

# Food Security and the Literary Imagination

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# Charles Dickens (1812-70)



- *Oliver Twist* (1837-38)
- ‘Please, sir, I want some more’
- Three servings of ‘thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays’
- Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal* (1729)

*A Christmas  
Carol (1843)*

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Too much,  
or not enough?



# Food riots in Dickens' novels

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- *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

- Set during the French Revolution (1789)
- Includes the storming of the Bastille and alludes to the beginnings of the Terror

- *Barnaby Rudge* (1841)

- Set during the Gordon Riots (London, June 1780)
- Set amid the American War of Independence (1765-1783)
- Describes the liberation and prisoners from London prisons, including Newgate

# Food and the Literary Imagination

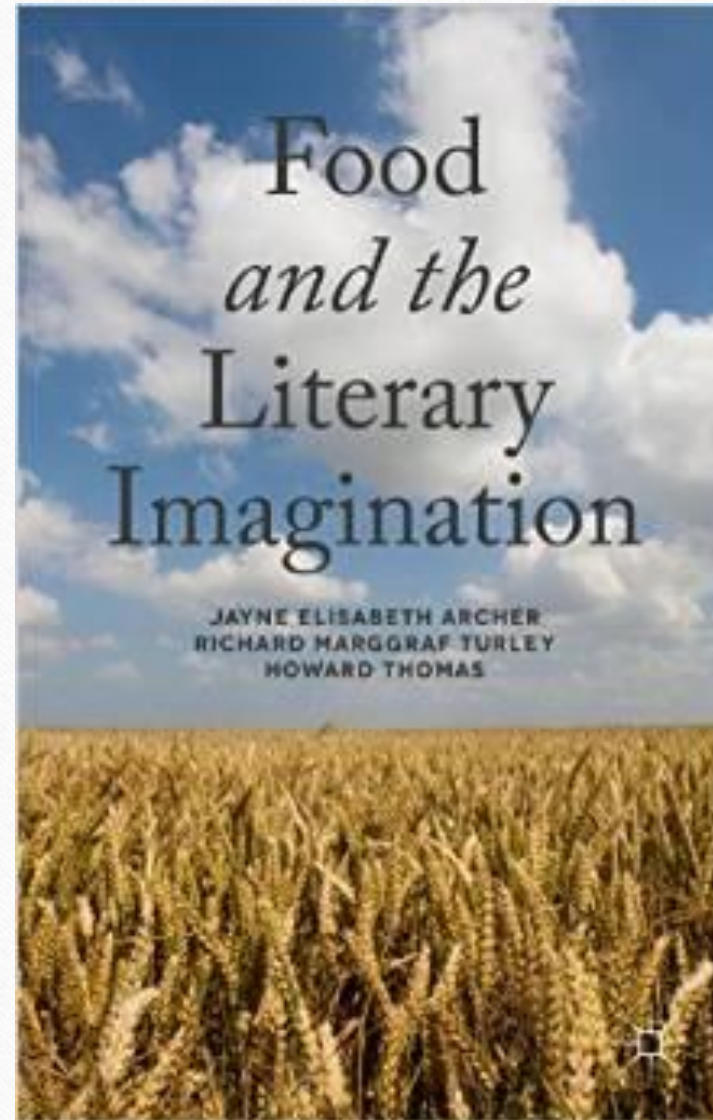
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Chaucer

Shakespeare

Keats

George Eliot



"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR."—SHAKESPEARE.

# ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

A WEEKLY JOURNAL.

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

N<sup>o</sup>. 15.]

SATURDAY, AUGUST 6, 1859.

[PRICE 2*d*.

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES.

In Three Books.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

BOOK THE SECOND. THE GOLDEN THREAD.

CHAPTER XVI. STILL KNITTING.

MADAME DEFARGE and monsieur her husband returned amicably to the bosom of Saint Antoine, while a speck in a blue cap toiled through the darkness, and through the dust, and down the weary

limer intelligences may read in the feeble shining of this earth of ours, every thought and act, every vice and virtue, of every responsible creature on it.

The Defarges, husband and wife, came lumbering under the starlight, in their public vehicle, to that gate of Paris whereunto their journey naturally tended. There was the usual stoppage at the barrier guard-house, and the usual lanterns came glancing forth for the usual examination and inquiry. Monsieur Defarge alighted: knowing one or two 'of the soldiery

# ‘Good and Bad Fungus’



- Published in Dickens' periodical *All the Year Round*, 6 August 1859
- Followed an instalment of *A Tale of Two Cities*, 'Still Knitting'
- Describes the effect of consuming food contaminated with a variety of toxins, including ergot of rye, mildew and fungi

‘A diseased state of rye and other grasses, called ergot, is owing to a fungus which causes the ovary of the grain to become dark coloured, and project from the chaff in the form of a spur; and hence its name of spurred rye. The nutritious part of the grain is destroyed, and it acquires highly injurious properties.’

The fungus called ‘racodium’ is said to be attracted to casks of wine, and another fungus, ‘Agaricus muscarius’, is used ‘in decoction, as an intoxicating liquor’: ‘when they drink it they are seized with convulsions in all their limbs, followed by that sort of raving which accompanies a burning fever’.





‘In the close and stifling atmosphere of the vault ... the floors were of sodden earth, the walls and roof of damp bare brick tapestried with the trails of snails and slugs; **the air was sickening, tainted, and offensive.** It seemed, from one strong flavour which was uppermost among the various odours of the place, that it had, at no very distant period, been used as **a storehouse for cheeses;** a circumstance which, while it accounted for the greasy moisture that hung about it, was agreeably suggestive of rats. It was naturally damp besides, and **little trees of fungus sprung from every mouldering corner.**’ [Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), ed. and intr. John Bowen (Penguin Books, 2003), p. 71]

# The Gordon Riots as Food Riot

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- The professed objective is to compel Parliament to repeal recent, pro-Catholic legislation, but ‘under the noisy revel of the public-house, there lurked unseen and dangerous matter’ (p. 328)
- The rioters anticipate ‘an altered state of society’ (p. 331)
- ‘The mob raged and roared, like a mad monster’ (p. 408)
- The rioters gather in St George’s Fields and march north, crossing the Thames, to storm Westminster, the public prisons (including Newgate) and key strategic sites of civic and national governance



**Barnaby Rudge and his mother**

# The Mob as Deadly Harvest

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- Blue Cockade = corncockle
- The execution of rioters: ‘Such was the wholesome growth of the seed sown by the law, that this kind of harvest was usually looked for, as a matter of course.’ (p. 636)
- Hugh’s dying curse against his father: ‘On that black tree, of which I am the ripened fruit, I do invoke the curse of all its victims, past, present, and to come.’ (p, 646)
- ‘Mr Dennis [the hangman] might have been likened to a farmer ruminating among his crops, and enjoying by anticipation **the bountiful gifts of Providence**. Look where he would, some heap of ruins afforded him rich promise of a working off; **the whole town appeared to have been ploughed, and sown, and nurtured by most genial weather; and a goodly harvest was at hand.**’ (p. 582)

# The Fiery Lake

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- ‘The gutters of the street and every crack and fissure in the stones, ran with **scorching spirit**; which, being dammed up by busy hands, **overflowed** the road and pavement; and formed a great pool, in which the people dropped down dead by dozens. They lay in heaps all round the fearful pond ... and drank until they died ... others sprang up from the fiery draught, and **danced, half in mad triumph, and half in the agony of suffocation, until they fell, and steeped their corpses in the liquor that had killed them.** Nor was this even the worst or most appalling kind of death that happened on this fatal night ...’ (p. 569)



# History as Haunting

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- *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)
- Revisits many motifs, including the mob devouring a lake of wine; the executioner as reaper; contaminated food supply; dancing madness and frenzied self-destruction
- The citizens of St Antoine are suffering from ergotism (black grains)





# Some Thoughts

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- The role of the food riot in driving political and social change; it is predictable and unpredictable
- The role of medicine (including history of medicine) and plant science in informing literary analysis
- The need to respect knowledge and practices acquired through experience
- The demented and dying