“Jam and idleness”: Jam, play and the socialisation of girls in ‘The Mill on the Floss’

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The idea that eating fruit can somehow be connected to (im)proper notions of behaviour for women is neither new nor revolutionary; we need only look to the Bible to find this concept’s influence on women’s lives. But what happens when the fruit is cooked? What happens when the women are actually girls, learning restraint and polite behaviour? George Eliot’s characterisation is always masterful, but she particularly excels in writing wilful women, and the girls who either learn or shirk rules of society to become these women. From Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (1859) to *Daniel Deronda*’s Gwendolen Harleth
Eliot’s ability to craft complex female characters is clear. Maggie Tulliver is no exception to this rule, and through the narrative of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) we learn more about her childhood and how she developed into the woman she becomes than perhaps any other of Eliot’s heroines. One way in which Eliot develops Maggie’s character is through depicting several scenes of her childhood in which the consumption of jam becomes a means for Maggie to understand the society into which she is being socialised, and it is on these scenes that I wish to focus.

For Terry Marks-Tarlow, play is a space where “mutuality arises as rules of emotional engagement are negotiated”, and furthermore, “emergent games help to structure social space, by dictating patterns of turn-taking and rules of interpersonal co-ordination.” In this analysis, she is speaking about play between patient and practitioner as a therapeutic tool, but she specifically frames it as a subconscious experience, arguing that “play can arise implicitly during psychotherapy, often without ever reaching conscious awareness,” as “it is deeply stamped into the brains, bodies, and minds of all mammals in service of open neural wiring”. As such, I would argue that Marks-Tarlow’s theories can be applied to play outside of a therapeutic setting.

George Eliot uses jam, cakes, and cooked fruit in *The Mill on the Floss* as a way of representing propriety in a similar fashion to that outlined by Marks-Tarlow. Jam and cakes relate to childhood play, the
negotiation of social rules, and how children learn to act in a “proper” way throughout the novel. In Eliot’s fiction, young girls are held to higher standards than their male peers and are more heavily scrutinised when they fail to conform to societal norms. As such jam, cakes, and other preserved fruits serve as an important medium through which Eliot shows us young girls being socialised into gendered ideas of the proper way to behave in society.

**Jam, Cake, and the Theory of the Dead Girl**

Emily Watson preparing to film the final scene. (http://www.simonhadley.co.uk/2013/04/from-the-archive/)

For the young Maggie Tulliver, jam and cakes are associated with a lack of propriety. Eating impolitely has resonances of humiliation; as in this excerpt from the novel’s fifth chapter, which occurs when, after the two children quarrel, Tom offers Maggie a cake to her down from the attic:

Maggie’s sobs began to subside, and she put out her mouth for the cake and bit a piece: and then Tom bit a piece, just for company, and they ate together and rubbed each other’s cheeks and brows and noses together, while they ate with a humiliating resemblance to two friendly ponies.[5] Eliot here inverts the common imaginative play of children pretending to be animals: Tom and Maggie instead unconsciously look like ponies
because of the way they express their affection, and since this is associated with impolite eating it is described as “humiliating”.

This scene is framed by questions of emotional restraint. Maggie’s distress at Tom telling her that he does not love her is portrayed as hyperbolic, as she wonders to herself, “what use was anything if Tom didn’t love her?” and decides that she might as well “starve herself” if he won’t return her affections.[6] The fast pace with which Maggie’s emotions move from this distress to contentedly playing as horses is, for Marks-Tarlow, connected to learning to tolerate emotional intensity. She gives the example of a father who “tosses his baby high up in the air and then catches her” and finds that “these close calls help to weather the ups and downs of intimate contact with others.”[7] Maggie is, of course, not a baby at this point and the fact that she is still seemingly so immature might suggest she has yet to be fully socialised into the society in which she is growing up.

As Maggie considers starving herself to death, Tom has already forgotten about the argument: “he meant to punish her, and that business having been performed, he occupied himself with other matters, like a practical person.”[8] It would be reductive to imply that Maggie’s hysterical response and Tom’s pragmatic approach to this event are related only to gender — Tom’s pragmatism is as idiosyncratic and important to his character as the depths of Maggie’s emotions are to hers. I would, however, suggest that children are socialised differently and that Tom’s practicality and Maggie’s
emotional outburst certainly have at least one root in the gender roles expected of the two children. It is not an innate gender difference, but one that has been taught through socialisation.

Although we see that these deep feelings continue into Maggie’s adulthood, here they are explicitly linked to childhood and a lack of restraint. As we have seen, in Marks-Tarlow’s schema her behaviour here might be more expected from an infant than an older child. “Those bitter sorrows of childhood!” the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* says, “when sorrow is all new and strange, when hope has not yet got wings to fly beyond the days and weeks,”[9] and, again linking Tom and Maggie to animals, asserts that,

We learn to restrain ourselves as we got older [...] We no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilised society. Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals.[10]

Jay B. Frankel explains this in the terms of relational psychoanalysis: “Children,” he says, “[...] are less likely to have developed a socially acceptable mask or to have learned smooth segues from state to state.”[11] Simply put, Maggie has not developed the mechanisms for conducting herself like a member of “a highly civilised society”[12] and she needs to be taught these rules in order to enter successfully society as an adult.
Young girls are not only expected to learn the implicit rules of society through socialisation, their levels of success in so-doing is used as a way to bring them into competition. Mrs Tulliver draws a comparison between Maggie and her cousin, Lucy Deane, in terms of their playfulness. She resents Lucy’s mother who is “allays trying to make the worst o’ my poor children to their aunts and uncles” but admits that “Maggie’s ten times naughtier when they come than she is other days [...] And there’s Lucy Deane’s such a good child—you may set her on a stool and there she’ll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off.”[13] For Nina Auerbach, Lucy is commended for her ability “to simulate the deathlike immobility of an icon”[14] which aligns with the Dodson’s ethos which views life as “a tedious rehearsal for the triumphant performance of death.”[15]

Socialisation is never a healthy experience for young girls in The Mill on the Floss. Maggie and Lucy’s responses to the propriety expected of them are extremely different but equally destructive. While Maggie is resistant to the attempts of her aunts and mother to teach her proper adult behaviour, Lucy has internalised them to a dangerous extent and now seems an impotent character who lacks the force of life expected of most children, with which Maggie overflows. When their Uncle Pullet’s offer of cake is rescinded by Mrs Pullet to avoid any danger of creating mess, we are told that “Lucy didn’t mind that much, for the cake was so pretty, she thought it rather a pity to eat it.”[16]

The Tulliver children are not so docile:
Tom, watching his opportunity while the elders were talking, hastily stowed it in his mouth at two bites, and chewed it furtively. As for Maggie, becoming fascinated, as usual, by a print of Ulysses and Nausicaa, which Uncle Pullet had bought as a ‘pretty Scripture thing,’ she presently let fall her cake, and in an unlucky movement crushed it beneath her foot.[17] It is striking that, of the three children, only Tom seems to act in a way which simultaneously avoids the reproofs of adults and exhibits a childish enjoyment: he seems to have learnt to restrain his appetite to keep it within socially acceptable bounds without losing all desire for food like Lucy. As a young boy, Tom experiences socialisation in a different way from Maggie and Lucy. We rarely see Tom’s behaviour being discussed in the same way the girls’. Indeed, the narrator tells us of Tom’s headstrong nature, saying, “though he was much more wilful and inflexible than Maggie, his mother hardly ever called him naughty [...] If Tom Tulliver whipped a gate, he was convinced [...] that he, Tom Tulliver, was justifiable in whipping that particular gate and he wasn’t going to be sorry.”[18] For Marks-Tarlow, “play helps children learn to adapt and respond dynamically to change, preparing them to live in an unpredictable, chaotic world.”[19] It seems likely that, as a boy, Tom has enjoyed more opportunities to play without rebuke and, as such, learn these skills of adaptation which allow him to act properly without losing enjoyment.

Maggie’s enthusiasm for play and entertainment is at odds with polite behaviour, and this motif is repeated on the next page when she is so enthused by the music Lucy has requested their uncle to play on her behalf that,
for the first time she quite forgot that she had a load on her mind, that Tom was angry with her [...] But when the magic music ceased, she jumped up, and running toward Tom, put her arm round his neck and said, ‘Oh Tom, isn’t it pretty?’ [...] he had his glass of cowslip wine in his hand, and [...] she jerked him so as to make him spill half of it.[20]

Once again, Maggie’s enthusiasm prevents food and drink from being consumed with the propriety the adults demand of her. Her exuberance is at odds with the “deathlike” and “immobile” feminine ideal presented by Lucy and the more rational and level-headed politic of Tom and as such it cannot be reconciled with polite society.

**Playing with Your Food, Playing at Propriety**

Tom shows Maggie his Sword in the 1978 BBC Adaptation

The concept of play as a way of structuring space is closely associated with one of the most famous jam-eating scenes in *The Mill on the Floss*. Mrs Tulliver and Kezia, are preparing to receive the aunts and uncles and do not want the children to interrupt their work in the kitchen. Mrs Tulliver thus persuades Tom and Maggie to “keep aloof for a time only by” and allows them “to carry away a sufficient load of booty.”[21] The language of this passage is replete with imagery of piracy – the children are “marauders” who “make several inroads into the kitchen” and are only persuaded to leave by “a sufficient load of booty.”[22] The connotations of the children undertaking hostile
incursions or raids into the kitchen and the framing of them as plundering enemy territory for treasure gives the scene a narrative of the children playing at being pirates. Similar language is used to describe the game of snapdragon in Anthony Trollope’s *Orley Farm* (1862): “the raisins shall become the prey of those audacious marauders only who dare to face the presence of the ghost.”[23]

This type of play has long been gendered as male,[24] the very physical activity associated with marauding is thought inappropriate somehow for female children, and yet both in these passages they are presented either as gender-neutral or female-led exercises. The game of snapdragon in Trollope’s novel is instigated by Marian Arbuthnot, and both Madeline Stavely and Sophia Furnival play the part of ghosts; while Tom and Maggie seem to take an equal part in the pillaging of jam puffs in *The Mill on the Floss*. One might expect that, if the girls are being socialised into a higher sense of propriety, they would not be allowed to participate in this kind of imaginative play but I would argue that this is exactly the reason they are allowed, and even encouraged, to do so. In play, children are able to enact behaviours within a safe space. If they act in a socially unacceptable way whilst playing, they may receive a gentle reprimand but will not experience the negative consequences associated with these behaviours in adulthood. Marks-Tarlow discusses this with reference to hide-and-seek, which she finds “sets the stage for turn taking.”[25] At the same time, allowing children to participate in this kind of imaginative play
helps them to “get it out of their system”, so to speak, before adulthood.

Marks-Tarlow finds that “children engage in rough-and-tumble play during the earlier years, which ironically relates to cognitive capacities to settle down and focus attention.”[26] Further evidence of the link between militaristic play and socialisation is provided by Diana Taylor who wrote about war re-enactments and scenario thinking in the October 2009 issue of PMLA, which took war as a special topic. Her description of these “games” and the ways in which they teach both soldiers and civilians to conceptualise war bears a close resemblance to what I refer to as socialisation:

People learn, experience, and come to terms with past and future behaviours by physically doing them, trying them on, acting them through and acting them out—[this] is the theory of ritual, older than Aristotle's theory of mimesis and as new as theories of mirror neurons.”[27] When the children of The Mill on the Floss and Orley Farm play at being “marauders” they are actually honing their ability to co-exist with others in polite society and, crucially, they are doing so with some degree of adult supervision. Tom and Maggie might be irritating their mother to some extent, but they have are clearly doing so within reasonable boundaries as rather than being scolded they are warded off with treats. Further, the description of the scene that pre-empts Tom and Maggie’s inroads into the kitchen is overwhelmingly positive. “There were”, we are told, “such various and suggestive scents as of plumcakes in the oven and jellies in the hot state, mingled with the
aroma of gravy, that it was impossible to feel altogether gloomy: there was hope in the air.”[28] When Tom and Maggie play at marauding, they are in fact contributing to social cohesion by allowing Mrs Tulliver and Kezia to prepare for the family party without disruption.

Girls playing in this male-coded way is seemingly admissible only when adults are there to supervise and ensure that it is used in a way to guide socialisation. This is made clear when Maggie visits Tom at school for the second time. Tom has bribed his alcoholic drill-master, Mr Poulter, to lend him his sword and is “glad to have Maggie as a spectator” when playing as the Duke of Wellington.[29] Maggie does not take an equal part in this play and reacts in a much more stereotypically feminine way screaming and fearing that “you’ll hurt yourself; you’ll cut your head off!”[30] The result of this unsupervised and unproductive episode of militaristic play is that Tom stabs himself in the foot then faints while Maggie has another attack of hysteria: she first believes Tom to be dead, and is then being overcome with joy that he is alive. It seems from these two very different outcomes that, in The Mill on the Floss, militaristic play is only to be condoned when it is likely to contribute to proper socialisation and is overseen by a responsible adult.

The Importance of Dividing Jam Puffs Ethically
Questions around socialisation continue to arise when the children go to eat the jam-puffs that constitute their “booty.” Ironically, their prize turns out to be inadequate and the problem of division arises because the two children have three jam puffs. “[Tom] had finished his puff, and was eyeing the third, which was to be divided between them.”[31] He takes great care dividing the remains of the spoils, “opening his pocket-knife and holding it over the puff, with his head on one side in a dubitative manner. (It was a difficult problem to divide that very irregular polygon into two equal parts.)”[32] It seems that one of the children has not yet learnt to regulate their desire, as rather than taking a pastry each and leaving the third, one has seemingly taken two and now Tom struggles to restrain his desire for more than Maggie. This gestures forwards to his relationship with Maggie as an adult.

Tom has an extremely exacting sense of what is right and wrong from an early age and he struggles to reconcile strict adherence to these rules with his love for Maggie and desire to treat her fairly, and, on another level, his own private desires. For instance, when bailiffs have visited their house and Maggie reprimands Tom and Mrs Tulliver for speaking ill of her father, Tom feels that “she ought to have learned better than have those hectoring assuming manners by this time”, but his anger at Maggie’s display of improper socialisation is short-lived, as the siblings “forg[et] everything else in the sense that they had one father and one sorrow.”[33] It is notable that Eliot explicitly refers to the two here as children, but it is implied elsewhere in the novel that
Tom and Maggie are adolescents by this point: Maggie “ought to have learnt better [...]. by this time”[34] (emphasis added) and “the down had come on Tom’s lip.”[35] There is an implication that, in adolescence, Tom is in a kind of liminal space, more aware of social convention than he had been in childhood but more willing to condone and forgive Maggie than he is, for example, when she returns from her brief elopement with Stephen. He tells her then that “you struggled with your feelings, you say. Yes! I have had feelings to struggle with; but I conquered them [...] I will sanction no such character as yours.”[36] Tom’s dilemma as to the division of this jam puff is a foreshadowing of this struggle with his feelings – the struggle between his desire to act properly, his desire to do right by Maggie and his desire to have the larger piece for himself.

It seems that Tom’s uneven division of the puff is partially influenced by the distraction caused by thinking about food. Maggie expects him to run away from home for the day in order to avoid his aunts, which is his usual course of action. He tells Maggie, however, that he intends to stay at home for “the pudden. I know what the pudden’s to be—apricot roll-up—O my buttons!” and after this, as “the knife descended on the puff, and it was in two, but the result was not satisfactory to Tom.”[37] Ian McCall sees this as illustrative of Tom’s childlike nature, and the difference between the unrestrained appetite of childhood and the more utilitarian approach taken to food by adults in polite English society. According to McCall, “from an adult perspective there is an incongruity between the enormity of the decision to run away
and the triviality of the reason for delaying it.” He highlights the fact that Tom “is already thinking of another pudding beyond the one he is about to consume.”[38] Whilst McCall’s analysis of Tom’s “greed” seems accurate, he overstates the “enormity of the decision to run away.” When Tom runs away upon hearing of a visit from his aunts and uncles, he is not doing so with the same motivations as Maggie, who intends to “run away and go to the gypsies and Tom should never see her anymore.”[39] Tom “generally abscond[s] for the day with a large supply of the most portable food, when he received a timely warning that his aunts and uncles were coming”[40] (emphasis added). He has no intention of staying away permanently; the narrator tells us that he has done this in the past and always comes back, and as such the decision to leave the house for the day is far from enormous.

Susan Fraiman highlights the reality behind Tom’s disappearances by arguing that “Tom maintains (the illusion of) his freedom from extended kin ties by absconding whenever the uncles and aunts appear.”[41] Crucially, his disappearances are only ever intended to be temporary, and unlike Maggie he never considers leaving home as a realistic course of action.

I find Deanna Kreisel’s explanation of this scene more convincing than McCall’s. It is also more closely related to this essay, as Kreisel analyses the two characters’ relationship with food, arguing that this scene demonstrates the way Eliot “conjoins questions of appetite and ethical behaviour”:[42] Both Tom and Maggie attempt to restrain their
appetites in order to act ethically but, because they are not yet mature in this respect, neither can be satisfied with restraint. The narrator tells us that Maggie “cared less that Tom should enjoy the utmost possible amount of puff, than that he should be pleased with her for giving him the best bit.”[43] When she, unknowingly, chooses the larger piece she finds it “no use to contend further” and “ate up her half puff with considerable relish...seesawing on the elder-bough, lost to almost everything but a vague sense of jam and idleness.”[44]

Maggie tries to give Tom the larger portion of puff because she wishes for him to think well of her, but she is perfectly happy to enjoy this larger half herself. Kreisel argues that “as odious as we may find Tom’s behaviour, he is right in exposing Maggie’s generosity as a sham: she promptly forgets about him and his inferior piece of puff once her point has been made. It is in the service of gaining Tom’s approval that this point is made.”[45] This scene, then, perfectly demonstrates that Tom and Maggie still have a lot of playing ahead of them before they are fully socialised and have learnt the rules like turn-taking that for Marks-Tarlow are intimately connected to play.

It is because Maggie has not yet developed the skill of restraining her appetite in order to share with others that she cannot substantiate her desire to appear self-sacrificing. Although Tom remonstrates with Maggie for being “greedy”, he behaves in exactly the same way.[46] When Maggie offers to have “that with the jam run out” he tells her, “you don’t like that, you silly. You may have it if it comes to
you fair, but I shan’t give it you without.”[47] Maggie wins the better piece fairly but Tom, having watched her eat it is “conscious of having acted very fairly, and thought she ought to have considered this, and made up for it.”[48] He believes that, having made the ethical decision to choose fairly which child should receive the larger half, he should be rewarded but there is no way that Maggie can know this. Tom plays at being an adult in this scene but still has a childlike appetite over which he has little control. Fraiman finds this episode “carefully orchestrated by Tom so that his sister is at fault whether she gives him more or less puff” and argues that the cutting of the pastry “figure[s] the severing from Maggie that this scene literally accomplishes.”[49] The narrator subtly illustrates Tom’s hypocritical nature: “he would have refused a bit of hers beforehand,” we are told, “but one is naturally at a different point of view before and after one’s share of puff is swallowed.”[50] Whilst Tom is trying to act ethically, his view of the situation changes once he has eaten his half of the pastry and this is because he has not yet learned to regulate his appetite for the needs of others.

When Tom, Maggie and Lucy eat jam and cakes in The Mill on the Floss, they are sending subtle messages about their progress towards becoming successful members of civilised society. The three children all seem to have internalised these rules to a dangerous extent: Lucy is more aware of her outward appearance to society than of her own hunger while Tom is excessively strict with Maggie until they are finally reconciled by death; and Maggie, who never is never fully
successful in this aim, only gives the illusion of having done so in order to please Tom. The idea of “playing with food” may well seem antithetical to learning polite behaviour but I hope I have managed to show that for the girls of *The Mill on the Floss*, play and food are both crucial spaces in which they can safely practice acting properly.

[1] Effie in *Silas Marner* is an obvious exception in some respects, but we don’t follow her into adulthood.


[3] Ibid. 111

[4] Ibid.,109


[6] Ibid. 37

[7] Marks-Tarlow, 111

[8] Eliot, 37
[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid. 39


[12] Eliot, 39

[13] Ibid. 43


[15] Ibid. 157

[16] Eliot, 92

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid. 65

[19] Marks-Tarlow, 111

[20] Eliot, 93
[21] Ibid. 45

[22] Ibid.


[26] Ibid. 110.


[28] Eliot, 44

[29] Ibid. 180

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid. 45

[32] Ibid.

[39] Eliot, 104

[40] Ibid. 44


[43] Eliot, 45
[44] Ibid. 46

[45] Kreisel, 90

[46] Eliot, 45

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid. 46

[49] Fraiman, 140

[50] Eliot, 46