

Fat

JOYCE L. HUFF 

Ball State University, Indiana, United States

IN *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), when Mr. Pickwick first encounters Joe, known as “the fat boy,” he expresses astonishment at the boy’s prodigious size and sluggish behavior. Joe’s employer, Mr. Wardle, responds, “I’m proud of that boy—wouldn’t part with him on any account—he’s a natural curiosity!”¹ The narrator endorses this description of the fat boy, dubbing him “the infant Lambert” in reference to Daniel Lambert, a professional fat man who exhibited himself as a “curiosity” in the early part of the century.²

Yet within the world of *The Pickwick Papers*, Joe’s fatness is hardly remarkable. Pickwick is himself fat, as is Wardle, and they appear alongside Tracy Tupman, Tony Weller, and a host of others, including characters who seem to be notable for nothing other than their fatness, characters referred to simply as “a fat man,” “another fat man,” and “a third fat man.”³ Nor would Joe seem out of place in the company of characters from other Victorian novels, such as Bertha Mason, Jos Sedley, Clara Peggotty, Flora Finching, and Count Fosco.

Such characters are often read metaphorically, in isolation from the cultural milieu that produced them. Yet their presence across Victorian literature calls out for analysis that goes beyond the metaphorical to examine how fat literary representations participate in the construction of knowledge about nineteenth-century bodies, intersecting with economic, medical, gendered, and racial discourses. Such an investigation reveals that fatness was central to Victorian understandings of the body, as it was thought to make manifest those hidden desires lurking within all bodies. It provided a visual grounding for the impetus toward bourgeois self-management.

The nineteenth century was pivotal in shaping contemporary Western attitudes toward fat. However, to study Victorian fatness involves being willing to question twenty-first-century assumptions that may hinder understanding. Current public discourse is dominated by epidemic

Joyce L. Huff is associate professor of English at Ball State University. Along with Martha Stoddard-Holmes, she coedited the collection *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Bloomsbury, 2020). She is working on a book manuscript on fat in Victorian Britain.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 407–410.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000244

rhetoric, which labels fatness a disease. Yet, in 1864, writer William Aytoun was able to dismiss William Banting's recently published reducing plan with the words, "fat men may wish to become leaner; but so long as their health remains unimpaired, they are not fit subjects for the doctor."⁴ To many Victorians, fat was not in itself pathological, though this does not mean that it was not stigmatized.

Indeed, Banting's primary concern when he began his diet was not his health but rather his difficulty negotiating the public sphere, which was being rapidly reconfigured to meet the needs of a new figure, the hypothetical normal body. Mass-produced goods, such as ready-made clothing, created an environment in which individual bodies had to conform to manufacturers' standards. These changes in the public sphere helped solidify cultural norms regarding what bodies should be and do, creating a standard against which nonconforming bodies could be judged.

While excluded from certain consuming practices, fat bodies were, ironically, central to the iconography of consumerism. The Victorians projected the difficulties of managing their consumer desires onto fat bodies, which were commonly assumed to be the product of out-of-control appetites. Fat bodies signified excess, not simply in relation to food but also with regard to the greater resources needed to accommodate larger bodies. Fat bodies thus performed the cultural labor of symbolically embodying the consumer appetites that drove the Victorian economy.

In contrast, the proper bourgeois body was an efficient machine, which processed food to produce continued life and health. This ideal came to prominence in the wake of the New Poor Law of 1834. Government officials in search of cheap ways to feed workhouse inmates turned to the science of nutrition to discover how to obtain the maximum nutritional benefit at the least expense. In so doing, they created a dietary discourse in which fat indicated wasted nutrients.⁵

Because economic production belonged to the masculine public sphere, while both reproduction and consumption were displaced onto the feminized domestic realm, fat was frequently coded female. Whereas fatness was positively associated with maternal nurture—as can be seen in Charles Dickens's portrayal of Peggotty—the relationship between fat and gender was not a simple one. Alimentary appetite was frequently conflated with erotic appetite, with fatness signifying sexual insatiability.⁶ Much critical attention has been directed to female food refusal as a means of disavowing sensual desires in accordance with

propriety. The slender form of Little Dorrit proclaims her sexual innocence, while Bertha Mason wears her fat as a metonym for her carnal excesses.

Sexual excess in men, however, could manifest as fatness or slenderness. According to doctors like John Harvey, the male body could become thin and wasted through overindulgence in the “secret sin.”⁷ The desire for food could also be perceived as supplanting normative sexual desires, as, when faced with the prospect of courting Becky Sharp, the emasculated Jos Sedley turns his attention to the pleasures of curry and rack punch. In relation to gender, then, fat could be deployed in multiple ways.

Because it evoked uncontrolled, “savage” appetites, fatness was invoked in representations that stigmatized non-Western peoples as uncivilized and in need of European supervision.⁸ Fat non-Western women became repositories for fantasies and fears regarding female sexual appetite. They appeared in eroticized depictions, from Orientalist paintings, like the Cleopatra in *Villette*, to the writings of explorers like Mungo Park and John Hanning Speke. However, in casting non-Western people as primitive versions of themselves, white Victorians produced a paradox. If the fat non-Western body was, as they claimed, both more desirous and closer to nature than Western ones, then these representations revealed the “truth” that, beneath their civilized trappings, all bodies harbored savage appetites.

This suggests new research directions that would foreground the role played by perceptions of body size in the construction of Victorian bodies in general. Such explorations should follow the lead of disability studies scholars like Alison Kafer and Eunjung Kim, who call for an intersectional model of disability studies that “requires us to look not only at disabled characters or figurations of disability, but also, and especially, at ideologies of ability and health.”⁹ Fattening Victorian studies requires a similar interrogation of the ways in which the normative ideologies and practices associated with bourgeois body management have structured a society that was, and remains, hostile to fat bodies.

NOTES

1. Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37; New York: Bantam, 1983), 52–53.
2. Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, 80.

3. Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, 65.
4. William E. Aytoun, “Banting on Corpulence,” review of *A Letter on Corpulence*, by William Banting, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, November 1864, 609–10.
5. Joyce L. Huff, “Corporeal Economies: Work and Waste in Nineteenth-Century Constructions of Alimentation,” in *Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion and Fat in the Modern World*, edited by Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 34.
6. Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13.
7. John Harvey, *How to Get Fat, or, Leanness, and Its Connection with Organic and Functional Nervous Affections*, 3rd ed. (London: Dean, 1865), 36.
8. Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 7.
9. Alison Kafer and Eunjung Kim, “Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 129.

