



BAD APPLES

Annalisa Quinn

On the insidious myth of female entrapment

*“I know something interesting is sure to happen,”
she said to herself, “whenever I eat or drink anything.”*

—*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

I’ve always hated *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As a child, I never played at being Alice—who wants to be so befuddled, kittenish, and meek, with a dumb band on your head? Eat me, drink me—Alice did what she was told. There was nothing messy or dangerous about her; she was nothing like a real, lying, mischievous, moody child. And Lewis Carroll’s tone was so cooing, so caressing, and so precious,

that coming across his letter to a “child-friend” talking of their “shivery affection for each other,” I found it hard not to wonder if the two of them might have been shivering for very different reasons.

The 1936 edition of Carroll’s complete works opens with an odd, defensive little introduction by an American critic named Alexander Woolcott. “At least,” he writes, “the new psychologists have not explored this dream book nor pawed over the gentle, shrinking celibate who wrote it.” This is not the kind of thing you write unless you think there really is something the

“new psychologists” might find in all their pawing, and of course, in time, they did. Whether or not Carroll was what we now call a pedophile, whatever he meant when he wrote of “unholy thoughts, which torture, with their hateful presence, the fancy that would fain be pure,” the fact remains that you never quite want to be Alice.

For someone who, the evidence suggests, loved children and loathed himself for it, it makes sense that the central, poignant fantasy of *Alice* is one of being able to grow and shrink others at will. It is mere size, for Carroll, that determines whether or not you reach the garden at the center of Wonderland, “among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains.” And the agent of that control, as it is so often in myth and children’s stories, is food.

As I got older and started paying attention, I realized I was always reading the same story: women lured by fruit or candy into losing control over their bodies. It’s in “Snow White” (though, as a child, I liked the movie version for the cute, scrunched little singing dwarves): in that one, she eats a poisoned apple and wakes up only when the prince kisses her. Atalanta outruns all the men who want to marry her, until Melanion distracts her with golden apples. Persephone eats six pomegranate seeds and is chained to a life underground half the year, the unwilling bride of Hades. Helen is carried off to Troy as Paris’s bride, just because Aphrodite wants an apple. And then, of course, there’s Eve.

Out of all these stories of entrapment, the one that sticks with me most is one

I came to late, in graduate school. It’s a strange, cruel little myth in Callimachus’s *Aetia*. According to his version of the story, a young man named Acontius sees a Naxian girl named Cydippe at the festival of Artemis and falls in love. She has a “face like the dawn,” and many mothers have tried, fruitlessly, to offer oxen in exchange for her hand in marriage to their sons.

But the conclusion is foregone. The god Eros himself teaches Acontius a trick. Acontius takes an apple and carves an oath into it: “I swear by Artemis to marry Acontius,” then tosses it at Cydippe’s feet. She picks it up, reads the oath aloud, and discovers she has to marry him or she will die.

When Cydippe resists and tries to marry someone else, she gets sick in a perverted imitation of lust, with all the symptoms of longing Sappho described so famously some eight hundred years earlier: green skin, fevers, trembling. All because she picked up an apple—it’s as if one kind of appetite implicates you in another. There’s a robust tradition of classicists claiming that since apples are associated with marriage, picking one up is a de facto acceptance of sexual advances, but this doesn’t square with the descriptions of Cydippe resisting almost to the point of death.

So Cydippe gives in, as she must. Callimachus describes Acontius’s joy on their wedding night in a warm, conspiratorial aside, like a happy matchmaker.

We’ve always understood that we don’t just eat for nutrition, but to meet a tangle of needs: for love, community, cohesion,

PREVIOUS PAGE: TRAVESTI COSTUME BY REDFERN IN WHICH EVE IS DEPICTED AS THE SERPENT. BY CHARLES MARTIN IN GAZETTE DU BON TON, FEBRUARY 1913 / MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

and, sometimes, control. Accepting food from someone comes with a complex set of expectations and concessions. This myth enforces what we've always feared about food: how it implicates us in certain futures. You will be what you eat. It doesn't matter what you want—what matters is what the man offering the food wants. "If it is a crime to love, I'll admit it," Acontius says to a despondent Cydippe in Ovid's version of the myth, as if that wanting, not the taking, were the problem.

Why is it, I wonder, that these women are never ensnared with, say, roast beef? Or salad? Or stew? The mothers offering their valuable horned oxen don't tempt Cydippe. What does the trick is always fruit, candy, or, in Christina Rossetti's phrase, "cakes for dainty mouths to eat." Something empty, something trivial, nonessential, not nourishing. It's as if greed—rather than mere hunger—makes you vulnerable.

When women do eat meat or other heavy things in literature, it is often of their own volition, and those women both repel and entice the men around them. Take the scene in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* when Lucy Snowe is wandering through an art gallery and spots a painting of a very fat Cleopatra, "a dusk and portly Venus of the Nile." Lucy describes her: "She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very

much butcher's meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh."

Before long, a fussy man of Lucy's acquaintance spots her and tries to draw her away from the sight of so much naked flesh. Cleopatra is "une femme superbe," the supercilious man says, no doubt, with the waist of an empress. But he would not want her for a wife, a daughter, or a sister. It is not just her nudity that makes her scandalous—it is her size, which carries a whiff of the sybaritic, the indecent. He himself feels free to stare, but the fat queen is not for the eyes of good girls. He leads Lucy instead to gaze at a painting of a quartet of pious women, "grim and grey as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts." Those thin women are safe.

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We tend to relegate food anxiety to the women's issues pile, somewhere between cellulite and menopause. But even for men food fear is threaded through the mythic canon. For men, though, the threat is not a loss of sexual agency but rather isolation and loneliness. Think of Edmund Pevensie, who plays the mingled roles of Eve and Judas in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

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Tempted by the White Witch, Edmund sells out his family for her Turkish delight: “a round box, tied with green silk ribbon, which, when opened, turned out to contain several pounds of the best Turkish Delight. Each piece was sweet and light to the very centre and Edmund had never tasted anything more delicious.” In eating what the White Witch offers, he submits to her will. He tells her everything, losing his family (at least for a while) in return.

I think, too, of how the first question Odysseus asks when he lands on a strange island is: Are these bread-eating men? He means: Are they like us? Can they be trusted? Are we safe here among them?

And if they are not bread-eating men? The poor lonely giant Polyphemus, one of the great misunderstood characters in literature (in my opinion, anyway—I guess he was technically a cannibal), “does not look like a bread-eating man but like the wooded peak of high mountains, which appears alone, apart from the rest.”

We’re not supposed to eat bread anymore, but you see what I mean. Stories tell us that food reveals something essential about yourself, something to do with appetite and character and fate. Homer makes this duality explicit: the giant is not bread-eating, but rather, he is lonely, like a peaked mountain.

They are, I suppose, two sides of the same coin: isolation and never being left alone. But the shadow of a specifically sexual control lurks behind women in everything we do, in every story about us.

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As a fat teenager, I found sidewalks excruciating. Each stretch of pavement held leering, jeering men who followed me onto buses, down alleys, lingered outside of work or my dorm in college, whispered propositions and obscenities down the back of my neck on the subway. Almost any time I was in public, I felt angry and frightened.

The worst ones were the ones who had given me something—once a maintenance man, once a security guard, another time an internet installation man—as if, having fixed something, they had the right to break something else.

When I became a fairly thin adult, it just . . . stopped. Not entirely, of course, but enough to completely transform the texture of my daily life. It was like stepping outside for the first time. I could go running, sit on park benches, drink in bars. I discovered the luxury of being absorbed in my own thoughts in public, instead of using my energy fending off sexual hostility. It was wonderful, and it was devastating. All that was required for me to be safe and respected, at least much more of the time, was losing weight?

It still happened, of course—I was still followed or propositioned or cornered—but the tone of those interactions shifted. It went from a wall of contemptuous, lewd threats to milder, warier insinuations. Predators suddenly felt like they had to be careful.

It’s such a crude, boring equation: control myself, and you can control yourself.

To what extent is respect even valuable when it comes in response to size? I know that the men who are now polite to me might have been ones who spat propositions at me before, that their contempt and lust cohabit easily. That my self-control apparently creates theirs. That some few pounds, lost somewhere along the line, tipped me into humanity again, made me someone worth courtesy. Or perhaps I just became a more complex target.

I wonder what it would be like to be thin without knowing how tenuous, how easily collapsed, are the structures of courtesy and safety around me. Though I don't really wish for that: It's an awful but valuable insight—knowing the difference between being presumed autonomous, and worth respect, comes down to calories. You can't unfeel it.

The realization, when it came, was astonishing, and disillusioning. Is that it, so easy? Just be thin? But in retrospect, it was just the same story I had been hearing all my life. Eve knew it, Persephone knew it, poor Cydippe knew it: Eat, and you'll be eaten. Refrain, and you'll be free. I had finally become small enough to fit into the garden. 🍷

Poached Apples

Poached apples feel autumnal and snug, while requiring little skill or effort. They also make your house smell delicious. The first time I made these, it was because a new friend had come over last minute, and the only sweet things in the house were apples, honey, and jam. No sugar, even. So I mixed them in a pan with a half bottle of wine, and twenty minutes later, sweet, crimson little clouds emerged. Now I add a bit of sugar or some butter, but the recipe will take almost anything.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups red wine
- 1 cup honey
- pinch of salt
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 apples, preferably a tart variety

DIRECTIONS

Peel, core, and halve the apples. In a small saucepan, combine the apples with the honey, red wine, sugar, and salt. If you have other things lying around, throw them in—I've used blueberries, orange rinds, and apricot jam. Simmer until soaked through. Take the apples out, reduce the syrup, and drizzle it over the fruit. If you want, add toasted nuts or cream.