

ENTERTAINING EDIBLES



RIDDLING PRACTICES IN ENGLISH RECIPES AND MENUS

by Nathalie Cooke and Leehu Sigler

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If you can guess from hints like these
Your fare take part of when you please.¹

Unless cookbooks have extensive annotations, or better yet, stained and smeared pages that indicate which recipes were in frequent use, they provide limited access to what was actually prepared and consumed. Instead of *descriptive* practice, they offer evidence of *prescriptive* practice: that is, what cooks were counselled to produce rather than what was eaten around the table. In contrast to cookbooks, however, authors of literary works rarely have a culinary agenda or a nutritional prescription in mind as they set pen to paper. Their objectives are rhetorical, and detailed accounts of meals and dishes help set the stage for plot and character development. As a result, literary works often allow their readers to comfortably consume the fictional meals served up as credible for the period and locale.

Rather counterintuitively, then, one finds that fictional books, more than the prescriptions found in cookbooks, are an excellent source of information about the fare actually served and enjoyed at particular periods in British culinary history. Take Jane Austen, for example. In the novel *Emma* (1815), Austen demonstrates how there is often a difference between

what is prescribed for dinner and what the guests actually eat. Mr. Woodhouse, Emma's father, who hosts a supper early in the novel, is one perpetrator of the difference: "He loved to have the cloth laid, because it had been the fashion of his youth, but his conviction of suppers being very unwholesome made him rather sorry to see any thing put on it; and while his hospitality would have welcomed his visitors to every thing, his care for their health made him grieve that they would eat" (Chapter III).² As a result, Emma serves plenty of cakes and wine to Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Goddard after an evening meal, to make "all the amends in her power...for whatever unwilling self-denial his care of their constitution might have obliged them to practise during the meal" (Chapter VIII). She "had provided a plentiful dinner for [Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Goddard]; she wished she could know that they had been allowed to eat it" (Chapter VIII). Clearly, these two women did not consume the dishes that Mr. Woodhouse and Emma prescribed for dinner.

Fictional works also help us understand practices that appeared around the dinner table or during a meal. Jane Austen's *Emma* is not only a frequent guest of evening soirees, but a riddle enthusiast. Throughout Austen's novel, both Emma and Harriet write, solve, and pass along charades, a specific riddling form that first hints at the solution's individual syllables, and finally offers clues about the whole word or phrase. Indeed, as Jillian Heydt-Stevenson claims, it is possible to understand Austen's novel as a charade.³ The novel not only shows how riddles, like food, bring individuals together, but details the affinity for word games around the table in the large homes of the day. *Emma* shows us attitudes toward both food and riddles in ways that cookbooks and recipes alone cannot.

The coexistence of riddles and mealtime descriptions in *Emma* might appear peculiar to the modern reader. However, this facet of the novel is no coincidence. From the Biblical tale of Samson to the Saturnalia and Twelfth Night traditions, and all the way to the satirical works of 19th-Century English journalists and artists, riddles have provided a source of entertainment or challenge at mealtime.

It is here that *The Riddle Project*, hosted by the McGill University Library and funded by the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada, was born. In Summer 2018, McGill Library finalized the purchase of manuscripts hailing from the Doncaster area of South Yorkshire, England. The Doncaster recipes collection consists of 15 books, primarily manuscript with some printed, containing over 1,300 culinary and medical handwritten recipes, plus numerous loose recipes also mainly manuscript, dated 1780-1860; and 1950. Among the cookbooks and scattered papers was a curiosity that bore the title "Enigmatic Bill of Fare". We came to realize that this was a table setting menu, but a curious one— all of the dishes were written in riddles! After this first discovery, we naturally set about exploring the Enigmatic Bill of Fare and related traditions, finding other examples along the way. We discovered that such unusual and enigmatic menus originated in early 18th-Century England and appeared until the late 19th Century. During the past two years we have come to learn not only what was on the menu, but also about the riddling pastimes that accompanied meals of the period.

Books like *Emma* allow us to be flies on the wall of some of the great homes of Southern England. But *Emma* is important, too, because it offers two valuable clues for how Enigmatic Bills of Fare were used. First, Austen detailed the way coterie shared and copied puzzles amongst themselves, largely in the form of handwritten manuscripts during her time. This practice helps account for the circulation of many Enigmatic Bills of Fare (EBoFs) that are not only similar, but identical, although written in different hands and at different times. Second, Austen described the way conversational exchanges afforded by puzzles, such as the charade, consolidated people, whether friends, families, or lovers. Both meals and riddles enabled a sense of community, accommodating visitors and newcomers while also testing their worthiness for wholehearted adoption into private and familial circles.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us turn now to the heart of the mystery and reveal this riddling practice recently uncovered thanks to the extensive digitization efforts, databases, and computational tools that make such digital material available and searchable.

What Can the Doncaster Collection Teach Us?

If one sat at a table and received a table setting diagram like that presented at the right, one would be surprised. “Move Jack”, “Crooked Sarah”, and “The Grand Seigneur’s Dominions” are not typical names for dishes.⁴ Puzzle me this!

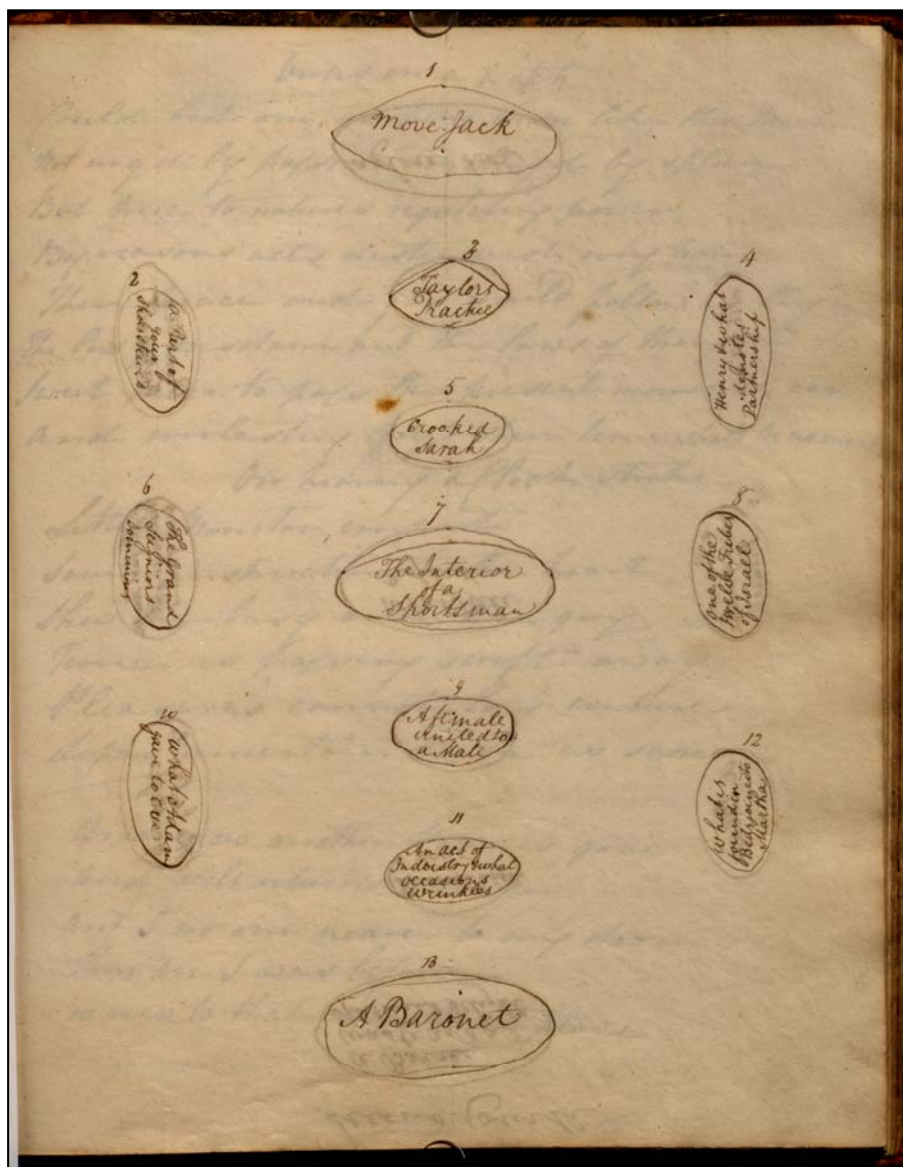
This Enigmatic Bill of Fare comes from one of two books begun in 1805 by Eliza Smithson (and continued by another hand), found in Hooten Pagnell Hall, Doncaster, Northern England. The Doncaster collection not only contains this cryptic menu, but many recipes, medicinal remedies, and a vast collection of riddles, including the sort of charades that appear in Austen’s *Emma*.

Handwritten manuscripts such as the Doncaster papers luckily contain notes and marginalia that offer clues about the dishes that were enjoyed—or not. One example occurs on a page with the recipe for “Lemon Curd”, where “very good” is written in the top right-hand corner, a clear notation that someone has tried this particular recipe and enjoyed it.⁵ Some of the other recipes, such as the one for “Mince Pies”, have an “X” marked off to the side.⁶ Clearly these were tried, but it is quite possible that these recipes did not pass the taster’s palate test to warrant a more detailed annotation. Other pages, such as the one bearing the recipe of “Doncaster Yeast”, reveal heavy smudge stains, suggesting that they were handled frequently.⁷ Consequently, personal and handwritten manuscripts may demonstrate what people were *actually* eating in the large homes of England, validating or departing from the prescriptive practices of cookbooks published at that time.

And yet, by combining recipes with riddles, the Doncaster manuscripts not only hint at what food was being consumed, they also hint at *how* that food was being shared. Like *Emma*’s exchanges around dinnertime, the Doncaster collection provides evidence of how both riddles and recipes circulated amongst a coterie. If one looks closely at the recipes for “Lemon Curd” and “Mince Pies”, one sees the attributions “Mrs. Ashley” and “Mrs. Jep[?]son”. Similarly, the name “Miss Holmer” is written under the recipe for “Doncaster Yeast”. In fact, many of the recipes have names next to them, probably indicating from whom the recipe originated, and from whose notebook it was subsequently copied. Many names repeat but some return more often than others. Such notations hint at the friends and community figures who provided valuable food knowledge, or the hosts and guests most active in the community’s social circles.

continued on next page

Below, Eliza Smithson’s 1805 Enigmatic Bill of Fare, from the Doncaster recipes collection. Image courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal, QC.



RIDDLING PRACTICES *continued from page 7*

Exchanges evidenced by these recipes are mirrored by the riddles scattered in the Doncaster collection and similar manuscripts. Riddles often have initials or names written beside them, and many identical puzzles appear across multiple manuscripts and later publications.⁸ Exchanges implied by the appearance of identical riddles are seen even more clearly in Enigmatic Bills of Fare. For example, some riddling dishes found in the Doncaster papers had appeared some 50 years earlier in other Enigmatic Bills of Fare, and many appeared in similar 18th-Century manuscripts and publications from across the United Kingdom. Since the beginning of *The Riddle Project*, we have identified several dozen enigmatic menus. Most of them have no unique riddles: their puzzling dishes can be found across multiple different manuscripts.⁹ Some of the cryptic menus are even identical despite spanning decades and multiple geographic locations.¹⁰ The circulation of duplicate cryptic dishes and menus suggests that they were used successfully and that hosts extensively copied and enjoyed them. Perhaps, as with the individual riddles in Austen's novel, friends exchanged such menus by post as challenges?

Although we cannot know for certain, it is likely that guests who were invited to and entertained by an enigmatic dinner copied down the menu for future use, spreading the practice. Such exchanges and the eventual migration of riddling menus to popular journals have allowed us to follow their development and spread across the UK. Our first documented Enigmatic Bill of Fare appeared in 1733.¹¹ By 1755, identical riddling dishes were served at The King's Feast for King Charles II.¹² Within a few years, menus from the mid-18th Century began appearing in periodicals from around Suffolk, Exeter, and even as far as Dublin. Indeed, we have discovered riddles identical to those appearing in the earliest discovered Enigmatic Bill of Fare in periodicals dated nearly 80 years later.¹³ Clearly, enigmatical dinners were immensely enjoyed, and either the riddles or the dishes—likely both—must have satisfied appetites around the table.

Solving the Enigmatic Bill of Fare

One initial and ongoing challenge of *The Riddle Project* is solving the dishes' riddles. In Smithson's books, the original hand that wrote the riddles provided some answers and a different hand suggested others. This second hand, attempting solutions in pencil, was writing likely some 30 years after Smithson. As she took her pencil to paper, she, too, was stumped by some of the riddles. We imagine that the first hand might have been mistress of the house, whereas the second hand could have been a cook attempting to interpret the culinary solutions.

After several months of research, we decided to emulate the exchanges of our 18th- and 19th-Century diners. We exchanged information with others, and we asked for their responses in turn. After transcribing the Doncaster menus and other riddles, we used McGill Library's blog and social media accounts to show these riddles to as many people as we could, hoping to receive suggestions for answers. Luckily, our crowd-sourcing method yielded many answers, and some riddles even produced multiple possible solutions. Internet outreach allowed us to communicate with food and riddle enthusiasts from across the globe—even in Ireland and New Zealand.

See the next page for a rendering of the Smithson enigmatical table setting (with riddles and answers depicted), recreated with hand-drawn images of the offered meals. Some of the place-setting riddles included clues such as "a part of your shoes stewed" (the answer: "stewed sole"), and "an act of industry & what occasions wrinkles" ("spin" combined with "age" or "ache" to produce "Spinach"). "One of the Twelve Tribes of Israel" could be "Simeon" (a pun on salmon). But another possible solution is "Issachar" ("Is-a-char", a potted fish dish popular in the early 19th Century¹⁴), suggested in one of the crowd-sourced answers that we received.¹⁵

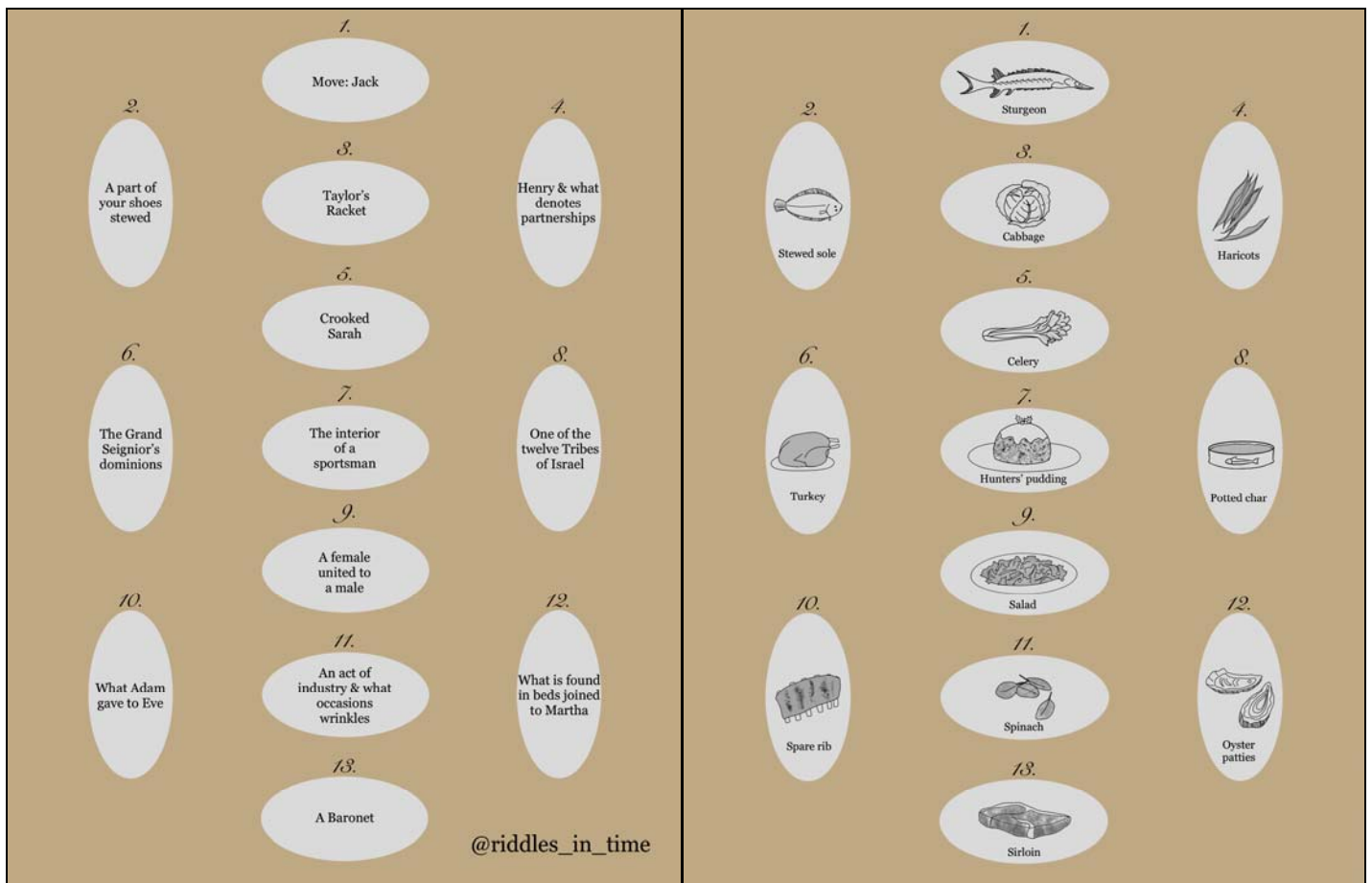
Certain riddles, such as "a part of your shoes stewed" and "crooked Sarah" ("Sal awry" to produce "Celery"), imply that both wit and a grin were required to understand some of the served dishes. "One of the Twelve Tribes of Israel", as well as "what Adam gave Eve" (a spare rib), both suggest that Biblical knowledge, particularly of the Old Testament, was required as well. General knowledge was also expected of guests, in order for them to know that the "Grand Seignior's dominion" was "Turkey", and that the "Tailor's Racket" was "Cabbage" (small bits of cloth left over from sewing). Evidently, multiple forms of literacy were employed around the table. Hosts tested guests for their general knowledge, familiarity with the Bible, and even their humor, all required to understand the many puns and word games being served. In deciphering these riddles, we discover what fare was being proposed, but we also gain insight into the form of entertainment provided by cryptic menus, as well as hints to how they were enjoyed around the tables of the era.

What We Don't Know (Yet)

Research into Enigmatic Bills of Fare has taught us where these riddles come from, how they were exchanged, and even what was on the menu in addition to the puzzling entertainment. However, like the historical menu, we can only know what was prescribed for dinner: a healthy dose of riddles and food. What guests actually ate, and how they played with and solved these menus, are questions that still elude us.

Although we found Enigmatic Bills of Fare in all manner of manuscripts, books, pamphlets, and almanacs between the 18th and mid-19th Centuries, we know little about their use around the table. Were they employed as invitations for a meal, sent as menu cards to other guests, as implied by one riddling poem titled "An Invitation to an Entertainment with the Bill of Fare" from 1780? Perhaps the solutions to the riddling dishes were revealed as food was served? If so, then perhaps they were primarily used for personal collections, allowing people to copy amusing puzzles to take home as souvenirs.

Jane Austen's Harriet behaved similarly, "collecting and transcribing all the riddles of every sort that she could meet with" (Chapter IX). Iona and Peter Opie, in their landmark publication about children's riddling practices, note how important is the step of copying and memorizing riddles to the tradition and its preservation.¹⁶ For children in particular, one can imagine the sense of pride and intellectual confidence garnered from reciting a riddle, especially if the one at a loss is an adult! Perhaps this intellectual challenge was the purpose and point for guests around an Enigmatic Bill of Fare, which was also known as "The Intellectual Feast" in at least five separate



A modern rendering of the Smithsonian EBoF on page 7, with riddles on the left and answers on the right. This digital artwork was created in 2020 by Tara Allen-Flanagan, a graduate student in art history at McGill Univ.

manuscripts and publications.

Then again, maybe riddles simply made feasters laugh as guests succeeded or failed to solve a menu placed on their plates. Or perhaps those who typically find social situations awkward were put more at ease by conversation starters readily at hand. Enigmatic Bills of Fare are artifacts that offer us glimpses of the food and riddles prescribed. But what *actually* happened around the table? Surely that is food for our own dinner table conversation.

Now What?

Until now, our research into Enigmatic Bills of Fare has been extensive but has nevertheless proven just how much more needs to be discovered. *Emma* offers hints as to how riddles and food coexisted for the leisure class in the British mansions of the day, suggesting how they were enjoyed, exchanged, and circulated through social coteries. But while Austen's *Emma* illustrates the practice of charades in her day, there is no such illustrative guide to Enigmatic Bills of Fare. The lack of contemporaneous sources describing and documenting enigmatic meals of the period continues to leave us wondering.

Despite the obscurity surrounding Enigmatic Bills of Fare, there is still much to uncover about riddles and food. Our research into enigmatic menus has led us to a number of

discoveries of other forms of cryptic writings mingled with food-related entertainment pastimes in Great Britain and around the globe. One popular example are Scripture Cakes, a custom that is said to have begun in Ireland and England in the early 1700s.¹⁷ These are recipes written in another kind of code: entirely in Bible verse. (Some Jeremiah 6:20 with your coffee? That's "sugar" to most of us.)

All of our research to date, including the evolution of Enigmatic Bills of Fare from the UK across the Atlantic, is available on McGill University Library's Quartex exhibition titled "Food Riddles and Riddling Ways".¹⁸ The Library Matters series¹⁹ at McGill also features ongoing articles on riddle-related items, and both the 'Riddles in Time' Instagram²⁰ as well as the Riddle Project Github²¹ present previous and ongoing research.

Although the British Enigmatic Bill of Fare changed and ultimately disappeared after the 19th Century, we continue to keep an eye open for related practices. Even today, many restaurants and bars still keep the tradition alive by combining enigmas and food in unique ways. At The Mad Hatter in Oxford, for example, guests are required to answer a riddle to enter the establishment. House rules dictate in all caps: "NO RIDDLE NO ENTRY".²² Many other modern speakeasies employ similar measures, requiring guests to find a secret door, discover a secret menu, or provide a code in order to enter the establishment.²³

continued on next page

RIDDLING PRACTICES *continued from page 9*

But we, too, have decided to sustain the tradition. As Emma asked Mr. Elton: “Why will not you write one yourself for us?” (Chapter IX). He refused, horrified, only to provide a charade the following day. We have followed suit. In our pandemic and post-pandemic age, where much of our collaboration and research is conducted digitally, we have found time to create, share, and laugh about riddling meals through online platforms. So what do food and riddles have in common that makes them such unlikely allies over hundreds of years? *Emma* suggests the answer to that riddle, too: they bring people together. ■

Endnotes

1. From “An Invitation to an Entertainment with the Bill of Fare”, part of “Pleasing Variety for Miss Mary Arnold”, a 184-page bound manuscript of verses by a Mrs. Stapleton, England, ca. 1780, MS.1987.001 in Early Modern English Manuscripts Collection, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Univ. of California, Los Angeles. Available at <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/21198/n1t306>.
2. All citations to Jane Austen’s *Emma* are taken from the Project Gutenberg version available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/158/158-h/158-h.htm>.
3. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, “Games, riddles, and charades”, *The Cambridge Companion to Emma* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 150-152.
4. The answers are “Sturgeon”, “Celery”, and “Turkey”.
5. Page 22 of *Doncaster Recipes*, one of the book-length manuscripts in the Doncaster papers at McGill’s Rare Books and Special Collections, Manuscript Collection, MSG 1230.
6. Page 12 of *Doncaster Recipes*.
7. Page 56 of *Recipes from Doncaster*, another one of the book-length manuscripts in the Doncaster papers.
8. See for example the charade: “My first is equality; my second is inferiority; my whole is superiority.” (“Matchless” and “Peerless” are possible answers: in either case, consider the two individual syllables, and then the entire word.) Although this charade appears in a popular riddle compendium by the pseudonymous Peter Puzzlewell in 1794, we have found this handwritten charade in the Diaries of Lady Anne Romilly (MS207 in Birmingham Cadbury Library, p. 1) from 1793, as well as in manuscripts owned by Elizabeth Berney from 1788 (MS.2016.009 in UCLA Clark Library, p. 2).
9. Some of the most popular repetitions include riddles such as “the divine part of man” or “the immortal part of man” (the answer to which is either *heart* or *soul/sole*); “A Dutch Prince” (*orange pudding*), an example of which actually appears in the second course of an incomplete Smithson table setting; as well as variations of riddles with the answer *spare-rib*, which can include “What Adam gave to Eve”, “Adam’s wife in her virgin state”, or even “a lean wife” (The Riddle Project, “BOF_Unique Riddles”, 2020).
10. For example, the 1808 receipt book of Sarah Yeates in Pennsylvania has an enigmatic menu identical to the English MS.1987.001 from ca. 1780 (see endnote 1).
11. Elenor Poole’s *Cookery Book*, 1733 (MS.2003.001 at UCLA Clark Library).

continued on page 20

CULINARY RECIPES *continued from page 5*

of study. Many recipe books can be connected to individual owners and compilers, and many recipes are attributed by name to the donors who provided the texts. Part of my current work in progress is documenting these people and connections so as to better understand this category of networks of recipe readers and writers.

Conclusions

Considering the history of English cookbook production through the framework of reader and writer networks is useful in a number of ways. First, through networks we can see the impact of these cookbooks and recipes on book production and circulation, the limits of early print and its intertwining with manuscript culture, and the development of culinary habits over time. Second, unraveling the web of recipe reader and writer networks in conjunction with concurrent changes in food trends and book production is important in demonstrating the growth of the cookery genre and the rapid expansion of readership in the 15th and 16th Centuries. This expansion of readership furthermore supports a broader claim in my research that a widespread audience existed for manuscript cookeries prior to the introduction of print and the subsequent explosion in cookbook production. These early reader networks shaped the prodigious circulation of recipes among families and individuals in 17th- and 18th-Century recipe books and the parallel circulation and readership of cookbooks as printed texts.

Over the course of several centuries, distinct groups of recipe readers and writers yearned for cookbooks that reflected their social identities. We can assess from the longevity and popularity of cookbooks the degree to which these communities had some connection to the recipes within, and the social identities that these texts asserted. ■

Further Reading

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ELISABETH AYRTON *continued from page 18*

river fish stewed whole with aromatic herbs and served in the stewing water as a kind of soup). Others combine finfish with oysters in the 18th-Century manner.

Of course, there is also a selection of curries and a recipe for mulligatawny soup, which were Raj creations inspired by the foodways of the Subcontinent but of a peculiarly British character.

And so to sweets, our final course. There are too many to provide much detail—creams, fools, possets, syllabubs, trifles, and more, in addition to the countless steamed puddings. One sample will need to suffice. Hardly anyone knows flummery anymore, but many good variations exist, and someone cooked this particularly appealing one back in 1760. It is short enough to cite Mrs. Ayrton's prose in full. Note her economy of language and her assured tone:

Soak 3 handfuls of fine oatmeal in cold water for 24 hours. After this time add an equal quantity of water and leave another 24 hours. Strain through a fine sieve, add a heaped tablespoon of caster [granulated] sugar and the strained juice of an orange. Boil until very thick. Pour into shallow dishes and serve with honey and cream (Ayrton 1974, p. 469).

All of this traditional variety appeared in print eight years before the Cowans in America found Mrs. Ayrton's *English Provincial Cooking* such a revelation. Yet the foodways of England remain relatively obscure in the United States. As the founders of St. John wrote, "Good things should be a constant", and books at least endure.

The rewards of the English canon are hiding in plain sight. They are there for American readers' taking, and the work of Elisabeth Ayrton is a good place to look. ■

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RIDDLING PRACTICES *continued from page 10*

12. The King's Feast, served for Charles II in 1755, held by the British Library (MSS 15956) and transcribed by India Mandelkern (<https://homogastronomicus.blogspot.com/2011/05/the-kings-feast.html>).
13. See, for example, the Enigmatic Bill of Fare appearing in *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (1812).
14. For a detailed account of this dish, see the entry "A Georgian Foodie Delight – Potted Char" (Mar. 5, 2016) in Louise Allen's weblog "Jane Austen's London" (<https://janeaustenslondon.com/tag/potted-char>).
15. Nathalie Cooke, "Table Setting Riddles 101: The Solution Set" (Aug. 28, 2017), (<https://news.library.mcgill.ca/table-setting-riddles-101-the-solution-set>).
16. Iona and Peter Opie, *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 73.
17. See the posting "Scripture Cake" (Mar. 7, 2013) on the forum "Civil War Talk", <https://civilwartalk.com/threads/scripture-cake.81545>.
18. <https://mcgill.quartexcollections.com/doncaster>.
19. <https://news.library.mcgill.ca/what-is-this>.
20. https://www.instagram.com/riddles_in_time.
21. <https://riddleproject.github.io>.
22. <https://themadhattoxford.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/January-2020-Menu-4.pdf>.
23. For instance, the bars Callooh Callay and The Chelsea Prayer Room in London are hidden and require that guests know a secret four-digit code to enter (https://www.squaremeal.co.uk/restaurants/best-for/best-speakeasy-london_9356).