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Camping in the Kitchen: Locating Culinary Authority in Elizabeth Robins Pennell's *Delights of Delicate Eating*

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<1>Elizabeth Robbins Pennell begins her 1896 collection of gastronomical essays, *The Delights of Delicate Eating*, with an unexpected renunciation. In her introduction, she announces, with uncharacteristic brevity, that her collection “does not pretend to be a ‘Cook’s Manual’” (8). This delineation of what her essays are *not* instantly checks the expectations of curious readers seeking out supper suggestions, readers who have turned to *Delights* hoping to find exactly what we hope to find in the cookbooks we peruse: a narrator whose culinary expertise far exceeds our own. At the same time, however, Pennell’s definitional protest draws a smile because it asserts, with considerable cheek, what the essays themselves attest—that *Delights* is, essentially, a cookbook. (1)

<2>This initial insistence that *Delights* is not what it appears to be appropriately derives from the pen of an author who established her culinary authority by renouncing her knowledge of cookery. To Henry Cust, the *Pall Mall* editor who commissioned the essays of the unknown journalist and thereby propelled her to short-lived literary fame, Pennell confided that she was completely helpless in the kitchen (Williams xv). Pennell openly admitted as much to readers of her memoir, confessing that her “only qualifications [for writing the cookery column that would be collected in *Delights*] were the healthy appetite and the honest love of a good dinner usually considered unbecoming to the sex” (*Cookery* 2). The cookbook collection she amassed over the course of her life in England—comprised of more than 400 limited, rare, and first editions that now reside in the Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress—began from gifts offered to Pennell by friends who enjoyed her company but couldn’t abide her dinners.(2) Thus, as odd as it might seem, this non-“Cook’s Manual” is authored by a non-cook—a very humorous prospect, indeed.

<3>The reallocation of authority prefigured in Pennell’s declaration that what is, is not—a gesture she repeats throughout *Delights*—lies at the foundation of my argument, which, for convenience, I’ve separated into three segments: first, that as Elizabeth Pennell abdicates her authority as both a writer and a food critic, she adopts the voice of aestheticism, a discourse dominated in the 1890s by male writers and artists but becoming increasingly amenable to women(3); second, that Pennell’s appropriation of aestheticist tropes, themes, and rhetoric is quickly subverted by her employment of aesthetic camp, which provides her with a methodology for critiquing and revising the philosophy she adopts(4); and third, that Pennell’s efforts transform the practice of cookery into a philosophy that aspires to the condition of art.(5) The revision of aestheticism that Pennell achieves as she sheds one kind of intellectual authority for another offers readers a model of self-critique that we would do well to put into practice, revising our notions about who “did” nineteenth-century aestheticism and how, with the same candor, the same sympathy, that Pennell exercises in *The Delights of Delicate Eating*.

<4>Elizabeth Pennell, an American expatriate who moved to London to continue her career in journalism shortly after her marriage in 1884, wrote the essays that would be collected and published first as the *Wares of Autolytus* and then as *The Delights of Delicate Eating* while working for the *Pall Mall Gazette* throughout the 1890s. In the text, the essays are arranged so as to correspond with the order of meals in a day and courses in a formal supper (beginning with chapters on “A Perfect Breakfast” and ending with tributes to “Indispensable Cheese” and “Enchanting Coffee”), as do many other Victorian cookery books. With its premeditated categorization of foods, then, *Delights* call to mind the kitchen-dominated manuals of domestic economy popularized in mid-century by writers like Eliza Acton and, of course, Mrs. Isabella Beeton.(6) But as Pennell’s introductory assertion makes clear, her literary project descends only nominally from the “Housewife’s Companions” (*Delights* 8) authored by these women. Instead of the direct, “iterative” (Meir 134) voice that gives Acton’s *Modern Cookery for Private Families* its unassailable note of finality, for example, Pennell offers readers her thoughts on “The

Triumphant Tomato” and “The Most Excellent Oyster” in a lilting, meandering prose(7); and instead of the carefully enumerated lists of directions that Beeton includes in her manual, Pennell’s instructions often culminate in a rejection of the idea of the list itself as insufficiently adaptable to the impressions of the culinary artist—a habit that makes following any of her recipes an exercise in frustration, as I know from personal experience.

<5>Still working within the genre of the cookery book but eager to separate herself from her predecessors in these and other ways, Pennell goes so far as to define herself publicly as a kind of anti-Beeton. Her frequent and deliberate professions of culinary helplessness, when compared with the perfect self-sufficiency exemplified by the queen of *Household Management*, serve to unseat Pennell from the (albeit tenuous) locus of authority typically occupied by female writers of the domestic manual.(8) Her admission of incapacity in the kitchen, made to her *Pall Mall* editor as well as to her readers, similarly negates whatever literary—as well as culinary—expertise Pennell might rightfully have assumed as a writer much admired by readers and critics alike. Those troubled by her repudiation of ability would undoubtedly have been made still more uncomfortable by the fact that Pennell’s essays appeared in “The Wares of Autolycus” column shared by several female authors and devoted to the discussion of traditionally “feminine” topics. (9) Autolycus, astute scholars of classical literature (or astute users of Google) will recall, was the mythical son of Hermes renowned for his cleverness as a trickster and a thief (Schaffer 125n1). Shakespeare’s character of the same name describes himself in *The Winter’s Tale* as “a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles,” emphasizing the petty nature of his thievery and the impudent attitude of a rogue who receives great satisfaction from pulling the wool over his companions’ eyes (4.3.1694). Guided by this allusion, Talia Schaffer perceptively notes a parallel “pleasure in elaborate trickery” in *Delights* that leads her to wonder, as she reads, whether Pennell may not actually intend to “cheat the reader” as Autolycus cheated his victims (125).

<6>Schaffer’s speculation regarding Pennell’s writerly intention is revelatory and sure to be shared by nineteenth- as well as twenty-first-century readers of *Delights*. We, like Schaffer, might well express the same suspicion that we are being cheated, duped, or otherwise misled by an author who takes pains to abet rather than assuage the doubts of her readers. Our perception of literary betrayal, however, only reveals the degree to which our personal investment in the essays relies on our expectation that they will conform to the conventions of the cookery book. By their generic nature, recipe books retain an element of interpolation and assume that readers will perform the instructions they catalog, becoming cooperative participants in the literal re-creation of dishes (Floyd and Forster 2). In *Delights*, however, readers who make this participatory investment expecting to find themselves sous-chefs to Pennell quickly realize that they are cooking alone. Pennell’s recipe for *Sauce Soubise*,(10) included in a chapter titled “The Incomparable Onion,” offers one such moment, an instance that would certainly inspire a reader’s misgivings.

<7>Pennell begins her recipe with the simple, straightforward directions that one might find in any cookbook: “Peel four large onions and cut them into thin slices; sprinkle a little pepper and salt upon them; . . . put them into a saucepan with a slice of fresh butter, and steam gently . . . till they are soft” (*Delights* 164). Familiar, dependable, these instructions inspire a confidence in the writer’s culinary authority attributable to the hundreds of other cookery books that use the same language to guide inexperienced readers to gustatory success. But this confidence is immediately and abruptly dispelled when Pennell breaks off the recipe just at this point, abandoning readers holding saucepans of limp Vidalias to their own devices. She writes:

But why go on with elaborate directions? Why describe the exact quantity of flour, the size of the potato, the proportions of milk and cream to be added? Why explain in detail the process of rubbing through a sieve? In telling or reading these matters seem not above the intelligence of a little child. But in the actual making, only the artist understands the secret of perfection, and his understanding is born within him, not borrowed from dry statistics and formal tables. (164)

<8>Unfortunately for those of us not blessed with an inborn understanding of sauces, Pennell does not complete this recipe but aborts it in the same manner that she aborts the majority of the recipes included in *Delights*, as Schaffer has observed in her astute reading of this recipe (120). (11) Little wonder, then, that a reader might feel duped or cheated. But setting possible frustration aside, we discover that Pennell achieves the same result with her stop-and-start literary technique that she does with her earlier admissions of culinary ineptitude: in her recipe for *Sauce Soubise*, Pennell shifts culinary and creative authority away from herself—the author on whom Acton, Beeton, and all of their counterparts have taught readers to depend. As counterintuitive as it might

seem to both Victorian and modern readers who are used to imagining the authors of cookbooks as quasi-divine figures of unassailable knowledge, we find Pennell displacing her own culinary authority not only here, but also at a number of other points throughout the essays. She does so, for example, when she refuses to disclose the correct measurements of ingredients for a French bouillabaisse, instead directing us to mix fish, crab, and lobster “as fancy prompts” (103). She eludes authoritative status yet again when she counsels readers to throw everything on the kitchen shelf into a recipe for a duck savoury, exclaiming, “And what of this, that, and the other, and ingenious combinations by the score? Be enterprising! Be original!” (222). Brave souls who attempt to follow this or any other of Pennell’s directions will take from the oven a concoction most revelatory of their own culinary skill, for when Pennell steps backward, she requires that her readers step forward in compensation, assuming the position of author and creator that Pennell has vacated.

<9>But this is not the only or even the most significant consequence of Pennell’s abnegation. In these and other examples, her renunciation of culinary authority and her refusal to sanction our comparison of her with other cookery book writers allows Pennell to take up a less scripted, less gendered literary authority located in British aestheticism.⁽¹²⁾ Although we might have overlooked the parodic reference, both supporters and critics of the “art for art’s sake” movement that blossomed in Britain during the final decades of the nineteenth century would have recognized, in Pennell’s recipe for *Sauce Soubise*, the distinguishing elements of the aesthete: an innate artistic temperament, an intuitive understanding of the secrets of color and sound, and a contempt for formal training. Pennell’s reliance on aestheticist themes, tropes, and theories is even more evident in her descriptions of individual foods. In *Delights*, a mushroom is, as Jacqueline Block Williams has remarked, “not simply grilled” (xxii) but “so self-sufficient in its chaste severity that it allows but salt and pepper and butter to approach it, as it lies, fragrant and delicious, on its grid-iron, calling, like another St. Lawrence, to be turned when one side is fairly done” (*Delights* 144). Pennell here imitates to perfection the aestheticist writer’s elaborate description, employment of “too precious” language, and investment in creating an artistic event out of even the most mundane of daily tasks. By adopting this highly stylized rhetoric, Pennell claims an alternative literary predecessor to those she has rejected, a substitute for the domestic discourse in which her authority was supposed to reside. Within the annals of 1890s British aestheticism, which had only just begun to offer women like Pennell a culturally sanctioned space for creative development, Pennell could cultivate and, in turn, exhibit an expertise that relied on a body of knowledge entirely different from that on which the authority of other Victorian cookery writers was based.

<10>After hearing only this small portion of *Delights*, however, you will probably agree that the aestheticism of Pennell’s prose is a little too . . . aesthetic. Her paeans to strawberries (a “Study in Green and Red”) and macaroni (a “Dish of Sunshine”) out-perform the raptures of Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, or Max Beerbohm even in their most devoted moments. In Pennell’s very capable, very deliberate hands, aestheticism is exaggerated to an extent that imitation becomes parody and parody crosses over into the performative realm of camp.⁽¹³⁾ Pennell’s camping of aestheticism cannot be easily categorized as the kind of “queer parody” that Moe Meyer regards as the only authentic manifestation of camp (9); rather, it is a method of “parody, pastiche, exaggeration, and subversion” that arises from a “critically humorous perceptive stance” (Denisoff 123).⁽¹⁴⁾ For Pennell, it is a way of seeing, reading, and writing and so comes closer to being what Susan Sontag famously (if elusively) described as a “sensibility” (275). Pennell’s “camp eye” (Meyer 13) regards a goose that will soon become a holiday supper as “an archangelic bird,” a “saviour of men” and urges her to claim with mock reverence that “it is the noble goose, the goose, ridiculed and misunderstood, that comes chivalrously and fearlessly to the rescue” of November dinners (*Delights* 125).⁽¹⁵⁾ Camp underlies Pennell’s rechristening of foods, as when she honors her favorite edibles with epithets like “the Incomparable Onion” (155), “the Triumphant Tomato” (171), and “the Magnificent Mushroom” (143). And it motivates her inversions of Christian platitudes, including the Wildean maxim that begins her chapter on “The Virtue of Gluttony”: “Gluttony is ranked with the deadly sins; it should be honoured among the cardinal virtues” (9).

<11>On the one hand, Pennell’s aesthetic camp is clearly deployed in a spirit of mockery and is intended to solicit laughter by spoofing the most visible aspects of aesthetic culture. Her parodic description of mushrooms and geese evinces as much. In those few lines, Pennell captures with piquant accuracy the aestheticist writer’s overly embroidered language, his reverence for all things medieval, and his half-veiled sexual intimations—characteristics that late-Victorian critics of art and literature denounced aesthetes and aestheticism for promoting ⁽¹⁶⁾ But on the other

of art and literature denigrated aesthetes, and aestheticism, for promoting.⁽¹⁷⁾ But on the other hand, Pennell's camp is deeply invested in aestheticism and, as Denis Denisoff has explained, must be recognized as affirming the philosophy via its derivation and appropriation (101). One cannot help but notice, as one reads *Delights*, that Pennell experiences real enjoyment in aestheticizing soup and salad. She loves discovering, and helping us to discover, "the Beauty, the Poetry, that exists in the perfect dish" (*Delights* 8). And when we consider how Pennell gains through aestheticism the literary authority that she denies inheriting from cookery literature, we begin to realize how the critique embedded in her camp carries an underlying sympathy for and identification with aestheticist philosophy.

<12>The purpose of Pennell's critique, the reason why she insists on camping in the kitchen even to the detriment of a literary style that she espouses with considerable enthusiasm, becomes apparent when one considers the specific targets of her parodic ridicule.⁽¹⁷⁾ A particularly campy passage in a recipe for *Sole à la Normande* provides an excellent example. She writes,

But fitter subject still for the contemplative, and still more strange, is [the sole's] marvelous, well-nigh limitless, culinary ambition. Triumph after triumph the most modest of them all yearns to achieve, and if this sublime yearning be ever and always suppressed and thwarted and misunderstood, the fault lies with dull, plodding, unenterprising humans. . . . A very Nora among fish, how often must it long to escape and to live its own life—or, to be more accurate, to die its own death! (*Delights* 90)

Here Pennell's tangential thoughts on fish fried in bread crumbs provide the occasion for a subtle critique of the pretentiousness that was associated with aestheticism and aesthetes in the minds of many Victorians. Were readers to substitute "aesthete" for Pennell's "sole" in the passage, it would become just one of many late-nineteenth-century denunciations of those men (and, occasionally, women) who declared themselves "sole" inheritors of a tradition of aesthetic transcendence, prophets of the beautiful whose attempts to "escape" the maudlin clutches of the "dull" and the "unenterprising" supposedly elevated them beyond their vulgar surroundings. Heavy with "precious" language ("sublime yearning," "ever and always") and rendered in the archaic syntax that characterizes the aestheticist tales of many "Yellow Book" aesthetes ("but fitter subject still . . . and still more strange, is"), Pennell's prose exhibits a "quite outrageously flamboyant style" that almost obscures her exquisite attentiveness to the nuances of aestheticist prose (Schaffer 110). Paradoxically both mocking and embracing aestheticism's inflated ambition, the passage conveys equal amounts of annoyance with and reverence for aestheticism itself. The sympathy underlying this reverence does not, of course, prevent the author from constructing a parallel between modest fish and aestheticist aspiration that causes us to laugh at the overly-affected pretensions of aestheticism and those who practiced it, something that becomes ridiculously apparent in the exaggerated language saturating the passage.

<13>Nor does it entirely deflect a second critique couched in Pennell's campy description of the "unassuming sole, in Quaker-like garb" (*Delights* 89): an indictment of cultural assumptions about women that aestheticism was very much responsible for perpetuating.⁽¹⁸⁾ Pennell suggests here that so overwhelming is the pall of Britain's repression of women that even a fish—much less the heroine of Ibsen's play that stunned London in 1889, or a real woman—will long for death. In a similarly masterful moment of camp subversion elaborated in detail by Schaffer, Pennell extends her condemnation of aestheticism's promotion of male, heterosexual privilege by translating an argument for female sexual knowledge into a call for the enjoyment of the pleasures of fine dining (116). For centuries, Pennell writes, woman has "looked upon [eating] as a deep mystery, into which only man could be initiated" while "the delicacy of women's palate was destroyed" by his protestations that for her "perverted stomach," food was "a mere necessity" intended only "to stay the pangs of hunger" (10). In this way, men transformed the "superstition" that "a healthy appetite passed for a snare of the devil" into a "convention" that lingered into the present time, becoming at last conflated with "Christian duty" and "feminine grace" (10). Pennell first presents and then dismantles a cultural binary that situates aestheticism and repressive male constructions of femininity in opposition to women and whatever "appetites" social convention might deny them possession of. By phrasing her argument in terms of physical consumption and coloring it with elaborate aestheticist description saturated with self-aware humor, Pennell effectively but only half-heartedly veils a pointed criticism of aestheticist sexism, allowing readers to interpret her elision of eating and sex at their pleasure.

<14>The brilliance of Pennell's aesthetic camp, then, lies not only in its wit, but in the liberality of its critique as well. The ornamental language and artistic descriptions that Pennell uses to

of its critique as well. The ornamental language and artistic descriptions that Pennell uses to comedic effect secondarily serve to engage her text in a larger cultural debate that has, as its objective, the reconsideration of Victorian ideologies of sexuality and gender. I do not have time here to discuss Pennell's treatment of non-normative sexuality, her advocacy of women's intellectual cosmopolitanism, or her incorporation of aestheticism into an ethical discussion of self-cultivation. But suffice it to say that throughout the essays, Pennell maintains her ability to speak to multiple issues concomitantly and always with the sparking raillery and tongue-in-cheek humor that strategically softens the critical blows buried beneath the aesthetic veneer of her prose.

<15>Throughout *The Delights of Delicate Eating*, Pennell's marriage to aestheticist rhetoric prevents her from losing the sympathy for aestheticism that fundamentally motivates her critique. And the sympathetic revision of aestheticism that her essays propose—an aestheticism purged of its pretentiousness, its elitism, and its sexism, among other things—maintains the spirit of the philosophy while making it more accommodating for other female writers. The humor of Pennell's camp critique moves the aesthetic eye, refocusing it within a sphere of domestic labor and consumption where the men who dominated high aesthetic culture were alien trespassers despite their professions of rapture for blue china and flowered wallpaper. In the kitchen, among the details of quotidian experience that circumscribed the lives of so many Victorian women, Pennell rejects and then relocates her authority as a writer, a food critic, and an aesthete. By doing so, she makes the same demand of us that she makes of her nineteenth-century readers: that we examine our notions of British aestheticism and critique our incorrect assumptions in the same way that her camp humor critiques, with indulgent but persistent sympathy, the incorrect assumptions of her peers. Her essays urge us to forego the conclusion that aestheticism was philosophically disengaged, politically uncommitted, and exclusively male, assumptions that still define aestheticism for many critics today. They encourage us to reformulate our understanding of who practiced and produced aestheticism—from the contemptuous connoisseur, to the self-professed aesthete, to the untrained admirer of beauty—and of what forms the aestheticisms of these participants took. And finally, Pennell's essays ask us to reconsider the ways that aestheticism, practiced as an end in itself, might also become a means of revising related ideologies and thereby contributing to what Pennell generously (if a little idealistically) calls a “gospel of good living” (*Delights* 15).

Endnotes

(1)My essay is indebted to Schaffer's pioneering research in the field of women's participation in British aestheticism, which has brought Pennell, along with a number of other neglected female writers, to academic discussions of late-Victorian culture. Schaffer's insightful comments about Pennell's deployment of aestheticist themes and tropes to revise conventional notions of female appetite and consumption (see 105-06 esp.) provide the conceptual basis for my argument here. See also Michie 16-17 on *Delights* as “essentially a cookbook” (17).^(△)

(2)For a more complete historical background on Pennell's cookbook collection and her relationship with Cust and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, see Schaffer 108-10.^(△)

(3)Although recent work on British aestheticism like Dellamora's *Masculine Desire* and Lane's *Burdens of Intimacy* emphasize aestheticism's important role in codifying a distinctly male homosocial culture, critics like Schaffer and Psomiades argue that aestheticism provided women with a number of opportunities for creative personal and intellectual expression. See also Blanchard.^(△)

(4)While it may seem anachronistic to describe Pennell's essays as exhibiting a form of camp aestheticism, the word ‘camp’ was used in French slang in the early 1800s (McMahon 7). A written definition that appeared in Ware's 1909 *Passing English of the Victorian Era* (defining camp as “actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis” used “chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character”) also locates its origin in the nineteenth century (61).^(△)

(5)See Schaffer's discussion of Pennell's attempt to translate cookery into art, a rhetorical feat that is somewhat problematically complicated by Pennell's concomitant insistence, as Schaffer says, on “establish[ing] art as the antithesis of the cookbook” (118-19).^(△)

(6)Acton's *Modern Cookery for Private Families* was published in 1845; Beeton's much reproduced text, *Beeton's Book of Household Management*, first appeared in 1861.(^)

(7)Meir's discussion of iterative language in cookery books focuses particularly on a narrative trope that, while recognizing, I find less readily applicable to Pennell's essays in consequence of their concerted rejection of standard patterns found in similar manuals. Her argument as to the iterative repetition of certain phrases and descriptions in Victorian culinary manuals does, however, provide an interesting point of contrast for readers of Pennell. See Meir 134-40.(^)

(8)See, for example, Pennell's descriptions of herself in *Nights* 143 and *Cookery* 2.(^)

(9)Other writers such as Graham Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), Alice Meynell, and Violet Hunt contributed regularly to this column, writing of home decoration, literature, art, music, and fashion. Pennell records in her memoir Tompson's rhyme about this group of friends, based on the old Mary Seaton ballad: "O, there's Mrs. Meynell and Mrs. Pennell, / There's Violet Hunt and me!" (*Nights* 158).(^)

(10)The fact that the majority of Pennell's recipes bear French titles attests to the popular opinion among many Victorians that French cuisine was superior to British, even when the supposed "plainness" and "honesty" of British food was conflated by patriotic nationalists with a praiseworthy element of authenticity; see Schaffer 106.(^)

(11)Once again, I express an intellectual debt to Schaffer, who first notes Pennell's odd retraction of information in this and other recipes throughout *Delights* (119-21). While Schaffer's interest in the passage lies in its cultivation of an artistic sensibility that pays highest homage to rarefied notions of Art, even perhaps at the expense of its usefulness as a recipe, however, I am concerned with the manner in which Pennell's language here concertedly extends—rather than negates—its functionality by displacing authorial voice.(^)

(12)For examples of other female writers who similarly find aestheticism a convenient location for establishing their own literary, artistic, or cultural authority, see the smart collection of essays compiled by Schaffer and Psomiades in *Women and British Aestheticism*.(^)

(13)On aesthetic camp, see Denisoff.(^)

(14)Although I do not have time to elaborate here, the queer element notably associated with camp is never far below the surface of Pennell's *Delights*. In Pennell's valorization of a "Sappho of the kitchen," she subtly aligns her essays with the growing community of same-sex aesthetes who, in the 1890s, found in that classical figure a space to enact the eroticized textual exchange that converted Sappho of Lesbos into a lesbian Sappho, thereby introducing a double-voiced discourse that allowed for the expression of lesbian desire. See *Delights* 7; also Prins 16-18.(^)

(15)In her description of Hayward's gastronomical treatise, *The Art of Dining*, Gigante notes a similar passage in which the goose is praised for possessing a "noble spirit of endurance" because he "gives his liver, abnormally expanded through a process a torture, to the famous foie gras of Strasbourg" ("Introduction" xxxvii).(^)

(16)In this respect, I agree more with Schaffer's suggestion that Pennell's seeming "self parody" evinces a "cool, sophisticated control of language" rather than intimating an author "spinning out of control" (117).(^)

(17)This fact—that Pennell appropriates aestheticism in large part to issue a critique of practitioners of that philosophy, as well as of Victorian conventions of gender, more generally—importantly provides the rhetorical motivation of the text and helps to reconcile her deployment of aestheticism in *Delights* with her decidedly unsympathetic comments about late-Victorian aesthetes written elsewhere (see, for ex., *Nights* 119).(^)

(18) For more on the stereotypes of gender and sexuality that upheld and largely enabled aestheticist ideology, see Psomiades.(^)

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