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CHAPTER 14

The Widest Lap

Fatness, Fasting, and Nurturance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction

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She, too, was stout, but it was with the plumpness of a vigorous matron; and an eager vitality was everywhere visible—in her energetic bearing, her protruding, enquiring glances, her small, fat, capable and commanding hands.

—Lytton Strachey, Queen Victoria (chap. 6, pt. 4)

In this 1921 description of the middle-aged Queen Victoria, Lytton Strachey offers a physical image of nineteenth-century womanhood rarely considered in literary and cultural studies. Ironically implying that Victorian culture was overly feminized, Strachey contrasts the rotund, robust monarch with her frail husband to hint that Victorian femininity (or at least Victoria’s femininity) did not always conform to the docility and affectionate self-sacrifice we have come to associate with the middle-class Angel in the House. While Victoria was among the nation’s advocates of female domesticity, her own social role and physical presence defied conventional boundaries. In her maturity, Victoria’s physical weight grew to match her importance in England’s political and cultural life, and Strachey here uses the excess of Victoria’s body to suggest excesses of character. Even her glances are “protruding”—an image that allows Strachey to poke fun at one of Victoria’s prominent features, but also to reflect her dynamic presence. Victoria’s ample flesh reveals energy and authority: Strachey invites us to see the queen as competent, aggressive, and fat.

This essay will argue that the value placed on nurturance within women’s role in Victorian culture also sows seeds for revision of unhealthy
extremes within the middle-class feminine ideal. Female fatness, as a sign of plentitude and inexhaustible reserves of nurturance, offers a tool with which some fiction writers subtly enrich and expand the prevailing gender role prescribed nineteenth-century women. While England’s queen (and thus its public face) had a double chin and a temper, the sentimental novels and advertising that often served as mouthpieces of Victorian popular culture tended to prize a more tightly laced brand of femininity. Given the iconic, atypical social role her royalty demanded, Victoria shared certain qualities with another familiar figure in nineteenth-century popular culture: the fat lady of the carnival freak show. In addition to their excessive bodies, both monarch and fat lady performed their roles for public consumption, and both tended to be presented through the rhetoric of idealized femininity. Together, these figures straddle the culturally dominant middle class, the aristocratic matron mirroring the folk performer whose carnival venue grew from working-class culture. Their extreme bodies help illustrate contradictory expectations for both female strength and female self-abnegation within nineteenth-century ideology, as well as unhealthy extremes of self-abnegation produced by the gender code of the self-conscious Victorian middle class.

Though the feminine ideal was often imagined as ephemeral and disembodied, the responsibilities incumbent upon women demanded real physical strength in addition to nurturing compassion. On one hand, the middle-class idealization of female domesticity elevated the moral status of women and conferred great honor on the work of motherhood: successful performance of nurturance was a woman’s finest achievement.

1 Noting the elaborate nature of royal ceremonies, and that folk performances (including a freak show) were featured in the queen’s coronation festivities, Michael Diamond suggests: “The great royal occasions showed clearly the link between royalty and showbusiness” (7). Though American audiences tend to locate the heyday of the freak show in the Depression-era traveling circus, the ancient tradition of bodily spectacle flourished in early and mid-Victorian England.

2 As Robert Bogdan and other disability theorists have explored, freak shows generally included narrative accompaniment that either aggrandized or exoticized performers. Female performers were described as unusually beautiful or as devoted wives and mothers, in order to contrast (and thus emphasize) their extreme physical traits.

3 For reasons of space, I have omitted a lengthier discussion of the freak show and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque. Like all aspects of the medieval and renaissance carnival tradition that Bakhtin describes in Rabelais and His World, the grotesque aesthetic is a tool for social regeneration and the revision of dominant ideals, and thus enables the notion that open, excessive bodies (as well as grotesque imagery of excessive consumption) are a long-standing tool for social criticism. Though Bakhtin saw nineteenth-century realism as an enemy of the grotesque, he finds a plentitude of grotesque imagery in the work of Dickens. Of the characters discussed at length here, Mrs. Jarley and Boule de Suif are presented with particularly grotesque imagery.
On the other hand, the selflessness associated with motherhood was often exaggerated and stylized within Victorian culture to an unhealthy degree. The hourglass figure cultivated by women throughout most of the century demonstrates the contrast between these two forces. An ample bosom and wide hips, physical traits associated with the comfort and plentitude offered by mothers, are emphasized by a tightly corseted waistline—a bodily emblem of self-restraint.4

Today the typical mid-Victorian silhouette seems plump and curvy, a comparison which leaves many of us nostalgic for a time of greater tolerance of bodily variation. Yet as Peter Stearns, Joyce Huff, and others have remarked, nineteenth-century culture was not wholly accepting of fat.5 While Stearns argues that American fat-phobia matured in the twentieth century, he suggests that it took its shape from nineteenth-century anxieties about consumer culture, religious skepticism, and social diversity. Joyce Huff cites the writing of William Banting, leader of a mid-nineteenth-century British diet movement, as evidence that fat-fighting was an active concern within Victorian culture. Banting, whose personal narrative of weight struggle characterized fat as disabling and demoralizing, recommended a low-carbohydrate diet that sparked medical controversy and put weight-control at the center of a passionate debate. Like Stearns, Huff suggests that our contemporary perception of fat grew out of Victorian concerns about self-control, heightened by the growing abundance of consumer goods and advertising.

Among the fundamental values of Victorian norms for women, Anna Silver’s *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* lists “an understanding of the body as an entity that must be subordinated to the will and disciplined as an emblem of one’s self control,” along with a resulting “aesthetic validation of the slender female form as the physical ideal of beauty and a concomitant fear of fat as ugly and/or unfeminine” (27). She assures us that “the slim-waisted hourglass figure occupied fashion’s spotlight throughout the nineteenth century” and required corseting and an anxious relationship with food from those women who hoped to achieve the ideal (35). Silver counters the common belief that Victorians valued plumpness with the claim that plump arms and hips serve primarily as foils for the true mark of nineteenth-century womanhood—the tiny “wasp” waist. As physical evidence of self-control over one’s appetites, the slender waist was a symbol of proper middle-class womanhood, and fat thus was a failure to live up to the ideal.

4 Susan Bordo makes a similar point in *Unbearable Weight.*
5 See Peter Stearns’s *Fat History* and Joyce Huff’s unpublished dissertation *Conspicuous Consumptions.*
Yet fat is too supple to conform to a single rigid interpretation. Victorian culture also cherished a range of positive associations for excessive fatness. While some excessive bodies seem to have been fed by the poverty of less fortunate characters, Victoria’s fat is a comforting sign of the grandeur and plentitude of the empire, and reassurance of her capacity to nurture an entire nation. Similarly, Arbuthnot’s iconic John Bull, reproduced in advertising and cartoons throughout the nineteenth century as a symbol of the ordinary Englishman’s stalwart strength, draws his characteristic firmness from his extra weight. The fat displayed within bodily spectacles is jolly and entertaining, and reassures the viewer of his or her own normality. For disability theorist Sander Gilman, fat adds gravitas and sensitivity to the characterizations of late-century male detectives. Clearly, the ideological implications of fatness (like those of femininity) shift radically from context to context. Even within the work of a single author, Charles Dickens, critics identify competing images of excess: Joyce Huff and Juliet McMaster each point out that Dickens blends positive and negative forms of fat characterization, what McMaster refers to as “jolly” fat and “bloated” fat. Here I focus on one particular aspect of nineteenth-century fat: the ability of physical excess to fuel nurturance within stories of poverty and social vulnerability. Beginning in the periodicals and novels of Charles Dickens before branching out to an 1880 work of Guy de Maupassant, the essay will explore the positive potential of fat to push back against extreme images of self-abnegation also resonant in Victorian gender ideology.

As disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has observed, unusual bodies attract ideological interpretation. Fat theorists Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel remind us that interpretations change, but the need to interpret an unusually fat body continues over time: “[F]at is a malleable construct that has served dominant economic and cultural interests, to the detriment of all people” throughout history (3). For LeBesco and Braziel, the meanings of “fat as an encoded surface” shift, but are generally negative: “Fat equals reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary” (3). Interestingly, Gilman argues that fatness helps by feminizing male detectives and putting them in touch with premodern instincts and intuition:

The fat detective’s body is of a different sort than that of the skinny philosopher. Huge, ungainly, sedentary, it houses the brain of a detective. . . . It is not a “modern” body, if by modern we imagine the body as trained, lithesome, strong, active, and thus supremely masculine. Such an obese body seems more feminine, but certainly not female; it is expressive of the nature of the way the detective seems to ‘think.’ His thought processes strike us as intuitive and emotional rather than analytic and objective. (Fat Boys 155)
I. Fat People and Fasting Girls

If fatness was not fully accepted within nineteenth-century social norms, it nonetheless provided the Victorians some entertainment value. An examination of the corpus of Charles Dickens reveals contradictory attitudes about extremes of self-indulgence and self-abnegation in its description of real and fictional bodies. Dickens's *All the Year Round* explores this fascination in the unsigned 1864 essay “Fat People,” a consideration of fat men and women who have exhibited themselves publicly. The essay confers a certain grandeur on large bodies. Extreme thinness does not satisfy: “It is observable that very thin people do not announce their thinness abroad. We speak, truth to tell, somewhat contemptuously of them. . . . Scarcely any man, except the Living Skeleton, ever exhibited himself on account of his thinness. What a poor object that same Claude Ambrose Seurat was!” (353). While it is unpopular to make a spectacle out of one's thinness, “many have done so for their stoutness. It is those who grow largely in excess, and not those who lag far behind the average of eleven stones, who claim for themselves a place in history” (353). The article goes on to describe several cases of dramatic obesity that captured the public imagination, and ends with a description of famous fat man Daniel Lambert’s shoes as a mind-expanding object of contemplation. They are “[t]oo broad to be conceived by any narrow mind” (355).

Yet thinness seems more entrenched than fatness in the imagery of Victorian womanhood. Five years later, another unsigned *All the Year Round* essay entitled “Fasting Girls” provides a more skeptical view of another form of bodily spectacle while reinforcing the idea that thinness and self-starvation generally lack nobility. The article observes the phenomenon of young women who starve themselves, and catalogues a number of cases in which girls have publicly claimed to exist without sustenance. The author’s tone is doubtful: “[F]asting women and girls have made more noise in the world than fasting men, and there has been more suspicion of trickery in the cases recorded” (442). The article attributes each case to fraud or attention seeking, thus implying that society rewards girls for pretending to survive without food and affirming the notion that social roles value

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8 Joyce Huff also discusses the two *All the Year Round* essays from which I borrow my section title.

9 The increase of skepticism here may also reflect the growing taboos placed on bodily spectacle as a form of entertainment. Though the second half of the nineteenth century saw the freak show coded as tawdry and limits enforced on venues and performances, unusual bodies continued to exert their shock and wonderment in the sensational fiction of the 1860s and beyond.
such self-starvation. The article clearly views fasting as a performance, and links the girls it describes to the bodily spectacle of the "hunger artist" enshrined in freak show tradition. By inviting readers to see such behavior as artificial, attention-seeking (and perhaps even feigned) performances of extremes, the author undermines any sense of wonder attached to such starvation. The skeptical outlook offered by this article echoes the negative perspective offered in "Fat People" on the pitiful Claude Seurat.

Female self-denial is a pressing issue for Victorian culture. "Fasting Girls" clearly identifies this brand of performance as largely feminine, and women’s fashions reinforce the idea that displays of self-control are an imbedded part of nineteenth-century gender code. The corset, with its offer of an artificially thin waist, gives us a material image for the more general value placed on female containment and bodily control in nineteenth-century middle-class culture. In her history of the Victorian corset, Leigh Summers suggests that the corset serves as a foundation, not just for fashion, but for nineteenth-century womanhood itself: “Few garments other than the corset could claim such an intimate, influential and popular place in the material culture of Victorian womanhood. The corset was (for many women) a lifetime companion, fitted in early childhood and worn until death” (4–5). The corset demonstrated the self-control and, by extension, the moral continence of the wearer. The meaning attached to the narrow waist reflected on a woman’s social status as well as on her personal character. A narrow waist served as a mark of her social class, and the tighter she could draw her laces, the more her body illustrated a privileged social position. Working-class bodies were already imagined as robust, so middle-class ladies (and, as manufacturing made corsets cheaper, working-class women with ambitions) used bodily control as a status symbol.

Both Anna K. Silver and Gail Turley Houston have emphasized the importance of self-starvation to Victorian gender ideology. Silver places the confining physical norm at the center of Victorian femininity and argues for a link between the voluntary starvation of anorexia nervosa (first diagnosed in the nineteenth century) and the values of middle-class femininity:

10 As Helena Michie argues, “While middle-class women were imagined—at least ide- ally—to be delicate and refined, working-class women were traditionally seen as coarse and robust” (“Under Victorian Skins” 410). Susan Bordo notes the different expectations for men and women in the middle class. While a protruding male stomach could indicate bourgeois success, a slim wife served as another male status symbol: “[I]f [the middle-class man] could not be or marry an aristocrat, he could have a wife who looked like one, a wife whose non-robust beauty and delicate appetite signified her lack of participation in the tax-ing ‘public sphere’” (Unbearable Weight 117).
Anorexia nervosa, I argue, is deeply rooted in Victorian values, ideologies, and aesthetics, which together helped define femininity in the nineteenth century. . . . One can thus “read” Victorian gender ideology through an anorexic lens. . . . The anorexic woman’s slender form attests to her discipline over her body and its hunger, despite the persistence of that hunger, and indicates her discomfort with or even hatred of her body and its appetites, which may or may not include her sexuality. If one reads the disease metaphorically, then, it becomes evident that the pathology of anorexia nervosa and predominant Victorian constructions of gender subscribe to many of the same characteristics. (3)

Control over the appetite for food analogizes the control over sexual desire, and thus points to limitations on sensuality imbedded in nineteenth-century expectations for women. Silver argues that the self-sacrifice and self-control often idealized in middle-class femininity easily took a sinister turn into self-starvation, and that anorexia nervosa therefore serves as a metaphor for unhealthy extremes within Victorian gender ideals.

In Consuming Fictions, Gail Turley Houston makes a similar suggestion targeted specifically at Dickens’s fiction: “Dickens’s representations of Victorian ideologies about the consuming practices of the sexes and classes indicate that codes of consumption were so extreme, complicated, and disjunct, they translated into medically defined consumptions, or what we now refer to as eating disorders” (xiii). She argues that women and the working class share the tendency for noble self-starvation in Dickens’s work, particularly in sentimentalized characterizations. While these characterizations can serve as social criticism, they often reinforce notions that women and the poor enact a “noblesse oblige” by denying themselves life’s comforts, literalized in the relationship to food: “Dickens both endorses and dismantles Victorian ideologies about class and hunger while he inculcates a similar ideology of abstinence when it comes to gender” (12). In her discussion of gender, Houston affirms the metaphorical significance of anorexia and extends the discussion of the disease to the mother figures that concern this study: “Because anorexia nervosa was diagnosed in nineteenth-century Britain, the Victorian cult of motherhood—which Dickens’s fictions helped to create and subvert—underwrites its nosology” (that is, its classification as a disease) (52).

For Silver and Houston, the need to control one’s appetite and body shaped the life of a Victorian woman. This code illuminates the middle class’s unhealthy discomfort with physical appetites, both gustatory and sexual, or possibly suggests an expectation for unequal distribution of resources that overlaps class discourse. To embody the ephemeral morality
and spirituality expected from the idealized womanhood, one eschews creature comforts to the point of starvation. From this viewpoint, self-control, self-abnegation, and respectability go hand in hand. A woman is measured by the size and shape of her waist, and thus also by her tolerance for hunger and constrictive pressure. Certainly, many of Dickens’s characters support a positive reading of voluntary hunger, particularly among women. Self-abnegating young women like Little Nell and Amy Dorrit, both of whom forgo shelter or food to leave more for their family members, are among Dickens’s loftiest characters.

Yet the ironic tone of “Fasting Girls” offers an alternative reading of self-starvation, far from noblesse oblige. The article’s emphasis on fraud suggests that fasting behavior is fundamentally unhealthy and ignoble, and that no woman would starve herself without clear motive. It imagines fasting girls as selfish, or at least hungry for fame and fortune. In that light, the small, disadvantaged girls of The Old Curiosity Shop and Little Dorrit are crafted to earn our pity and respect, but do not necessarily represent Dickens’s endorsement of voluntary starvation. Little Nell’s hunger and habitual sacrifice for her weak-willed grandfather seem tied to the gradual wasting that leads to her death. We mourn her, not as a mature woman making a reasonable sacrifice for her children, but as a girl whose life was cut short because of insufficient nurturance from others. Like much of Dickens’s fiction, The Old Curiosity Shop serves as an indictment of a social system that tolerates poverty and the neglect of the vulnerable. The suffering Nell endures with her grandfather contributes to her idealized presentation, but the novel’s tragedy lies in the fact that such a young woman has no better caretaker. As part of a host of child victims and orphans within Dickens’s novels—figures who drive Dickens’s social criticism—Nell does not represent an ideal to which other girls should aspire so much as an extreme, sentimental representation of the burden society allows its most vulnerable citizens to bear. Little Nell starves in her adolescent transition from girlhood to womanhood, not to enact an anorexic feminine ideal, but because she has not been sufficiently nurtured to build the strength required for her adult role.

Perhaps for that reason, a similar wasting illness—outwardly resembling anorexia—seems far less tragic when it afflicts an adult woman or biological parent. Nurturance requires strength, and those charged with the care of children must first keep themselves alive to perform their duty. As the next section argues, even Nell requires fat nurturance to sustain her brief time in the world, and finds it during her time with the jolly Mrs. Jarley. Similarly, orphan David Copperfield depends on extensive nurturance to meet his childhood needs. David’s mother, Clara, is presented in terms
more closely resembling the vanity of *All the Year Round*’s fasting girls than noblesse oblige, while the fat housekeeper Clara Peggotty provides young David with some of the best and most loving care. In the roles they play in the lives of their novels’ protagonists, as well as in the light they shine on the novels’ leaner characters, these fat ladies provide an important alternative image of the nurturing ideal for Victorian womanhood.

Dickens’s corpus contains a vast and varied cast of characters. In the subtle similarities and differences within Dickens’s network of characterizations, his reader finds a range of variations and repetitions of any given social type, and thus the ideological implications of Dickens’s work are most often revealed in the intersections of its descriptions or the juxtaposition of its characters. In his orphan-centered novels, Dickens condemns the economic and social vulnerability of children and tracks their journeys of sorrow or self-discovery, but must keep them alive for a time to do so. To that end, he introduces supplemental nurturers—representations of the kinder forces within society—to shelter these children along the way.

And that is where fat ladies offer their contribution. The robust, hardworking, stout body (conventionally expected of the working-class woman, but also a mark of hedonism and personal excess) is better suited to the demands of nurturance than the slim body of the fasting girl. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield*, Dickens introduces fat nurturers who seem to balance the novels’ propensity toward hunger, particularly in the weak, thin parent figures whose wasting is presented as more selfish than noble. In the lean world of the Dickensian orphan, fictional fatness offers a respite from suffering and models a more fruitful form of nurturance: one which can continue because it espouses self-nurturance, too. The energy contained in the plump body of Queen Victoria, for example, assures us she has strength to mother an empire, and so the nation’s welfare depends on her health and willingness to self-nurture—after all, “God save the Queen!” is the paramount cry of English patriotism. Fat mothering is supplemental. It meets excessive need with excessive means.

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11 I echo Alex Woloch’s idea of “character-systems” here. In *The One v. The Many*, Woloch argues that the interplay of characters give minor figures in a novel a key role in determining how we read the novel’s protagonist and overall significance.

12 Though I use the term “supplement” in a conventional sense here, Jacques Derrida’s philosophical explanation of the supplement in *On Grammatology* provides a useful framework for understanding the process through which a cultural ideal is deconstructed and, thus, revised through supplementation. As a practice or an idea that is added on to an original practice or idea, the supplement reconstitutes the whole. Whether the supplement is “a plenitude enriching another plenitude,” or whether it “adds only to replace” (Derrida suggests that both relationships are possible), the supplement creates space for imaginative play with absence and substitution (144).
and demonstrates that such means are first gained through aggressive self-nurturance.

II. Dickens’s Supplemental Mothering

This section explores Dickens’s use of nurturing fat ladies as a supplement for various forms of thinness in David Copperfield and The Old Curiosity Shop. In particular, David Copperfield creates a pronounced dichotomy between thin and fat motherhood, self-abnegation and self-nurturance. The Copperfields’ housekeeper and David’s most affectionate mother figure, Clara Peggotty, embodies the excess and warmth of the fat-mother alternative to more restrictive gender ideals. Her supplemental role in the Copperfield household fills David’s early needs for nurturance, and the comparison readers form between Clara Peggotty and Clara Copperfield, David’s biological mother, emphasizes the weakness within some versions of middle-class femininity and the child’s urgent need for supplemental care.

Clara Peggotty shares a first name with her employer, David’s biological mother Clara Copperfield, and the parallel names invite readers to contrast the characters. David himself seems to link the two women in his mind. He states: “[T]he first objects I can remember as standing out by themselves from a confusion of things, are my mother and Peggotty” (DC, chap. 2, 15). Indeed, David’s “earliest impressions” include his comparison of the distinctive beauties of both women:

When my mother is out of breath and rests herself in an elbow-chair, I watch her winding her bright curls round her fingers, and straightening her waist, and nobody knows better than I do that she likes to look so well, and is proud of being so pretty.

That is among my earliest impressions. That, and a sense that we were both a little afraid of Peggotty, and submitted ourselves in most things to her direction. . . .

I thought her in a different style from my mother, certainly; but of another school of beauty, I considered her a perfect example. (DC, chap. 2, 20–21)

Clara Copperfield is delicate, smooth, pale, and passive in appearance—an ideal Victorian woman. Clara Peggotty, on the other hand, is sturdy, rough, florid, assertive, and fat—far too big, aggressive, and full of working-class vigor to reach the middle-class ideal. Yet young David finds her beautiful,
unconventionally so. Of David’s two early mother figures, Peggotty becomes David’s best source of nurturance, and has the fuller role to play in his life.

While Peggotty thrives, Clara Copperfield wastes away. David’s mother presents a self-effacing extreme of middle-class feminine ideal as she repeats the cant of Victorian domesticity: “I ought to be very thankful to him, and very submissive even in my thoughts” (*DC*, chap. 8, 123). She remarries the seemingly respectable Mr. Murdstone, thereby disrupting young David’s sense of stability and security, only to find Murdstone cruel and inflexible. David’s stepfather dominates his wife’s impressionable personality. He revokes her household authority, interferes in her friendship with Peggotty, and, worst of all, rejects David and expects his wife to do the same. Torn between husband and son, David’s mother weakens. After giving birth to another child, she sickens and dies (along with her infant), leaving David vulnerable. Returning from school, David marks her physical wasting: her face is “too delicate,” and her hand “so thin and white that it seemed to me to be almost transparent” (*DC*, chap. 8, 120). From David’s point of view, his mother’s physical self-destruction is catastrophic. She does not starve so that he may eat, as Amy Dorrit does for her family, but instead wastes away from a lack of strength to defend her son. Had Clara Copperfield nurtured herself more successfully, she might have lived to protect David from his stepfather. Certainly, David’s mother achieves her own brand of asceticism through her submission to Murdstone’s abuse and her wasting illness, but her decision to remarry seems to grow out of vanity and desire for romantic love, which in this case conflict with the maternal love that Dickens and David Copperfield most value. While seeking an ideal middle-class domestic existence—married life, more children, and a strong patriarchal presence—Clara Copperfield in fact appears weak, even selfish, rather than self-sacrificing. Her figurative starvation and early death are a failure in her maternal responsibilities.

Unlike her employer, Clara Peggotty clearly rejects asceticism and abstinence, at least in terms of diet. Her excessive intake (as revealed through her excessive weight) renders her an inexhaustible source of nurturance and affection. Because she is not self-denying, she thrives as a nourishing mother figure. Even Clara Copperfield compares their parenting ability, joking that “Peggotty’s love is a great deal better than mine, Davy” (*DC*, chap. 2, 23). The largesse of Peggotty’s affectionate nature, hinted at by the largeness of her body, supplements Clara Copperfield’s frailty. David describes Peggotty in terms of a personal magnitude that becomes even vaster in his moments of his greatest vulnerability, such as just before sleep: “I had reached that stage of sleepiness when Peggotty seemed to swell and
grow immensely large” (*DC*, chap. 2, 19). Enveloped in the reassuring vastness of Peggotty’s presence, David finds moments of peace in a turbulent childhood.

As a working-class servant, Peggotty faces a different set of physical and social expectations than Clara Copperfield, but the child-centered structure of Dickens’s novel emphasizes her role as David’s nurturer. On the one hand, Peggotty represents the middle-class fantasy of a loving servant, whose robust body is an inexhaustible source of nurturance to be used indefinitely without risk of injury or emaciation. Houston emphasizes Peggotty’s compensatory role in the household, and notes that she serves to prop up David’s relationship with Clara Copperfield: “Dickens’s magnification of Peggotty’s bodily economy allows David to split the nurturing role between his two mothers, and David avoids consciously recognizing the inadequacy of his real mother” (102). Indeed, Peggotty compensates for Clara Copperfield’s weaknesses and proves capable of great self-sacrifice in the name of love. On the other hand, Peggotty does not seem to be primarily a figure of self-sacrifice, and need not be read in terms of class exploitation. In fact, her position in the Copperfield household is one of significant personal power, and her role in David’s life aligns her with strong-willed women of the middle class. Ultimately, the different physical norm tied to the working class, in which cultural expectations lean toward female robustness instead of a tightly controlled waistline, offers a healthier image of femininity that, in Dickens’s novel, outperforms middle-class beauty. Peggotty’s fatness implies reserves of strength and energy and, by extension, suggests that the excessive output expected from Victorian mothers can best be met through an equally excessive intake.

While Dickens endows Peggotty with a remarkable affection for her middle-class “superiors,” he does not emphasize self-abnegation or meekness in his description of this ideal servant. Consider Peggotty’s explosive embrace:

[S]he laid aside her work (which was a stocking of her own), and opening her arms wide, took my curly head within them, and gave it a good squeeze. I know it was a good squeeze, because, being very plump, whenever she made any little exertion after she was dressed, some of the buttons on the back of her gown flew off. And I recollect two bursting to the opposite side of the parlour, while she was hugging me. (*DC*, chap. 2, 20)

In this passage, David specifically notes that Peggotty’s sewing project is “a stocking of her own,” an unlikely detail for a child to remember, but
an important reflection of Peggotty’s overall character. For Peggotty, self-assertion and self-nurturance go hand in hand with dedicated mothering. She rules the Copperfield household with an iron (if loving) fist. Often treating Clara Copperfield like an errant child, Peggotty inverts the usual class relationships and takes on far more authority within the family than her position would normally allow. Her role is inflated to the point that, as cited earlier, David and his mother “were both a little afraid of Peggotty, and submitted ourselves in most things to her direction” (DC, chap. 2, 20). This unusual level of authority draws attention to the failure of David’s mother to meet her own responsibilities, but it also creates an alternative image of a grand, bossy nurturer whose success in the parenting role stems from self-assertion rather than self-denial. Just as Queen Victoria herself exercises power beyond the usual station of women, Peggotty exercises an authority far beyond the usual station of servants: perhaps that is why David promises to make Peggotty “as welcome as a queen” in any of his future homes (DC, chap. 8, 120).

Beyond her obvious pairing with Clara Copperfield, Peggotty’s connections to the novel’s other characters emphasize the brand of nurturance that makes her so valuable to David, and undercuts the idea that only the working class needs vigorous femininity. In the interest of space, though, I will offer only a broad survey. Peggotty eventually marries the miserly (but otherwise good-hearted) Mr. Barkis, and lovingly pushes him to spend money both for his own care and, at times, for David’s. In this sense, she again defends self-nurturance over pointless asceticism. The reader discovers Barkis’s attraction to Peggotty when she springs from the hedgerows to ambush Barkis’s cart, which was carrying David away to school, to force a wealth of food and some rough embraces on the boy before departing “without a solitary button remaining on her gown” (DC, chap. 5, 68). The scene, in which Peggotty’s abundant love seems nearly violent in intensity as she literally “crammed” the food into David’s pockets, suggests that excess is the root of Peggotty’s appeal.

The analogous nurturing roles played by Peggotty and David’s abrasive Aunt Betsy Trotwood also draw attention to the importance of sustainable lifestyles for Victorian nurturers, and the value of supplementary excess in nurturing relationships. David’s Aunt Betsy assumes the role of primary caregiver for his young adulthood. As a representative of the middle class, Aunt Betsy calls into question the idea that Peggotty’s rough, rugged nurturing is simply a reflection of her social class. If Peggotty’s position in the family breaks the boundaries of the usual servant’s role, Aunt Betsy crosses gender lines to assert her authority: this “formidable personage” is the “principal magnate” of David’s family (DC, chap. 1, 4). Far from selfless,
Betsy asserts her rights aggressively (by, for instance, leaving a failed marriage and famously chasing marauding donkeys from her yard). Both Peggotty’s fat body and Betsy’s fat ego provide shelter for David. Dickens takes pains to bring Betsy and Peggotty together for comparison. They both vie for power in the Copperfield family, provide shelter for David when he needs it, and accept his reciprocal support later in life. When he wins Agnes’s hand in marriage, they celebrate together: “The moment my aunt was restored [from happy hysterics], she flew at Peggotty, and calling her a silly old creature, hugged her with all her might” (DC, chap. 62, 904).

As David chooses a mate, readers apply the lessons of his early life to the young women he loves, and thus find a broader implication for the lessons taught by the novel’s excessive mother figures. We recognize in David’s first wife, Dora, an image of his mother. Like Clara Copperfield, Dora is too fragile and helpless to care for a household. Though not ascetic, Dora cannot nurture herself—for instance, she incurs sizeable grocery bills without producing edible meals. Like the fasting girls of All the Year Round, she seems to feel that sustenance is unnecessary. When David suggests to her that “we must work, to live,” she responds skeptically:

“Oh! How ridiculous!” cried Dora.
“How shall we live without, Dora?” said I.
“How? Any how!” said Dora. (DC, chap. 37, 571)

Ultimately, as in the case of Clara Copperfield, Dora cannot fulfill her domestic role and dies young, leaving David bereft. In contrast with Dora, David’s second wife, Agnes, seems defined by her capability. She guides David’s decisions and manages his household with all the authority allotted to the domestic role. Like Peggotty, Agnes pairs affection with strength, and survives to nurture David and his children. By repeating his juxtaposition of a strong and a weak woman, Dickens drives home the value of strength and self-care and aligns Agnes, his most direct expression of the feminine ideal, with those female characters who go to extremes of self-nurturance rather than extremes of self-abnegation. By creating double-wives as well as double-mothers for David, Dickens explores alternative models of femininity that reshape the normative ideal at the center of Victorian womanhood. The anorexic extremes of middle-class femininity appear here as a failure, and Dickens instead asks us to value the strength, even the supplemental excess, required for successful mothering.

While David Copperfield’s Agnes is offered as an idealized image of female nurturance, The Old Curiosity Shop presents its heroine Little Nell
as an idealized image of female self-sacrifice. Nell serves as the paragon of a certain brand of fragile Victorian femininity and, like Dora, is doomed to a short life. A young teenager, Nell is pretty, small, meek, and affectionate, and inspires strong impulses to either nurture or exploit in the novel’s older characters. Her trials as she flees the villainous Quilp include pronounced hunger, and her physical wasting leads to her death at the novel’s end. Houston examines Nell’s contrast with the all-consuming Quilp (whose voracious appetite extends to boiling liquids and eggshells), and claims for Nell the redemptive power of self-starvation in the face of consumerism run amuck. While the novel certainly valorizes Nell’s self-sacrifice—her story criticizes a neglectful society by granting female self-sacrifice the affective quality of pathos—her death ultimately points to flaws in the social system and calls for better nurturance of society’s vulnerable members. However noble, Nell’s brand of self-abnegation is impracticable as a way of life. Yet *The Old Curiosity Shop* also offers a series of characters whose experiences shape our reading of Nell’s. For instance, the spunky and demanding Marchioness—a girl roughly Nell’s age and also a victim of poor or absent parenting—manages to exhibit fine nurturing ability and also to carve out a fine life for herself with Dick Swiveller. The inclusion of such a character in the story provides a happy counterpoint to Nell, and suggests that a more aggressive attitude might better serve those in need. It is Nell’s parent figures that concern me here, though. Her gambling-addicted grandfather is both self-abnegating (as evidenced by his emaciated frame and constant avowals to sacrifice all for his granddaughter) and selfishly consumed by vice (a problem even Nell must acknowledge when he steals from her in a dreamlike trance). Like the “Fasting Girls” of *All the Year Round*, his character links the language and bodily experience of self-sacrifice with images of weakness and wasteful consumption. Most importantly, fat lady Mrs. Jarley provides the best nurturing Nell receives in the novel, and does so with constant reference to self-care and self-nurturance.

Mrs. Jarley, proprietress of the novel’s waxwork, serves as an alternative image of femininity in whom consumption is presented as positive. Jarley, “stout and comfortable to look upon,” meets Nell and her grandfather on the road, takes them in, and gives them food and work (*OCS*, chap. 26, 222). She first appears in the novel at repast and eats throughout the majority of her scenes. Spotting Nell and her grandfather among the other travelers, she summons the girl between gulps: “‘Hey!’ cried the lady of the caravan, scooping the crumbs out of her lap and swallowing the same before wiping her lips,” as Nell looks on with “modest but hungry admiration” (*OCS*, chap. 26, 222). Seeing Nell’s hunger, she invites the pair
to join her for tea and urges self-indulgence: “Now hand up the teapot for a little more hot water, and a pinch of fresh tea, and then both of you eat and drink as much as you can, and don’t spare anything; that’s all I ask of you” (OCS, chap. 26, 225). Jarley’s doctrine is consistently one of self-care through excess: she assures Nell, “[I]t does you good, when you’re tired, to sleep as long as ever you can” (OCS, chap. 28, 238).

Mrs. Jarley’s behavior is far from ideal and her habits of traveling with nonrelative male companions and drinking alcohol by the tumbler verge on scandalous. She does not vie with Nell for the novel’s idealized feminine role. Yet Jarley is a warm, positive character who offers a necessary supplement to Nell’s asceticism, and her nurturance keeps the young woman alive for a significant portion of the novel. Jarley operates a traveling waxwork depicting history’s most excessive figures, including “the fat man, and then the thin man, the tall man, the short man, the old lady who died of dancing at a hundred and thirty-two, the wild boy of the woods,” and a host of famous criminals (OCS, chap. 28, 242). Roving the countryside in tandem with a range of other folk entertainments including a live freak show, Jarley’s waxwork provides a direct link to the bodily spectacles considered in All the Year Round. The waxwork seems an extension of Jarley’s excess. Wax is a combustible fuel like fat itself, and the combination of Jarley’s personal fat and the waxwork’s profusion of artificial bodies (controlled and arranged by Jarley) seems to put an unlimited supply of real and waxen flesh—and hence, stored energy—at her disposal. According to its promotional poster, the waxwork “enlarges the sphere of the human understanding” (OCS, chap. 28, 244). It presents a spectacle of freakish extremes in order to encourage philosophical contemplation and a broadened perspective for its onlookers (not unlike Daniel Lambert’s shoes mentioned in the essay “Fat People”). Jarley, too, offers a spectacle of extreme self-nurturance that encourages examination of the self-sacrifice presumably expected from mother figures and freely given by Nell to her grandfather. In the show she makes of hearty eating and self-care, and in the encouragement she gives Nell to follow her lead, Mrs. Jarley offers a supplemental image of hearty femininity.

Mrs. Jarley forces the novel’s reader to question whether selflessness is the key requirement for good nurturance. The lady of the waxwork feeds Nell, offers her shelter and affectionate care, and yet doesn’t hesitate to profit from Nell’s skills as promoter. As the attractive Nell draws crowds to the waxwork, the two women share a mutually beneficial relationship. Jarley is both consuming and giving, with the natural procreative ability of a businesswoman: her “inventive genius” brings income and bon temps to the entire waxwork party (OCS, chap. 29, 245). In this case, a judicious and
balanced selfishness goes hand in hand with hearty nurturance, and forms a stable middle ground between the extreme greed of the novel’s villain Quilp and the extreme self-sacrifice of Nell.

Jarley’s active consumption renders her a far better nurturer than Nell’s grandfather, the child’s official caretaker. The grandfather’s compulsive gambling makes him at once all-consuming and nonconsuming. The grandfather’s gambling is both a form of sacrifice (in this case, sacrificing the present comfort for the hope of a better return) and a destructive brand of selfishness. He justifies his habit with the belief that his winnings will be for Nell rather than himself, and mourns that “God knows that this one child is the thought and object of my life, and yet he never prospers me—oh, never!” (OCS, chap. 1, 8–9). Ultimately, Nell’s grandfather provides neither protection nor sustenance for the object of his love. Quilp purchases the old man’s debts and uses that leverage to push his way into the household, forcing the man and child to flee. Unable to provide for his family, Nell’s grandfather starves alongside the child he loves.

Mrs. Jarley supplements the nurturance provided by Nell’s official guardian, and thus offers nurturing excess and self-care as antidotes to the grandfather’s unusually selfish brand of starvation. Fat ladies feed themselves in order to produce for their dependants, while failed parents squander resources in the name of self-sacrifice.

III. Fat Sexuality in Maupassant’s “Boule de Suif”

If the corset and thinness serve as an emblem of self-restraint that extends, metaphorically, to sexual continence, then the excess and self-indulgence hinted at by a fat body are likely to suggest libidinous sexuality. Indeed, Anna Silver suggests that the corseted waist is idealized specifically because it forecloses any suspicion of pregnancy. Though Dickens suggests a general moral laxity for The Old Curiosity Shop’s Mrs. Jarley, nineteenth-century connections between fatness and sexuality are scarce in British literature as cultural taboos ensured that sexuality itself is often relegated to the subtext of Victorian fiction. The more flexible moral code of French Naturalism offers a useful extension for an examination of how fatness enables both nurturance and the redefinition of ideology itself. In the case of Guy de Maupassant’s 1880 short story “Boule de Suif,” fatness carries nobility that allows it to interrogate restrictive and unhealthy moral codes. Maupassant’s work echoes the social message of Dickens’s fat lady imagery, but sets aside the demands of child rearing in favor of a more general
consideration of community spirit and nurturance and forges connections between fat and sex as pro-social bodily transgressions that push the limits of women’s roles.

Guy de Maupassant’s story “Boule de Suif,” literally, “Ball of Lard,” centers on a egregiously fat prostitute, and thus marries fat to female sexuality in its title character. Maupassant crafted this work within the comparatively liberal culture of 1880s France. Like Dickens, though, Maupassant appreciates nineteenth-century concerns about consumption and sexual control, and recognizes the imagistic potency of fat within social criticism. “Boule de Suif” chronicles the journey of a group of Normans trying to escape the ravages of the Franco-Prussian War by securing passage on an outbound coach. The passengers embody the wealth, religion, and ideological negotiation of bourgeois culture. They include three wealthy merchant couples, two nuns, a famous revolutionary named Cornudet, and the title character, an elite courtesan. Confined to the coach throughout the day, the unprepared passengers suffer greatly from hunger and thirst until Boule de Suif offers to share the ample picnic she brought for just such an eventuality. The “respectable” passengers put aside their prejudice against their “immoral” benefactor long enough to eat, and they pass the common cup (literally) in almost biblical fashion. Later, however, the coach is stopped by a Prussian officer and his men, who confine the passengers for several days. The officer will let them go, he insists, only if Boule de Suif makes love to him. Intensely patriotic, she refuses until her impatient companions assure her that such a sacrifice would be morally right and pressure her into accepting the officer for the common good. Against her judgment, she agrees, and the passengers are allowed to resume their journey. In spite of their prior assurances of gratitude, however, the upstanding citizens treat Boule de Suif with blatant scorn and, when they assemble an impromptu buffet from their meager food supplies, they refuse to share with her. Hurt and disgusted, Boule de Suif sobs while her ungrateful companions dine.

Like the amorous Prussian officer, Maupassant’s omniscient narrator evaluates Boule de Suif with an appreciative eye and metaphors of food:

Small, round and fat as lard, with puffy fingers choked at the phalanges like chaplets of short sausages, with a stretched and shining skin, an enormous bosom which shook under her dress, she was, nevertheless, pleasing and sought after on account of a certain freshness and breeziness of disposition. Her face was a round apple, a peony bud ready to pop into

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13 Zola and others share Maupassant’s fascination with fat sexuality. I prefer this particular story because of its strongly positive presentation of excess.
bloom, and inside that opened two great black eyes shaded with thick brows that cast a shadow within; and below, a charming mouth, humid for kissing, furnished with shining, microscopic baby teeth. She was, it was said, full of admirable qualities. (“BDS,” 6)\(^{14}\)

Boule de Suif’s extreme fatness is characterized as unusual but not unpleasant, and of a magnitude appropriate for her warm and outgoing personality. Her attractions, the narrator insists, are her “freshness and breeziness of disposition” and her “humid” sensuality. Her sausage-like fingers blur the line between food and body—they suggest that she, too, might be consumable. As critic Mary Donaldson-Evans argues, Boule de Suif and many of Maupassant’s other female characters are treated as consumables and exploited by their society. This aptly characterizes the attitudes of the other passengers, including the story’s narrator, yet in its entirety “Boule de Suif” resoundingly condemns such practice and shows that even women who commodify their sexuality are much more than objects. In Boule de Suif’s physical description, the challenges to middle-class ideology posed by the potential for cultural transformation within the grotesque aspects of her body merge with narrative irony about the consumption of the prostitute’s body by mainstream culture.\(^{15}\)

Maupassant also mocks the presumption of a fat prostitute’s lack of physical control to create ironic commentary on the nineteenth-century’s ideological limits for both bodies and social roles. Self-starvation and corseting were valued in nineteenth-century middle-class culture as proof of bodily self-control, so Boule de Suif’s transgression of physical and sexual norms should point to weak self-control. Yet Maupassant’s characterization insists on a more complex reading of his character’s bodily life. Boule de Suif is not a passionate amateur, but a sex professional who bases decisions about her body not just on emotion or desire, but also on experience, personal values, and business principles. Boule de Suif’s sexual professionalism actually enables her control over her own body. While the other

\(^{14}\) Petite, ronde de partout, grasse à lard, avec des doigts bouffis, étranglés aux phalanges, pareils à des chapelets de courtes saucisses, avec une peau luisante et tendue, une gorge énorme qui saillait sous sa robe, elle restait cependant appétissante et courue, tant sa fraîcheur faisait plaisir à voir. Sa figure était une pomme rouge, un bouton de pivoine prêt à fleurir; et là-dedans s’ouvraient, en haut, deux yeux noirs magnifiques, ombragés de grands cils épais qui mettaient une ombre dedans; en bas, une bouche charmante, étroite, humide pour le baiser, meublée de quenottes luisantes et microscopiques.

\(^{15}\) The narrator’s fixation on his character’s bodily openings such as her mouth, and the extent to which his food imagery also blurs the boundaries between meat and person, death and life, draws attention to the short story’s imagery. In context of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, the grotesque underscores the main character’s role as a tool for social criticism.
characters blindly follow prescribed moral codes, the prostitute is free to
give or withhold sex based on her own set of principles about politics and commerce. Her initial decision to withhold sex from her Prussian pursuer (and in an earlier scene, from Cornudet) foregrounds her moral and physical self-determination: she bases her decision on her political and ethical sensibilities, not on men’s desire. While Boule de Suif makes mature, reasonable sexual decisions and refrains from sex with ease, her cotravelers are preoccupied with sex and childishly titillated by the prostitute’s sexuality. In the same manner, Boule de Suif casually shares her food and voluntarily skips meals during the passengers’ confinement, while the others complain incessantly of hunger, devour her proffered rations, and then hoard their own supplies. Clearly, of all the characters, the fattest is best able to control her sexual and gustatory impulses. By conflating fat with sexual excess, and associating both with self-governance and an authentic moral consciousness (through his central character’s prolonged deliberation of whether or not to barter sex for freedom), Maupassant presents the female body as something to be revered rather than restrained.

Like Peggotty and Jarley, Maupassant’s prostitute demonstrates the interpersonal warmth and social responsibility valued by the emphasis on motherhood within nineteenth-century feminine ideals. Maupassant’s story features only adult characters, but nevertheless ties bodily excess to caretaking and nurturance. Boule de Suif’s sensual richness is urgently needed within the story’s war-starved environment, in which the fleeing passengers cannot stop for food without risk of capture. One female passenger becomes ill with hunger before agreeing to partake of the prostitute’s food: far from being the story’s unhealthy eater, Boule de Suif instead resuscitates the flagging health of others. In contrast, the self-starving attitude of the other passenger seems narrow-minded rather than noble. Though excessive for one person, Boule de Suif’s plentiful picnic offers a necessary counterbalance to the emptiness of the others’ stomachs.

Like the bulk and excess of Dickens’s supplemental mothers, Boule de Suif’s fatness points to an almost limitless generosity and strength of character. Though Maupassant emphasizes that middle-class society is more willing to exploit such excess than validate it, he criticizes such a mentality and gives the fat prostitute a moral high ground. These images of inexhaustible women whose bodies store fuel for near-eternal mothering

16 As Mary Donaldson-Evans notes in A Woman’s Revenge, Boule de Suif and many other of Maupassant’s heroines “preserve their self-respect by transferring their morality to a non-sexual sphere” and “play active and heroic roles” in spite of their socially stigmatized profession (14).
and lovemaking are deeply powerful. They have strength and resilience in stark contrast with scads of nineteenth-century wilting, swooning heroines, and the size of their bodies adds weight to their presence. They defy the notion that female self-sacrifice must come through self-denial, and instead find active roles to play in improving the lives of those around them. Most importantly, by exceeding the acceptable physical dimensions for women and (in Boule de Suif and Jarley’s cases) transgressing the acceptable social limitations of womanhood, they challenge the idea that a woman should fit into a particular mold while still outperforming more conventional female characters at the valued work of nurturance. Peg-gotty redefines nurturance as an active, important role requiring as much self-care as self-sacrifice. Jarley helps us to distinguish between productive, nurturing excess and selfish asceticism. Finally, Boule de Suif insists on her right to determine her own sexual and ethical boundaries and weeps in frustration at a society’s lack of appreciation for her valuable excess.

Exceptional fatness can hold myriad meanings, but in these works it guides our appreciation of a character’s attitude toward consumption, pleasure, and self-nurturance. As an obvious physical signal of excess—excess that can also emerge as social nonconformity or open sexuality—fat supplements lean spots in nineteenth-century social norms. Such supplementation creates the possibility for revision of a troubling contradiction within Victorian femininity: the potential for self-starvation within some applications of the middle-class feminine ideal can rob women of their ability to nurture and, thus, to fulfill that ideal. Within *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, assertive women who feed their own physical and emotional needs make the best nurturers. Dickens invites us to break the connections between bodily conformity, social conformity, and successful motherhood. Dickens has his finger on the tool that succeeding generations of women would use to call for female social equality: the claim that since motherhood gives women authority and requires mental and physical strength, women should therefore be nurtured, educated, and allowed to speak their minds. Maupassant contrasts joyful consumption with mercenary consumerism and embraces fat female sexuality as metaphor for a more permeable, sharing society in which we all nurture each other. For both authors, fat pushes back against social restrictions to create breathing room for all women, as expansive female bodies produce expansive female lives.
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