Victorian Freaks

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The Victorians evinced what may be called an obsession with the limits of human proportion. This fascination with body size had its roots in the eighteenth century, when technologies for weighing and measuring objects became more reliable and inventors such as John Merlin and Thomas Weeks created machines for weighing individual bodies. According to Pat Rogers, at the turn of the nineteenth century Londoners could visit Merlin’s Museum and Berry’s Wineshop to be publicly weighed. A certain amount of curiosity about body size is evinced by the fact that the Prince of Wales, Beau Brummel, and James Boswell all weighed themselves and kept records of the results, while some, like Sir John Dashwood, even competed with others to determine who could gain the most weight.

By the mid-nineteenth century, with the consolidation of medical authority and the rise of arithmetical ways of knowing in the sciences, this curiosity had developed into a perceived need to determine the relative sizes of individual bodies in relation to emerging statistical norms. The fact that statistics were considered valuable as a way of knowing a population can be seen when one looks at the writings of African explorer John Hanning Speke, who measured the bodies of native women and recorded their measurements in his journal next
to statistics about the sizes of mountains and lakes. Lennard J. Davis has noted that there was a burgeoning of interest in statistics in the nineteenth century, evidenced by the founding of institutions such as the General Register Office. He points out that early British statisticians were also often eugenicists and that they regarded differences as deviations. Indeed, in the 1860s Poor Law Board inspector Edward Smith studied the weight of individual paupers in relation to statistical norms and used his results to adjust workhouse diet in order to reduce deviations from those norms, while Sir William Guy conducted similar studies on prison inmates.

The first English actuarial tables for determining ideal body weight in relation to height were formulated by insurance companies at the turn of the nineteenth century, and they influenced nineteenth-century individuals to strive for the “happy medium” where weight was concerned. Both corpulent and slender bodies fell outside of the limits that these tables constructed. The attention paid to those whose bodies did not conform to cultural norms is clear from the well-documented Victorian infatuation with the American sideshow performer General Tom Thumb. But the Victorians did not neglect the other side of the scale, either; for example, in the 1860s two articles on human “curiosities” famed for their large dimensions and appetites appeared in Dickens’s *All the Year Round.*

At the time that statistics came into vogue, Britain was developing a consumer culture. Bryan S. Turner places the start of a mass consumer culture in the 1880s. Thomas Richards, however, argues convincingly that the “cultural forms of consumerism” were in place before the full development of a mass consumer economy was complete. The Great Exhibition of 1851, for instance, contributed to the ongoing formation of “a phenomenology and a psychology for a new kind of being, the consumer, and a new strain of ideology, consumerism,” and that exhibition had its roots in even earlier commodity spectacles. It is not surprising, then, that the Victorians, as Gail Turley Houston has noted, “had to deal in complex ways with the meaning of their material production and consumption” and that much of their literature reflects “an attempt to define and account for the practice of consumption” in all its various guises.

As Houston argues, nineteenth-century writings tend to collapse economic and alimentary consumption. Indeed, the logic of early capitalism was interwoven with metaphors relating to digestion and nutrition. The need to consume food was often made to serve as the quintessential representative of all forms of consumption; in Victorian writings, it
is hunger that drives the marketplace. For example, according to an 1861 article in *Cornhill Magazine*, the stomach is man’s “task-master”; it makes him a “working animal” in “spite of his laziness.” As the Victorians extended their association of fat with aberrant consumption to include economic as well as alimentary consumption, it is not surprising that their interest in discovering and documenting the dimensions of the human body should be intertwined with concerns about not simply bodily control but also the management of economic, and specifically consumer, desires.

These concerns are evident in the Victorians’ continuing attempts to account for the body of Daniel Lambert, a seven-hundred-pound man who exhibited himself in England at the turn of the nineteenth century (figure 2.1). Although Lambert died in 1809, his legend was preserved and transmitted throughout the nineteenth century, and, in the process, it was fragmented, revised, and made to serve a multiplicity of purposes. Posthumously, Lambert took on many roles, some of which bore conflicting connotations. For example, when, in 1846, General Tom Thumb performed with a suit of Lambert’s clothing, walking through the arm of Lambert’s jacket, the spectacle emphasized both men’s difference from an implied norm. Furthermore, as viewers were invited to marvel at the amount of cloth needed to make his suit, Lambert’s difference from the normative middle-class consumer was highlighted as well. Yet when his image was emblazoned on the sign of a public house bearing his name, Lambert was transformed into the representative of the normative middle-class consumer’s appetite for premium goods.

References to Lambert in Victorian writings provide a focal point for readers’ fears about the ability to manage consumer desires in a developing commodity culture. Because Lambert’s fat was associated by the Victorians with the consumption of resources—not simply space, but also food and other goods such as the cloth for his suits—the tension between Lambert’s roles as freak and as typical Englishman reflects conflicts within the self-definition of the British middle-class consumer, and Lambert’s continuing popularity can, at least in part, be explained by the centrality of the consumer dilemmas that plagued the Victorian British middle classes.

**“The Life of That Wonderful and Extraordinary Heavy Man”**

In the summer of 1806, London tourists flocked to visit Daniel Lambert, “The Jolly Gaoler of Leister,” at his apartments in Piccadilly. For the
price of a shilling, spectators could call upon and visit with Mr. Lambert, whose handbills advertised him as “the heaviest man that ever lived.” Lambert would only exhibit himself in Piccadilly for five months before returning home to his native Leicester, where he had served most of his life as custodian of the local prison. Over the course of the following three years, he could occasionally be seen on display at fairs and races across the country, though he did make two more brief visits to London for repeat performances before his death in 1809, by which time he had
attained the weight of 739 pounds. Although his career as a freak was short, it was highly successful. In fact, one man claimed to have visited Lambert so many times and paid so many shillings to see him that he had “fairly had a pound’s worth” of him, while spectators came from as far as Guernsey to view him.21

Lambert’s posthumous career, however, lasted considerably longer. His spectacular afterlife began with his funeral. He had gone to Stamford to exhibit himself at the races and had died in his sleep, presumably of heart failure, on the night before his scheduled performance. The local paper and at least one spectator reported that hundreds of people, not wanting to be deprived of the promised spectacle, attended his burial to see the enormous coffin and to marvel at the probable dimensions of the body it held.22 Not long afterward, objects associated with Lambert began to circulate, particularly his clothes and other items that—like his coffin—denoted the proportions of his body. Lambert's specially built coach and his clothing were auctioned, after which his tailor made additional suits of clothes to Lambert's dimensions for sale to collectors. Lithographs and prints were made from the four portraits that had been taken of him during his life. Wax models of his body were constructed, one of which was exhibited as far away as America and resided until recently in the American Dime Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. There were even Lambert collectibles, such as whisky crocks fashioned in his image. This interest in Lambert continued well into the mid-century. In 1842, for example, an innkeeper in Stamford was able to purchase a suit of Lambert’s clothes from an American dealer and displayed them at his public house, rechristened the Daniel Lambert in honor of the clothing’s original owner, along with a suit donated by General Tom Thumb (figure 2.2).

While objects associated with Lambert continued to be disseminated throughout the nineteenth century, legends about him also spread. These began to appear in print soon after his death, and some of them seem likely to have been used originally to promote his performances. According to the tales, Lambert defied all of the stereotypes normally associated with corpulence in the nineteenth century: he was “very partial to the female sex,”23 enjoyed “perfect and uninterrupted” health, displayed uncommon intelligence and quick wit, and showed a remarkable amount of temperance and restraint at meals. He also exhibited a “truly extraordinary” degree of energy and activity, and as a young man, he was “passionately fond” of “sports of the field.”24

Little is known about his childhood, except for the (alleged) fact
Figure 2.2
Daniel Lambert’s clothing. Photo courtesy of Lincolnshire County Council: Stamford Museum.
that Lambert was not particularly fat as a boy. At fourteen, he was apprenticed to a button and buckle engraver, but changes in fashion displaced many engravers at that period and, after four years, Lambert was forced to seek other employment as keeper of the Leicester jail. If the tales be true, all of the prisoners testified to his benevolence, and some even wept upon being released. It was at about this time, by all accounts, that he began to gain weight and, not surprisingly, to show signs of extraordinary ability. He could, for example, reportedly lift five hundred pounds with ease and was supposedly able to stand on one leg and kick the other leg seven feet in the air. In addition, he was reputed to have performed amazing feats at this stage in his life. Once a troupe of traveling entertainers brought some bears to Leicester, one of which escaped to attack a local dog. Lambert is said to have wrestled with this bear in an attempt to rescue the dog. In some versions of this tale, Lambert is defeated because he falls and, encumbered by his weight, cannot rise again. In a more fanciful account, however, Lambert arises to triumph over the bear, while another bear performer tips its hat to Lambert in recognition of his superior prowess. Another tale has Lambert courageously escaping a burning building and, in some reports, returning to save seven children. Yet another anecdote casts him as the local swimming instructor, because his fat gives him extraordinary buoyancy. In this story, he saves children from drowning by allowing them to ride on his belly as he floats. It is said that as rumors of his marvelous exploits spread throughout the land, this normally shy and retiring man was called forth by the public to exhibit himself. More creditable, however, is the story that Lambert became a freak because he experienced pressing financial need, due to the expense of obtaining special accommodations in a culture adapted to meet the needs of much smaller men.

As the century continued, images of Lambert, both pictorial and literary, proliferated as the legends were passed down in both oral and written form. Lambert appeared not simply as an object of study and wonder in books and articles on scientific and medical curiosities but also as a carnivalesque Bacchus figure in a broadsheet ballad, a role model in a Christian tract, and a British national icon, in the style of John Bull, in at least five political cartoons. By the mid-nineteenth century, Lambert's name had passed into slang discourse as a descriptor for a corpulent man and had become a household word. This is demonstrated in the numerous casual allusions to Lambert that appear in literary works such as Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas
Nickleby and Thackeray’s Vanity Fair and Men’s Wives. References to Lambert even turn up in texts by American authors such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and humorist Charles F. M. Noland. Lambert’s name and image were associated not merely with corpulence but also with feasting and drink. Despite the fact that Lambert himself had reportedly been a teetotaler who ate sparingly, “The Jolly Gaoler” and “The Daniel Lambert” became popular names for public houses, and his likeness was used to decorate their signs.

To begin to understand the cultural work that Lambert’s image accomplished in the Victorian era, one must examine the contexts in which his image appeared and the uses to which it was put by the Victorians. It is not surprising that the figure of Lambert is frequently invoked as an example of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called an “extraordinary body,” though it may be unexpected that Lambert’s physical difference is cast as both freakish and heroic. More surprisingly, however, Lambert’s body sometimes appears as the representative English body. As Lambert’s size was associated not simply with the consumption of space but also with the consumption of resources, it will be seen that these opposing modes for representing Lambert reflected tensions in British self-definition regarding consumerism.

**Consumer Anxiety**

One mode of representation continued to depict Lambert as a freak, a signifier of aberrant consumption that both warned consumers to control their own appetites and reassured them that their lesser consumer desires were “normal.” As Garland-Thomson has asserted, with the emergence of the “unmarked norm” as “reference point” in the nineteenth century, the body marked by its physical difference from that norm was stigmatized, or “freakified,” to delineate the boundaries of the normal. Garland-Thomson calls the process of stigmatization “enfreakment.” She argues that, since the nineteenth century, the freak’s body has functioned as a site upon which an audience could “project cultural characteristics they themselves disavowed.” In human exhibits, freakified bodies mark the boundaries that define the normal, serving to warn individuals to stay within those boundaries. But Garland-Thomson notes that freaks also serve a more reassuring function. Freakified bodies are represented as existing in a binary relationship to the norm. The logic upon which this binary is constructed aligns nonstigmatized
bodies with the cultural ideal. What this opposition offers to subjects whose bodies are thus defined as normal is the illusion of freedom from the uncertainties, flux, and grotesqueries of bodily existence. This fiction can only be maintained, however, by the continued and systematic devaluation of the freakified body, for it is only by comparison with stigmatized subjects that “normal” ones appear free.

Thus, the continuing enfreakment of Daniel Lambert in the Victorian era, through the display of his coach, chair, clothing, and other personal items signifying his size, was a part of the process by which the Victorians created a composite picture of the “normal body,” of which bodily proportion was a major component. In such an atmosphere, someone like Lambert is reduced to his dimensions and transformed into a representative of the limits of the human. For example, writing in 1884, G. H. Wilson describes Lambert’s audiences as eager “to behold to what an immense magnitude the human figure is capable of attaining.”32 Similarly, an 1864 article from Dickens’s *All the Year Round* introduces Lambert, the “king” of fat men, by addressing a reader hungry for statistical knowledge of the human condition: “What is the average weight of a man? At what age does he attain his greatest weight? How much heavier are men than women? What would be the weight of fat people; and what of very fat people?”33 Tellingly, the essay contains little biographical information about Lambert’s fat subjects, beyond statistics regarding the weight of each fat person and the dimensions of his or her coffin. Such accounts appear to have provided a touchstone grounding readers’ anxieties with regard to the relationship between individual bodies and the supposedly universal corporeal standards developed in the nineteenth century.

Capitalism played a large part in the defining these standards for the Victorians. Mass production assumes a consumer who possesses an adaptable body, a body that can and will adapt to fit into preconstructed spaces.34 As the century progressed, the public sphere was slowly standardized and, increasingly, those with bodies that did not fit the norms found themselves out of place in an environment built to meet the needs of the “average” body. In 1863 William Banting, self-proclaimed expert on obesity, complained that the corpulent man daily faced “the annoyance of finding no adequate space in the public assembly if he should seek amusement or need refreshment.”35

It is not surprising, then, that Lambert’s difference from the emerging norms of the time was specifically expressed through the display of his clothing. The rise of the ready-made clothing industry exemplified the
standardization trend. With ready-made clothing, the individual body does not serve as a reference point, as the immobile absolute to which the environment must be adapted; rather, the body itself is perceived as adaptable, conforming to the clothing manufacturers’ standards. In the practice of auctioning and displaying Lambert’s clothing, Lambert’s dimensions were preserved while the social interaction that was integral to his original performance was lost. Lambert’s clothes could continue to draw crowds without him, and if the actual clothing were not available, suits made to his measurements would do just as well.

This last example highlights the way in which anxieties over bodily proportion and body management were read through and against anxieties about consumerism. For it was not merely Lambert’s proportions that fascinated the Victorians. They wanted to learn how much a person of Lambert’s size would consume, in terms of space, food, clothing, and other resources, and, through doing so, construct limits on consumer desire. If Garland-Thomson is correct that the Victorians projected the characteristics that they themselves disavowed onto the bodies of freaks, then the specific “disavowed characteristic” that the British population projected onto the body of Daniel Lambert was consumer desire, especially anxieties about the management of consumer desire. The management of consumer desire is a continuing problem in a capitalist society. As Susan Bordo has noted, capitalist cultures make conflicting demands on consumers: “On the one hand, as producers of consumer goods and services we must sublimate, delay, repress desires for immediate gratification; we must cultivate the work ethic. On the other hand, as consumers we must display a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse; we must hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction. The regulation of desire thus becomes an ongoing problem, as we find ourselves continually besieged by temptation, while socially condemned for overindulgence.”

For the Victorians, the image of Lambert provided a focal point through which they could fashion consuming bodies; he placed their own consuming practices in context. The stigma of corpulence was the stigma of unchecked appetite; corpulent people, it was assumed, could not manage their desires effectively. When, in the mid-century, doctors such as Thomas King Chambers proclaimed that the etiology of obesity was unknown or that it proceeded from multiple causes, the public responded, “The grand cause of obesity is our eating and drinking more than enough.” Fat bodies thus bore a metonymic association with consumables in the Victorian mind, and Lambert was associated with
literary characters that failed to regulate their appetites, not simply for food and drink but also for goods.

In *Vanity Fair*, for example, William Makepeace Thackeray associates Lambert with the ultimate unregulated consumer, Joseph Sedley. *Vanity Fair* is a novel about consuming. According to Barbara Hardy, successful consumers in *Vanity Fair* are those like Becky Sharp, who can remain “coolly acquisitive,” as opposed to those like Joseph, who fetishize commodities and become entrapped within their roles as consumers.\(^39\) Joseph invests objects with far too much desire and is thus held prisoner by his appetites. His interaction with the world is limited to meaningless consumer display. He spends hours each day adorning himself with numerous weskits and neckcloths in order to display himself by riding around the town in his expensive carriage, and then he returns home to eat a solitary meal and retire alone. The few social interactions in which he does engage are mediated by goods and particularly by food; he even finds conversation “delicious.”\(^40\) When Amelia is pining for her husband who is at war, for example, Joseph “show[s] his sympathy, by pouring her out a large cup of tea.”\(^41\) Furthermore, when the family loses their fortune, Joseph responds to the material loss by sending money but neglects the human loss by refusing to visit and to help restore his father’s sense of self-respect.\(^42\)

Like Lambert’s, Joseph’s body is large enough that it calls attention to him whenever he enters the public sphere. And, also like Lambert’s, Joseph’s body is not merely a spectacle but rather a spectacle of consumer desire unleashed. When Joseph drinks “the whole contents of the bowl” of rack punch at Vauxhall, Thackeray explicitly evokes Lambert to emphasize the spectacle of Joseph’s consuming feat. His drunken antics draw a crowd, who taunt him about his size by calling out, “Angcore, Daniel Lambert!”\(^43\) For the rabble of pleasure seekers at Vauxhall, the spectacle of Joseph’s enormous body, coupled as it is with Lambert’s freakified image, provides comforting, if false, reassurance that their own desires are under their control.

**Capitalist Nostalgia**

Legends presenting Lambert as extraordinary were not, as one might imagine, entirely negative. In the folk tales that flourished after Lambert’s death, he is frequently depicted as a rescuer, saving animals and children. In 1815 Lambert even appeared in a Christian tract extolling
the “humanity, temperance and liberality of sentiment” that made him “a model worthy of general imitation.”

This pamphlet was reprinted and plagiarized throughout the nineteenth century, until at least the 1880s. Given the association of fat with aberrant consumerism, how does one explain the continuing popularity of legends that present Lambert as heroic?

Heroic tales depict Lambert in a mode that Robert Bogdan has characterized as the “aggrandized mode” of presentation, a technique of freak show performance that draws attention to a human exhibit by making claims that enhance his or her status. The politics of aggrandized performance, in my opinion, depend upon context. In this case, the very norms that forced actual bodies like Lambert’s out of the public sphere, abjected them, and labeled them freakish also enabled the symbolic portrayal of these bodies as heroic. I will label the process by which the deceased Lambert is idealized, at the very point in time when capitalism is creating an environment hostile to those of Lambert’s size, “capitalist nostalgia.”

In a chapter titled “Imperialist Nostalgia” in Culture and Truth, Renato Rosaldo remarks that nostalgia frees individuals of guilt by allowing them to “mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed.” Capitalist nostalgia enabled the Victorian public to enjoy wonder tales that celebrated Lambert’s difference while simultaneously participating in the creation of an increasingly standardized environment that devalued actual fat people. The more fantastical the tale, the more Lambert seemed to be removed from the socioeconomic milieu that placed increasingly restrictive limits on the lives of fat people and forced Lambert himself to become a human exhibit in order to pay for specially made chairs, coaches, and clothing. Such stories also often stressed Lambert’s difference from other fat people, facilitating identification with Lambert while distancing the audience from the majority of fat individuals. Furthermore, by highlighting Lambert’s extraordinariness, even in a positive light, these legends simply reified the idea that Lambert was different from the “average man” and thus worked to reinforce the norms that stigmatized fat people.

But, more interestingly, such narratives functioned to relieve any guilt the Victorians felt over their own roles as consumers of the Lambert phenomenon. This is particularly true of tales that celebrate Lambert’s extraordinary wit, in which Lambert is frequently portrayed in the act of resisting objectification through direct verbal confrontation. In these stories Lambert defies the objectifying gaze—or “stare,” as
Garland-Thomson has called it—by making his audience aware that he is looking back at them. According to Wilson, Lambert’s “apartments [in Piccadilly] had more the air of a place of fashionable resort, than of exhibition,” and his guests are described as “not merely gazing at him as a spectacle, but treating him in the most friendly and soothing manner.” Wilson recounts several surviving anecdotes regarding Lambert’s wit at the expense of those few impertinent viewers who insisted on objectifying him through their interactions by neglecting to observe the everyday social rituals through which one acknowledges another’s humanity. For example, on one occasion Lambert supposedly told a woman who inquired about the price of one of his enormous coats, “If you think it proper to make me a present of a new coat, you will then know exactly what it costs.” Another time, he refused to answer the same question and when the inquisitor replied that he had a right to know, having paid a shilling to view Lambert, Lambert retorted, “If I knew what part of my next coat your shilling would pay for, I can assure you I would cut out the piece.”

Such stories evoke Victorian guilt over the consumption of Lambert’s image, only to allay it by distancing the “normal” consumer from the impertinent one. The continuing popularity of these stories, even seventy-five years after Lambert’s death, highlights the Victorians’ discomfort with their own roles as consumers of spectacles such as Lambert’s. These tales allow the Victorians to condemn the crass consumerism of certain members of Lambert’s original audience, even as they themselves marveled openly at representations of him.

The concept of capitalist nostalgia can also serve to explain, at least in part, representations of Lambert as a sort of everyman. When Lambert appears in advertisements for pubs and eating houses, it is as a signifier of the satisfied customer, whose appetite for plentiful and high-quality goods is coded as normal. In such images, Lambert may actually serve as the vehicle for the carnivalesque fantasies of unregulated consumption and continually fulfilled desire that are produced within an atmosphere that stresses the need to regulate consumer desire. The fact that Lambert is recalled from the past to serve as the tabula rasa onto which such fantasies could be projected demonstrates the nostalgic nature of these fancies; they represent a longing for an imagined past in which consumption was supposedly unregulated. And Lambert’s fat enhances the carnivalesque nature of these fictions. Fat, as M. M. Bakhtin has pointed out, is one of the principal symbols of the carnivalesque tradition. That Lambert’s fat could be read as carnivalesque
in the nineteenth century is apparent from his appearance in works such as a broadsheet ballad with the title “The World Turned Upside Down.” According to Bakhtin, in the nineteenth century the grotesque aesthetic associated with carnival was sanitized to such an extent that in Victorian writings fat displaced all other aspects of the grotesque body, especially those that were scatological or sexual in nature, and the carnivalesque aesthetic was reduced to symbols of feasting and fat, such as Mr. Pickwick’s “fat little paunch.” Bakhtin mourned this change, as he felt that the all-inclusive, communal values of the “people” were lost when the eminently middle-class Pickwick became the representative of carnival.

Dickens actually invokes Lambert in The Pickwick Papers, in association not with Mr. Pickwick but with a more carnivalesque consumer, the working-class Joe, known familiarly as the Fat Boy. Following carnivalesque tradition, Joe’s body is continually expanding; each time the Pickwickians encounter him, he is “fatter than ever.” When Sam Weller warns him to “take care you don’t get too fat,” the caution does not seem appropriate, for, although at first Joe appears “much affected” by Sam’s warning, immediately afterward he takes “the opportunity of appropriating to his own use, and summarily devouring, a particularly fine mince-pie.” The Fat Boy’s expansion is almost always associated with his prodigious consuming practices, and all who see him acknowledge him to be a consuming phenomenon. Sam, for instance, remarks, “Vell, young twenty stun [stone] . . . you’re a nice specimen of a prize boy, you are!”—as if the Fat Boy, like Lambert, were on exhibit at a fair, while Joe’s employer Mr. Wardle boasts, “I’m proud of that boy—wouldn’t part with him on any account—he’s a natural curiosity.” Yet Joe’s astonishing ability to consume is not constructed as negative, for, as James R. Kincaid has pointed out, in the nostalgic economy of The Pickwick Papers, nothing is ever used up. Indeed, it seems that the more the Fat Boy eats, the more he has to share with others and thus “no speculative observer could have regarded [him] for an instant without setting down as the official dispenser of the contents of the . . . [picnic] hamper,” the giver of food to others. Kincaid cites Joe as the ultimate representative of the carnivalesque economy of the novel, an economy in which the body is “infinitely expandable, as well as insatiable” and the resources on which it feeds are “endless.” Kincaid also associates the novel’s vision of unrestricted yet always satisfied appetite with nostalgia, as I do, although he reads it as nostalgia for “the oral-
erotic fantasies of childhood” rather than historicizing it in relation to Victorian consumer dilemmas.

**English Identity**

Lambert, however, is not always merely a generic consumer figure. He is often depicted as quintessentially English. It may seem surprising that the English would choose one whom they regarded as a freak to represent their national character. But human curiosities were often referred to in the nineteenth century as “eccentrics,” as the title of Wilson’s *The Eccentric Mirror* demonstrates, and eccentricity had deep moral and philosophical connotations for the Victorians. John Stuart Mill, for example, points to the moral ramifications of eccentricity in *On Liberty*: “Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. . . . That so few dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of our time.” But while Mill characterized England as a land in which few dared to be true eccentrics, Julia F. Saville argues convincingly that the English saw eccentricity as a defining national characteristic and the need to balance the tension between conformity and individualism as a pressing social tension. Indeed, Mill himself feels that it is their defiance of the “despotism of Custom” that makes the English more “progressive” than the rest of the world. When eccentricity becomes a defining national trait, however, it loses much of the ability to signify the sort of nonconformity that Mill advocated.

According to Saville, the Victorians defined eccentricity as “an assertion of individual liberty that will not capitulate to containment but instead celebrates excess.” That Lambert’s corporeal excess was viewed as a positive symbol of English eccentricity is clear from the period’s penchant for associating him with that icon of Britishness, John Bull. For example, there is a tale in which a Frenchman and a Jew offer to manage Lambert and to exhibit him on the continent, at which Lambert, “in the emphatic style of a true son of John Bull,” refuses to leave England. Lambert also appears as a representative of Englishness in Napoleonic-era political cartoons. In “Two Wonders of the World, or A Specimen of a New Troop of Leicestershire Lighthorse,” Lambert, in military dress, charges a scrawny Napoleon, who remarks in an exaggerated French accent, “Parbleu!! if dis be de specimen of de English
Figure 2.3
Lambert and Napoleon cartoon. Photo © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.
light Horse, Vat vill de Heavy Horse be!! Oh by Gar I vill put off de
Invasion for an oder time!”66 (figure 2.3). In another cartoon, Napoleon
says to Lambert, “I contemplate this wonder of the world and regret that
all my conquered domains cannot match this man, pray sir, are you not
a descendant from the great joss of China?” to which Lambert replies,
“No, sir, I am a true born Englishman from the county of Leicester, a
quiet mind and good constitution nourished by the free air of Great
Britain makes every Englishman thrive.” Yet another shows a robust
Lambert feasting next to a weak and undernourished Napoleon, who is
sipping broth. The caption reads, “The English Lamb and the French
Tiger. Roast Beef and French Soup.”67 These cartoons may serve to
mock Napoleon’s famed appetite for land by making his desires appear
inconsequential and thus soothing anxieties regarding the threat that
he posed to the English. But they also objectify Englishness and present
it as something to be consumed, whether in the form of roast beef or
free air.

Of course, corpulence was quite literally associated with Englishness
in the nineteenth century. Physician Thomas King Chambers, the lead-
ing authority on obesity in the 1850s, believed fatness to be a hereditary
English trait. He writes, “Erasmus says, that in his day for one stout
person to be seen on the Continent there were four in England. Among
the Celts who live in the same climate we do, it is less frequent. It
has been diminished in our Transatlantic brethren, probably from the
more general mixture of blood through intermarriage.”68 But the linking
of corpulence with Englishness also provided a naturalizing corporeal
anchor for certain personality traits to which the English laid claim.
In Reflections on the Revolution in France, for example, Edmund Burke
compares the British favorably to “great cattle” chewing their cud under
“the shadow of the British oak,” arguing that, like cattle, the British
possess a “sullen resistance to innovation.” It is the “cold sluggishness”
of their “national character,” symbolized by fat and sedentary cattle,
that in Burke’s opinion allows the British to reject the revolutionary
ideas of the more incendiary French.69 Burke extends the metaphor that
associates the British citizen with the consumption of British products,
such as beef, making the beef itself stand for the citizen. This, like the
cartoons above, highlights the fact that, in many ways, the British began
to define themselves, not simply as a nation of eccentrics but also as
one of consumers.

The association of fatness with positive English traits, however, did
not lead the English to view foreign fatness in a positive light. In fact,
fatness could provide the scientific grounding for the stigmatization of whole races of people. To the Chinese, for example, Chambers attributes an unusual propensity to corpulence. But he views this tendency as a punishment for inbreeding: “It is an evil which the exclusiveness of that singular people has entailed upon them.”\(^\text{70}\) This seems ironic, given Chambers’s remarks about the diminishment of the English waistline through continental intermarriage, quoted above, which appear as a warning against miscegenation and loss of national identity; what in the Chinese is seen as a punishment for cultural isolation becomes for the English a reward for maintaining cultural purity.

The stigmatization of foreign fat and, by extension, foreign consumer practices also worked to allay British consumer anxiety. British scientists, in general, tended to view cultural differences in eating practices as deviations from a Western norm. The inherent racism of this view becomes clear when physician William Wadd compares abnormalities of English diet to the supposed diets of those in foreign lands. In 1829 Wadd documented what he considered the “morbid or extravagant propensities of English stomachs” as models for understanding why “an Esquimaux may dine very daintily on a slice of whale” or “African gentlemen should eat one another.”\(^\text{71}\) In so doing, Wadd casts natives of exotic lands as morbid versions of Englishmen, which reinforces the normalcy of the average Englishman’s consuming practices.

**Conclusion: Lambert Today**

In the early twenty-first century, a traveler visiting the town of Stamford, where Daniel Lambert met his end, could view not only a replica of Lambert’s famous suit of clothing alongside which Tom Thumb performed in 1846 but also his hat, his walking stick, a life-sized model of his body, a porcelain collectible statue emblazoned with a Union Jack, two portraits, his grave, and the inn where he died. At the Stamford Museum, one could even play a Lambert-themed game, in which tourists compare their own bodies to Lambert’s silhouette and attempt to guess how many of them can fit into a space the size of Lambert’s waistline (figure 2.4). Proceeding to the Newarke Houses Museum in Lambert’s hometown of Leicester, one could view more of Lambert’s clothing and personal effects, another portrait, another life-sized model, and his specially made chair. Between the two towns, one could purchase Lambert jigsaw puzzles, greeting cards, postcards, refrigerator magnets, bookmarks,
coloring pages, pins, and badges. One could even have a drink at a Stamford pub that was rechristened the Daniel Lambert in 1984.

The popularity of such exhibits leads one to question how invested the spectators of Lambert’s image are in maintaining the ways of seeing and knowing that stigmatized Lambert in the first place. In fact, the Stamford Museum is actively engaging in this sort of questioning, as they renovate their Lambert exhibit as part of the “Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums” project. In twenty-first-century Britain and America, our consumer disorders have intensified with the development of a full-blown culture of mass consumption and the
consolidation of the ideologies and institutions of capitalism. Corpulent bodies continue to serve as the abjected forms onto which new consumer dilemmas are displaced. As readers approaching nineteenth-century texts, we must ask ourselves how much our readings of corpulent bodies participate in their stigmatization and the furthered devaluation of corpulence in our own cultures.

Notes


2. Ibid., 176.


8. For more information about the Victorian love of the miniature, see Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

9. “Fat People,” All the Year Round (October 9, 1869): 442–44; and “Great Eaters,” ibid. (March 12, 1870): 343–45.


12. Ibid., 5.


See also William Wadd, Comments on Corpulency and Lineaments of Leanness (London: Ebers, 1829), 13–14.

16. Many thanks to the staff and curators at the Stamford Museum, especially Philippa Massey, for allowing me access to their collections and to the staff and curators at the Newark Houses Museum, Leicester, especially Philip French, Helene Kelly, Mary Hider, and Lee Richard, for providing information and literature regarding Lambert.


18. For an alternate reading of Lambert’s body, see Paul Youngquist, Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).


21. Wilson, 14.
22. Elizabeth Gilbert, letter to her sister Ann, June 29, 1809 (Stamford Museum, Stamford, UK, photocopy), and extract from The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury, June 30, 1809 (Stamford Museum, Stamford, UK, photocopy), 1.
23. Clarke, 5.
25. Phillipson, 2.


29. Ibid., 40.
30. Ibid., 59.
31. Ibid., 55–56.
32. Wilson, 14.
34. For more on bodies that are adaptable and their subjection to regimes of power/knowledge, see Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).
40. Thackeray, Vanity Fair, 862.
41. Ibid., 374.
42. Ibid., 206.
43. Ibid., 66.
44. Child’s Magazine, 46.
47. These tales function in much the same manner as current myths of the “supercrip.”
49. Wilson, 13.
50. Ibid., 17–18.
52. As Peter Stallybrass has pointed out, for example, the grotesque aesthetic was used to demonize the lumpenproleteriat as dirty, diseased, and dangerously reproductive, constantly threatening to escape the slums and spread contagion among

53. Bakhtin, 292.
55. Ibid., 368.
56. Ibid., 356.
57. Ibid., 52–53.
58. Ibid., 80.
59. Ibid., 48.


63. Mill, 1131.
64. Saville, 782.
65. Wilson, 17.
66. Clarke, 7.
67. Ibid., 16.
68. Chambers, 689.


70. Chambers, 689.
71. Wadd, 19.

72. This information was gathered from a visit to Stamford and phone and e-mail interviews with the staff at the Newark Houses Museum (see note 16).


74. According to a private e-mail communication from Philippa Massey, dated April 17, 2007.