My current book project, *The Many Functions of Taste: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century England*, argues that taste—a central concept in eighteenth-century thought—plays an important and largely unrecognized role in Victorian attempts to connect art to ethics and social life. The starting point for my analysis of nineteenth-century criticism is the recognition that the word “aesthetic” was not commonly used in English until the early 1800s. For the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, English criticism still relied on an eighteenth-century vocabulary of “taste.” For thinkers living in a world altered by social mobility, urbanization, technological change, and mass manufacturing, taste helped make sense of a bewildering array of relationships among individuals, objects, and social groups. As a category associated with consumption, taste foregrounds the charged interaction between aesthetic object and perceiving subject. It raises the question of how we communicate aesthetic evaluations when they are grounded in experiences as intense and individual as the pleasure of biting into a perfect peach, or the displeasure of biting into a mealy one. It can shape how both self and community are imagined. After providing an overview of eighteenth-century debates on the “standard of taste,” I track how the Victorian cultural critics John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde used taste to connect aesthetics to ethics as they alternately participated in and resisted two powerful trends: the increasing tendency to imagine the aesthetic as an autonomous realm unconnected to other kinds of production and consumption, and the increasing tendency to treat aesthetic desires as individualized preferences unconnected to larger issues or norms. By demonstrating how these nineteenth-century critics used the elusive aesthetic category of taste to assert, reimagine, and challenge the link between art and life, individual and community, I model an unexplored direction for a literary studies that combines aesthetic analysis with social awareness.