

Gourmand and Gourmet — A Glimpse of Women Status from the Gender of the Two Words

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Abstract—To get an idea of the social status of women in 19th century France, we can go through a linguistic study of the gender of two words *gourmand* and *gourmet*, both indicating an eater on the table. If the word *gourmand* has a feminine form *gourmande*, while the word *gourmet* only designates men eaters, it deserves a deeper look at their meaning for French writers, especially the master of realism, Honoré de Balzac, representing more or less the ideology about women at the time.

Index Terms—*gourmand*, *gourmet*, women's status, French literature, 19th century, Balzac.

I. INTRODUCTION ^a

The word *gourmand*, with both masculine and feminine genders, means “who eats with greed and with excess [1]” (Larousse, 1863, 1397): “He is greedy (*gourmand*), my dear, to be killed at every meal. You cannot imagine what he would eat if he was left free [2]” (Maupassant, 1895, 260); or “lover of certain specific dishes [2]” (Larousse, 1863, 260) [3]. Although it can also mean the one who loves good food and knows how to appreciate it: “Greedy (*gourmand*) as a cat. Morny [...] insisted that women had no taste, that they did not know what is good, that they were neither greedy (*gourmandes*) nor libertine, that in terms of taste, they did not have only caprice [4]” (Goncourt, 1891, 114), or else, “Are you greedy (*gourmand*)? - Of course! It is only fools who are not greedy (*gourmand*). We are greedy (*gourmand*) as we are an artist, as we are educated, as we are a poet. Taste, my dear, is a delicate organ, perfectible and respectable like the eye and the ear [5]” (Maupassant 1902, 10). Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the word *gourmand* itself shows a certain uncertainty towards the erudition or the knowledge of the eater or the female eater, which can be proved by the fact that the synonym of *gourmand*, is “glutton, glutton, greedy [6]” (Larousse, 1863, 1397).

In contrast, the word *gourmet*, lacking of feminine gender, is intended apparently only for men. The word is shrouded in certainty and assertion. It means an individual, male only, who “knows how to taste and appreciate good wines or sought-after dishes” (Larousse, 1863: 1397). “The *gourmet* is the one who discerns the mixture of two wines, who will smell what dominates in a dish, while the other guests will

Chambertin! Oh my God! it's surene [7]!” (Brillat-Savarin, have only a confused and lost feeling [8]” (Voltaire, 1879, 278). “A good *gourmet*. It takes a small amount of time for the *gourmet* to say: ‘It is good, fair or bad. Plague! it's 1825, 53). Or the one who appreciates the quality, the refinement of a table, of a particular dish. “A foodie (*gourmand*). A sigh of bliss as one would have heard it from a *gourmet* eater of truffles [9]” (Champfleury, 1857, 69). “A fine dinner, consisting of a green wheat soup, Lapland reindeer tongues, Provençal-style sautéed mullet, truffled guinea fowl. A *gourmet* dinner, seasoned with an original conversation on the things of the mouth and the imagination of the stomach, at the end of which Tourguéneff makes the commitment to make us eat double snipe from Russia: the first game in the world [10]” (Goncourt, 1882). Apparently, the absolute masculine form is an unspoken admission: for such delicate business as gastronomy, there is no place for women, who can only be *gourmandes* (‘greedy’), but never *gourmettes*.

II. IMAGE OF WOMAN EATER IN THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF 19TH CENTURY FRANCE

As Dupré (1972) indicated in the *Encyclopédie du bon Français dans l'usage contemporain*:

Gourmet and *gourmand* are not interchangeable. A *gourmet* is a delicate eater; a *gourmand* (foodie) is not necessarily one. One can be *gourmand* for chocolate and sweets and not in any way know the other elements that constitute the pleasures of the table [11]. (Dupré, 1972)

Indeed, the founders of French gastronomic culture assure that women do not play a significant role in the world of gastronomy. Their aptitude, which is limited to sweets, sugar or light meals, does not allow them the upper spheres of gastronomy [12] (Quellier, 2010). Grimod de la Reynière (1806) underlines in his founding work that:

If this service [the desserts] is not strictly speaking that of the *gourmands*, it is undoubtedly that of the pretty women, their Appetite hardly manifests itself until the approach of the little feet and it usually gets hold of the sweets that are part of the dessert [13]. (Reynière, 1806, 189-190)

Brillat-Savarin (1825) also considers women as great lovers of light or sweet plats,

Manuscript received January 27, 2022; revised August 4, 2022. This work was supported in part by Grants C202109 and 2022XS-0048 of Tianjin University.

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^a If not indicated specifically, all the documents in French are our own translations. We have chosen the version of *La Comédie humaine*, Paris, Classiques Garnier: “Le Monde”, 2008, and indicating the number of volume by roman numbers, and the number of page by Arabic numbers in the text of this paper.

Gluttony also includes the delicacy which is none other than the same preference applied to light, delicate dishes of little volume, jams, pastries, etc. This is a modification introduced in favor of women and men who resemble them [14] (Brillat-Savarin, 1825, 141-142).

This tone fixes the position of the women eaters, who can be *gourmandes* but not *gourmet*, from the beginning of the 19th century. The writers of this century also adopt this tone when they themselves speak of gastronomic pleasure with keen interest. Maupassant excludes women from gastronomic pleasure:

[...] Of all the passions, the most complicated, the most difficult to practice seriously, the most inaccessible to common people, the most sensual in the true sense of the word, the most worthy of artists in refinements, is undoubtedly gluttony. Of a purely human creation, unknown to the first living, perfected from age to age, growing with civilizations, scorned by barbarians and the plebs, misunderstood by the mediocre, scorned by fools, which is a glory; little appreciated by women, which idealizes her [...] [15]. (Maupassant, 1993, 345)

Indeed, the female characters of the novels of this period rarely eat in the romans, but it is necessary to distinguish the bourgeois and noble women, that is to say the honest women of the upper world, from those coming from the lower classes, popular and *demi-mondaine*. According to Becker's studies, in the 19th century, the act of eating is interpreted in a particular way for women: the mastery of hunger in fact symbolizes an interior moderation, which "suggests a perfectly disciplined erotic life [16]" (Becker, 2017: 140). For example, the women of the working class, like Gervaise, in *L'Assommoir*, huge, cramped on the elbows ate large pieces of white, not speaking, for fear of losing a bite" at the goose banquet (Zola, 1876, 573-595), and especially the courtesans, like Nana (during several sumptuous banquets at her place) under the pen of Zola, do not hide their good appetite at all. "Nana, who said she had her stomach in her heels, threw herself on radishes, which she crunched without bread" (Zola, 1879, 1128). She contrasts with her aunt, Mme Lerat, a former florist who now lived on her savings - a worthy woman - "Mme Lerat, who had become ceremonious, did not want radishes; it gave the pitié. [...] Nana [...] just sucked the bone". Nana's verbs "to throw" or "to suck" have a rather aggressive and erotic connotation, which creates an image with the invincible baits of a lethal creature. During the debauchery supper of thirty-eight people at Nana's (Ibid., 1171-1187), a mixture of debauched and prostitutes, the erotic atmosphere and fatty dishes intertwine, good food and good food are mixed up, which precisely reflects the close link between the cleavage body and the female good appetite. "The champagne she had drunk made her very rosy, her mouth wet, her eyes glistening; and the banker offered more, with each hugging movement of her shoulders, to the slight voluptuous bulges of her neck, when she turned her head" (Ibid., 1184). This attitude towards Zola's greedy women is representative of 19th century writers, a greedy woman implies a dispirited woman, and Balzac is no exception.

III. WOMAN EATER IN THE WORK OF BALZAC

In his descriptions around the table, we can see that the

decent woman rarely eats, while the courtesans do not hide their appetites at all, just as they do not hide their bodies well. Examples of decent women like Eugénie Grandet in the eponymous novel, Adeline Hulot in *La Cousine Bette*, Henriette de Mortsau in *Le Lys dans la Vallée*, or else Julie de Chastillon in *La Femme de 30 ans*, never eat. Balzac himself explains in *Physiology de mariage*, citing Lord Byron who was loath to see women at the table:

A woman who is busy giving birth and feeding a child really has no time to think of a lover; besides that, she is, before and after her bedtime, out of state to present herself in the world. Indeed, how could the most immodest of distinguished women, of whom it is question in this work, dare to show herself pregnant, and to walk this hidden fruit, her public accuser? O Lord Byron, you who did not want to see women eating [17] (Byron, 1922, 84)

The studies of Muhlstein and Becker prove this writer's point of view: in Balzacian novels, women eat little (Muhlstein, 2010: 162-163; Becker, 2017: 140). They seek to maintain the shape by eating very little: a distinguished woman, "a rare variety in the human race" shines by its delicacy, its whiteness and its sweetness, to such a point that one must ask this question: "Does she eat? It is a mystery [18]" (Balzac, 1829, 43).

The women eat little at a formal dinner: their secret harness bothers them, they wear the parade corset, they are in the presence of women whose eyes and tongues are equally formidable. They like, not the good, but the pretty dish: sucking crayfish, gulping quail au gratin, twisting the garlic of a heather cock, and starting with a piece of fresh fish seasoned with one of those sauces that are the glory of French cuisine [18] (Balzac, 1830, 393).

It seems that an admirable woman is bound to be an ethereal creature, who has no need of the pleasure of the table. Barthes's (1975) observation on reading *Physiologie du goût* affirms this point, "Mythologically, food is men's matter; the woman takes part only as a cook or a servant; she is the one who prepares or serves but does not eat [19]" (Barthes, 1975, 11). This myth about the female body, that it should not be organic or natural, that it only performs its aesthetic or erotic functions is well spread, as advocated by the aforementioned Byron, or Baudelaire, who writes an entire article to praise makeup. According to Baudelaire, nature teaches nothing but dreadful, it "forces man to sleep, to drink, to eat, and to protect himself, as best he can, against the hostilities of the atmosphere [20]" (Baudelaire, 1885, 100), consequently, "all that is beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation". He then claims a kind of mastery for a woman:

"A woman is well within her rights, and even she performs a kind of duty by endeavoring to appear magical and supernatural; she must surprise, she must charm; idol, she must adore herself to be adored. It must therefore borrow from all the arts the means to rise above nature the better to subjugate hearts and strike spirits." (Baudelaire, 1855, 100)

He talks about make-up on the surface, yes, but isn't that principle suitable for all aspects of a woman's image? Transported to the order of the table, a woman must then hide the natural and organic side of her body, namely the appetite, and the act of eating, she is only at the table to serve, feed, or

be observed by men.

This explains why there may be cooks in the novels of Balzac, for instance, Sauvage and Mme Cibot in *Le Cousin Pons*, and Mme Vauquet in *Le Père Goriot*, but that, if these female cooks offer really delicious dishes, they never eat; left alone the dignified ladies who must maintain their elegant image on a daily basis. In Balzacian works, specifically for women, taste, as the organic side of their body, is completely rejected.

A. Eugénie Grandet

If we take a closer look at the example of Eugénie Grandet - submissive, humble, pure, admirable, she is a young girl who represents the ideal femininity for the author, "Eugénie was sublime, she was a woman [21]" (Balzac, 1833, 543). At first, she lives a rather sad life under the tyrannical greed of her father. He is a stingy, stern old bourgeois who only knows money and calculation.

Of course, all the food for the family is decided by the father, Eugénie and her mother remain silent all the time at the table, we do not see them eating or talking about eating. Until the day when more or less illusory love arises with her handsome cousin Charles, Eugénie suddenly seems interested in food. In order to arrange the room where Charlie will stay,

"More ideas had arisen to her in a quarter of an hour than she had had since she had been in the world [...] She went, light as a bird, to draw from her purse the crown of one hundred sous. that she had received for her expenses for the month".

"- But what will your father say? This terrible objection was proposed by Madame Grandet when she saw her daughter armed with a sugar bowl from Vieux Sèvres brought back from the Château de Froidfond by Grandet.

- And where will you get the sugar? Are you crazy?
- Mom, Nanon will buy both sugar and candle.
- But your father?
- Would it be fitting that his nephew could not drink a glass of sweetened water? Besides, he won't care.
- Your father sees everything, said Madame Grandet, nodding her head [21]". (Balzac, 1833, 503)

It's already ridiculous that their father doesn't even let go of a sugar cube, but the saddest thing is that the women involved here fully submit to this monster, and that the first time we feel the consciousness of the heroine, it is to be of service to another man! This type of behavior around the table is repeated in the novel:

"Nanon, my good Nanon, make some cream for my cousin's coffee." But, mademoiselle, it should have been done yesterday," Nanon said, laughing out loud. I can't make cream. Your cousin is handsome, beautiful, but really cute. You did not see him in his silk and gold chamber louque. I saw it myself. He wears fine linen like that of Monsieur le Cure's surplice.

- Nanon, make us some pancakes.
- And who will give me wood for the oven, and flour, and butter? says Nanon, who in her capacity as Prime Minister of Grandet sometimes assumed enormous importance in the eyes of Eugénie and her mother. Shouldn't this man be stolen to celebrate your cousin? Ask him for butter, flour, wood, he is your father, he can give you some. Here he is coming down to look at the provisions [...] [21]. (Balzac, 1833, 521)

The sugar, the pancakes here serve as her weapons to oppose her father, one might believe that the heroine finally takes courage to be able, as a girl, to fight against the tyrannical control of her father, but in fact, she only transfers the submission to her lover Charles, who is only a light and superficial dandy, and who accepts all her treasure, her beautiful gold coins that her father gave her. Later, attracted by marriage to another wealthy heiress, he betrays the love for Eugénie, who had been waiting for him for seven years. Even if she later becomes rich after the death of her father, she is not happy under the pen of Balzac. She resigns herself to a decent marriage, and ages on her own with all the pain of what has happened in her life. Insignificant, the moments of the sugar and the pancakes are part of the only moment when Eugénie shines in the novel. She always finds herself in the passivity imposed on her by androcentric society, which allows women only the most traditional archetypes: daughter, mother, wife, mistress. As a daughter, she is at the service of her father; as a lover, she expresses her feelings through maternal behaviors through food. Everything serves the interests of the male, and she herself, as a person, as a human, never eats, never enjoys, never talks about the pleasure of food, left alone gastronomy, which is caused by a situation of dependency imposed by society, not only financially but, more essential, mentally. This confirms the myth we talked about above, the woman does not eat, she serves food, she feeds the man. As Barthes (1975) notes:

[...] In the immense mythology that men have developed around the ideal woman, food is systematically forgotten; a woman is commonly seen in a state of love or innocence; we never see her eating: it is a glorious body, purified of all need [22] (Barthes, 1975, 10).

Nevertheless, it is through the body that we experience all sensations, enjoyment or pain, it is in and through his body that the individual "feels reached, observed, desired, rejected" [23] (Corbin, 2005, 8). This nature of the body, if the theory is always imprinted in Baudelaire's *L'Éloge du Maquillage*, is not recommended for women to reveal it to others, it is then the development of the formula mentioned above: disciplined woman = moderate diet – because she well hides her appetite, which is part of the nature of the body; dissipated woman = opulent food - she lets go her appetite, by extension, the whole nature of her body, which immediately recalls the sexual drive. So, a greedy woman is necessarily corrupt, on the other hand, a woman who does not eat is necessarily perfect.

B. Valérie Marneffe

This is precisely the case of Adeline Hulot, another model woman according to Balzac, in *La Cousine Bette*. The absence of food descriptions around her confirms the mythology mentioned by Barthes about ideal women, in the high society in the world created by Balzac. As a pious believer, perfect wife who tolerates the adultery of her husband, Baron Hulot, suffering immense pain, the beautiful Adeline never eats in the novel, there is indeed no scene of food around her, which contrasts with the scenes of the table, around the mistress of Baron Hulot, Valérie Marneffe, either ambiguous, or seductive, even erotic. She is pushed into the baron's arms by Adeline's cousin, Lisbeth Fischier, who has

a morbid jealousy of Adeline's beauty. The collaboration of the two women destroys the Hulot family. Valérie, tormenting several men at the same time - Polish artist Wenceslas Steinbock, Célestin Crevel - is truly a fatal woman. Shameless insincerity, this attractive woman comes into the picture with descriptions of her life, including details of an ordinary family dinner:

The dinner which the husband, wife and child made, this dinner delayed by four hours, would have explained the financial crisis this family was undergoing, for the table is the surest thermometer of fortune in Parisian households. A soup with herbs and bean water, a piece of veal with potatoes, drenched in red water for juice, a dish of beans and cherries of an inferior quality, all served and eaten in dog-eared plates and dishes with the sound and sad silverware of nickel silver, was this a menu worthy of this pretty woman? The baron would have wept over it, if he had witnessed it. The tarnished decanters did not save the ugly color of the wine taken by the liter from the wine merchant on the corner. The towels had been in use for a week. Finally, everything betrayed a misery without dignity, the carelessness of the wife and that of the husband for the family. The most vulgar observer would have said to himself, seeing them, that these two beings had arrived at that disastrous moment when the need to live makes one look for a happy rascality [24]. (Balzac, 1846, 71-72)

Unlike the miserable Adeline who never eats, from the start there is a link between "a dignified menu" and "this pretty woman", suggesting a sort of equation concerning the relationship between woman and food: disciplined woman equals to moderate appetite, dissipated woman equals to rich food. Indeed, it is Valérie who specializes in the use of good food. Only through a cup of tea, she managed to drive Count Wenceslas Steinbock, husband of Hortense Hulot-Ervy, mad:

At this moment, Valérie was bringing Steinbock a cup of tea herself. It was more than an honor, it was a pleasure. There is a whole language in the way a woman performs this function; but women know it well; it is also a curious study to make that of their movements, their gestures, their looks, their tone, their accent, when they accomplish this seemingly simple act of politeness. From the request: Do you have tea? - Do you want some tea? - A cup of tea? - coldly formulated, and the order to bring some given to the nymph who holds the urn, up to the enormous Odalisque poem coming from the tea table, cup in hand, to the pasha heart and presenting it to him with a submissive air, offering it in a caressing voice, with a look full of voluptuous promises, a physiologist can observe all the feminine feelings, from aversion, from indifference, to the declaration of Phèdre to Hippolyte. Women can do themselves there, at will, contemptuous to the point of insult, humble to the slavery of the East. Valérie was more than a woman, she was the serpent made woman, she completed her diabolical work by walking up to Steinbock, a cup of tea in her hand.

- I will take, said the artist in Valérie's ear, getting up and brushing her fingers over Valérie's fingers, as many cups of tea as you want to offer me, to see me present them like this [24]! (Balzac, 1846, 244)

The image of Valérie is so closely linked to appetizing food that Count Steinbock admits this connection, comparing these two types of women himself, those like Valérie, and those like his wife Hortense:

Comparing Valérie to his wife, he gave the first one the advantage. Hortense was a beautiful flesh, as Valérie said to Lisbeth; but there was in Madame Marneffe the Spirit in Form and the spiciness of Vice. Hortense's dedication is a feeling that a husband thinks owed to him; the awareness of the immense value of absolute love is soon lost, as the debtor imagines, after some time, that the loan is his. This sublime loyalty becomes, in a way, the daily bread of the soul, and infidelity seduces like a treat. The disdainful woman, especially a dangerous woman, irritates curiosity, as spices enhance good food [24]. (Balzac, 1846, 238-239)

The worthy lady, Hortense, like her mother Adeline, as pious, pure, sublime, and who never eats in the novel, is only "beautiful flesh" for her husband. Like an exquisite meat dish, the flesh needs the spices to stimulate the appetite, by analogy, a beautiful woman must be provided with the "spiciness of Vice" to stimulate the sexual appetite. This remark is not surprising, again in the influential work of Brillat-Savarin, the connection between a woman, especially a pretty woman, and food is established:

Nothing is more pleasant to see than a pretty greedy in arms: her towel is advantageously put on; one of her hands is resting on the table; the other car has elegantly cut little pieces in its mouth, or the wing of a partridge that she has to bite [...] [25] (Brillat-Savarin, 1825, 145)

It should be noted here that we are not at all concerned about the internal sensation of this pretty woman when she savoring the dish, but "we spy on her, we surprise her as if we were dealing with a little erotic kidnapping [26]" (Barthes, 1975, 10). In fact, when it is about a woman, the food discourse has nothing to do with the gastronomic knowledge, nor the gustatory pleasure, we read a lot of her body: the hands, the mouth, the teeth [...] showing a kind of pleasure concerning a pretty *gourmande*, it is rather the pleasure of observing on the part of the men: The blooming of the physiognomy of gluttony implicitly suggests the primitive pleasure of the body brought by sexual activities, which arouses the erotic imagination of the man who observes it. Obviously, this type of woman, a sweet tooth, cannot be the model woman at this time when the Church still relies heavily on women, while men who practice religion are becoming rare [27] (Corbin, 2005, 53). Indeed, if Alphonse de Liguori wrote, during the first half of the 19th century, that "the greatest of our enemies is our body [28]" (Liguori, 1984), the ascetic position for the use of the senses is relentless, for food as well as for the sexual drive. Permanent vigilance is required of women, "gestures, rhythms, sources of emotion and contributions of sensitivity [29]" (Arnold, 1984, 136) are part of daily monitoring. Conversely, women who fail to master the use of their senses, "perceived as so many doors of the demon [30]" (Corbin, 2005, 75) are inevitably seen as dissipated, easy, dissolute.

Thus, women, whether disciplined or dissipated towards food, are completely objectified. The image of a greedy woman, a *gourmande*, suggests her inability to control her hunger, and hence her sexual desire. Of course, she cannot be a *gourmet*, as she naturally lacks the ability to enjoy good food. The greedy women, *les gourmandes*, at Balzac - Valérie in *La Cousine Bette*, Coralie in *Les Illusions Perdues*

- are not exceptional compared to those of the works of the great writers of this century, like Nana and Gervaise at Zola, which are almost all described with an erotic connotation, while the woman who does not eat is the one who is “admirable because she is devoted, perfect because she is dedicated to man, sublime because she is suffering, unequaled and incomparable when she is a mother, believer and confident in man, his principles, his society, his morality and his God [31]” (Özates, 2003). The only alternative for women: to be enslaved or infamous, which is reflected in depth through the food descriptions around them at Balzac.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the presence of the feminine form of the word *gourmand* and the absence of it for *gourmet* suggest a kind of equation concerning the relationship between woman and food: disciplined woman equals moderate appetite. Most French writers of the 19th century, relate a sublime, noble, beautiful woman not showing her appetite, she only speaks of food when it concerns men. Good food and good flesh are intertwined in this androcentric world of 19th century France, the role of women is reduced and limited to the frigid girl, the obedient woman, the exemplary mother or the chewy mistress, in short, a position that serves men, which promotes the superiority of man in order to reassure the dominance of the patriarchal system.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Youyou Wu conducted the research, Youyou Wu and Junkai Li wrote the paper together; all authors had approved the final version.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Youyou Wu would like to thank Prof. Anne CHAMAYOU for her kind direction of the present research. Both authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their pertinent suggestions.

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