuperscript{36}Gaskell, \textit{North and South}, 42.
competitive and, accordingly, more of a financial burden.

When Margaret and her father arrived punctually for the Thorntons’ dinner party,\textsuperscript{27} they found the house excessively ornamented. In the drawing room, "every cover was taken off, and the apartment blazed forth in yellow silk damask and a brilliantly-flowered carpet. Every corner seemed filled up with ornament, until it became a weariness to the eye . . . ."\textsuperscript{28} The dinner was similarly excessive. Gaskell, through her heroine, compared the nouveau-riche taste of Mrs. Thornton with that of her more subdued London counterparts: "Margaret, with her London cultivated taste, felt the number of delicacies to be oppressive; one half the quantity would have been enough, and the effect lighter and more elegant."\textsuperscript{29} Not only were Mrs. Shaw’s seasonal delicacies unoppressive; they were rarely ordered. For the Thorntons, hospitality was measured in terms of how much they could display and offer during one evening.

The competitive spirit prevailed among the women at the party. Although they were for the most part silent during dinner, "they employ[ed] themselves in taking notes of the dinner and criticizing each other’s dresses."\textsuperscript{30} Margaret too was silent, but she immersed herself into the "very animated conversation" of the

\textsuperscript{27}The Hales were the only party to arrive on time; Walker and others would have frowned on the Milton custom of arriving sociably late.

\textsuperscript{28}Gaskell, \textit{North and South}, 213.

\textsuperscript{29}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., 215.
men regarding local mill politics.\textsuperscript{31} She was impressed that they talked "in
desperate earnest,--not in the used-up style that wearied her so in the old
London parties."\textsuperscript{32}

Whether silently observing their surroundings or engaging in a lively
discussion (in which all men--not just one--participated), the Milton circle was
much more active than the one in London. Even their fierce competition was
lively. By contrast, the members of Mrs. Shaw's circle performed their dinner-
giving responsibilities numbly: At every dinner, Mr. Grey delivered his "mots"
and, taking their cue, the rest of the party (except Edith, who would soon be
asleep) "enjoyed" them.

Gaskell knew how revealing dinner parties could be of both players who
performed the ritual and of their social circles as a whole. Her personal
correspondence confirmed this conviction, as has already been indicated.\textsuperscript{33}

Finally, her comparison of dinner parties in Milton and London also serves as a
comparison between north and south, a primary theme.

All four of the novelists examined here recognized how socially significant
the dinner party was. They created dinner party "performances" in their works
not only for plot and character development, but also to illustrate the mentality

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 216.

\textsuperscript{33}See above, Chapter III.
of specific social groups. Further, dinner party scenes reflected important issues of the time. Ellis focused on what she saw as a pressing need for moral reform in the early Victorian period; Thackeray satirized the pretentiousness of the rising middle classes; Eden strived to rectify middle-class preconceptions (such as those of Mrs. Hutchinson) about upper-class life-styles; and Gaskell described how the nouveaux riches in provincial manufacturing districts compared with their more established counterparts in London. All of these issues were addressed through the dinner party.

Having examined the dinner party from several perspectives—advice literature and critical essays, memoirs, and novels—we have a better idea of what the ritual entailed. From 1830 through 1859, England was in a state of flux. Attitudes toward self and society changed, and were revealed in "the main institution of society," the dinner party. Throughout the period, the upper class still had control over the social system, maintaining strict standards of etiquette and frowning upon undesirable newcomers. But as the era came to a close, more newcomers penetrated the higher circles with a commodity that was gaining gradual, if sometimes reluctant, respect: money.
CHAPTER V

THE SETTING, 1860-1885

By 1860, the dinner party was no longer a fledgling institution. Like the rising middle classes, the formal feeds had, since about 1830, emerged as a hallmark of Victorian culture. No longer was it outrageous to refer to the dinner party as "the main institution of society," as would the author of The Habits of Good Society when the work first appeared in 1859; nor was Arthur Helps's speculation unconscionable that as many as 2,500 dinner parties would take place in London in one evening. The dinner party--for host, hostess, and guests alike--had become a critical tool for gaining both respectability and access to desired circles in an increasingly competitive and status-conscious Society.

The period from 1860 to 1885 represents a cross-section of British history: Generally, the earlier years brought a continuation of growth and prosperity, while the later years--even until 1914--underwent a series of political and economic crises. Between the 1857 and 1873 editions of J. H. Walsh's Manual of Domestic Economy; suited to Families spending from £100 to £1,000 a Year, the author raised the income levels substantially for all four of his middle-class categories.¹ In the same period, "middle-class outlay on food, drink, domestic...

¹Specifically, from £100 to £150, from £250 to £350, from £500 to £750, and from £1,000 to £1,500 (Donald Read, England, 1868-1914: The Age of Urban Democracy [London and New York, 1979], 28).
service, and household goods seems to have increased . . . by about one-half."\textsuperscript{3}

Consequently, upper-middle-class families in particular could indulge in respectable dinner-giving as never before. Peter Bailey has noted that the "growing extravagance" of the formal feeds "was a prime indicator of rising consumption levels among a class increasingly divorcing itself from its heredity of thrift and frugality."\textsuperscript{4} Competition among families was so fierce that "leisure . . . became subsidiary to 'the struggle to outdo one another.'"\textsuperscript{4}

The significance of material objects used at the dinner party cannot be overemphasized. Rooms became so filled with various acquisitions that by the 1860s, "a lack of clutter was considered to be in bad taste."\textsuperscript{5} The Great Exhibition of 1851 introduced many buyers to a wide range of consumer goods, including items for the dinner party such as furniture, glass, services, lace and linen napery, and cutlery. All of these goods were more affordable for a wider range of people because of new mass-production techniques using cheaper materials.\textsuperscript{6} A case in point is the discovery of an electrolytic method of

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4}Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885 (London and other cities, 1978), 60.

\textsuperscript{5}Ryder and Silver, Modern English Society, 74.


\textsuperscript{6}Evans, The Victorians, 168.
depositing silver on less expensive base metals. The result, plated silver, enabled more families to own the material in a variety of forms. Previously, silver had been an important indication of a family's wealth and social position, but had been inaccessible to all but the very rich. The acquisition of these new objects symbolized a new phase of respectability for middle-class dinner parties.

Having accelerated their momentum during the "golden age" of Victorian prosperity (1850-1873), the upwardly mobile classes were better prepared than ever to compete not only among themselves, but also among their social "superiors." Further, when the 1870s and beyond brought periods of instability, it was the moneyed classes rather than those members of the aristocracy living on old wealth who prospered more. This was particularly true during the agricultural depression of the 1880s, which hit the landed gentry hard. As a result, the nouveaux riches and their money were looked upon more receptively, with less disdain. By the mid- to late 1880s, more people with commercial and industrial backgrounds were honored with peerage titles.

Historians vary as to when and how many nouveaux-riches families were accepted into gentry circles, but there is agreement that amalgamation between

---

7Dorothy Rainwater, "Victorian Dining Silver," in Dining in America, ed. Grover, 173.

8Susan R. Williams, Introduction, Dining in America, 5.

9Davidoff, Best Circles, 59-60.
the two groups flourished in the 1880s.\textsuperscript{10} Significantly, the increasingly affluent and revered nouveaux riches could afford to restrict their own admission standards while members of the old gentry class relaxed theirs, thus accepting new members who earlier would have been excluded because of their backgrounds.\textsuperscript{11}

For newcomers to higher circles, etiquette-manual writers supplied an onslaught of new advice. These works continued to serve as fantasy wish-fulfillment for the middle layers of the middle class, who "desired to learn how their betters acted."\textsuperscript{12} Although some individuals claimed that etiquette standards became more relaxed in these later years, manual writers continued to give strict advice.\textsuperscript{13}

Critics of the ostentatious dinner party continued their earlier pattern of condemnation. Although, as Bailey asserted, much of the middle class was "increasingly divorcing itself from its heredity of thrift and frugality," there were

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 59; Thompson, \textit{Respectable Society}, 61; Margetson, \textit{Victorian High Society}, 10.

\textsuperscript{11}Thompson, \textit{Respectable Society}, 104-05, 108; Shkolnik, \textit{Leading Ladies}, 4-5. This is not to say that all members of the old aristocracy withered while those of the new replaced them. Lady St. Helier (Mary Jeune), for example, described a thriving gentry class in her discussion of prominent hostesses in the late-Victorian period. See below, Chapter VII.

\textsuperscript{12}Curtin, \textit{Propriety and Position}, 40.

\textsuperscript{13}Sir Henry Thompson, \textit{Food and Feeding} (London, 1899), 226; Lady St. Helier (Mary Jeune), \textit{Memories of Fifty Years} (London, 1909), 178, 181. See also below, chapters six and seven.
many who objected to the growing extravagance of dinner parties and who, in a sense, embodied the heredity of thrift and frugality. This represented only one perspective, however: Those who supported the newfound affluence may have considered the critics "thrifty" and "frugal," but the critics themselves wanted only to preserve the simplicity, sincerity, and enjoyment that were so rapidly waning at the dinner party and in Society in general.

The setting had shifted: Times had changed, desirable props of the dinner party ritual were more easily acquired, and the best circles were becoming wider. Using the same types of sources examined earlier--advice manuals and critical essays, personal writings, and fiction--we shall see not only what impact these changes had on the dinner party but also ways in which the institution continued unhindered. Regardless of these patterns, the dinner party remained a hallmark of Victorian culture.
CHAPTER VI

THE SCRIPT, 1860-1885

From 1860 to 1885, works addressing the dinner party appeared in greater numbers than ever before. During the earlier Victorian period, from 1830 to 1859, information on the ritual was found in works of a broader nature: gastronomers' treatises, general etiquette guides, household manuals, and writings of general social criticism such as those by Whately and Smiles. Works in those categories continued to appear throughout the later period, but more of them dealt exclusively with dinner giving. For example, in the first period, only one of the works cited here contains a form of the word dinner in the title, whereas in the second period, there are five such works.

Throughout the later period, critics and advocates of the demanding system of dinner giving carried on their debate between simplicity and refinement. Authors of these disparate works continued to address mostly the middle classes and, specifically, members of the nouveaux riches who aimed to match their financial prosperity with social achievement. As one of the strongest advocates of the system, the author of the best-selling Manners and Tone of Good Society, explained, "There is no better or surer passport to society than the
having a reputation for giving 'good dinners.' Conversely, an outspoken critic of the system, Leslie Stephen, deplored the Society that necessitated such a passport:

Our taskmaster is known as the World or Society, or Respectability. We dread sneers and ridicule . . . and are only too glad to fall back into the ranks and escape censure by doing as nearly as may be precisely what everybody else is doing.²

Society was, for Stephen, "a machinery for enforcing a superficial decorum," a quality despised and protested by critics of the dinner party as it then was.³

Consistent with this critical view, Stephen's perceptions of the dinner party were not much different from those of Walker thirty-five years earlier. Stephen lamented over "drearv ceremonies which ape the natural forms of social enjoyment, . . . [with participants] boring each other to the very verge of despair."⁴ Similarly, Walker had complained of "mockery" (a term commonly used among critics of the dinner party) and, further, had used the slavery metaphor: "As to enjoyment, I shudder when I think how often I have been doomed to only a solemn mockery of it . . . and how often in this land of liberty

---

¹Manners and Tone of Good Society, 83. The National Union Catalogue has estimated that a thirty-third edition of the work was issued sometime in the 1920s.


³Ibid., 568.

⁴Ibid.
I have felt myself a slave!" Like Walker, Stephen longed for a time when people could "meet each other on friendly terms without senseless extravagance or squalid meanness," which would result in "a much purer and simpler state of society."6

A more optimistic view—and one that acknowledged the problems of too much formality—was expressed in Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding, which, like "Social Slavery," first appeared in 1870. The author claimed that manners had "relaxed" in recent years, and that, as a result, "society has undergone a wondrous transformation."7 In reflecting on the changes that had transpired since the days of "the most ceremonious politeness," he maintained that "the stern barriers which kept different classes apart were broken down, and a freedom of manner was observable that formed a complete contrast to . . . half a century before. . . ."8 Although the author was relieved that the earlier era had passed, the present one, in his opinion, went too far in the opposite

---

6Walker, Aristology, 2.

7Stephen, "Social Slavery," 577 (first quotation); 575 (second quotation). Stephen most likely used the term squalid meanness to connote latent motives of "trickery" and "grovelling selfishness" behind the veil of Society (ibid., 568).

8Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding . . . (London, 1870), 52. Three years earlier, another etiquette writer (also an advocate of the dinner-giving system) had expressed a similar conviction: that "modern etiquette . . . goes wholly in the direction of ease and comfort" (Etiquette of the Dinner Table, With Carving [London, 1867], 37).

8Ibid.
direction. The answer was to find "a happy medium between the state and
stiffness of bygone days, and the freedom from all forms of courtesy which is too
much gaining ground."  

_Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding_ was, for the most part, a work
that advocated the dinner-giving system. The author provided specific rules of
etiquette and stressed the importance of executing "small acts" of "forms and
observances," which would in part determine the basis for character judgment.  
At the same time, however, the nervous guest was encouraged to relax as much
as possible during the dinner-party testing process:

Do not begin to think how you ought to behave, nor try to
remember the rules of etiquette; this will only serve to embarrass
you. Rather forget yourself altogether, and do not endeavour to
appear what you are not. Feel that you have a right to be happy,
that an opportunity is given you for innocent enjoyment . . . ."  

Discouragement of pretension and encouragement of enjoyment--common
themes, as has been shown, in the earlier period--continued to be pressed by
writers in the later period, especially by critics. _Etiquette, Politeness, and Good
Breeding_ did not fit the norm of works advocating the dinner-giving system
because it acknowledged the importance of these issues. However, the work

---

9Ibid., 53.

10Ibid., 4. Interestingly, one of his points of etiquette went back to Day's
recommendation not to pick teeth "much" at dinner; the author asserted, "on no
account pick your teeth after dinner; it is a most unseemly habit" (ibid.).

11Ibid.
remained, in essence, a manual for proper behavior and did little to challenge the social regulations of dinner parties.

The emphasis of the dinner party as judging ground for social newcomers was prevalent in works that advocated the dinner-giving system. The author of *The Manners and Tone of Good Society* (1879) held an unmistakably high regard for the institution, understanding its significance in the broad scope of Society:

Dinner parties rank first amongst all entertainments . . . having more social significance, and being more appreciated by society, than any other form of entertainment. ‘An invitation to dinner’ conveys a greater mark of esteem, or friendship and cordiality, towards the guest invited, than is conveyed by an invitation to any other social gathering, it being the highest compliment, socially speaking, that is offered by one person to another.12

The receipt of an invitation alone did not guarantee the success of newcomers; that must be earned in the course of the ritual, where their behavior would be carefully scrutinized. What many of the more traditional authors of etiquette books tried to do was to ensure that newcomers were properly armed with knowledge about "what is done." That knowledge, in turn, led to social ease, which resulted in the end product, a well-bred individual.13 What was more likely, however, was that the works’ constant reminders of the crucial importance of dinner parties for newcomers served only to make them more anxious.

12*Manners and Tone of Good Society*, 82.

13Ibid., ix.
Moreover, writers continued to warn readers about the dangers of committing solecisms. These faux pas, according to *Manners and Tone*, became "magnified" "in the eyes of society at large," and reflected "most disadvantageously upon the one by whom . . . [they were] committed." The grave consequences for guilty newcomers penetrated even further, possibly even jeopardizing them from the promising future that awaited only moments before:

To commit a 'solecism' argues the offender to be unused to society, and consequently not on an equal footing with it. This society resents, and it is not slow in making its disapproval felt by its demeanour towards the intruder.\(^{13}\)

To alleviate these threats, the author warned, newcomers--at risk of becoming "intruders"--must tread carefully through the dinner party ritual until they became "used to society."

Perhaps the most caution was required in the proper execution of table manners. Day had emphasized the importance of them in 1834, and the author of *Etiquette of the Dinner Table* echoed and expanded upon this crucial part of the dinner party thirty-five years later:

A knowledge of dinner-table etiquette . . . is regarded as one of the strong tests of good breeding. Persons new to society may master . . . simpler forms [of etiquette]--such as dropping cards, paying visits, mixing in evening parties, and so on; but dining is the great trial. The rules to be observed at table are so numerous and so minute in respect of detail, that they require the most careful study; and the worst of it is, that none of them can be violated

---

\(^{13}\)Ibid., x.

\(^{13}\)Ibid.
without exposing the offender to instant detection . . . . society judges of character and accomplishments by trifles.\(^6\)

Given the mounting demands that etiquette manuals thrust upon newcomers, the chances that the often-intimidated host, hostess, or guest would, as *Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding* had advised, "forget yourself altogether" grew increasingly slim.

Not all manuals that advocated the dinner party placed such difficult demands on newcomers. Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861), one of the best-selling manuals of the century, was such a work.\(^7\) The 1,112-page tome, originally published in serial form in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, featured every aspect of household management, including entertainment, recipes, servants, and medical and legal advice. Beeton sympathized with the plight of distraught, and especially young, housewives, and sought to help them gain control of their expected role as household manager.\(^8\) Her message was clear: Take pride in your critical role as household manager,

\(^6\) *Etiquette of the Dinner Table*, 8-9.

\(^7\) The work sold thirty thousand copies in the first three years (Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, 13); by 1871, two million (Phillips and Phillips, *The Victorians at Home and Away*, 54). It is still in print.

\(^8\) Beeton's good intentions might not have always helped housewives. Branca has argued that manuals such as Beeton's served only to increase "feelings of inadequacy" in the already exasperated housewife (Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, 17 [quotation], 29.)
and perform your duties "intelligently and thoroughly."\textsuperscript{29}

Part of this role was knowing how to manage dinner parties. Beeton acknowledged the anxiety the hostess felt but encouraged her to execute her role smoothly. The greatest challenge to the hostess came before, not during, dinner:

The half-hour before dinner has always been considered as the great ordeal through which the mistress, in giving a dinner-party, will either pass with flying colours, or, lose many of her laurels. The anxiety to receive her guests,--her hope that all will be present in due time,--her trust in the skill of her cook, and the attention of the other domestics, all tend to make these few minutes a trying time. The mistress, however, must display no kind of agitation, but show her tact in suggesting light and cheerful subjects of conversation . . . which may pleasantly engage the attention of the company.\textsuperscript{29}

Not even Mrs. Beeton could refrain from reminding readers of the perils of dinner giving. Other authors did not always identify which half of a hosting-couple bore the brunt of the responsibility in entertaining guests, but Beeton left no doubt. In most cases, it was up to the hostess to greet and receive guests, inform the men which women to accompany to the table, keep the conversation going during dinner, know when to adjourn to the parlour with the other women after dinner, and supervise all servants, including the cook.\textsuperscript{31} The hostess' test

\textsuperscript{29}Mrs. Isabella Beeton, \textit{The Book of Household Management . . .} (London, 1968), 1.

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid., 12. \textit{Etiquette of the Dinner Table} satirized the predinner awkwardness in the drawing room, in which "spasmodic flashes of conversation . . . die away into melancholy lengths of silence, indescribably oppressive" (28).

\textsuperscript{31}There were, of course, variations to this formula. Some manuals called for the host to tell men who to escort into dinner, as well as for the host (or the host and
of entertaining would in large part determine the success (or failure) not only of the dinner party but also of her and her husband's status in the social circle to which they aspired.

The importance of hospitality was at least acknowledged by all authors: Ease and comfort for everyone were dominant themes. However, it was the critics of the dinner party—descendants of Walker—who combined the idea of pure hospitality with the simplicity they encouraged. Mrs. Loftie, for example, agreed with Thackeray that

The dinner at home ought to be the center of the whole system of dinner-giving. Your usual style of meal, that is, plenteous, comfortable, and in its perfection, should be that to which you welcome your friends, as it is that of which you partake yourself . . . If I had my way, and my plans could be carried out, dinner-giving would increase as much on the one hand as dinner-giving snobbishness would diminish.

In contrast to that style, Loftie lamented that "hospitality in its true sense has become a rare virtue among us. The last possible reason now for asking a man

hostess) to keep the conversation going at dinner. Arthur Helps deemed the hostess' knowledge of when to adjourn after dinner so important that he urged his male readers to consider that quality when choosing a wife ("On the Art of Dinner-Giving," 562).

See, for example, Etiquette of the Dinner Table, 20, 37, 42; Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding, 4; Beeton, Book of Household Management, 3; and Dinners and Housekeeping (London, 1867), 44.

to dine would be that he wanted a dinner.\textsuperscript{24} Instead, ostentatious entertainers eager to display their riches were the norm.

Another theme common among advocates of simple, enjoyable dinner parties was the importance of good conversation.\textsuperscript{25} Like other factors, the quality of dinner conversation was crucial to the outcome of the gathering. Mrs. Caddy agreed with Sidney Smith that "one of the greatest pleasures of our lives is conversation," and emphasized the need to meet for enjoyment rather than for display, and with "simplicity of manners."\textsuperscript{26} She referred to the "gaiety" at dinner parties as "a hollow mockery, masking fatigue, untruth, and disappointment."\textsuperscript{27} The antidote for this scenario was intelligent conversation: "If we will simply allow ourselves to talk upon subjects of common interest, we shall find social gatherings less wearisome than when we have to manufacture small-talk for civility's sake alone."\textsuperscript{28}

The author of \textit{Dinners and Dinner-Parties} held similar convictions about the importance of simplicity, the elements of which included good food, good

\textsuperscript{24}Mrs. Loftie, \textit{The Dining-Room} (London, 1878), viii.

\textsuperscript{25}This already has been shown to be a dominant theme in personal writings. See above, Chapter III.

\textsuperscript{26}Mrs. Caddy, \textit{Household Organization} (London, 1877), 18 (first quotation); xiii (second quotation).

\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid.
conversation, and overall enjoyment. "Dinner-parties to be avoided" were described satirically, from poor food to morose waiters to the discomfort of many people crammed into a small, hot room. As for social intercourse, the author lamented that "there is plenty of talk, but . . . no conversation." Dinner of such poor quality were "a mockery, and ought to be avoided." Later in the work, a contrasting scene was depicted in the chapter entitled "Good Eating Favourable to Beauty":

How enjoyable is a dinner where all affectation is abandoned, where there is no competition in vanity, where the guests are all good temper and smiles, no smell of scents or filthy patchouli to disturb your digestion, where the convives give their attention to dinner, knowing that each entrée should be eaten at the moment it is in its highest perfection. At such a dinner you never hear senseless cackle, but a calm, quiet interchange of sentiments; the guests are all attention to each other, and pass the plates according to convenience (without waiting a servant), and enlivening the entertainment by expressions of appreciation.

Again, echoes of Walker reverberate, not only for the emphasis on aristology as he knew it but also for appreciation of the art of gastronomy. Moreover, the homage paid to "beauty," as well as the presence of elements such as goodwill and conviviality among guests, rendered the passage—an ode to simplicity in itself—far closer to Wordsworthian romanticism than to the golden age of

---

29Dinners and Dinner-Parties (London, 1862), 36.

29Ibid.

29Ibid., 48.
Victorian prosperity.

Arthur Helps, writing "On the Art of Dinner-Giving" for *Cornhill Magazine* seven years later, in 1869, was another author who criticized Society as it was; he particularly lamented the "absence of gaiety" at parties. He "great aim" was "to add only a little more real pleasure, to each of these 2,500 dinner-parties" (estimated to be held in London that day). Helps, like other authors already examined here, recognized the importance of each element of the dinner party.

Table appearance, serving style, and food were three such elements that Helps addressed. Belonging to the school of simplicity, he urged dinner givers to avoid having "unnecessary ornaments for the table." He especially shunned tall ornaments such as the dreaded epergne, which he likened to "the presence of a disagreeable guest" because it prevented "good talk and geniality." Fruit and flowers, likewise, should be minimized as much as possible "while engaged in the solid business of eating." Helps was skeptical of ambiguous and pretentious

---

32"On the Art of Dinner-Giving," 555. Helps would most likely have identified "gaiety" with the kind of simple enjoyment that Walker had advocated, not with the "hollow mockery" that Caddy deplored.

33Ibid.

34Ibid., 558.

35Ibid.

36Ibid., 561. The gravity with which Helps regarded the meal itself was similar to that of Walker; both men were gastronomists and, more specifically, aristologists.
menus; he believed that "the presence on the table of the dishes to be offered
... [would be] a move towards simplicity ... ." As to servants, Helps, like
Walker, considered them an intrusion; further, they oppressed shy people. He
boldly advocated that they be "diminish[ed]," for "the less of pomp and
circumstance you have, the less you will have of shyness . . . ." 38

A good host and hostess were also on order for Helps, who believed they
should be "genial, kind, and encouraging." 39 Displaying such traits of genuine--not
contrived--hospitality, "they must give you the notion that they are thoroughly
pleased to see you." 40 The guests, likewise, were responsible for being genial,
with "a happy audacity." 41 Such qualities in host, hostess, and guests suggested
success in another important goal of the dinner party--good conversation. Helps
recognized the rarity of this accomplishment and the barriers that might prevent
it:

Cultivate the man who has the splendid courage to talk to someone
across the table. He is a real treasure at a dinner-party. Of
course the main object in inviting guests is to bring people together
who will like one another. 42

37Ibid. Walker also had made this suggestion (see above, Chapter II).
38Ibid., 559 (first quotation), 560 (second quotation).
39Ibid., 556.
40Ibid.
41Ibid.
42Ibid.
It has already been demonstrated how the pressures facing newcomers—such as those found in etiquette manuals—could lead to nervousness and hesitancy in speaking out. Even if a newcomer overcame that nervousness, however, Helps pointed out that the system of etiquette itself demanded that the tone of table-talk be extremely light:

Older men . . . say that talk at dinner-tables is not so good as it used to be. If this be so, I think it has arisen from the fact that earnest discussion has been thought to be unpolite and ill-bred . . . A butterfly mode of talk, flying from one flower to another, and sipping the sweets of this or that, in a rapid manner, is not really good talk.\(^3\)

For critics of the dinner party as it was, the list of casualties caused by that great Victorian ogre, the blueprint of expectations, included a decline in the quality of table conversation. Helps’s distinction between the early and later Victorian periods is a reminder that as more financially prosperous newcomers tried to gain entry into higher circles, the blueprint became even more important, at least in theory. The increasing numbers of etiquette books that appeared in the later period to meet the demand created by newcomers further codified and solidified the blueprint.

The Glass of Fashion . . . (1881) was a work that catered to those newcomers but that did not necessarily advocate the blueprint. The manual was, in many ways, a synthesis of both critical and adversarial works on the dinner

\(^3\)Ibid., 560.
party. Glass was subtitled, in part, *A Universal Handbook of Social Etiquette*, yet the author condemned other etiquette manuals as "vulgar" and "filled with instructions in the minutiae of behavior," considering them childlike. To solve the inconsistency, the writer broadened the term *etiquette* to mean "something more than those conventionalities of manners which are commonly called politeness—to embrace . . . the moral culture of the individual." Like so many of the other authors in both the early and later Victorian periods examined here, the author of *Glass* believed that hospitality must come from the heart. Without that sincerity, manners would be merely "rules which everybody respects but no one prizes." Although *Glass* included aphorisms on proper behavior—including many borrowed directly from Day—the writer emphasized that the best way to learn good etiquette was by observation.

---


*Ibid.*, 139, 295. Interestingly, the writer included Day's rule about not picking teeth "much," to which he added, "I should rather say, don't pick your teeth at all!" (ibid., 295).
The author—like Walker and Helps—was part gastronomist, part aristologist. He stressed the importance of a simple dinner (in both style and substance), and respected the meal’s "social value and interest." Specifically, good conversation was found to be "the best accompaniment to a good dinner." The author provided a discussion about "the art of conversation," which involved "the harmonious combination of many voices and many minds." Like etiquette in general, however, he emphasized that such conversation could not be "taught in books," but must be "acquired only by constant intercourse with society acting upon a well-stocked mind."

Like so many other authors examined here, that of Glass contrasted his ideal dinner party with the actual, lamentable state of the ritual. He deplored ostentatious entertainment, especially the host and hostess who used it to aggrandize themselves. In his conclusion on dinner parties, the author seemed convinced that, as participants of the dismal affairs, his readers were as miserable as he:

Our modern dinners are generally failures; and I appeal to my readers to say whether the sight of a dinner-card does not fill them with unspeakable agony. They must accept the invitation, or offend where they do not want to offend; yes, they must go, but what they

---

48Ibid., 111.
49Ibid., 140.
50Ibid., 141 (quotation); 130.
51Ibid., 150.
must suffer!\textsuperscript{32}

The obligation to attend went beyond offending the host and hostess; the author recognized the broader picture and its corresponding blueprint of expectations:

We must, however, in spite of reproach and lamentation—we must still give, and go to, dinners. \textit{Noblesse oblige}—that is—Society commands us—and few of us have the courage to defy Society.\textsuperscript{33}

This Society was the same "taskmaster" that Stephen had described eleven years earlier; the same "smooth-shaven lawn" that Whately alluded to thirty-four years before; and the same lawn mower evident in Day's work in 1834, forty-seven years before the appearance of \textit{Glass}.

For these and other critics of the simplicity-starved dinner party, Society had undergone no "wondrous transformation," as the author of \textit{Etiquette}, \textit{Politeness, and Good Breeding} had claimed in 1870. Once members of the upwardly mobile classes had attained their "footing" and then acceptance into Society through their successful performances at dinner parties, what then? Whether ostentatious or just keeping up with one's neighbor, if they wanted to retain (or still further advance) their position, they were forever obligated to "give, and go to, dinners."

Helps, for one, had recognized that the fault lay more with the blueprint and less with the victimized people; he pleaded—with the Taskmaster himself,

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 148.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 149.
perhaps--that Society be "placed upon an easier and more pleasant basis."54

Included in the chorus of critics in the 1870s and 1880s were Felix Summerly [Sir Henry Cole] and Blanchard Jerrold, each of whom edited new issues of Walker's work and who advocated anew the original aristologist's ideas.55 These new editions provided a link between dinner parties in the earlier and later periods. For most critics, the plight of the institution seemed as dismal as ever.

While the critics' school continued to protest, those in the school that advocated the dinner party and the Society it represented kept eating; kept displaying flowers, epergnes, and other ornaments; and kept watching carefully those newcomers likely to pick their teeth.

54Helps, "On the Art of Dinner-Giving," 566.

55Jerrold, ed., The Original (1874); Summerly, ed., Aristology (1881).
CHAPTER VII

THE PLAYERS, 1860-1885

From 1860 to 1885, a wide range of diners continued to record in diaries, journals, and correspondence their impressions of formal feasts. The social transformations that occurred in this period affected the players of the ritual differently: For some, the dinner party was more relaxed; for others, it was just as grandiloquent and cumbersome as before. The older, more conservative social bulwarks insisted that the strict standards of etiquette remain intact, while younger, more liberal circles welcomed a loosening of social/admissions standards. Yet in spite of the changes already discussed,¹ the old framework remained intact, and the lawn mower continued to operate unhindered.

Dinner parties continued to pose hardships for women of all classes. Among those in the middle class was young Isabella Mayson—soon to become Mrs. Beeton. Throughout Isabella’s long-distance engagement to Sam Beeton, she implored him in her letters to come and escort her to “that terrible ordeal, a dinner party.”² Sam disliked the rituals as much as Isabella did—at least in the genteel circles that Isabella’s middle-class family considered so desirable—and

¹See above, Chapter V.

²Quoted in Spain, Mrs. Beeton and Her Husband, 66. Spain failed to indicate dates of the letters she cited.
rarely accepted Isabella's invitations on the pretence of ill health. Isabella did not give up her "plaintive cries," however, until the marriage. In another letter, she pleaded:

I hope you will not disappoint me because you know very well these formal feeds I abominate... so pray do not leave me to sit three or four hours with some old man I do not care a straw about... .

Although biographer Sarah Freeman surmised that Isabella and Sam entertained "fairly regularly," another biographer, Nancy Spain, maintained that "all her life [Isabella] behaved in this temperamental way about formal dining." Beeton, according to Freeman, considered boredom "the worst affliction" that could befall a dinner party, and went to great lengths in her advice literature to recommend how to avoid it. With Isabella's disdain for dinner parties in mind, one can be better assured of the sincerity behind her efforts to help fellow housewives in Household Management.

Middle-class women's memoirs were far outnumbered by those of their upper-class counterparts. Recently, historians Shkolnik and Jalland have drawn attention to the lives of upper-class political hostesses of the era, including the

---

1Ibid., 68. Original emphasis.

2Sarah Freeman, Isabella and Sam: The Story of Mrs. Beeton (New York, 1978), 132; Spain, Mrs. Beeton and Her Husband, 69.

3Freeman, Isabella and Sam, 189.
successes—both social and political—that their entertainments produced.4 Lady St. Helier (Mary Jeune) provided more details, however, about the predinner anxieties that upper-class hostesses experienced despite the wealth—and copious staff of servants—that were at their disposal. Specifically, she cited the difficulty of getting a good cook, of finding a suitable day to entertain, and of selecting compatible guests; she even noted "a tone of envy in one’s friends’ congratulations on any entertainment which has been successful."

Even Mary Gladstone, daughter of the political leader, became stressed before a dinner. She recounted one afternoon in 1872 when she failed to return home from hectic afternoon errands until one-half hour before her dinner party was to begin. In spite of finding the arrangements in "a despairing state of disorder, and a heap of flowers to arrange with nought to put them in"—[all of] which had "a humiliating effect" on her temper—she reported that both "dinner and evening went off well."

Gladstone had a reputation for her smooth and gracious hospitality, and she cited enjoyment and laughter in many of the dinner parties she attended.

4Shkolnik, Leading Ladies; Jalland, Women, Marriage, and Politics.

5Lady St. Helier, Memories of Fifty Years, 188.

Solecisms and other breaches of etiquette committed by middle- and upper-class guests alike continued to be condemned and weighed against the offenders. Not even Lady Nevill—a harsh judge herself—escaped committing one. At a dinner party in which Thackeray sat "some little distance away," Lady Nevill asked her partner Mr. Venables—a friend of the satirist—"whether the malformation of Mr. Thackeray’s nose . . . [was] natural or the result of an accident." Venables seemed upset by the question, and stammered out that it was a result of an accident at school. As her bad luck would have it, Nevill later learned that "it was Mr. Venables who, as a boy at school, had broken Thackeray's nose in a fight." It is unclear whether Nevill knew how close Thackeray was to her at the time of her remark; possibly, he was hidden from view by the dreaded epergne. Although Nevill's error was not a breach of etiquette per se, it is important to note that she considered the mishap "a dreadful blunder." She judged herself harshly when the performance she delivered at the ritual did not go according to the blueprint.

Solecisms of a more serious nature included arriving either on the wrong night or at the wrong address for a dinner party—the latter was especially

---

9Reminiscences of Lady Nevill, 279.

10Ibid., 279-80.

11Walker had warned about such embarrassing circumstances being caused by epergnes. See above, Chapter II.

12Reminiscences of Lady Nevill, 279.
common when neighbors with mutual friends gave a party on the same night.\textsuperscript{3} That there would be several cases in which dinner parties were held on the same night at next-door neighbors’ homes attests to the growth of the institution between the early and later periods examined here. More money bred more affluent households, which in turn made possible more dinner parties. St. Helier cited several instances of company—especially single men—who not only committed one of these faux pas, but who refused to leave when the hostess regretted that she could not accommodate another guest. Here was yet another obstacle that the hostess could encounter; in cases where the intruder refused to leave, she often called her husband to settle the problem. St. Helier cited two cases in which not even the husband could prevent the man from joining the party. In one case, the man was a foreigner who understood no English but who cheerfully pantomimed his way through the evening, producing "roars of laughter" from the rest of the company.\textsuperscript{4} Such was the kind of spontaneity in which critics already examined reveled.

Whereas St. Helier and others accommodated themselves to such unforeseen circumstances, defenders of the strict standards of etiquette were less understanding to ill-bred guests. An acquaintance of Augustus J. C. Hare, for

\textsuperscript{3}Both Lady St. Helier and Anne Thackeray Ritchie recounted instances in which guests arrived one week in advance. See St. Helier, Memories of Fifty Years, 191-92; and Letters of Anne Thackeray Ritchie, 183.

\textsuperscript{4}St. Helier, Memories of Fifty Years, 189-91.
example, who insisted that his guests be punctual, expressed his disfavor for latecomers by remaining in his study until "a good many" had arrived. He boasted that he had read two shelves of books while stubbornly awaiting late guests.\textsuperscript{15}

Other defenders of the system could be outright hostile to offenders; ironically, their own hostility was rude in itself. For example, when St. Helier and her husband showed up "rather late" at the home of Madame Goldschmidt (Jenny Lind)—who insisted on punctuality—the hostess turned them away and devoted her attention to her two punctual guests. Apparently, "rather late" was an entire day late; the couple arrived the evening after the appointed time. St. Helier made "many apologies for being late," but in vain. Goldschmidt replied

\begin{quote}
"We waited dinner last night for you till nine o'clock, and you did not come. To-night Madame Schumann is dining with me, and has made it a condition that we shall be absolutely alone. Therefore I cannot ask you to stay to our dinner."\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Not even after Mr. Goldschmidt intervened on behalf of the perplexed arrivals did his wife agree to accommodate them; accordingly, they were obliged to leave "with what dignity . . . [they] could muster."\textsuperscript{17} The inconvenience that resulted was considerable: Their servants were out at a play, and they were lucky to find an

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{15}Augustus J. C. Hare, \textit{The Years with Mother}, ed. Malcolm Barnes (London, 1952), 157.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{16}St. Helier, \textit{Memories of Fifty Years}, 194.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
open restaurant that served them soup and cold meat. The evening was a good example of what happened when the script of a dinner party not only floundered, but collapsed. St. Helier and her husband were robbed of their precious dignity, and the blueprint of Society failed to provide an alternative script of respectability.

St. Helier discussed in detail how social changes of the later Victorian period—especially, what many perceived as a less rigid code of behavior—were received differently by a variety of people. One was the Dowager Duchess of Cleveland, who, in the 1860s, "absolutely refused" to accept these changes, which were "so rapidly altering the whole aspect of English society." In defiance, the duchess clung steadfastly to "the severe etiquette and conduct" of her older generation. Accordingly, she was "very intolerant of what she considered the want of good manners and uppishness of the younger generation." For example, she scolded St. Helier, who was married, for shaking hands when introduced to a man. St. Helier concluded that the duchess never hesitated to set anyone straight—"in a very unpleasant manner"—when "the laws of good

Ibid., 95.

Ibid.

Ibid. This was the very opposite reaction of the author of Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding, who had celebrated the changes as "a wondrous transformation." See above, Chapter VI.
society" were broken. St. Helier used the political hostess Lady Waldegrave to exemplify a progressive attitude toward looser social standards. Unlike the previous, traditional-minded "social head of the Whig party," Lady Palmerston, the more open-minded Lady Waldegrave incorporated representatives from both old and new orders into her invitation lists. Guests from the new order included not only the nouveaux riches, but also those from recently recognized professions such as drama and medicine. St. Helier accounted for the widening social circles in part by noting "the extreme dulness [sic] and narrowness of English life," which "made people welcome any new-comer who brought a little vivacity into its dreary atmosphere . . . ." Lady Waldegrave cherished vivacity; St. Helier claimed that the secret of her success was "a thorough enjoyment of her life and occupations, and she always seemed instinct with vitality . . . ." Waldegrave's affability qualified her as an excellent hostess. Justin McCarthy appreciated her hospitality; he noted that "Lady Waldegrave was a charming hostess, and made all her guests feel happy by her genial manner and the unaffected sincerity of

---

21 Ibid., 96.

22 Ibid., 199.

23 Ibid., 91. These qualities are reminiscent of Lady Eastlake, examined earlier.
her welcome."

The debate between sincerity and affectation continued in memoirs of the later Victorian period, but in a more subdued form than in the public writings already examined. St. Helier—a participant of the finest dinner parties in London Society—would have cast her vote for sincerity: She never complained about ostentatious gatherings, and rejoiced that because of relaxed etiquette laws, Society was more comfortable and enjoyable. But as has already been demonstrated, middle-class judgments could differ considerably from those of upper-class counterparts such as St. Helier. Opinions about dinner parties are especially valuable coming from those admitted into the best circles who had lower-class origins—the nouveaux riches.

Lady Nevill recounted revealing anecdotes about how upper-class hostesses vied to get nouveaux-riches celebrities to dine with them. The presence of Sir Edwin Landseer, as was shown earlier, was one "new-comer who brought a little vivacity into [Society's] . . . dreary atmosphere"; Charles Dickens was another. The novelist, however, did not appreciate invitations from strangers who wanted his company merely for celebrity value. Accordingly, when he reluctantly attended one of Lady Waldegrave's dinner parties after a friend coerced him to do so, Dickens "merely uttered a few commonplace remarks and


25 See above, Chapter III.
nothing more." Many "very fashionable people" attended, "all agog as to how amusing Dickens would be," and all were doubtless disappointed. The friend who had coerced and accompanied him, Bernal Osborne, told Nevill afterward, "I feared this; once he imagines he is being trotted out, he won't say a word!"27

Both St. Helier and McCarthy failed to mention in their praise for Lady Waldegrave that not even she could resist using a celebrity like Dickens as a fashionable display—they would find nothing wrong with such an act. Thus, what was "the perfect hostess" for some was an ostentatious elitist for others. Doubtless, the novelist himself might have penned a condemning satire of the evening. As a postscript, Nevill added that a short time after the Waldegrave debacle, Dickens dined with her and a few others at the home of Lady Molesworth. The company were all affable; Nevill called the evening "one of the most agreeable" she had passed.28 The requisite of good company being fulfilled, Dickens "simply bubbled over with fun and conversation."29

The subjective element of dinner parties thus continued unabated. For as many like St. Helier who delighted in more relaxed social standards, there were as many more who continued to lament excess, ostentation, and a cumbersome

---

26Reminiscences of Lady Nevill, 146-47.
27Ibid., 147.
28Ibid.
29Ibid.
code of behavior. Still others—the conservative bulwarks—clung desperately to the congealing traditions on which they prided themselves and their Society. Yet encompassing all sides, the social framework—the blueprint of expectations—continued to hold everything in place. Critics might have deplored it, and advocates might have applauded its new form, but the structure—eminently Victorian—would remain intact until the First World War.30

Whether in the "golden age" of Victorian prosperity or in the crisis-laden 1870s and 1880s, the dinner party remained a strong institution, and individuals continued to debate its function and purpose in personal writings. Whether they found the occasions to be evenings of "innocent enjoyment" or opportunities to impress or keep up with their neighbors depended on their values, personality, and social background. Accordingly, formal feeds were assessed as "dullish" or "fun," "stupid" or "enjoyable," "pretentious" or "simple."

30Davidoff, Best Circles, 68; Shkolnik, Leading Ladies, 6.
CHAPTER VIII

THE PERFORMANCE, 1860-1885

Dinner party scenes in novels published between 1860 and 1885 continued to reveal various aspects of the players’ social lives. Elements of change such as the relative financial decline of the landed gentry, the increasing respect for money, and the consequential widening of social circles figured prominently in some scenes, but in others were hardly noticeable. This pattern highlights the fact that dinner parties reflected both change and continuity in Victorian culture. Dinner parties will be examined here in three novels, two by Anthony Trollope (The Claverings and The Way We Live Now) and one by Charles Dickens (Our Mutual Friend). Clearly, the three novels cannot be representative of all novels that appeared throughout the era, but they can provide a way of showing how dinner parties were depicted by novelists then.

In The Claverings (1867), Trollope presented a contrast between middle- and upper-class diners. The novel contains two significant dinner party scenes: In one, the hero, Harry Clavering, visits the home of his future brother-in-law and family, the Burtons, in their simple, virtuous, middle-class London home; while the other scene finds the gentry Clavering clan assembled at the family’s country manor, Osborne House, with feelings of suspicion and animosity. Unlike the Longestaffes of The Way We Live Now, the gentry characters in The
Claverings were powerful and unthreatened by nouveaux-riches enclaves.

Harry Clavering was reluctant to accept Theodore Burton's invitation because the man dusted his shoes with a pocket handkerchief. When Harry finally conceded, he dreaded the occasion, and anticipated "an untidy, ugly house, with an untidy motherly woman going about with a baby in her arms. Such would naturally be the home of a man who dusted his shoes with his pocket-handkerchief." Harry's predictions were wrong; instead, he found "the prettiest drawing room he had seen," with Theodore's wife, Cecelia, sincerely warm and hospitable. Accordingly, Harry "found himself quite at home in ten minutes," with Cecelia speaking to him as though he were a member of the family. To add to the spirit of conviviality was the presence of the Burtons' two young daughters: a seven year old who went through "some pretence at needlework," and a four year old sprawled over the drawing room table, working on a puzzle.

The presence of children—even at a small dinner party with only Harry and one other visitor as guests—reinforced the simplicity and domestic harmony

---

1 Anthony Trollope, The Claverings (New York, 1977), 64. Harry's subsequent error in this preconception is comparable to Mrs. Hopkinson's preconception about the Chesters in The Semi-Detached House. The first case involves upper-class prejudices against the middle class; the second, middle-class prejudices against the upper class.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 65.

4 Ibid., 64.
of the household. It would be unheard of to include children at other dinner parties examined here. The only role children played in Society's blueprint was to make a brief appearance—usually accompanied by a nursemaid—as a display object, and then to be out of the way as quickly as possible. The Burton children, by contrast, expressed themselves freely, and charmed Harry in all their innocence.

In spite of the casual atmosphere, Harry's visit was not treated as an ordinary night at the Burton home (when they would have eaten cold leg of mutton). The Burtons, though simple and unpretentious, took their dinner-giving responsibilities seriously. While not wealthy, Theodore, a civil engineer and land surveyor, could afford to offer a few delicacies. As important as what was offered was the care that the host himself bestowed upon insuring a good meal, in true Walkerite style. Specifically, we learn that

There was some wild-fowl, and [Harry] was agreeably surprised as he watched the mental anxiety and gastronomic skill with which Burton went through the process of preparing the gravy, with lemon and pepper, having in the room a little silver-pot and an apparatus of fire for the occasion.\(^5\)

The food good and the company affable, enjoyment came naturally. Harry, with his formal gentry background, was unaccustomed to such good-hearted hospitality, and changed his attitude toward the family in the course of the evening:

\(^5\)Ibid., 67.
[He] had not intended to pass a pleasant evening, and would have stood aloof and been cold, had it been possible to him; but he found that it was not possible; and after a little while he was friendly and joyous, and the dinner went off very well.\(^6\)

The Clavering dinner at Osborne House was the reverse of the Burton dinner. The event took place during a time of family conflict, when relationships among the assembled guests were especially tense. Harry's arrogant cousin Sir Hugh, host and proprietor of the "Great House," was anything but hospitable; the payoff for his troubles was only his snug superiority to all others present. In "greeting" Harry, for example, he extended not his hand, but one finger. For most of the company, predinner conversation was cold, awkward, and even deprecating, as when Sir Hugh's brother, Archie, condemned Harry for choosing the wrong profession.

The hypothetical "display" child referred to earlier becomes a reality at Osborne House—complete with nursemaid. Conveniently for comparison purposes, Trollope made this child a cumbersome infant, whose presence annoyed Sir Hugh—the father—so much that he ordered him removed just as the child was being exhibited to arriving relatives.

Table conversation during the meal was also stilted. It was not until the first course concluded that Sir Hugh condescended to speak to his partner, Harry's fiancée, Florence. Even then, the conversation was stiff and short lived,

\(^{6}\)Ibid.
despite Florence’s kindhearted efforts. Archie seems to have been the only one out of the seven or so present to converse throughout dinner. He took the blueprint of expectations most seriously, recognizing conversation as "a duty . . . at which he would work hard." His partner, Mrs. Clavering, quickly became annoyed at his "laborious" and demanding questions. Trollope’s description of the dynamics of the conversation reveals a penetrating social awareness. In Archie’s mind,

He always recognized the fact that he was working hard on behalf of society, and . . . he had no idea of pulling all the coach up the hill by his own shoulders. Whenever therefore he had made his effort he waited for his companion’s, looking closely into her face, cunningly driving her on, so that she also should pull her share of the coach. Before dinner was over Mrs. Clavering found the hill to be very steep, and the coach to be very heavy.\(^7\)

Archie’s philosophy toward dinner conversation represents an extreme not previously exemplified. He clearly was on the side of those who defended rigid formality rather than simplicity, sincerity, and enjoyment. Other advocates of his side--Sir Hugh being an exaggerated example--were not willing to work as hard at the "duty" of conversation. Seen as such, the dinner party--and conversation, in particular--was like a military drill, the smooth execution of which represented a kind of patriotism to one’s country or, in this case, to one’s Society. Both Archie and Sir Hugh would have claimed membership in the school of social

\(^7\)Ibid., 88.
\(^6\)Ibid., 89.
refinement, but its founders would probably not have accepted them. Archie succeeded in executing his fair share of the conversation, but surely writers of etiquette books would not have condoned the forceful manner in which he did so. He brought only misery to those around him. As for Sir Hugh, his role could have served the etiquette writers as a satiric example of how a host should not behave to guests. As a fitting conclusion to the evening, when the insulted rector, Henry Clavering, departed, he offered his host three fingers, and vowed to his wife never to return with Sir Hugh in the house. The host offered one finger in return.

A later work by Trollope, The Way We Live Now (1874-75), provides other dinner parties to contrast. Here, the focus shall be on those of Roger Carbury, the unpretentious but noble and wealthy hero who lived a simple life at his secluded country estate; and Adolphus and Lady Pomona Longestaffe, symbolic of the declining aristocracy who were overrun by the fortunes of nouveaux-riches magnates such as Augustus Melmotte. As a host, Roger adhered to the Walker camp, while the Longestaffes clung desperately to their last remnants of glory as fading aristocrats in what they believed to be the school of social refinement.

The dinner at Carbury Manor consisted of a recommended number of guests, eight. These players included Roger, the financially struggling widow

*Trollope himself stated, "the party consisted of eight, which is, perhaps, the best number for a mixed gathering of men and women at a dinner table" (The Way
Lady Carbury, the bishop and his wife, and the local priest. Like Theodore Burton in *The Claverings*, Roger Carbury was a responsible host who reflected his class; and like Thackeray in *A Shabby Genteel Story*, Trollope revealed the seating plan—although without a diagram—which served as a stage for the ritual’s performance. More significantly, Trollope described Roger’s own awareness of performing his responsibilities as host:

> In this case Mr. Hepworth faced the giver of the feast, the bishop and the priest were opposite to each other, and the ladies graced the four corners. Roger, though he spoke of such things to no one, turned them over much in his mind, believing it to be the duty of a host to administer in all things to the comfort of his guests. In the drawing-room he had been especially courteous to the young priest, introducing him first to the bishop and his wife, and then to his cousins.\(^\text{10}\)

Even if there were conflicts in the ideology of some of the party (as between the bishop and his wife, and the priest), all did their duty in keeping up their share of the conversations, and in "pulling the coach up the hill." Lady Carbury, who prided herself on her experience and adeptness in Society, "was skilful [sic] enough to talk to each [of her partners] without neglecting the other."\(^\text{11}\) Further, Trollope contrasted her public and private sides by assuring the reader that "at dinner [she] was all smiles and pleasantness" and that "no one looking at her, or

---

*We Live Now* (Indianapolis, 1974), 128).

\(^{10}\)Ibid. Emphasis added.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., 132.
listening to her, could think that her heart was sore with many troubles." In spite of the presence of Lady Carbury's "pretty energy"—easily interpreted as affectation—Roger’s goals of simple elegance and some intellectual stimulation were achieved: He provided unspoken cues to the players, and his guests responded by executing their prescribed roles smoothly.

The Longestaffes’ dinner party at their country house reflected their unmitigated pretentiousness. Guests ranged from the bishop to the Melmottes to Lady Carbury. Significantly, Roger, who deplored such ostentatious affairs, declined his invitation. With the same acute perception that he demonstrated in *The Claverings*, Trollope again served as critic of the arrangements of the formal feed. He began by noting the uneven male-female ratio of diners (fourteen women and only ten men) and then asserted that "the Longestaffes, though . . . people of fashion, were not famous for their excellence in arranging [dinner parties]." He continued:

> If aught, however, was lacking in exactness, it was made up in grandeur. There were three powdered footmen . . . and . . . a very heavy butler, whose appearance of itself was sufficient to give éclat to a family . . . . [N]othing was spared which could contribute to the magnificence of the fête.

Here was a case in which an established, upper-class gentry family was

---

10 Ibid., 131-32.
11 Ibid., 161.
12 Ibid.
considered ignorant in the management of dinner parties. Clearly, the time of "powdering" one's footmen had long passed; but for the Longestaffes, "grandeur" and "magnificence" superseded the mode of the day, which they probably disdained.

The hosts' deficiencies in organizational skills extended to include inability to make guests feel comfortable. Before dinner was announced, for example, "the grand room was . . . fairly full, but nobody had a word to say." This occurred in spite of the presence of otherwise skillful conversationalists such as Lady Carbury and the bishop. At dinner, there was some conversation, but after a while, Lady Carbury "abandoned" her partner Auguste Melmotte "in despair," when her efforts at "pretty energy" failed. The party ended as it began, with all assembled in the same spacious room. "Again," the narrator concluded, "nobody talked to anybody, and the minutes went very heavily till at last the carriages were there to take them all home."

In the end, all that the Longestaffes were left with was appearances; they

---

3Etiquette books—for the most part written by and for the middle classes—would have been loath to admit this. Many authors prided themselves on exemplifying how smoothly upper-class entertainments were conducted.

3Trollope, The Way We Live Now, 161.

3Melmotte's lack of social skills was well apparent at the grand banquet he gave for the emperor of China. People came to see and to be seen; except for the last-minute intrigue with Melmotte's probable criminality, the hosts were inconsequential (ibid., 474).

3Ibid., 164.
could not claim a place in the school of refinement because they--fading aristocrats--failed miserably in following the code of etiquette. Adolphus's failure as a host is reflected in the fact that the only mention of him through the narration of the evening was the information that "the master of the house shook hands with each guest as he entered, and then devoted his mind to expectation of the next comer." A similar line was mentioned about Lady Pomona and the two Longestaffe daughters. Not surprisingly, Adolphus ran himself into debt from spending too much on such entertainments, which were clearly out of his range. Finally, whereas Roger had provided unspoken cues to his guests as to the nature of the evening's performance, the only message the Longestaffes relayed was cold, unfriendly silence. The result was that silence dominated the evening and that the performance element of the ritual plunged to a low ebb.

The crown to our examination of dinner party scenes in novels will be an evening with the Veneerings and company in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Dickens used the scene, in part, to emphasize the increasing respect for money and the widening of social circles. The event is about one couple's efforts to make their way into a new upper-middle-class society, the competition involved in people trying to impress one another, and the resulting shallowness

---

9Ibid., 162.

8Ibid., 161.

2Ibid., 171.
of social relations. Humanity and human feeling are nowhere in sight. Seen as such, Dickens's satire is the ultimate condemnation of nouveaux-riches pretentiousness.

The Veneerings themselves, along with all their "bran-new" possessions (including a "bran-new" baby), reflected the "veneer" of their name:

[All things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings--the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle stickey.22

For Dickens, such nouveaux-riches qualities were synonymous with artificiality. Another case in which he equated a person with a material acquisition was between one of the guests, Twemlow, and the dining room table, complete with expanding sections. Twemlow was the party's only claim to sophistication because of his relation to a member of the aristocracy, Lord Snigsworth. As such, Twemlow acted as a "center piece" around which the rest of the party was arranged. Appropriately, it was him who questioned the nature, or function, of friendship in a Veneering world. Shortly after meeting Veneering at a club, Twemlow received an invitation to the Veneerings' dinner party, which led him to believe that all the guests--who themselves had been only recently and minimally acquainted with the host--were "the most intimate friends Veneering

had in the world." The satire thus implied that a dinner invitation symbolized the closest thing to intimacy that a person as bran-new as Veneering—or others in his world—could have. The reality, however, was that host and guests alike manipulated one another, whether it was to enlist them as useful connections or merely to serve as someone to impress with one’s grandiose self-importance.

So far were the guests from being Veneering’s friends that most did not even recognize their host. Such was the case with the arrogant Mr. Podsnap, who mistook Twemlow for Veneering, and addressed him as such. (Both Twemlow and Veneering were offended by the error but did not reveal their resentment and continued their performances unhindered.) So smooth was Podsnap’s performance that he re-introduced himself to both men as though nothing had happened, with "perfect satisfaction." Meanwhile, four of the other guests were so unsure of their host’s identity that they entered "with wandering eyes and wholly decline[d] to commit themselves as to which [wa]s Veneering, until Veneering ha[d] them in his grasp."

The random group of strangers assembled at the Veneerings’ dinner table have only Society’s blueprint to hold them together. Although many of them—including the bran-new Veneerings—were still inept at following the rules, they

---

20Ibid., 49.
24Ibid., 51.
25Ibid.
performed the ritual as best they could. Unlike the awkward silences at other
dinner parties examined here, at least the Veneerings' group was conversational,
even if the topics were absurd. Still, one suspects an undertone of boredom.
Genuine enjoyment was clearly missing; like the material aspects of the dinner, it
was available only in synthetic form.

The most revealing part of the chapter showed the lavishly decorated
room and the players reflected in a large mirror above the sideboard. This
perspective—with the mirror serving as a lens—was the only way the narrator
offered to see the reality of the scene; without this aid, all was farcical, and
nothing could be taken at face value.

The mirror revealed facades, or veneers, of people, as well as their latent
qualities; it is a script of stage directions. We learn, for example, not only that
Podsnap was "prosperously feeding" (his prosperity being a source of pride), but
also that there were "red beads" of sweat on his forehead and that his collar was
rumpled.\textsuperscript{26} Also in view was a "mature young lady" with a "complexion that lights
up well when well powdered," in the process of flirting with a "mature young
gentleman; with too much nose in his face," and "too much sparkle in his studs,
his eyes, his buttons, his talk, his teeth."\textsuperscript{27} Not least of all was "'Mortimer,' . . .
who never was in the house before, and appears not to want to come again . . .,

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 52-53.
\end{footnotes}
and who was inveigled by Lady Tippins . . . to come to these people’s and talk, and who won’t talk.”

From the revealing reflections in the mirror, it seems as though we, the audience, are watching the players from backstage, in the midst of their performance. One can almost feel the heat of the lights (causing Podsnap to sweat profusely) and see the blinding sparkle of the players’ synthetic qualities. Everything seen through the mirror--brilliant material objects, dazzling personalities, and the dinner party ritual itself--seems to meld into one image. Of the other novelists examined here, only Thackeray, in A Shabby Genteel Story, used such blatant theatricality to emphasize the performance aspect of the dinner party. Dickens, however, was more penetrating and disturbing in his message: Not only did the players exhibit a facade of artificiality, but also the facade would eventually be used to destroy one another.

The Veneerings’ dinner party offers an important way of deciphering the ritual: The real is separated from the artificial; the latent, from the manifest; and, ultimately, the inner, from the outer self. Each player’s own behavior--whether it leaned toward simplicity or social refinement--thus contributed to the

\footnote{Ibid., 53. Mortimer’s misery, including the pressure used by Lady Tippins to bring him, seems to have been taken from Dickens’s own misadventures in being "trotted out." See above, Chapter VII.}

\footnote{Trollope had done this to some extent when he differentiated between the public and private sides of Lady Carbury when she was at Roger’s dinner party.}
overall tone of the ritual. In most cases, however, the tone was set by the
host(s), who acted as conductor(s) of the performance. The result, as we have
seen in a number of novels, ranged from flawless success to unmitigated failure.
CONCLUSION

A disparate cast of characters have dined in succession throughout these pages, leaving a trail of convictions in their stead. With the last of the dinner guests having departed, we are free to reflect upon the meaning behind the performances that have been presented here. To witness a Victorian dinner party in action is to learn about the Victorians socially, ideologically, and materially.

Dinner parties afforded an illuminating link between Victorian public and private life. This was symbolized by their setting: carefully selected guests within the public rooms of a private home. The inclusion of private writings here has emphasized the private nature of the dinner party as a gathering of individuals in a specific social circle. And fiction, as was discussed earlier, brought entire (if imaginary) "private" dinner party "performances" into public view.

The dinner party was public in the sense that it was a major institution of Victorian Society—and one that was legitimized by the blueprint of expectations. Etiquette writers explored this path and examined the rewards that a knowledge of their field might bestow upon the upwardly mobile classes aspiring to join higher circles. Those who adhered to the school of social refinement recognized the dinner party as an excellent opportunity to display themselves and their possessions, to impress or compete with their neighbors, or, in the case of
newcomers, to prove to Society's judges that they were worthy of membership in the circle to which they aspired. The dinner party, for all these people, was a showcase.

For advocates of the school of simplicity, however, the dinner party was a way for friends and acquaintances to meet amicably and to share a meal in a comfortable setting. They stressed the importance of sincere hospitality and enjoyable company and conversation. Some diners achieved these goals while at the same time exhibiting social refinement that would have impressed even etiquette book writers. Specifically, in the cases of the Chesters (in The Semi-Detached House) and Lady Eastlake, both sides of the debate would have been satisfied: Because they were members of the upper class, social refinement came naturally to them, but at the same time, participants enjoyed themselves—even laughed—in what was for them a relaxed environment.

The central debate continued throughout the periods examined here, but changes in social life shifted the arguments. Significantly, each side perceived the new conditions and their effect on the dinner party differently. Lady St. Helier--a representative of the school of social refinement--welcomed less rigid standards and wider circles that resulted from it. She seemed to see exclusivity as a bygone oddity, with the exception of straggling old-timers who clung to withering, conservative traditions. Ostentation was not an issue.
Predominantly middle-class members of the opposing school would have adamantly disagreed. They continued to condemn the cumbrous pomp they saw around them, and few recognized a more relaxed environment. Authors of nonfiction lamented loudly and angrily about machinery, taskmasters, and slaves of Society; in private, from a bored Isabella Beeton to a "trotted-out" Charles Dickens, many dined in misery; and novelists often used satire to accentuate the pitfalls of the ritual.

Why were these critics ultimately ineffective in diminishing ostentation at the dinner party? First, how much the quality was curtailed—if at all—in St. Helier's group is questionable. Did looser social standards necessarily mean less ostentation? St. Helier seemed to think so, but Walker's group clearly did not. The school of simplicity lost a major battle when the enemy—holding on to their pomposity—actually professed qualities advocated by the other side. An example of this is the dinner parties of Lady Waldegrave: Both St. Helier and Hardman praised them for their openness and friendliness, yet Dickens condemned the one he attended for being trotted out as a display object.

In "Social Slavery," Leslie Stephen pondered other reasons for the helplessness of the Walker school. Revealing a rift within the group, he questioned the motives of writers who used satire as "a transparent device under cover of which they may gloat over the external splendour of the vice which they
affect to denounce." This is a valid accusation for some, but certainly the fervent sincerity with which other writers—including satirists—expressed their views would be difficult to deny. Stephen did acknowledge the writings of vigorous, well-intentioned social reformers—much like those examined here—but reached a despairing conclusion. Their problem, he asserted, was that the efforts they made at reform were too isolated and too small to solve the monumental problem of "how people are to meet each other on friendly terms without senseless extravagance or squalid meanness . . . ." Stephen maintained that these reformers ("workmen") needed a leader ("superintending architect") to unify their efforts and to change the blueprint. Similarly, Walker and, after him, Helps, had called for "daring spirits" to emancipate diners from cumbrous pomp, but no one accepted the challenge. The opposing school had no need of such leadership, because the ruling system was already well in place.

Thus, we are left with a divided, unorganized group of bitter cynics who were powerless to change the dinner-giving system they deplored; and, on the other side, those who celebrated the opportunities and advantages that dinner parties brought. Many less opinionated diners probably overlapped both sides, at some times taking pride in the material acquisitions and pageantry around them, and at others, being filled with "unspeakable agony" at "the sight of a dinner-

1"Social Slavery," 569.
2Ibid., 577.
card."

Although we have no way of interviewing middle- and upper-class Victorians on how they perceived the formal feeds, we are fortunate to have so many of their writings describing and reflecting upon the ritual. Only the surface of Victorian dinner-party literature could be examined in this necessarily limited work, and many more volumes are yet untapped. Whether social historians will recognize this opportunity to reveal such an important aspect of Victorian culture remains to be seen.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Acton, Eliza. Modern Cookery, in All its Branches . . . . Philadelphia, 1845.


Dinners and Dinner-Parties. London, 1862.

Dinners and Housekeeping. London, 1867.


"Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-One," *Fraser's Magazine* XLV (January 1852), 17-32.


*Etiquette of the Dinner Table, with Carving.* London, 1867.

*Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding.* London, 1870.


Loftie, Mrs. The Dining-Room. London, 1878.

______. Social Twitters. London, 1879.

Manners and Tone of Good Society . . . . London, 1879.


_____.* The Way We Live Now.* Indianapolis, 1974.

Whately, Elizabeth. *English Life, Social and Domestic, In the Middle of the Nineteenth Century...* London, 1847.

**Secondary Sources**


