

**Kathryn Hughes.** *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs. Beeton.*  
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The ideals of mother, home, and hearth are fraught with contradictions in western culture. In the abstract, they are praised unreservedly, but in practice they are often scorned and despised as unimportant, secondary, or trivial. With the exception of the *Odyssey*, all of the great epics of the world are about leaving home and hearth behind, and even today, “woman’s work” is disdained by women and men alike. Nothing important seems to happen in the drudgery of the kitchen, where, as Virginia Woolf reminds us in *A Room of One’s Own*, the same mundane tasks are repeated on a daily basis throughout one’s life with nothing ultimately to show for them.

And yet, as Woolf also famously remarks in the same book, “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.” Our food and homes shape us, perhaps even more than we care to acknowledge, and one wonders if the paths of philosophy or science, for example, might have been adversely affected due to an ill-prepared meal and the resulting dyspepsia in the stomach of a great thinker. So it behoves us to examine carefully the claims made by Kathryn Hughes in her impressively researched book *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs. Beeton*. Through the lens of the life of Isabella Beeton, the iconic figure behind the most popular British cookbook of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hughes pinpoints the welter of contradictions at the heart of the cult of domesticity which the *Book of Household Management* helped to create, as well as demonstrates how the reassuring voice of “Mrs. Beeton” led a generation of young wives to navigate successfully the rapidly-changing social structure of mid-nineteenth century England. Furthermore, Hughes challenges her readers to look carefully at ourselves and consider what exactly we continue to want from our contemporary Mrs. Beetons, such as Martha Stewart, Rachel Ray, and others. At its best, this book holds up a mirror to our innermost longing for “domestic goddesses” to guide us in how to live.

And indeed, the most stimulating question that arises from Hughes' book is precisely the one that the humanities profess to examine, namely, "what is the good life?" Socrates may have had a difficult time answering this question, but, as Hughes shrewdly points out, Mrs. Beeton reveals no such hesitation. In the pages of the *Book of Household Management*, Mrs. Beeton is more than happy to answer it, in a voice which remains worth reading: at once knowledgeable, reassuring, practical, and nostalgic. It does not matter that the real Isabella Beeton, the young wife and mother turned journalist, did not necessarily possess first-hand knowledge of all she wrote; the voice she projected was enough for the other young inexperienced wives and mothers to trust her advice.

The good life, for Mrs. Beeton, was tied up with the project of transforming chaos into order wherever it appears—in the kitchen, the household budget, and even on a national level. "A nation," says Mrs. Beeton, "which knows how to dine has learned the leading lesson of progress. It implies both the will and skill to reduce to order and surround with idealisms and grace the more material conditions of human existence" (279–80). As Hughes adds, "dining well isn't simply a pleasure, it is a civilizing duty, part of the obligation of those who have access to culture to take it to places where nature might otherwise run amok" (280). No wonder, as Hughes aptly points out, the *Book of Household Management* became a beacon of culture for the upwardly-mobile, helping them assimilate into the middle class and beyond. Hughes' reading of the book as a means of indoctrinating the lower classes into middle class attitudes is revealing, especially as she notes Mrs. Beeton's tendency to both idealize and demonize the natural world as a lost Eden now in serious need of controlling. For example, Mrs. Beeton's comments on "the prolific power of the pig" which, if left unrestrained, would allow these animals to "degenerate into vermin" are mirrored by what Hughes calls "bourgeois anxieties" about the similarly prolific working class in need of restraint.

Hughes' reminder that "Everyone in Mrs. Beeton's imaginary household is rising, moving upwards, heading *somewhere*" (71) is another point well-taken; the *Book of Household Management* is all about transi-

tions—from rural to urban, from local economy to mass market, from traditional class structures to a more fluid upwardly-mobile system. And in the midst of all this, home itself had become something in need of defining and safeguarding, even while it became detached from older customs and traditions. As Hughes points out, Mrs. Beeton's book replaces those customs and traditions, which had broken down as people migrated from country to city and adopted new class ideals that in theory relegated cooking to the servants. The book also marks a critical change in attitudes towards women and women's work—indeed, it may have *caused* the change—as Mrs. Beeton redefines the mistress of the house as no longer drudge but now “the Commander of an Army,” efficient, scientific, and capable of transforming the world one meal at a time.

But where *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs. Beeton* sometimes fails is in its own disinclination to thoroughly address the questions it searchingly raises. In some ways, Hughes would have done better to downplay the biographical angle and focus more on the relationship of the *Book of Household Management* and the perceived persona of “Mrs. Beeton” to the British public. The “short life” of Isabella Beeton (and indeed, she died sadly young at age 28 of puerperal fever) ends up filling the book with occasionally numbing details of courtship arguments and unpaid bills, while the “long times” get undeserved short shrift. At times, the half-glimpsed and sometimes surmised details of Isabella's and Sam Beeton's lives are incapable of bearing the weight of significance that Hughes places on them, but the larger problem is the use to which Hughes sometimes puts the details. As much as she wants to give Mrs. Beeton her due, she occasionally relies on unsubstantiated anecdotes and theories to either discredit her or distract the reader from the genuine accomplishment of the *Book of Household Management*. If Mrs. Beeton strove for order in the pages of her book, Hughes seems determined to show the chaos underneath, even if she has to concoct or over-interpret it.

Hughes' obsession with the possibility that Sam Beeton infected Isabella with syphilis early in their marriage reflects her attention to the seeming chaos beneath. Even though Hughes herself states in a

footnote that “of course we will never know for certain that Isabella and Sam had syphilis,” even warning the reader against the dangers of “retrospective diagnosis,” she maintains it as a fact for much of the book, speculating frequently on such questions as what sort of syphilitic fetuses Isabella may or may not have miscarried, and whether Sam went a little mad at the end. Were it an undisputed fact, this would be necessary knowledge; if it had direct bearing on how Isabella edited the *Book of Household Management*, it would likewise be useful; but as it is, it is unclear what purpose it serves, except to suggest a vague underlying dark terrain in the Beetons’ lives.

This emphasis on unsubstantiated details highlights what seems to me to be a distracting tension in Hughes’ attitude towards her subject in general. She wants to celebrate Isabella Beeton as a sort of new woman—enterprising, sharp-eyed, modern, clever, and effective as a sort of Victorian spin-doctor—and yet she also wants to discredit her as a woman capable of creating the *Book of Household Management*. Her effort to prove that Mrs. Beeton did not test every recipe in the book, alongside her insistence that Mrs. Beeton did not simply plagiarize all her recipes, is indicative of this double-sided approach. Yet, to be fair, this is not entirely Hughes’ failing; rather, it reflects the ambivalence which is alive and well in modern culture regarding our views of domesticity. Over a hundred years after her death, the enterprising and modern Mrs. Beeton can still be condemned for not really being a domestic goddess, and it is not just Kathryn Hughes leveling the charge. As a society, we remain uncertain about how domestic we want our women (or ourselves as women) to be, and Hughes helps to draw attention to that troubling fact. Isabella Beeton’s life and achievement was to begin the redefinition of women’s lives in and beyond the home, and Hughes reminds us that this task remains very far from complete.