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Taking Chardin's Kitchen Maids Seriously

Abstract

Historically, Jean-Siméon Chardin's *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market* have been characterized as austere images of middle-class virtue. However, the engravings made after these paintings include verses that place the paintings within the satirical tradition. Thus, there is a misalignment between the canonical interpretation of Chardin's kitchen maids as virtuous and the satirical understanding of these paintings. I reconcile these two contradictory interpretations by offering a feminist reinterpretation of Chardin's *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market*, juxtaposing the prints and their satirical verses and considering the female viewer. In my analysis, I focus on small, disquieting details that seem to be out of place in Chardin's oeuvre, the effect of stopped time within these paintings, and the women's expressions. From these details, I argue that Chardin's women are neither the one-dimensional figures of domestic bliss nor the comedic stereotype, but rather women with agency, offering a feminist reinterpretation of these canonical works.

Keywords

Chardin, kitchen maid, The Kitchen Maid, Return from the Market, print, print culture, servant, maid

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Cover Page Footnote

This paper arises from my MA qualifying paper and previous versions were presented at the Williams Qualifying Symposium in 2016 and the Feminist Art History Conference in 2018. I am grateful for the helpful comments that I received at both conferences and particularly from Jay Clarke and Marc Gotlieb, who advised my qualifying paper. I also want to thank Anna Lovatt and Amy Freund for their thoughtful advice in the later stages of crafting this article. Finally, I want to thank the reviewers for their helpful commentary and recommendations.

A woman sits on a wooden chair in a stark interior. She hunches slightly, leaning forward and resting on her forearms, a knife in her right hand and a turnip in her left. With a blank look on her face, she takes a break from the dull task of peeling vegetables. A solid figure, she evokes a sense of stability. The lower part of her body is comprised of a weighty cube, from which the pyramidal structure of her torso emerges. Her clothing—a bulky brown top with a white apron and a voluminous skirt—obscures her womanly form. A bonnet hides her hair and shields her face. Her figure is hefty and unmoving, with a gravity that weighs down upon her body. If she were to stand up however, she would likely break out of the canvas, of which she comprises half the surface. She is unaware of our gaze as we look upon her monumental figure. Stoic, diligent, and respectable—this is Jean-Siméon Chardin's *The Kitchen Maid* (1738) as we think we know her (figure 1).



Figure 1: Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Kitchen Maid* (*La Ratisseuse*), 1738. Oil on canvas, 46.2 cm by 37.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection, www.nga.gov.



Figure 2: François Bernard Lépicié after Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Kitchen Maid* (*La Ratisseuse*), 1742. Engraving, 37.1 cm by 25.8 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art. © Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953, www.metmuseum.org.

However, the print made after this painting presents an entirely different picture (figure 2). The moralizing couplet accompanying the print rather indicates that this kitchen maid may be attempting to poison her master:

When our ancestors took from the hands of nature,
These vegetables, guaranteed in their simplicity,
The art of making a poison of our food
Had not yet been invented.
Quand nos ayeux tenoient des mains de la nature,
Ces légumes, garants de leur simplicité,
L'art de faire un poison de notre nourriture
N'étoit point encore inventé. [Lépicié, qtd on print])

This disconnect between paint and print appears in Chardin's *Return from the Market* (1738) as well (figure 3). In this painting, the maid is composed of simple shapes, wears conservative clothing, and is hard at work, burdened by two large loaves of bread and a bag containing a leg of lamb. She too takes up a significant portion of the canvas's surface, her sturdy figure the focus of the scene. Furthermore, Chardin's perspectival scheme forces his viewers to look up at her, placing her in a position of respect, even as she is unaware of our gaze upon her. The print after this painting, however, implies that that she is a thief (figure 4):

By your air, I guess and I believe,
My dear child without doing any calculations,
That you took from the expenditures,
What you needed to buy your clothes.
(A votre air j'estime et je pense,
Ma chère enfant sans calculer,
Que vous prenez sur la dépense,
Ce qu'il faut pour vous habiller. [Lépicié, qtd on print])



Figure 3: Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Return from the Market (La Pourvoyeuse)*, 1738, oil on canvas, 46.7 cm by 37.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa © NGC



Figure 4: François Bernard Lépicié after Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Return from the Market (La Pourvoyeuse)*, 1742. Engraving, 37 x 25.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art. © Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953, www.metmuseum.org.

Historically, Chardin's paintings of women have been interpreted in this first manner, as paintings that depict little more than what they show—benevolent mothers, dedicated governesses, and hard-working maids, all as models of Enlightenment virtue.¹ Furthermore, the moralizing interpretations that the prints promote, which has its roots in Netherlandish painting, have largely been ignored despite the strong association between Chardin and Dutch painting in his own era.² With this paper, I examine both interpretations and how they align with the social history of the eighteenth-century kitchen maid. Then I seriously consider the prints after *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market*, not only as indicators of how the prints were understood in their own time, but also for what they point us to in the original paintings that may have been overlooked. Furthermore, I consider the differences in viewership between paintings and

prints and how this could impact who we understand the viewers of Chardin's works to be. With this alternative perspective, I argue that Chardin's paintings of kitchen maids allow for a feminist interpretation focused on the agency of these women.

Born in 1699 to a Parisian cabinetmaker, Chardin began his artistic career studying drawing with Pierre-Jacques Cazes and painting with Noël-Nicolas Coypel before becoming a master in the artist guild of Saint Luke in 1724. In 1728, Chardin was presented and received on the same day into the *Académie royale de peinture et sculpture* as a still-life painter. He had a successful career as an academician, eventually becoming an officer of the Academy in 1743, receiving a pension from the King in 1752, becoming elected as treasurer of the Academy in 1755, and being rewarded with studio and lodging in the Louvre that same year, where he resided until his death in 1779.³

The historiography begins with Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, prominent French writers whose rediscovery of Chardin in the late nineteenth century cemented his place in the art historical canon. In their own words, Chardin was the painter of "...the simple and pure figures of the bourgeoisie, hard at work, happy in their tranquility, their labor and their obscurity" ("...les simples et pures figures de la bourgeoisie de peine et de travail, heureuse dans sa paix, son labeur, et son obscurité" [1:121]). In reference specifically to *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market*, the Goncourts noted that Chardin's kitchen maids were austere, and that his paintings depict bourgeois life in "the happiness of its hard existence, and its modest pleasures" ("C'est toute la vie de la bourgeoisie que Chardin déroule ainsi... le contentement de sa dure existence, ses voluptés modestes..." [1:122-123]).

Over one hundred years later, Thomas Crow continued with this interpretation. In his influential text, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (1985), Crow characterizes Chardin's genre scenes as "cleaned up" versions of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings that eliminate the low humor and unpleasant moralizing, despite the presence of this in the genre prints (136-137). In more recent scholarship (2007), Crow allows for these genre paintings to take on a role in Chardin's life as evocations of his supposed Jansenism, but he does not consider these paintings to have any sort of deeper meaning than a simple portrayal of hard-working domestic servants and sweet bourgeois women. In fact, his argument rests upon a rejection of other interpretations, particularly moralizing interpretations of Chardin's genre scenes ("Chardin at the Edge of Belief" 100).

Chardin scholarship in recent decades has shifted towards reading the works of art through Enlightenment philosophy, with the strongest challenges to this traditional interpretation of his kitchen maids as bourgeois ideals having come recently. Paula Radisich sets out to dispel precisely this reading in her 2013 book on Chardin's genre scenes, *Pastiche, Fashion and Galanterie in Chardin's Genre Subjects*. With her book, Radisich argues that rather than depicting real life, Chardin's genre scenes are highly constructed images arising from seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings that speak to the "goût moderne" and Chardin's own *esprit* or wit. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, in her 2018 publication, *The Painter's Touch*, focuses on these paintings not for their subject matter but for what they tell us about Chardin himself. She envisions these genre scenes as "an opportunity [for Chardin] to reimagine himself... to reconfigure the relation between object, canvas, and his own body, ultimately providing him with the framework within which to envision himself as an embodied self" (123). While this innovative approach is certainly an intervention into the scholarship on Chardin, Lajer-Burcharth views these women only as a means for Chardin to understand his own interiority, robbing these women of meaning outside of the artist's body. Nevertheless, Lajer-Burcharth's visual analysis provides new avenues for interpreting Chardin's kitchen maids.

In order to understand how these paintings may have been understood in their own time, I turn to the social history of servant and employer relations. In eighteenth-century France, many households relied upon domestic servants, and many women and men relied upon domestic servitude to make ends meet. According to Sean Takats in his 2011 publication *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France*, there were anywhere from 40,000 to 100,000 domestic servants in Paris at this time—the largest occupational category in a city with a total population of about 600,000 (13). Most homes that employed a domestic servant hired a single woman who worked as a general-purpose maid, both in the kitchen and outside of it (Takats 16). In the kitchen, these maids were not only responsible for preparing food but also for keeping the books, doing the shopping for both food and kitchen implements, cleaning the kitchen, and keeping their employers safe from toxins (Takats 66-68, 73-81, 130).⁴

Thus, the relationship between the domestic servant and the employer required an element of trust and responsibility, and character was the single most important element of a woman's qualification to be hired as a domestic servant (Takats 22-24). Despite this reality of the morally upstanding kitchen maid, popular literature and imagery of the time presented her as a wholly immoral. So where do Chardin's depictions of kitchen maids fit into this trope? By turning to the popular

culture version of Chardin's paintings—engravings after his paintings—we see that his previously diligent and virtuous depictions of kitchen maids now participate in these same negative stereotypes.

Genre prints, engravings after genre paintings, were popular in the eighteenth century.⁵ However, there was general disagreement regarding the degree to which these genre prints should be considered faithful copies of their original paintings. In the *Encyclopédie* entry on engraving, Claude-Henri Watelet wrote that engravings were generally faithful to the original work of art and that they should be interpreted as such (7:888). The prominent art critic Étienne de La Font de Saint Yenne disagreed, arguing that “most prints were unfaithful translations of excellent originals, where one finds neither the soul, the life, nor the true thoughts of the artist” (“Sans ce mérite que seroient-elles, que ce que sont la plupart des Estampes, d’infidelles traductions d’excellens originaux, où l’on ne trouve ni ame, ni vie, ni la vraie pensée de l’auteur?” [180]).

With regards to Chardin, the famed critic Denis Diderot claimed in his 1761 Salon review that the engravings after Chardin's works were faithful to his paintings:

Chardin has originality in his genre. This originality extends from his paintings to his engravings. Once you have seen one of his pictures, ... you can always recognize them. (“Chardin a de l’originalité dans son genre. Cette originalité passe de sa peinture dans la gravure. Quand on a vu un de ses tableaux, ... on le reconnaît partout.” [125]).

Thus, Diderot asserted that there is a truthfulness or authenticity in the translated image or subject matter of the engraving, that these prints adhere to the meaning derived from the painting they were made after.⁶ Regardless, engravers, sometimes working with the original artist and sometimes not, often deviated from the original composition of the painting to change the meaning or correct the image.⁷ They might include little verses as well to add entertainment value or to steer the viewer's interpretation in a certain direction. Chardin's beloved genre paintings certainly did not escape the burin of engravers, nor the narrative captions and verses added to them, raising the question as to whether or not these engravings are faithful depictions of the surface reading of Chardin's paintings or whether they add a new element to their interpretation.

The role of these engravings and the degree to which these verses are considered when analyzing paintings is still debated amongst scholars today. Art historians

have traditionally condemned the practice of rereading Chardin's paintings through the frame of the moralizing quatrains added to his paintings by engravers. Rather, these scholars tend to write off these verses and maintain their belief that Chardin's works reflect idealized middle-class virtues such as simplicity, hard work, and morality. For example, in *Painters and Public Life*, Crow argues that the prints after Chardin's paintings trivialized their true meaning by textualizing them and setting them within the moral tradition of Dutch and Flemish paintings. In Crow's opinion, Chardin has purposefully removed these moralizing references to the world outside his interiors. Crow contends that these paintings remain true to their innocent and non-trivialized forms despite the addition of these quatrains (136-138).⁸ Paula Radisich dispels this interpretation of Chardin, arguing that his work is fully rooted in the seventeenth-century Dutch tradition, as "pastiche," or purposeful imitations. In the case of *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market*, Radisich cites the Dutch tropes of servants peeling vegetables and the eavesdropper, respectively. Furthermore, Radisich uses the verses from the reproductive prints as further evidence of her argument that Chardin's genre scenes are rooted in the Dutch tradition and are meant to be understood as contrived scenes of the *goût moderne* (34-35, 47-49, 75-77).⁹

Following Radisich, I argue that these quatrains should not simply be ignored when considering Chardin's depictions of kitchen maids in particular, but rather they should be used alongside the paintings to analyze their shared image. First, as Watelet, La Font, and Mariette have all shown, it is likely that Chardin's contemporaries knew his genre paintings primarily through the prints after them, regardless of how true to the original image each writer believed the engravings to be. These genre prints were even owned and displayed as art pieces themselves. Madame de Pompadour displayed a copy of Lépicié's print after *Return from the Market* under glass (Radisich 77). Most of Chardin's genre paintings quickly entered private collections and were borrowed by Chardin to be displayed at Salons. His genre paintings were often only shown at a single Salon, which lasted a mere six weeks.¹⁰ In later years after he stopped painting genre scenes, Chardin would still display some genre paintings at the Salons and often in conjunction with the exhibition of the prints made after the displayed paintings (Radisich, 152).¹¹ This practice of dual display indicates both the popularity of Chardin's prints and the strong connection between the paintings and the engravings. As such, these verses could shed light on the apparent contradiction between the contemporary understanding of Chardin's paintings of kitchen maids as dignified and diligent workers and the eighteenth-century popular stereotype of the morally depraved domestic worker.

Furthermore, Chardin was involved in the process of making prints after his own paintings. In at least one case, he asked the patron of two of his genre scenes for permission to engrave the paintings before sending them to her, remarking that “these two paintings will be lost to France and one owes something to his nation” (“comme ses deux tableaux seront perdus pour la France Et que L’on doit quelle que Chose à sa nation...” Letter from Chardin to Count Tessin, October 1746, reprinted in Rosenberg, *Chardin, 1699-1779* [387]). Not only did Chardin commission the engravings, but he found it important to do so in order to provide an account of his work to those in France. The engravers were also often close colleagues of his, such as François Bernard Lépicier who engraved the prints after both *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market*.¹² Moreover, Lépicier, who was also a poet, wrote the verses for both of these engravings himself (Sjöberg, 364). As Lépicier did work closely with Chardin when making an engraving after one of his works, Chardin was likely aware of these verses before publication. Because there is no indication that Chardin condemned these alternative interpretations of his paintings, it is possible that Chardin did not have a strong opinion on the inclusion of the epigraphs, or he could have outright approved of the verses, which is a distinct possibility as the prints with verses likely added interest for the buyer and caused these prints to sell better on the market (Schroder, 69, 72-73).¹³

Another reason for seriously considering the prints, these engravings serve as the primary source of contemporary criticism regarding these two paintings by Chardin, both of which were only ever exhibited to the public in the Salon of 1739. Published criticism on Chardin from this salon is limited, and most of the attention was lavished upon Chardin’s *The Governess*. The most telling criticism comes from Jean-Florent-Joseph de Neufville de Brunaubois-Montador who noted that *Return from the Market* was very popular that year, and he praises it as “the most correct depiction of this type that [he] knew of” (“On aime tout ce qu’il produit; mais ce qui semble avoir la preference cette année, est *une Cuisiniere revenant de la boucherie & de marché au pain*. C’est bien le caractère le plus correct que je connoisse.” [8-9]). However, no other contemporary criticism refers directly to *The Kitchen Maid* or *Return from the Market*, other than criticism that merely acknowledges their existence at the Salon. Thus, the popular engravings after Chardin’s paintings become the most prominent indicator of their popularity and contemporary interpretation. Lépicier made his engravings after both of these paintings in 1742 and advertised in the *Mercure de France* in November 1742 for *Return from the Market* (2506-2507) and in January 1743 for *The Kitchen Maid* (148-149). Both advertisements include the verse added to the engraving and acknowledge Lépicier as the author. Although including these verses in the advertisements was not unusual, this practice does emphasize the importance of

these verses in the contemporary understanding of the image and the image's popularity. Furthermore, other similar advertisements for Lépicié's engravings after Chardin in the *Mercure de France* indicate that Lépicié's verses explain Chardin's paintings.¹⁴

In the case of both paintings, the quatrains implore the viewer to reconsider Chardin's original paintings, calling for a reinterpretation of Chardin's supposedly quiet domestic scenes and happy homes through the popular imagery of his time. These added verses shed light on the apparent contradiction between the canonical understanding of Chardin's kitchen maids as dignified and diligent workers and the eighteenth-century stereotype of the immoral domestic servant. Thus, these engravings certainly call for a second look at Chardin's works. Reading Chardin's paintings through the lens of the verses that negatively stereotype domestic servants highlight alternate interpretations of his paintings—interpretations that align more closely with the popular negative stereotype of kitchen maids.

When we look closely at the print, the verse that Lépicié's added to his engraving after Chardin's *Return from the Market* reads:

By your air, I guess and I believe,
My dear child without doing any calculations,
That you took from the expenditures,
What you needed to buy your clothes.
(A votre air j'estime et je pense,
Ma chère enfant sans calculer,
Que vous prenez sur la dépense,
Ce qu'il faut pour vous habiller. [Lépicié, qtd on print])

Lépicié implies that this kitchen maid in her fancier dress has embezzled money that was meant for the purchase of food and kitchen supplies, that she has “shoed the mule,” even though kitchen maids were required to dress well (Radisich, 77). The kitchen maid here has just returned from the market, and she would have likely overseen settling accounts with vendors and keeping ledgers of the kitchen's expenses. Because these tasks all fell to her, it would have been easy for the kitchen maid to steal from her master's accounts. Theft was a real concern and *vol domestique* (domestic theft) was a capital crime in eighteenth-century France. Domestic servants could and did hang for stealing from their masters (Takats, 88-91).

For example, the 1740 play *La Maltôte des Cuisinières, ou la Manière de Bien Ferrer la Mule* (*The Cooks' Illicit Tax, or the Manner of Shoeing the Mule Well*)¹⁵ sets up a dialogue between an older female cook and a young female cook. The older servant claims to have embezzled over 3,000 *livres* from their master by inflating the price of items purchased in the accounting ledgers that she presents to their employer and pocketing the difference in addition to outright theft. She then schemes with the younger servant, teaching her to do the same. The elder woman tells the younger one, “avenge yourself! . . . It is a rather sad and harsh fate/ to be reduced to a life of servitude” (“Vengez-vous! . . . C’est une destine et bien triste et bien rude/ Que de se voir reduite à vivre en servitude” [n.p.]). This story illustrates the popular trope of cooks and domestic servants as thieves and even goes a step further by indicating that theft was not committed out of economic necessity or as a perk of the job, as Sarah Maza suggests in her study on eighteenth-century servitude, but rather that it was a form of vengeance for servants who were displeased with their low lots in life (101-103). Although this theme of theft is not so boldly apparent in Chardin’s painting, this quatrain has turned this image into one of the wickedness of the kitchen maid.

The kitchen maid’s more embellished garb, however, is not the only possible indication of wrongdoing in Chardin’s painting. Upon second look, there are potential indications of both drunkenness and lascivious behavior. A wine bottle on the bottom right of the painting is tipped over, a detail that becomes more prominent in Lépicier’s engraving due to his decision to brighten that corner of Chardin’s painting, allowing the wine bottles, which previously disappeared into the dark background, to become a prominent feature of the engraving. The upturned wine bottle in the pantry implies that it has been opened and drunk, not by the master, but by the servants in the pantry. Not only does this reinforce the accusation of theft in this kitchen—as drinking the master’s wine would be theft of his property—but it also implies that one or both female servants are drunkards, which a virtuous kitchen maid certainly is not.¹⁶

Likewise, the caption that Lépicier has added to his engraving after Chardin’s painting of *The Kitchen Maid* implores us to look for a more sinister image in Chardin’s painting by implying that this woman preparing vegetables is poisoning her master:

When our ancestors took from the hands of nature,
 These vegetables, guaranteed in their simplicity,
 The art of making a poison of our food
 Had not yet been invented.
 Quand nos ayeux tenoient des mains de la nature,

Ces légumes, garants de leur simplicité,
L'art de faire un poison de notre nourriture
N'étoit point encore inventé. [Lépicier, qtd on print])

Looking again at the painting, violence appears in his *Kitchen Maid*: the sharp, ominous cleaver jutting out of the butcher's board to the maid's left with the blood still pooling on its surface. This sort of violent reference is generally considered rather rare in Chardin's œuvre—even his hunting still lifes rarely depict blood so overtly. One could say that the ray's entrails spilling out of its body in Chardin's *The Ray* (1725-1726) is gory, but it is not violent in that it avoids reference to the acts of gutting the fish (figure 5).



Figure 5: Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Ray (La Raie)*, 1725-1726, oil on canvas, 114 cm by 146 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Angèle Dequier. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

There was also a real fear in the eighteenth century that kitchen maids were purposefully killing their masters. This fear became especially pronounced when cooks began to claim that they were able to regulate appetite and digestion

through food preparation, which came with the rise of *la cuisine bourgeois* after the publication of François Menon's *La Cuisinière bourgeoise* (1746), an easy-to-follow and thrifty cookbook for the household with one to two women working in the kitchen (Takats, 130; Pinkard, 177-178). In a review of this cookbook, the *Journal de Trévoux* defined contemporary cooking as an assassin art that hides a subtle poison underneath a pleasant sensation, further inciting this fear ("Mais cette moderation est-elle donc si aisée, lorsqu'un art assassin cache un poison subtil sous une sensation agréable?" [1992]). Furthermore, the *Encyclopédie* made mention of the tendency for domestic cooks to poison their masters. In the entry "*Assaisonnement*" on the seasoning of foods, the author stated that, our domestic chemists work ceaselessly to poison us ("...nos chimistes domestiques, travaillent cesse a nous empoisonner" [1:765]). While poison in this context was also used to refer to overly elaborate and unwholesome cooking, the language of poisoning shifts the fault to the kitchen maid or cook and implicates her conscious participation in the deadly act.¹⁷

A 2012 essay by Ewa Lajer-Burcharth argues in favor of understanding Chardin's genre scenes as violent images. She contends that Chardin's genre scenes are marked by a sense of formal and temporal interruption and division that lend an air of suspense and violence to his scenes, such as the dangling turnip in *The Kitchen Maid*. In this painting, our seemingly virtuous servant may in fact be the assassin, plotting to kill her master for revenge due to her poor lot in life, like the *vielle cuisinière* in *La Maltôte des Cuisinières* (1724) albeit in a more violent manner than embezzlement. Lajer-Burcharth also points to Chardin's brushstrokes and unique painting style as an element of violence in *The Kitchen Maid*: "she peels and plucks, he scratches and scrapes" ("Elle pince et pèle, il érafle et racle." ["Chardin Cruel," 182]). This harshness in Chardin's manner did not go unnoticed in his own time. Just one year before he displayed this work of art, Neufville de Brunaubois-Montador commented on his technique: "His style of painting is his own: it doesn't have fine lines and his brushstrokes are not blended; on the contrary, they are raw and rough" ("Son goût de peintre est à lui seul: ce ne sont pas des traits finis, ce n'est pas une touché fonduë; c'est au contraire du brute, du raboteux." [n.p.]).

The verses undoubtedly rise from the satiric tradition of the morally depraved kitchen maid, which aligns the understanding of these images in their own time more closely with the negative stereotype as opposed to the canonical interpretation of the virtuous woman at work, but there is a misalignment between these two modes. Certainly, these images are not only satirical. However, the satire tells us that the traditional interpretation of bourgeois simplicity is ahistorical. Instead Chardin's paintings depict women, not as obedient subjects for

our visual enjoyment, but as self-sufficient women, independent actors in their own scenes.

Beginning with *Return from the Market*, recall that Lépicié's verse indicated that this woman was stealing from her employer while she was doing the shopping. Although little in the painting serves to confirm this, it implores us to reexamine the scene and turns our attention to the act of shopping and women who shop. Enlightenment thought and ideals placed women firmly in the domestic sphere, with an ideal of feminine respectability, perhaps the same respectability that led to the traditional, surface-level reading of Chardin's genre paintings. However, the reality was that women did enter the public sphere and did so quite often, but when they did so, they had to be cognizant of the image of themselves that they produced: how they acted, how they appeared, how others would perceive of them (Hyde and Milam, 7-8). The kitchen maid going to the market was no exception, as her moral character was tantamount to her employment. She can leave the confines of the home, of domesticity, but domesticity does not leave her. Nevertheless, she gains an economic power in this act of shopping. As Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, eighteenth-century women who made purchases, domestic women, were an influential group in the modern economic era precisely because of their role as buyers. The kitchen maid in Chardin's painting has become the provider, the *pourvoyeuse* of the French title, and we might even reconsider her dress as a sign of the modern era and her financial success, not from theft but from hard work.

At this moment, we clearly see the kitchen maid has just returned. She has not even been able to put down what she has bought. She perhaps appears tired, but she has turned her head slightly towards the scene in the back because just as she has returned, a faceless man has appeared at the door, his unseen body echoed by the cistern with its flaccid spigot. This mysterious figure in the background amplifies the ambiguity of this scene. Is this man known, or is he an unwanted visitor? Did she interrupt a lurid scene between the man and the other kitchen maid, or has he just arrived as well? Perhaps this man indicates her own impropriety, and that she returned not directly from the market but from a tryst, or even perhaps he has followed her without her consent, highlighting the dangers that come with leaving the house on one's own.

In popular literature and in painting, the kitchen maid was often depicted as a seductress, employing kitchen-related sexual innuendos. The 1757 play *L'Ancienne et nouvelle cuisine* referred to the seductive kitchen maid in her element: "This steam is increasing her charms" (qtd. in Takats, 55). A brief fictional story from 1789 about a pretty cook by Rétif de la Bretonne reprises the theme of the promiscuous kitchen maid. In this account, a master instructs his young cook to maintain her purity. These words of warning however were meant to mask the master's true intentions to exploit the young cook himself. This



Figure 6: François Boucher, *La Belle Cuisinière*, before 1735, oil on panel, 55.5 cm by 43.2 cm, Musée Cognacq-Jay, Paris. Photo: Bulloz. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

scheme backfires on the master, as she uses her relations with him and her feigned naiveté ultimately to marry him. This text indicates that not only were kitchen maids thought of as overtly sexual beings, but that the blame for any inappropriate sexual interaction lay with her, despite the clear power imbalance.

The licentious kitchen maid also appears in popular imagery, such as paintings and engravings, which were frequently accompanied by little poems that highlight the inappropriate behavior. For example, one popular genre scene, *La Belle Cuisinière* (1735), by François Boucher, one of the most well-known genre painters of the era, depicts a young kitchen maid standing between the legs of a man (figure 6). The male figure, with his breeches hiked up and his stockings pushed down, grasps the young maid's hand and apron in his left hand and guides her toward him with his right,

which is placed forcefully on the back of her neck. His eyes, level with her voluptuous bosom, gaze invitingly up at her. The kitchen maid seems to be leaning away, but she smiles down at him, humoring his desires while feigning innocence, entirely unaware of the eggs falling from her apron. One of these eggs has already tumbled onto the floor and cracked open, perhaps indicating that her virginity and virtue may no longer be intact, which is emphasized even more by the broken egg's proximity to the phallic cucumber on the kitchen floor. Furthermore, the kitchen is in a state of complete disarray. Vegetables and kitchen implements are strewn all over the floor. A rag hangs from the sill of the cabinet

on the right. A cat has even started to eat a bird, presumably intended for the master's dinner. The chaos and dishevelment of the kitchen reflects upon the character of the young woman as well—a dirty and disorderly kitchen is indicative of an immoral cook.

Boucher's painting alone exemplifies the stereotype of the lascivious kitchen maid, but when it was translated into a print for the wider market, verses were added emphasizing the cook's promiscuous behavior. One engraving after *La Belle Cuisinière* (1735, figure 7) includes the following verse below Boucher's image:

Your eggs are falling, Mathurine,
 This omen is bad for you
 The ribald in your kitchen
 Wants you to break them all.
 (“Vos oeufs s'echapent Mathurine
 Ce présage est mauvais pour vous,
 Ce grivois dans votre cuisine
 Pouroit bien vous les casser tous.”

[qtd on print])

This little epigraph highlights the sexual innuendo of the broken egg and the potential for lewd acts.¹⁸ Furthermore, the already phallic cucumber takes on an even more sexualized form in print. Various engravings after Boucher's *La Belle Cuisinière* (1735) circulated widely throughout France, indicating their popularity. The *Mercure de France* noted in April 1735 that one of these reproductions was sold with great success (“Se vend avec un très-grand succès.” [737]). Further mentions of these reproductions in the *Mercure de France* in June 1737 and June 1738 reveal their sustained popularity (Takats, 52-54).

It is much more unclear in Chardin's painting whether the kitchen maid is the perpetrator or the victim of potential sexual impropriety. Regardless, the man's appearance prompts the question: what will happen next? The kitchen maid's expression seems frozen in time. As though caught in a moment of bated breath, pausing to listen to the intruder at the back door, a moment with potential for violence. However, she would be the one to act, for she commands this scene. She



Figure 7: Pierre Alexandre Aveline, after François Boucher, *La Belle Cuisinière*, c. 1735, engraving, 42 cm by 34.3 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Thierry Le Mage. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

is the dominant figure, the larger and more robust of the two, and perhaps the only one aware of all three actors. Furthermore, the intruder's manhood, reflected in the cistern's flaccid spigot, has wilted, no longer a threat, shifting the agency from the male intruder to the kitchen maid.

The empowerment of the woman in *The Kitchen Maid* is even more direct. As we recall, Lépicié's verse accused this woman of poisoning her employers, which once again urges us to look for a more sinister image. In the moments leading up to this one, something interrupted the kitchen maid and grabbed her attention to the point where she stopped her task. While this pause in her work is often interpreted as taking a break from the dull work of peeling turnips, her face indicates her attention is focused elsewhere. With eyebrows raised, she stares ahead of her, cautiously, waiting, once again as if holding her breath. Other elements of the painting further emphasize both the suspense and the violence embedded into this image. In her hand, the dangling turnip, itself a phallic reference much akin to the cucumber in Boucher's painting, has stopped mid-swing, accentuating this moment of anticipation. The orange-brown hue of dried blood is smeared on the kitchen maid's otherwise white apron.¹⁹ Blood also drips down the side of the butcher's block. As our attention is drawn to the butcher's block, we suddenly realized that she used that cleaver, and she whacked its threatening blade back into the stump without any indication of what she has butchered. Turning back to the kitchen maid herself, she holds her knife erect in front of her lap with its blade jutting out defensively, a substitute phallus of her own, with which she has already skinned the phallic turnip and with which she protects herself.

In *The Painter's Touch* (2018), Ewa Lajer-Burcharth's interpretations of Chardin's kitchen maids also hinge on these same moments of suspense—the pendulous medallion around the servant's neck, the swing of the leg of lamb, and the dangling turnip—as well as the facial expressions of these two kitchen maids. This pendant imagery stops time, bringing focus on the objects within the paintings, everyday objects that would have been part of Chardin's daily life (125-126). Furthermore, the women's facial expressions, rather than being blank, also demonstrate this stoppage in time, as concentrated looks, highlighting the suspense of the stopped pendants. These moments of stopped motion puncture the thin veil of middle-class morality and diligence. In stopping time and allowing for close observation, these paintings interrupt this illusion, whether by enacting violence upon these women or allowing these women to break out of the mold of their characters and their domestic roles. This freeze in time also creates moments of potential for action, and the agency has shifted entirely to the kitchen maid in both scenes.

What happens when we consider a female viewer, as Mary Sheriff has implored us to do, specifically a female viewer who might see herself reflected in these images, unmediated by the artist's lived experience or another man's interpretation of female experience?²⁰ While this question is likely unanswerable through the written record, eighteenth-century women looked at images, including women from lower classes. With the popularity of prints, their widespread availability, and their presence of prints in working class homes (as close to two thirds of working-class homes displaying prints by the middle of the eighteenth century), it becomes even more reasonable to consider a female viewer who herself may have been a domestic servant (Pardailhé-Galabrun, 154). Contrary to the traditional male viewer whose perspective forces women in the role of either saint (the innocent and virtuous kitchen maid of the Goncourts) or sinner (the immoral stereotype of the quatrains), the female viewer in the eighteenth century and in our time can chart a middle course. This feminist understanding arises from the discord between the two polarizing interpretations and through visual analysis focused on the women's expressions and on the pendant effect. These women move beyond satirical figures and beyond exemplars of Enlightenment virtue, absorbed in their own work. These women are solid beings with an undeniable, almost forceful presence.

Reading Chardin's paintings through the prints made after them reminds us that art historians must consider those sources and perspectives outside of the traditional avenues of study in order to fully comprehend the canonical, what we think we already know. In order to truly understand the paintings, we must continue to investigate the prints as well. Furthermore, my argument considers the non-canonical viewer, the female viewer, rather than assuming a male viewer, an academic viewer, the viewpoint of the artist, or even the perspective of the woman as mediated through the man or male experience, allowing us to think more about class and gender in the eighteenth century. In light of this reinterpretation of Chardin's paintings, we might reconsider his entire oeuvre, not only from a female perspective but also through even more serious consideration of the prints. To truly understand Chardin's canonical paintings, we must consider non-canonical sources and non-male viewers.

Notes

¹ The majority of Chardin's genre scenes of women depict bourgeois women in fine domestic interiors or more trusted servants such as governesses. While he painted a few other paintings depicting the kitchen, these two paintings are the ones that have become standouts within the Chardin scholarship. For general resources on eighteenth-century genre painting, see the exhibition catalogues for *Intimate Encounters: Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century France* and *The Age of Watteau, Chardin, and Fragonard: Masterpieces of French Genre Painting*. For works specifically on Chardin's genre paintings, see the 2000 exhibition catalogue *Chardin*, edited by Rosenberg, and Radisich, *Pastiche, Fashion, and Galanterie in Chardin's Genre Subjects*. For more on Chardin as an Enlightenment artist in addition to the above, see Crow, "Chardin at the Edge of Belief," and Johnson, "Picturing Pedagogy: Education and the Child in the Paintings of Chardin."

² In his own time, Chardin was often likened to the Flemish painter David Teniers. Furthermore, in the legend of Chardin's entry into the Académie, he tricked Nicolas Largillière into thinking Chardin's own paintings were those of a Dutch master. For more on the connection between Chardin and Dutch painting, see Snoep-Reitsma, "Chardin and the Bourgeois Ideals of his Time;" Crow, *Painters and Public Life*; Radisich, *Pastiche, Fashion, and Galanterie in Chardin's Genre Subjects*; and Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter's Touch*.

³ For a more extensive biography of Chardin, see the many catalogues raisonnés detailing his life and work: Wildenstein, *Chardin* (1933); Wildenstein, *Chardin: Catalogue Raisonné* (this 1969 edition has been translated to English but does not contain the plethora of additional sources that the 1933 edition contains); Rosenberg, *Tout l'œuvre peint de Chardin*. While it is the oldest, I recommend Wildenstein's 1933 catalogue raisonné as he also reprints letters from, to, and about Chardin and published criticism of Chardin's works. For an easy-to-read biography of Chardin, see Rosenberg and Prigent, *Chardin: An Intimate Art*. Most recently, Lajer-Burcharth's section on Chardin in *The Painter's Touch* provides an in-depth biography, especially of the artist's childhood and training years.

⁴ Keeping an employer safe from toxins was not just an irrational fear of an external party poisoning food, but actually arose from the potential toxicity of cooking with copper kitchen implements, which could lead to poisoning if not maintained correctly. For a more thorough discussion of this concern, see Takats's discussion of maintaining copper pots and pans in *The Expert Cook* (73-76).

⁵ While documents relating to the sale of prints are not available across the eighteenth century, see Pierre Casselle's analysis of the sales records of the Parisian print dealer Vallée and Anne Schroder's analysis of *Mercure de France* advertisements for statistics on the print market and the prevalence of genre prints in the second half of eighteenth-century France.

⁶ It is important to acknowledge that Diderot was writing his Salon criticism primarily for foreign art collectors who may have only known a painter through engravings after his work prior to purchasing or commissioning a painting. Therefore, it would have been important for Diderot to assure his readers that what they see in the engravings is what they will get in paint.

⁷ Aside from reproducing the inverse of the image, the engravers after Chardin tended to alter Chardin's original paintings very little in their reproductions of his works.

⁸ Like Crow, Pierre Rosenberg and Renaud Temperini denounced the addition of these verses to Chardin's paintings, claiming that the verses do not align with Chardin's intentions and are more sentimental and moralizing than Chardin's paintings. They argue that Chardin avoided the portrayal of "quaint poverty" (72) and disliked condescending images of lower-class workers, such as those found in the Dutch tradition. Specifically highlighting *The Kitchen Maid*, Rosenberg

and Temperini insist that Chardin did not intend to illustrate an anecdote but simply portrayed a servant girl allowing her mind to wander during her monotonous task (81, 94, 101). Some scholars, such as Norman Bryson and Philip Conisbee, do refer to these engravings, but they tend to distance themselves from the quatrains while still acknowledging the print (Bryson, 112-115). For example, Philip Conisbee considers the verses attached to Lépicié's engravings after *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market* in particular. Regarding the former, Conisbee accepts the addition of the verse as relevant to Chardin's painting but argues that this addition stems from the Dutch and Flemish tradition rather than Chardin's own work. Conisbee cites the orderly kitchen space and the well-dressed and composed maid as his pictorial reasons for arguing against the Dutch trope of the idle kitchen maid. With regards to *Return from the Market*, Conisbee outright dismisses Lépicié's verse as unrelated to Chardin's original painting, further adding that in general these verses added to these genre scenes are misleading more often than not (192, 194).⁹ Ella Snoep-Reitsma also seriously considers the added verses. However, her aim in considering the role of these verses in her 1973 article is to forge a connection between Chardin and the seventeenth-century Dutch tradition, from which Chardin drew much inspiration, and to catalogue the genre prints (147-243). Additionally, Katie Scott has brought attention to these prints, acknowledging that the connection between Chardin's prints and his paintings are not well explored, in her article "Chardin Multiplied." She considers how these prints operated in the art market and how they would have been understood as copies, particularly in light of Chardin's propensity to make additional copies of his own paintings for sale. Scott acknowledges the addition of the couplets mostly as a potential for guiding interpretation (61, 66-67, 69-71).

¹⁰ Both *The Kitchen Maid* and *Return from the Market* were only ever publicly displayed in Chardin's lifetime at the 1739 Salon. I also want to note that the audience for these paintings in their private collections (and most of Chardin's patrons were royalty) would have been very different from the public of the Salon, and thus the meaning of these paintings as understood by their collectors and in the private collections where they resided is going to be different from what I am presenting here.

¹¹ It is important to note that neither *The Kitchen Maid* nor *Return from the Market* were displayed at a Salon alongside the prints that Lépicié made after them. Radisich also indicates that Chardin's choice of titles was made in collaboration with the genre prints and that he used this dual display to capitalize on the Salon, providing the genre prints for sale as a means for visitors to acquire a lasting experience of their Salon visit (152).

¹² While there is no overt documentation of their friendship, their calculated release of prints and advertisements suggest that they worked closely together in producing these genre prints. For a deeper discussion of Lépicié's relationship with Chardin, see Schroder, "Genre Prints," 72-75.

¹³ We must also remember that we have very few written accounts from Chardin's hand or about him aside from eulogies, so the lack of written disapproval from Chardin did not necessarily indicate that he did not disapprove of them.

¹⁴ The advertisement for Lépicié's engraving after Chardin's *Saying Grace* states that the subject of this painting is explained in the verse by Lépicié: "Le sujet de tableau est exposé dans les vers de M. Lépicié, qui sont au bas de l'estampe" (*Mercur de France*, December 1744, 137). This engraving reads, "La Sœur, en tapinoise, se rit du petit frere/ Qui bêgaie son oraison./ Lui, sans, inquiéter, dépêche sa priere./ Son apétit fait sa raison," "The sister secretly laughs at the little brother./ Who stumbles through his prayer/ Without worrying, he rushes his prayer./ Because of his appetite."

¹⁵ "Ferrer la mule" or "shoeing the mule" is a French expression from the eighteenth century that means cheating one's employer out of money. It was particularly associated with female cooks during the eighteenth century.

¹⁶ This moralizing interpretation strengthens the connection to the seventeenth-century Dutch genre tradition, and *Return from the Market* visually follows the trope of the eavesdropper. This

figure, often a woman, is architecturally separated from a scene in the back that usually depicts some sort of wrongdoing, whether it be a servant sleeping on the job or some sort of lascivious tryst. For an example, see Nicolas Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1656, oil on canvas, Apsley House, The Wellington Collection, London. For further discussion of this trope within Chardin's painting, see Radisich, pp. 75-77.

¹⁷ For more information on gastronomy in the eighteenth century and the role of health and food in Enlightenment philosophy, see Pinkard, *A Revolution in Taste*, and Rebecca Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*.

¹⁸ Other prints after *La Belle Cuisinière* contain other verses below the engraving, but most of them emphasize the sexual innuendo, often focusing on the eggs that the cook carries.

¹⁹ In her visual analysis of this painting, Paula Radisich identifies these same brushstrokes as bits of turnip peel, an observation that I think holds merit, especially in light of its companion piece (46-47). However, the reddish-brown hue and the smeared quality of the brushstrokes in conjunction with the blood on the butcher's board evokes dried blood and an element of the maid's personal involvement in acts of (necessary) violence.

²⁰ Sheriff has argued for the consideration of a female viewer in eighteenth-century painting, considering how interpretations change when we move beyond the limitations of the male viewer. For examples of this in her work, see Mary Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* and *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France*. Radisich likewise argues that the female viewer was not a radical idea even in the eighteenth century and devotes two of three interpretations of Chardin's *The Morning Toilette* through the perspective of women. Nevertheless, both interpretations are mediated through the male voice. In the first of these interpretations, she uses Chardin's familial connections to women in religious orders (through his half-sisters and sister-in-law) as a means of arguing that women would have viewed these paintings primarily through a religious lens. Her second interpretation is based on a fascinating piece of criticism written about this painting written by a provincial visitor to their magistrate, *Lettre à Monsieur de Poiresson-Chamarande*, who imagines how a woman might understand this painting (Radisich, 134-137).

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