Voracious Nonsense: The Cannibalistic Pleasures and Gluttonous Delights of Edward Lear's and Laura Richards's Nonsense Poetry

Etti Gordon Ginzburg

Victorian Nonsense, which is known for its eerie balance between violent content and restrained form (Thomas 119), is replete with scenes of unrestrained consumption and wild feasting.[1] This is true for the famous poems of Edward Lear (1812-1888), as well as for the verses of his less-known American female contemporary, Laura Richards (1850-1943). In their poems, food is often associated with bizarre, horrific deaths that nevertheless arouse a strange sense of satisfaction and vicious joy. Lear's poems, when they include food, tend to focus on the victims of food-related disasters (which are often self-inflicted); Richards's verses, by contrast, focus more on acts of feeding and eating (and sometimes devouring) from the perspective of an authority figure, often a mother, who joyfully avenges herself on the source of her responsibilities and obligations (i.e., the children). In both cases, the result is often the kind of guilt-ridden pleasure that is surely well-known to anyone who has ever enjoyed an extravagant meal. Indeed, both Nonsense and food seem to share what Hugh Haughton describes as a "pleasure principle": they are seasoned with "delight in transgression, [and] a protest against the arbitrariness of order" (8).

Such outrageous representations of food are not common in children's literature and may be dismissed as nonsense (in the denotative sense of the word), in accordance with the Victorians' association of Lear's and Richards's verses with silly humor and juvenile fun. However, the poems' carnivalesque reversal of the traditional role of food (as a

source of nourishment, warmth, and joy, among others) can also be seen as undermining the long-established role of children's literature in supporting a bourgeoise sense of order and morality. Instead, the poems destabilize social and parental authority, or challenge ingrained Victorian rituals around mealtimes as well as deep-rooted concepts such as maternal devotion.

Accordingly, this chapter will examine violent representations of food in Lear's and Richards's poems and attempt to understand the *Schadenfreude*, or malicious joy, each trigger. Paying close attention to the association of food with extreme brutality and death in both Lear's and Richards's verses, this chapter challenges these poems' classification as mere children's literature altogether.

Edward Lear (1812-1888)

Grotesque deaths caused by the consumption or preparation of food are ubiquitous in Lear's poems. Lear's violent limericks generally depict an assortment of social outcasts—lonely, isolated, and mostly elderly men and women—who in the specific case of his food-related poetry either eat or are eaten, hunted, or baked, sometimes to death, often by an anonymous "they." The "Old Man of Berlin" (77), for example, is accidentally baked by a group of "they," gendered female in the illustration (fig. 1), perhaps as befitting their occupation – baking:

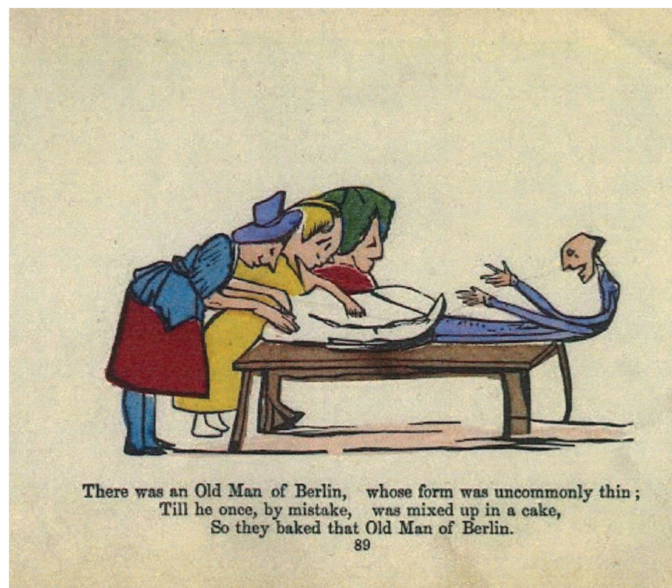

Fig. 1
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Man of Berlin."

Likewise, the "Old Man of Peru" is baked in a stove by his wife. Although the limerick describes the wife's act as unintentional, a "mistake," Lear's accompanying illustration (figure 2) – depicting a feisty housewife commandingly shoving a horrified man, likely her

husband, into the stove – clearly suggests otherwise:

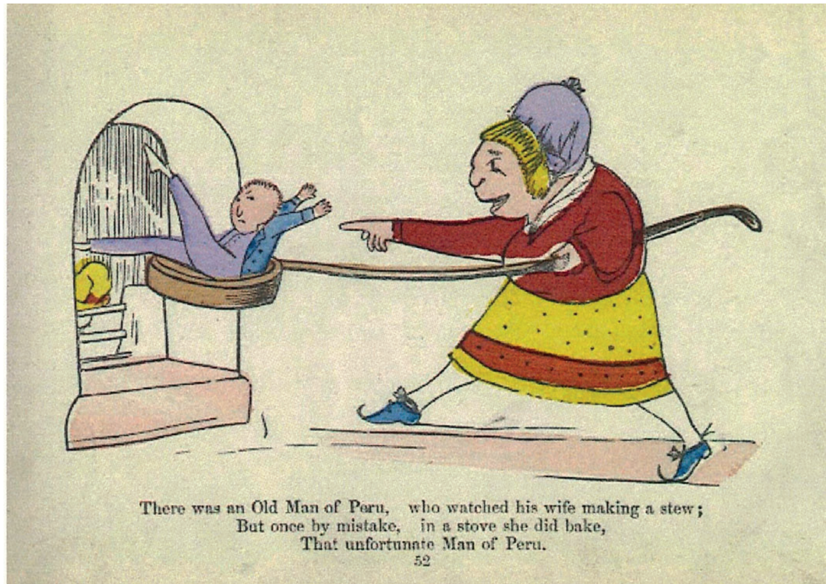

Fig. 2
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Man of Peru."

As noted, Lear's perpetrators tend not to be socially powerful actors and include women, animals and even children. "The Old Man of Leghorn" (73) is devoured by no other than a puppy, which the illustration (figure 3) renders a mighty dog:

Fig. 3
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Man of Leghorn."

There is a cannibalistic twist to such scenes, as "salads and people can both get dressed for dinner" to quote Peter Robinson's witticism (117). Here and elsewhere, however, Lear's unfortunate protagonists are never the agents of such fatal cannibalistic mishaps, but always their victims. With the victims as vulnerable as the perpetrators, Lear's

carnivalesque, hierarchical topsy-turviness is neither liberating nor egalitarian (as a warranted allusion to Bakhtin might suggest). Notably, the illustration (figure 3) of the Old Man's helplessness in the face of the beast of a puppy renders him child-like and exposes the vulnerability underlying this seemingly absurd foolery. Thus, although Lear's "puppy" is not anthropomorphized, a phenomenon that is common in Richards's poems, and its role as perpetrator may be a random poetic choice, the image successfully conveys a state of existential (emotional and social) impotence.

When Lear's eccentric characters *actively* engage in gastronomic activities (rather than when they are acted upon), these acts are innocuously nonsensical, as in the poem about the "whimsical Man of Apulia" (95) who "fed twenty sons, upon nothing but buns." However, a similar absurdity ends tragically when the "Old Man of the East" dies upon feeding his children. The nature of the children's deadly "conduct" is never explicitly stated, though it seems to be related to gluttony:

> There was an Old Man of the East
> Who gave all his children a feast;
> But they all ate so much, and their conduct was such,
> That it killed that Old Man of the East. (99)

Worse still, in "There was an Old Person of Rheims" (84), for example, Lear's famous "they" use food a means of torture, force-feeding the poor "Old Person of Rheims," a fact that is only revealed by the accompanying illustration (figure 4):

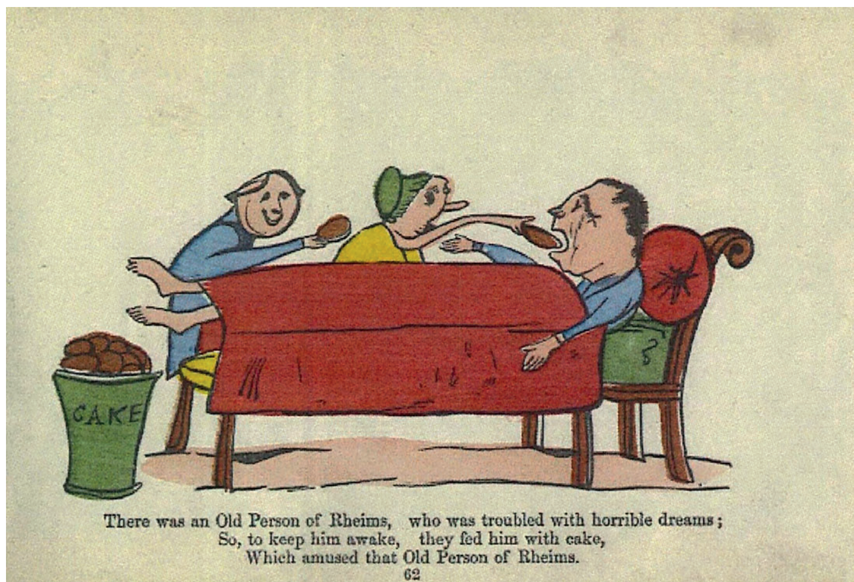

Fig.4
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Person of Rheims."

Lear's "they" similarly force-feed the "Old Person of Prague" (86), who, although ostensibly cured by this act, is shown in the illustration (figure 5) to suffer from it:

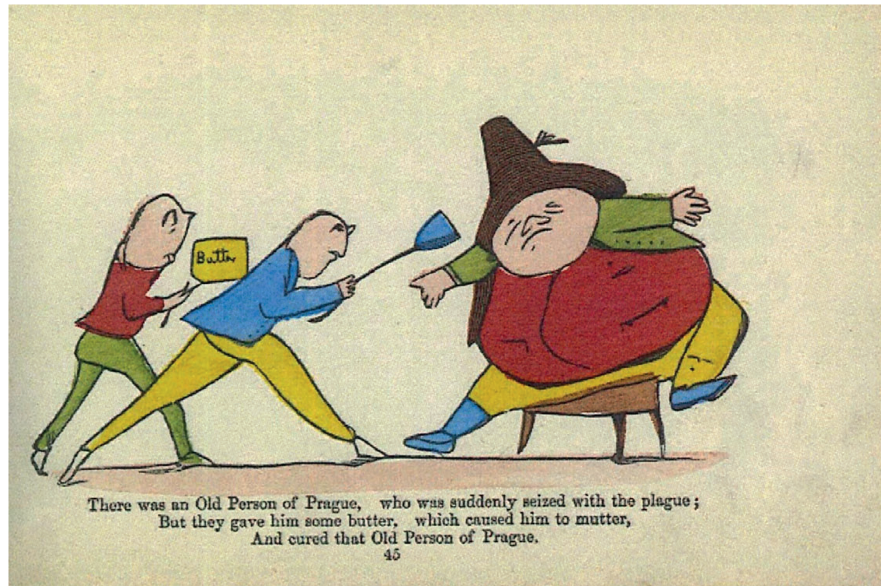

Fig. 5
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Person of Prague."

Although in both poems the acts of feeding others are depicted as beneficial to the recipients' parties—staving off bad dreams or curing a plague – they are simultaneously coercive and violent. However, the victims either ignore or deny the violence: The Old Person of Prague mutters incomprehensibly in response, while the Old Person of Rheims is said to be "amused."

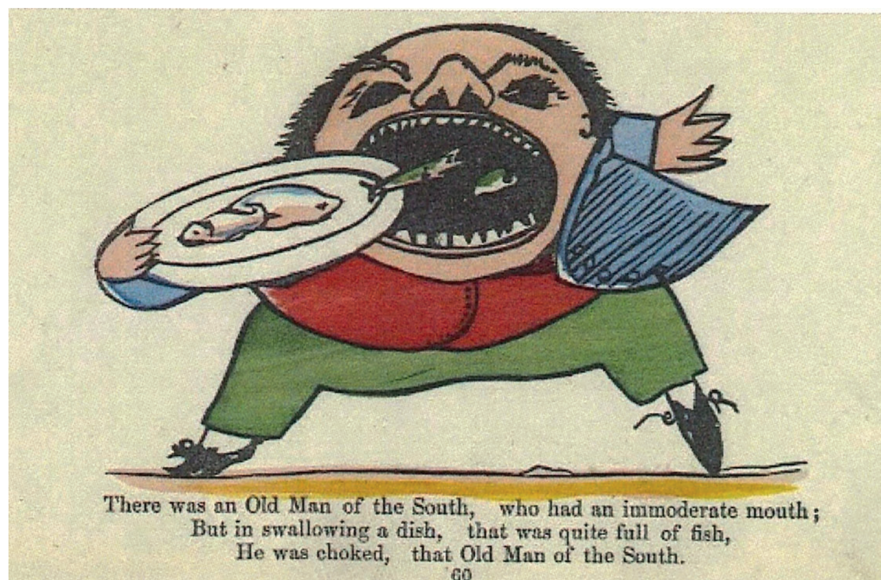

Fig. 6
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Man of the South."

Thus, the protagonists are also the victims, albeit in a self-inflicted manner, of the many poems where deaths are caused by food and excessive eating (but always of real food; significantly, there is no cannibalism in this category). This is manifest in the case of the "Old Man of the South/ Who had an immoderate mouth" and "in swallowing a dish, that was quite full of fish, / He was choked, that Old Man of the South" (90).

Fig. 7
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Man of Calcutta."

If the illustrations to both poems (figures 6 and 7, respectively) are evocative of the universal maxim – *don't eat with your mouth open* – such a didactic reading is nowhere supported by the words of the limericks (unless one reads "immoderate mouth" metaphorically, as referring to the diner's insatiable appetite), leaving the readers to puzzle over the poems' incongruities or dismiss their silly absurdities altogether.

Indeed, reading each poem disjointedly renders them utterly absurd. However, reading them in succession (or syntagmatically, to evoke Mary Douglas approach to food),[2] reveals the pattern already noted, of recurrent queer and eccentric protagonists who are always the victim, even of their own follies. This pattern of self-inflicted and misery-induced humor is also evident in a poem unrelated to fatal food disasters, "There was an Old Man with an Owl" (176), as the owl that uncannily resembles its master (see figure 8) even joins him for a drink; that both man and owl bear an eerie resemblance to their creator, Edward Lear, is telling.

Such illustrated self-portraits suggest an autobiographical reading. Lear's career as a Nonsense writer began when he was employed as a painter in Knowsley by Lord Derby and entertained his employer's grandchildren during dinnertime: "We owe the *Book of Nonsense* to the Earl of Derby's grandchildren" wrote an early critic, Emile Cammaerts, in 1925 (33). Lear, while comfortable in the nursery, where "he found an exuberant

enthusiasm" (Noakes 34), was much less so among the distinguished adult society he encountered when his success with the children resulted in an invitation into Lord Derby's dining room (Noakes 33-34).

Fig. 8
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Man with an Owl."

Lear was a life-long traveler whose engagement with food was greatly patterned upon, and dictated by, his nomadic lifestyle. A perpetual guest and eternal outsider, he was always on the receiving end of social interactions—the more vulnerable side of the table—as the following amusing excerpt from a letter to his sister Ann in 1829 suggests:

> They stuffed me with pudding—chops—cutlets—and pies,
> Wine and cakes (I was going to say up to my eyes
> But I thought 'twas so vulgar it lacked this addition
> They crammed and they stuffed me, yea, unto repletion.) (Lear, *Selected Letters*, 10)

The hosts, significantly described in this letter as "they," stuff their guest to the point of inconvenience. As the above description implies, being an eternal guest was not necessarily a positive experience.

Attending numerous dinner parties also accentuated Lear's lonesomeness, "for amidst all the hustle he could still feel as lonely as he had sometimes felt at Knowsley" (Noakes 41). It likewise made him acutely, sometimes even painfully, aware of the social functions and rituals surrounding food: "Food and its poetry are at the heart of host-and-guest cultural encounters, with the ever-present dangers of causing offence through a hapless ignorance of culinary customs" (Robinson 117). In Lear's case, these dangers must have

further intensified due to his epilepsy. Maintaining a reputation as a good entertainer, let alone observing the rituals of table manners, could be taxing as well. Indeed, "Lear *could suffer* from too much hospitality" (Robinson 119; emphasis mine).[3]

Lear's endless dinner parties, which both sustained him and were a source of stress for him, left their mark on his poetry. Peter Robinson maintains that "Lear's foodie limericks and poems are as regularly metered and rhymed as the most orderly of mealtime arrangements" (124). In this way, Lear's poems can be viewed as constrained as he himself was, by the same rules "which control the internal ordering of the meal itself" (Douglas 163). Yet, it is also possible to read the drama of disparity, the famously contradictory relations between the rhymes and their illustrations, as expressing his ambivalence on the matter. In Lear's illustration to "There Was an Old Man of the East," for example, the children who seemingly commit patricide are no children at all; ironically, nor does the old man die (figure 9):

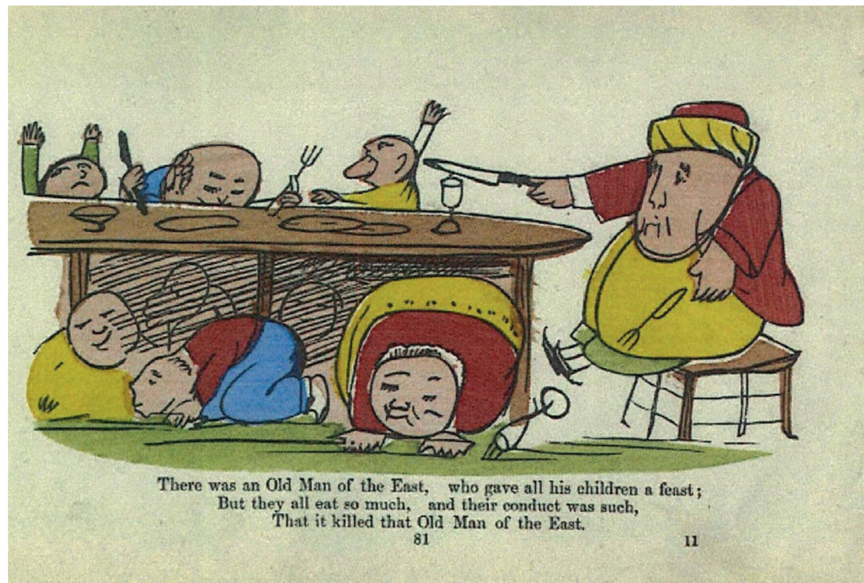

Fig. 9
Edward Lear. "There Was an Old Man of the East."

Thus, the conflict being referenced in this poem may well have more to do with adults than children. The anti-climactic and senseless endings of the poems may further insinuate that this is a joke at Lear's own expense, perhaps mocking himself for his dramatizations.

Laura Richards (1850-1943)

Unlike Lear's volume of limericks, Laura Richards's poems are more diversified in tone and form. Additionally, whereas most of Lear's food poems are teeming with human adult figures, Richards's food poems consist of children and anthropomorphic young animals, the latter of whom become the victims of Richards's violent mayhems. The brutality

of this violence is often overlooked, either due to the poems' light-hearted musicality or because of their dismissive classification as children's Nonsense rhymes. What is more, as Richards successfully nurtured a public authorial image as a role-model of Victorian American motherhood (Gordon Ginzburg, "American Sister" 465), it is even more unlikely that her contemporary readers would take seriously the violent retributions she visits upon the poems' anthropomorphic young victims.

Whereas Lear's limericks draw on meals as social events (if events with odd and fatal consequences), Richards's food poems focus mainly on food as service, where feeding children plays the major role. Also, unlike Lear's senseless plots and similarly pointless endings, Richards's rhymes usually tell a story and end with a climax. Moreover, in contrast to the disparity between Lear's limericks and their illustrations, Richards's illustrations enhance her poems' contents rather than disrupt them. Like Lear's food poems, however, Richards's verses benefit greatly from an autobiographical reading. Born in 1850, four years after Lear published his *Book of Nonsense*, the American Laura Elizabeth Richards was a busy mother of seven (unlike Lear, who never married or had any children). Nevertheless, Richards was hardly engaged in feeding her own children; like her mother, the poet Julia Ward Howe, she always preferred intellectual pursuits over the burdens of childrearing and housekeeping. Indeed, Richards's rather slender cookbook bears witness to her lack of interest in this aspect of domesticity. Richards never prepared a meal or washed a dish; her domestic struggles were far more likely to involve the servants than the children (the family employed two maids in the house until 1988) (D. Smith, Interview).

Several of Richards's poems not only capture this aspect of her home life but are explicitly autobiographical: The child in "Alice's Supper" (*In My Nursery* 42-43) is not only named after Richards's eldest daughter, Alice, but also receives the same level of service Richards's children were apparently accustomed to. In the poem, which also demonstrates the high status of children at the time in general, adults reap, grind, knead, bake and bring, all in the service of little Alice. In "Would n't" (*In My Nursery* 85), another typical though not overtly autobiographical example, Richards renders the parents' perspective of a stubborn toddler being cajoled into disciplined behavior:

> She *would n't* have on her naughty bib!
> She *would n't* get into her naughty crib!
> She *would n't* do this, and she wouldn't do that,
> And She *would* put her foot in her Sunday hat.

The patient parents never lose their temper until they finally manage to extract a promise from the stubborn toddler:

We tickled her up, and we tickled her down,
From her toddling toes to her curling crown.
And we kissed her and tossed her, until she was fain
To promise she wouldn't say "wouldn't" again.

Both "Alice's Supper" and "Would n't" successfully convey the spirit of "the cult of the child" that culminated in the second half of the nineteenth century, when new parenting standards required that American mothers exercise their authority only by means of gentle and affectionate behavior. At the same time, and as emphasis shifted from the children's duties to their parents, children became more unruly and obedience to parents was no longer absolute (Grylls 37). Consequently, "mothers were robbed of some of the social acclaim and confirmation that their difficult jobs deserved" (Ryan 145).

A nuanced reading of Richards's poems reveals a similar tension between the idealized view of children and the actual, strenuous practice of childrearing. Specifically, whereas Richards's "children" poems (where children are the main characters) seem to coincide with the new Victorian view of childhood, the more aggressive "animal" poems express a much more complex view of children than was typically held in the Victorian period, as well as a longing for stricter child-rearing practices. As I mention elsewhere, death is also ubiquitous in these rhymes, and the animals that end up dead are usually young: The three *little* chickens, one of the seven *little* tigers, one of the five *little* monkeys (Gordon Ginzburg, "There Once Was" 182), and the narratives surrounding these deaths are strongly reminiscent of traditional cautionary tales.

As in "Alice's Supper," an adult cook also features in "The Seven Little Tigers and the Aged Cook" (*In My Nursery* 143-44). The cook, who "was ninety-six years old, an authority I'm told" is dedicated to the service of seven little anthropomorphous tigers (seven is coincidentally the number of Richards's own children). The spoiled tigers, upon finding no sauce for their pie, are upset with the cook and decide to fry him for dinner:

"Mr. Sparrow-piper Tup, we intend on you to sup!"
Said the eldest little tiger very sweetly;
But this naughty aged cook, just remarking, "Only look!"
Chopped the little tiger's head off very neatly.

Then he said unto the rest, "It has always been confessed
That a tiger's better eating than a man;
So I'll fry him for you now, and you all will find, I trow,
That to eat him will be much the better plan."

So they tried it in a trice, and found that it was nice,
And with rapture they embraced one another;
And they said, "By hook or crook, we must keep this aged cook;
So we'll ask him to become our elder brother."

Fig. 10
Unknown illustrator. "The Seven Little Tigers and the Aged Cook."

The neat and sweet description of the seven young tigers may initially encourage young readers to identify with their anthropomorphous counterparts (who behave like spoiled children when they do not get what they want), only to discover that they risk either ending up in a pan or eating a sibling.

Similar aggression is bestowed on a youngster, again by an adult figure, in Richards's version of the "The Monkeys and the Crocodile" (*In My Nursery* 153-54), where a young monkey is eaten upon teasing "uncle" crocodile:

FIVE little monkeys
Swinging from a tree;
Teasing Uncle Crocodile,
Merry as can be.
Swinging high, swinging low,
Swinging left and right:
"Dear Uncle Crocodile,
Come and take a bite!"

Five little monkeys
swinging in the air;

Heads up, tails up,
Little do they care.
Swinging up, swinging down,
Swinging far and near:
"Poor Uncle Crocodile,
Aren't you hungry, dear?"

Four little monkeys
Sitting in the tree;
Heads down, tails down,
Dreary as can be.
Weeping loud, weeping low,
Crying to each other:
"Wicked Uncle Crocodile,
To gobble up our brother!"

The adult speaker in "Little Black Monkey" (110-12) also plans to kill the monkey that throws a coconut on his occiput and "placidly, wickedly" grins, but misses and decides to postpone his revenge for later: "I took up my gun and I walked away, /And postponed his death till another day."

The anthropomorphous chickens in "The Three Little Chickens Who Went Out to Tea, and the Elephant" (119-21) are not as insolent as their fellow tigers and monkeys, and perhaps this is why they are not eaten up. Still, they are portrayed as conceited and silly enough to cause their own demise; they admire themselves and ask the elephant to sing about them (among other things):

Sing of us and sing of you,
Sing of corn and barley too,
Beauteous beast with eyes of blue
  Cackle, wackle, wackle!

The ensuing violence is unmistakable, and the aggressor is, again, the adult:

Elephant next began to dance:
Capered about with a stately prance
Learned from his grandmother over in France,
  Cackle, wackle, wackle!

Fast and faster 'gan to tread,
Trod on every chicken's head,
Killed them all uncommonly dead,
Cackle, wackle, wackle!

The chickens' demand that the elephant sing about "corn and barley too" is reminiscent of the speaker in "Alice's Supper," who sings of "the finest wheat that ever did grow" and "the finest dough by near and far, /And it is for Alice's Supper, ha! ha!" This time, however, the adult figure's aggressions are not repressed, and the elephant has its revenge. If "tea-time in particular is used to dramatize states of harmony or disharmony" (Katz 193), then the social and emotional discord that is implied in "The Three Little Chickens Who Went Out to Tea" (*In My Nursery* 119-21) is colossal indeed. The tea ritual, like the cook and the uncle—all key symbols of safety and domesticity—becomes the loci of violence, where eating turns into a cannibalistic feast of vicious retribution in the hands of an adult protagonist.

Some of Richards's poems about children, although less violent, hardly portray them in a more favorable light. "Prince Tatters" (*Tirra Lirra* 45), for example, depicts a self-centered and spoiled child who drives his mother, his nurse – and eventually the whole neighborhood – berserk. Similarly, in "Higgledy-Piggledy" (*In My Nursery* 69), the child's puerile absentmindedness is juxtaposed with its consequences for his parents, who must work hard, fishing for a lost shoe (father) and mending, sewing, and ironing the son's school uniform (mother).

However, whereas in these "children" poems, Richards cautiously and shrewdly obeys the dictates of Victorian culture, old-fashioned mores are more daringly reflected in the poems where the protagonists are animals and hence eligible for hunting and eating. The contrast between Richards's rude or conceited yet powerless anthropomorphic animals and the all-powerful, almost tyrannical human-children in her poems is noteworthy. When the young animal-children are naughty, silly, or mean, Richards scarcely gives them a second chance, and upon playing a mischievous trick or simply being gullible, they are "gobbled," cooked and eaten, or simply die. By contrast, the aggression projected onto animal-children is held back when it comes to actual human-children. Notably, the aggressors in these poems are gendered male, and none of their anthropomorphic young victims evokes the Lacanian yearning for the oneness between child and mother or is charmingly and irresistibly desired (Williams 167).[4] These canniballistic or violent fantasies may be read didactically (Daniel 276); however, I do not think this is their only function. Considering the associative link between animals and children, and, again, the fact that most animals that end up dead in these poems are young (Gordon Ginzburg "There Once Was" 182), it seems that the poems can also be understood as concealing

the writer's maternal aggressions and wishful retributions.[5]

In Conclusion

Both Lear's and Richards's poems convey an adult perspective, and most consumers of risky diets in these verses are adults as well. In fact, the vast majority of Lear's characters are described as "Old," and are also illustrated as such; few are young, let along children. While food is bestowed, and more often forced, upon Lear's characters *as if they were children,* this is a vehicle for depicting adult struggles, perhaps his own, with helplessness and vulnerability. This is in contrast to Richards's poems, where food is described from the perspective of the adult whose *work* or duty it is to bestow it on the children.

Bearing in mind that both authors' food poems convey adult plights from adult perspectives, one wonders whether their classification as children's poems shouldn't be reconsidered in order to grant them the designation of adult poetry, or at least crossover poetry. In fact, until the nineteenth century and Lear, Nonsense was generally regarded as an *adult* genre; its historical origins are deeply rooted in the sophisticated world of scholarly learning, particularly in the comic tradition of mock scholarship (Malcolm 15). Perhaps we should pay serious heed to Emile Cammaerts, who declares Lear's verses to be better food for adults than for children: "It is not the child, it is the sensible man, who urgently requires the comforts and blessings of Nonsense, and it is generally he who enjoys them most" (35). Indeed, for a long time now, Lear has been more popular among a limited group of educated scholars than among the general public, especially children.[6] While this is not yet the case for the less famous Richards, such readings of her poems as this essay offers may change this state of affairs. More importantly, it may further the view of children's literature as something worthy not only to be tasted or devoured but also to be chewed and digested thoroughly.[7]

Works Cited

Cammaerts, Emile. *The Poetry of Nonsense*. Routledge, 1925.

Daniel, Carolyn. "Without Food Everything is Less than Nothing." *Food, Culture & Society*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2006, pp. 275-285.

Denisoff, Dennis. *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture.* Ashgate, 2008.

Douglas, Mary. "Deciphering a Meal." *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 1999, pp. 161-174.

Flegel, Monica. *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth Century England*. Ashgate, 1998.

Gordon Ginzburg, Etti. "Edward Lear's American 'Sister': The Nonsense Poetry of Laura E. Richards Reconsidered." *Transatlantic Conversations: Nineteenth-century American Women's Encounters with Italy and the Atlantic World*, edited by Beth L. Lueck and Sirpa Silenius, University of New Hampshire Press, 2016, pp. 287-306.

---. "'There Once Was a Lady Called Laura:' Laura E. Richards's Nonsense Poetry." *Childhood,* vol. 1, 2015, pp. 176-187.

Grylls, David. *Guardians and Angels: Parents and Children in Nineteenth-Century Literature.* Faber, 1978.

Haughton, Hugh. Introduction. *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry*, edited by Hugh Haughton. Chatto & Windus, 1998, pp. 1-32.

Katz, Wendy R. "Some Uses of Food in Children's Literature." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1980, pp. 192–99.

Lear, Edward. *Edward Lear: The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense,* edited by Vivien Noakes, Penguin, 2002.

---. *Selected Letters*, edited by Vivien Noakes, Oxford UP, 1988.

Malcolm, Noel. *The Origins of English Nonsense.* HarperCollins, 1997.

Noakes, Vivien. *Edward Lear 1812-1888.* Royal Academy of Arts, 1985.

Richards, Laura E. *In My Nursery*. 1890. Little, 1899.

---. *Tirra Lirra: Rhymes Old and New*. Little, 1932.

Rieder, John. "Edward Lear's Limericks: The Function of Children's Nonsense Poetry." *Children's Literature*, vol. 26, 1998, pp. 47-60.

Robinson, Peter. "Edward Lear: Celebrity Chef." *Edward Lear: The Play of Poetry*, edited by James Williams and Matthew Bevis. Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 115-133.

Ryan, Mary. *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity 1830-1860*. The Institute for Research in History and the Haworth Press, 1982.

Smith, Danny. Personal Interview. 28 March 2012.

Sewell, Elizabeth. *The Field of Nonsense*. Chatto, 1952.

Thomas, Joyce. "'There Was an Old Man...:' the Sense of Nonsense Verse." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly,* vol. 10, no. 3, 1985, pp. 119-122.

Williams, Karen. "'Edible' Children in Early Nineteenth Century Children's Literature." *Feast or Famine? Food and Children's Literature,* edited by Bridget Carrington and Jennifer Harding, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, pp. 165-181.

Notes

[1] Nonsense is capitalized throughout in accordance with Elizabeth Sewell's definition of capital-N Nonsense as a genre. See Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense.*

[2] Mary Douglas's approach to food aims to "discover the social boundaries which the food meanings encode by an approach which values the binary pairs according to their position in a series" (161).

[3] Unlike John Rieder, who maintains that Lear's limericks address "some of the most basic social conventions with which children struggle" (51), I suggest that these struggles, though similar to those children face, are very much Lear's own. Rieder's explanation derives from his association of "basic areas of socialization – eating, dressing, grooming, speaking, and so on" with "the kinds of tensions inherent in familial relationships" (54) but fails to acknowledge the social settings of hospitality that might have evoked similar tensions for Lear.

[4] Nor do Richards's "edible children" have to do with adult exploitation, as Monica Flegel suggests (1998), or with children as consumers (Denisoff 2008).

[5] Such aggressive contents are indeed "incongruous with nineteenth-century American notions of maternity"; however, "at a time that associated motherhood with tenderness and childhood with naiveté, there was no other way the American Victorians could classify Richards's buoyant yet disturbing poems except as nonsense if they were to accept her poetic offerings" (Gordon Ginzburg, "There Once Was" 182).

[6] Regarding Lear's reception into the (adult) canon and Richards's exclusion from it, see Gordon Ginzburg's "Edward Lear's American 'Sister': The Nonsense Poetry of Laura E. Richards Reconsidered."

[7] The allusion is of course to Francis Bacon's famous aphorism: "Some books should be tasted, some devoured, but only a few should be chewed and digested thoroughly."