

Reading (not-)eating in the works of Emily and Charlotte Brontë

Sarah Pearce

This paper offers a contemporary feminist reading of the cluster of themes surrounding consumption and food in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) by Charlotte Brontë, and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë. I explore key textual episodes of (not-)eating in light of contemporary feminist theory on women, food, the body, eating disorders and food refusal throughout history. In order to explore issues surrounding female food refusal, I look to those periods of history in which female fasting (or anorexia) was particularly prevalent, such as the early medieval period and the nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries. In so doing, I highlight an array of significant issues relating to women and food: the pervasive and to some extent a-historical cultural perception of female appetite as 'bad' and dangerous; adherence to nineteenth century codes of femininity; the attempt to gain control through food refusal; the physical expression of psychic states in the absence of a heard voice; and the potentially subversive or rebellious nature of female starvation and wasting. In much the same way that nineteenth century conceptions of femininity were partly defined by the paradox of the angel and the monster or whore, the act of food refusal is also defined by paradoxical gestures toward both acquiescence and rebellion. Therefore, I propose a need to counter traditional readings and thus de-story, or re-story, these texts by allowing these textual female bodies, as they refuse food and waste away, to make multiple, simultaneous, metaphorical and literal, paradoxical gestures.

This paper offers a contemporary feminist reading of the cluster of themes surrounding consumption and food in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) by Charlotte Brontë, and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë. To begin, I outline some key aspects of nineteenth-century discourse surrounding femininity, hunger and eating. Further, I explore key textual episodes of (not-)eating in light of contemporary feminist theory on women, food, the body, eating disorders and food refusal

Corresponding author:

Sarah Pearce, Flinders University

Email: sarah.pearce@flinders.edu.au

throughout history. In order to explore issues surrounding female food refusal, I look to those periods of history in which female fasting (or anorexia) was particularly prevalent in the west, such as the early medieval period and the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries.¹ In so doing, I highlight an array of significant issues relating to women and food: the pervasive and to some extent a-historical cultural perception of female appetite as 'bad' and dangerous; adherence to nineteenth-century codes of femininity; the attempt to gain control through food refusal; the physical expression of psychic states in the absence of a heard voice; and the potentially subversive or rebellious nature of female starvation and wasting. These issues have long existed at the heart of lived female experience in the west, and this paper demonstrates their centrality to the lives of the Brontë's protagonists.

Though I consider contemporary theories surrounding women, food and eating disorders in this analysis, I wish to be careful in my framing of this paper. I do not seek to 'diagnose' any of these fictional women as suffering from anorexia nervosa or religious anorexia (anorexia mirabilis). Rather, in an attempt to understand the range of meanings expressed by these fictional wasting female bodies, I look to varieties of knowledge that we have about women, their bodies and the relationships between these and with food.

As I detail shortly, the ideal woman of the nineteenth century was a morally pure, slender and passive creature, devoid of appetites and confined to the home. This construction of femininity, in addition to social strictures concerning the worthlessness of marginalised figures such as women, girls and orphans, led to many women leading confined, deprived and limited lives. Given this construction of femininity, and the inevitable states of emotional malnourishment in which they are forced to exist, the protagonists of the Brontë novels under consideration, who at various times stop eating and begin to waste away, may be read as typical manifestations or even victims of prevailing ideals of femininity: in starving and sickening, they may be said to directly acquiesce to prevailing gender norms. On the other hand, some critics have argued that female refusal of food or female pathology more broadly, in various historical contexts and in literature, constitutes a sign of female subversion or rebellion. However, as I discuss, such a reading of the

¹ Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth's *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (1994) and Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (1988) each provide excellent analyses of female fasting from the early medieval period to the twentieth century.

wasting female body is reductionist and misses critical elements of the picture (see Bell 1985, 55; Bordo 1993, 156-9, 175; Orbach 1986, 107).

Crucially, I suggest that the 'story' is more complicated and nuanced than a straightforward reading of either acquiescence or rebellion would allow. In her discussion of female eating disorders, Susan Bordo suggests that slenderness may be used as a vehicle for the expression of various, possibly contradictory, anxieties, aspirations and dilemmas: it is thus "*overdetermined*, freighted with multiple significances" (1993, 67). In addition to the wasted or wasting body, I suggest that the same is true of (not-)eating. Moreover, as Susan Ostrov Weisser points out in her discussion of sexual love in Victorian fiction, "fictional selves do not have a simple correspondence to the historical bodies of Victorian women" (1997, 5). It must be kept in mind that fictional (not-)eating may hold multiple meanings, both literal and metaphorical. In much the same way that nineteenth-century conceptions of femininity were partly defined by the paradox of the angel and the monster or whore, the act of food refusal is also defined by paradoxical gestures toward both acquiescence and rebellion (Bordo 1993, 65, 176-7). Therefore, I propose a need to counter traditional readings and thus de-story, or re-story, these texts by allowing these textual female bodies, as they refuse food and waste away, to make multiple, simultaneous, metaphorical and literal, paradoxical gestures.

Ideal femininity and patterns of acquiescence

According to Bordo, the disordered female body is "an aggressively graphic text" that "insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender" (1993, 169). In order to explore aspects of female subjectivity expressed in these texts, it is therefore necessary to consider gender norms during the period under consideration. The figurehead for normative nineteenth-century femininity was the 'angel in the house'. This 'angelic' woman subsisted only in the domestic sphere and was a symbol of purity, submission and selflessness. She was devoid of appetites, from the literal to the sexual, and was thus disembodied, desexualised and slender. This 'angel' lacked voice: she was silent and passive, offering only compliance (Bordo 1993, 117; Brumberg 1988, 63; Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 23-25; Silver 2004, 26-27, 40, 44; Weisser 1997, 8, 10, 12). Invalidism also became a normalised aspect of femininity: the ideal woman was 'naturally' fragile and weak, suffering and confined to the house or even the bed (Appignanesi 2008, 110;

Brumberg 1988, 110; Byrne 2011, 30-31; Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 53-55; Showalter 1985, 52-55; Sontag 1977, 33-34). Female invalidism in this context was commonly diagnosed as hysteria or neurasthenia and often included the psychosomatic symptom of food refusal (Ehrenreich and English 1978, 124; Showalter 1985, 129-30). When we consider any female pathology within a Foucauldian framework of power, we see “the body of the suffered deeply inscribed with an ideological construction of femininity emblematic of the period in question” (Bordo 1993, 168). Thus, we may read the starving, wasting bodies of fictional women as acquiescent bodies: the silent embodiment of gender expectations.

Attitudes toward food, eating and female bodies in these texts reflect powerful ideologies borne of cultural and historical context. Historically, and persisting today, there exists a representational tradition in which depictions of women eating (particularly enjoying food in a sensual fashion) is taboo.² The Genesis narrative of the fall is a powerful expression of cultural perceptions and ideologies regarding women’s appetites: “sin and death enter the world when a woman eats” (Heller and Moran 2003, 1). The representation of unrestrained female appetite as transgressive formulates restriction and denial as central components of the construction of femininity, and the thin body or ‘nonbody’ comes to represent purity, the triumph of will over the unruly (female) body, and transcendence of the flesh (Bordo 1993, 147-48). This control of female appetite is simply the most concrete expression of a general rule governing the construction of femininity: “that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited” (Bordo 1993, 171; see also Brumberg 1988, 46).

In the Victorian era, the eating process itself was seen as unfeminine and “female discomfort with food, as well as with the act of eating, was a pervasive subtext of Victorian popular culture” (Brumberg 1988, 178). Links were imagined between literal and sexual appetite, and women were encouraged to restrict their food intake and avoid ‘stimulating’ foods (Brumberg 1988, 176-78; see also Broomfield 2007, 47; Schlossberg 2003, 94; Silver 2004, 45). Women have been expected to be cultural custodians and embodiments of virtue; thus, if control of appetite(s) and body is seen as ‘virtuous’, women must exercise this control more so than

² The *Women Who Eat on Tubes* Tumblr constitutes a recent example of publicly shaming women for eating. As Nell Frizzell notes, the website is a demonstration of the fact that “women are told that greed, sensual pleasure and appetite are unladylike, unfeminine and unattractive” (2014).

men (Seid 1994, 11; see also Weisser 1997, 12). Paradoxically, although women were expected to be spiritual and pure, there also existed a belief that constant vigilance was required to repress women's appetites and sensual nature (Silver 2004, 47). This paradox echoes the angel/monster construction of Victorian femininity, as described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979, 20-29). The ideal Victorian woman was thus expected to regulate her appetite and food intake, "in order to conform to a slim ideal of beauty and ... to normative incorporeal conceptions of femininity that posited the body as in constant conflict with the soul" (Silver 2004, 48).

Early in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë presents a striking example of female malnourishment as a consequence of incarceration within a space governed by patriarchal authority and ideas regarding 'proper' femininity. At Lowood School for orphaned and unwanted girls, according to Jane herself, the "scant supply of food was distressing: with the keen appetites of growing children, we had scarcely sufficient to keep alive a delicate invalid" (*JE* 71). Many female pupils become ill and even die as a result of malnourishment and disease. Mr Brocklehurst, the supervisor of Lowood school, personifies social doctrines regarding the governance of ideal femininity. For example, he criticises Miss Temple for allowing the students to have extra food on days when the porridge is burned and inedible. Brocklehurst valorises deprivation in the service of fostering self-denial and spiritual purity in the orphan girls (*JE* 74), stating: "Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!" (*JE* 75). Here, he connects female appetite and satiety with spiritual corruption and impurity, demonstrating the confluence of gender and moral ideals resulting in the deprivation and wasting of these young women. Starving and wasting may thus be seen as inevitable consequences of patriarchal conceptualisations of appropriate femininity.

During the Victorian era, food was often used as "a means to teach children moderation, discipline, selflessness, and virtuousness in general" (Broomfield 2007, 47; see also Vandereycken and Deth 1994, 187). Ragged School Union Magazine (1857), for example, frequently used the metaphor of education as nourishment. This is indicative of attempts to determine cultural consumption and decide what is appropriate and necessary in maintaining social stability (Scholl 2016, 120). As described above, the young girls at Jane's school are in a state of perpetual hunger due to the insufficient provisions. Lowood doctrine is therefore an

extreme representation of the ways in which food deprivation may be used to “tame the appetite physically, socially, and intellectually” (Scholl 2016, 121). The school diet, in both alimentary and intellectual terms, aims to render the girls “hardy, patient, self-denying” (Scholl 2016, 121-22). Food and taste are used to control social positioning within the school context: the girls are expected to be grateful for any morsel at all, resulting in “the reduction of their social prospects, reducing their human differentiation of taste to a mere animalistic need to fill their bellies” (Scholl 2016, 122).

Beyond a simple doctrine of control and social education, Charlotte Brontë uses Jane’s experiences at Lowood to engage specifically with contemporary discourses of evangelicalism surrounding childhood and womanhood. The Victorian evangelical child, unlike the Romantic child, is already destined for hell, and was “subjected also to a rigorous discipline, aimed at subduing the desires of the flesh, instilling humility and obedience, and fitting them for eternity” (Glen 2004, 72). Brocklehurst’s comment regarding the ‘feeding of vile bodies’ and ‘starving of immortal souls’ directly reflects such subjugation of the flesh in the service of moral obedience and purity. Beyond a private nightmare vision, Jane’s experiences as a child therefore offer “a hostile but realistic portrayal of the ethos of evangelicalism” (Glen 2004, 78). *Jane Eyre* draws attention not only to physical privation and punishment, but also to the self-subjugating ideology of death and discipline espoused by contemporary evangelical writings (Glen 2004, 81).

In both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, we find evidence of negative attitudes toward over-consumption held by the protagonists themselves (Silver 2004, 82). In describing John Reed, her abusive cousin, Jane states: “He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious, and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks” (*JE* 16). Jane is clearly critical of John’s excessive consumption, linking his ill-temper to his ‘gorging’. In John, Charlotte Brontë paints a picture of “alimentary excess”, which spills over into violent excess toward his family and toward Jane (Scholl 2016, 122). Furthermore, John’s indulgence undermines his school education, disrupts his intellectual and social development and results in his eventual self-destruction (Scholl 2016, 122-23), as a result of his bad habits and ‘extravagance’ (*JE* 249-50).

Even more so than their male counterparts, female characters are subjected to criticism and scrutiny on account of eating habits and physical form. In criticising her sister Georgiana, Eliza Reed refers to her

as “such a fat, weak, puffy, useless thing” (*JE* 264). Both Jane and Eliza draw connections between corpulence and physical weakness and lack of utility, in addition to immorality. In contrast to the frivolous Georgiana, Eliza herself is a model of asceticism, denial and renunciation. She is:

very thin... There was something ascetic in her look, which was augmented by the extreme plainness of a straight-skirted, black, stuff dress... hair combed away from the temples, and the nun-like ornament of a string of ebony beads and a crucifix. (*JE* 256)

Eliza is incredibly disciplined, and eventually gives herself to God through becoming a nun (*JE* 264, 272). In her asceticism and severe morality, Eliza represents an extreme version of Victorian ideals of moral femininity (Weisser 1997, 64). In comparison to the “full-blown, very plump” (*JE* 257) Georgiana, Eliza is clearly presented as a ‘better’ woman. As a small-figured and somewhat puritanical figure herself, Jane appears to have more in common with Eliza than Georgiana: to an extent, they respect and understand one another, each admitting that the other has “some sense” (*JE* 272).

In *Villette*, during a visit to the art gallery, Lucy provides an insight into her own thoughts regarding those aspects of femininity represented on the walls. Significantly, she expresses negative attitudes toward consuming or corpulent women, such as the obese Cleopatra portrait (*V* 222-23). Lucy comments on the woman’s size: “She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher’s meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids – must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh” (*V* 223). As she examines the painting, Lucy becomes increasingly critical of the woman depicted: “She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material ... she managed to make inefficient raiment” (*V* 223). Lucy focuses her criticism on the woman’s apparent (and, in Lucy’s eyes, unacceptable) indolence and her impropriety or lack of virtue. However, in her vitriolic description of the piece, Lucy clearly connects the woman’s size to both her indolence and immorality, equating fleshliness with promiscuity (Michie 1987, 27; Silver 2004, 101). Helena Michie points out that Charlotte Brontë frequently uses female plumpness as a sign of ‘fallen nature’ (1987, 22). Ginevra Fanshawe is plump, and grows ever plumper until her final elopement with de Hamal: “she often eats the ‘lion’s share’ of Lucy’s

bread, cream, and wine, while Lucy, silent, sanctimonious, and puritanical, refuses food throughout the novel" (Michie 1987, 22). Lucy's condemnation of the woman in the portrait, in addition to her 'sanctimonious' attitude toward Ginevra, may constitute evidence that she has incorporated and thus regurgitates ideologies of normative femininity.

Much like Jane, Lucy also draws a connection between greed or appetite and stupidity. Lucy points out a student in the concert audience:

who ... ought to have been in the first class, but whose brains had never got them beyond the second division ... the quantity of household bread, butter, and stewed fruit, she would habitually consume at 'second dejeuner' was a real world's wonder – to be exceeded only by the fact of her actually pocketing slices she could not eat. (V 239-40)

Lucy here seems to echo nineteenth-century discourses that denigrate both female appetite and plump female bodies. As in the case of John Reed, the students' indulgence is linked to the disruption of intellectual and social development (Scholl 2016, 122-23; Silver 2004, 105). The opinions of Charlotte Brontë's protagonists may be said to reflect social norms connecting female appetite with stupidity, laziness, uselessness, immorality and ill-temper (Silver 2004, 101).

Negative attitudes toward gluttony also directly reflect Victorian religious discourse. Protestant England during the early- and mid-Victorian era condemned the indulgence of Catholicism and glorified abstinence (Cozzi 2010, 81; Silver 2004, 106). In *Villette*, Madames Beck and Walravens and Père Silas, the Catholic trio that threatens Lucy's happiness and religious freedom, are all characterised as corpulent and sensual (Silver 2004, 106). Throughout the text, Lucy demonstrates an ever-present desire to demarcate herself from the "swinish multitude" (V 91) of Catholics, who are "robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning" (V 141; see Boumelha 1990, 118). Lucy remains "throughout convinced of the superiority of the English lady and of Protestantism" (Boumelha 1990, 118), repeatedly aligning indulgence with Catholicism and defining herself against such baseness (Cozzi 2010, 96). Religious discourse in Victorian England, reflected in literature of the time, thus echoes broader social discourse that designates gluttony and corpulence as negative characteristics.

Negative attitudes toward female appetite and the denigration of fat bodies almost inevitably give rise to the slender body as manifestation of

beauty and virtue. For nineteenth-century women, a slender waist indicated the lack of appetites, including carnality, which was so important to the Victorian construction of ideal femininity. Slenderness represented not only an angelic or spiritual nature, but also female weakness and vulnerability (Brumberg 1988, 187; Silver 2004, 27-9, 34, 39-45; Vandereycken and Deth 1994, 210-12, 240). As Gilbert and Gubar point out, this "aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty" is linked to the "moral cult of the angel woman": women were required to become "slim, pale, passive beings" (1979, 25), and in doing so became beautiful. Through merely existing within the bounds of ideal femininity, and at times acquiescing to particular patriarchal expectations of femininity, these fictional women and girls are shown to be small and to waste away.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, starving, wasting and the slender form are associated with performing ideal femininity. Charlotte Brontë, according to Anna K. Silver, "validates her female characters' control over their desires and presents the slim body as a symbol of regulated appetite, thereby reproducing an anorexic logic" (2004, 101). Jane's flight from Rochester following his indecent proposal may be interpreted as an expression of unwavering morality (Weisser 1997, 67): she refuses to follow her sexual appetite and stay as his mistress, living in bigamous sin with his first wife locked upstairs (*JE* 337-61). Following her exit from Rochester's home, Jane spends several days wandering in the wilderness, starving, sickening and wasting (*JE* 362-72). In wasting away, Jane becomes the idealised "sylph-like woman, whose smallness spoke, through her body, of her lack of carnality" (Silver 2004, 40). Jane's adherence to gender codes that construct women as the keepers of morality is reflected in this fuller expression of the idealised female form: a shrinking, sick body. Conversely, Jane's denial of her desires, in accordance with the strictures of moral purity, leads directly to her wasting away. Similarly, Paulina (Polly) Home, the most 'angelic' character in *Villette*, is a paragon of domestic virtue and a bodily manifestation of idealised beauty. As both child and adult, Polly is "exceedingly tiny" (*V* 10): "an airy, fairy thing – small, slight, white – a winter spirit" (*V* 304). We may attribute her 'smallness' in part to her self-sacrifice. In her subservience to Graham, Polly often feeds him, while taking nothing for herself (*V* 27-28). Through the performance of selflessness and the denial of appetites, Polly's body consequently embodies the beautiful slenderness associated with ideal femininity (Silver 2004, 111).

Beyond acquiescence: Rejection and autonomy

Though the physical 'smallness' and wasting of these characters may fall in line with contemporary expectations of ideal femininity, it is important to consider the variety of ways in which starving is presented by the authors. It is in this way that we, as literary critics, may begin the feminist reworking of normative scripts. Beyond reflecting the ideal feminine, slenderness may also manifest in response to the negative consequences of ideal femininity, such as confinement and limitation. Starvation may thus form a vehicle to critique the nature of women's lives. The severity of Lucy's suffering throughout *Villette*, as I detail in the following sections, particularly during periods of loneliness and wasting, suggests that Charlotte Brontë does not merely repeat anorexic cultural maxims. In fact, Brontë's novels both conform to and depart from Victorian 'anorexic ideology' and the Victorian tradition of denouncing female appetite (Silver 2004, 115).

In both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë uses physical malnourishment and wasting to figure emotional malnourishment. Jane's diminutive size as an adult may be interpreted as a reflection of her lack of love and affection as a child (*JE* 13, 23). For both Jane and Lucy, a direct correlation may be observed between eating and happiness. When happy, fulfilled and loved, they flourish, gaining flesh (see e.g. *JE* 166; *V* 538). Conversely, Jane grows pale and thin when Rochester's interest in her seems to dwindle, and following her loss of him, she spends several days wandering in the wilderness, starving (*JE* 362-67). Beyond the literal, Charlotte Brontë uses physical starvation to articulate Jane's emotional loss and deep suffering, "mirroring Christ's forty days of fasting in the wilderness" (Scholl 2016, 163).

Lucy often figures human affection as food, referring to companionship as "my little morsel of human affection" (*V* 42), and a letter from the man she loves as "juice of a divine vintage" (*V* 281) and "the wild savoury mess of the hunter" (*V* 266). Symbolically, it therefore follows that she would waste away when any source of human contact is withdrawn (Silver 2004, 100), from her widowed employer to her two love interests: she becomes "a poor, pallid, wasting wretch" (*V* 296). Lucy herself theorises a link between isolation and starvation, pointing out that the similarity between lack of food and solitary confinement is generally not understood or acknowledged (*V* 303). For Lucy, the "want of companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine" (*V* 175). Here Charlotte Brontë both reinforces the food

metaphors used by Lucy to describe love and points to the dangers of emotional malnourishment, suggesting that it is just as dangerous as physical malnourishment. Inevitably, the more these women are deprived and the more they miserably waste away, the more they conform to codes of femininity.

Unlike both Jane and Lucy, who are starved by outside forces or seemingly involuntarily manifest emotional deprivation and misery as (not-)eating, Catherine of *Wuthering Heights* starves herself. Following her husband's demand that she forsake her adopted brother and true love, Heathcliff, Catherine flees to the attic, locks herself in and refuses food for three days (*WH* 118-20). This brief period is etched upon her body: she gains a "ghastly countenance" and becomes much "wasted" (*WH* 121). This episode in the attic marks the beginning of a period of severe illness, and consequently Catherine's slow decline into death.

The scene may be read as Emily Brontë's criticism of the limited female subjectivity permitted by her society, in which women lead an impoverished existence. Catherine's decision to marry Edgar confines her within the role of middle-class wife and expectant mother, and within the space of Thrushcross Grange, which in turn enforces restrictions upon her behaviour and her social relations. Catherine's 'wasted' body may therefore be interpreted as a manifestation of deprivation, much like both Jane and Lucy. Enshrined within Thrushcross Grange, she is removed from her childhood, the moors, and her true love Heathcliff. Though little detail is given regarding Catherine's daily life at the Grange prior to Heathcliff's return, the reader may infer that her life is circumscribed and that she is quite isolated. In her own words, Catherine is "tired of being enclosed" in her "shattered prison" and "yearning" for the world outside (*WH* 161-62). She describes herself as an "exile" and "outcast" and wants nothing more than to return to the wild freedom of her childhood (*WH* 125-26). Heathcliff's return is both the return of her true love and a reminder of all that she has sacrificed in order to become Edgar's wife. In response to Edgar's demand that she choose between them, Catherine chooses to starve: the mere mention of losing Heathcliff for good, after having him returned to her, precipitates a terrible consequence upon her body. Catherine's self-starvation and wasting may therefore be viewed as a manifestation of deprivation: of childhood, of the outside world, of her home at Wuthering Heights, and of the connection with Heathcliff that she craves.

Catherine's agency is key in this episode. Her self-confinement and her self-starvation (*WH* 121) are intimately linked; she locks herself away to escape the world that causes her anguish, and her food refusal constitutes a further attempt to escape the world through death. If "by taking food into the body, we take in the world" (Lupton 1996, 16), rejection of food constitutes a severing of connection to that world (Orbach 1986, 62-3; Piatti-Farnell 2011, 9; Sceats 2004, 93, 115). Catherine's self-starvation, particularly during a period of self-confinement, may be interpreted as an attempt to reject her specific circumstances: a world in which she has become a domestic 'angel' and consequently must be separated from Heathcliff. Terry Eagleton explains that the hunger strike is not merely about refusing food; rather, it is "a question of not taking food from a specific oppressor" (Eagleton 1998, 205). In this case, the oppressors are her husband and, by proxy, the housekeeper Nelly, and Catherine's rejection of food is a rejection of the reality that they impose upon her.

Moreover, Catherine's self-starvation may constitute a rejection of femininity itself. Many critics have suggested that ambivalent or negative feelings toward femininity, particularly adult femininity, have played a role in female food rejection, and indeed broader illness, throughout history (see e.g. Perlick and Silverstein 1994, 77, 80, 89). For women in medieval Europe, the path of monastic asceticism, often characterised by extreme fasting, amounted to a rejection of the traditional roles of wife and mother (Bell 1985, 39-42, 65, 82, 148). More recently, eating disorder theorists from Hilde Bruch (1978) to Naomi Wolf (1994) suggest that the relatively common adolescent onset of anorexia is related to a fear of puberty and adulthood (see Appignanesi 2008, 449; Brumberg 1988, 28; Warin 2010, 8). Wolf describes her own anorexia as a direct rejection of womanhood: "anorexia was the only way I could see to keep the dignity in my body that I had had as a kid, and that I would lose as a woman" (1994, 103). A curvaceous body may symbolise weakness and dependence, by linking any contemporary woman to the traditionally powerless woman: "changing our bodies is the most visible way to reject the feminine stereotype" (Kilbourne 1994, 407).

Trapped in a society that demands conformity to normative femininity, women of various historical contexts have refrained from participation, or rebelled, by refusing food. Young women refusing to take food in the family home may thereby reject the values of domesticity and idealised femininity propagated by their families and society more broadly (Brumberg 1988, 136). In the Victorian era in particular, female sickliness

offered a way to “temporarily escape from the family duties, imposed by the cult of true womanhood” (Vandereycken and Deth 1994, 202). Catherine’s self-starvation in the attic thus forms a rejection of broader femininity; of her role as wife to a man she does not really love, and her impending role as pregnant mother: a role which will eventually kill her.

Control emerges as another central aspect to ‘reading’ the disordered female bodies in these novels. Control in the context of eating disorders and food rejection may manifest as autonomy over the body; freedom from an oppressive institution or situation; or control over circumstances or events. In the medieval era, monastic asceticism offered women a kind of autonomy and power impossible to find within the mainstream Church or society (Bell 1985, 55-56, 116; see also Bynum 1987, 125, 128-29, 146-7, 221). Holy fasting women broke out of the established boundaries of female piety, as proscribed by the patriarchal church, and thereby created newer and wider avenues for female religious expression (Bell 1985, 117). Currently, it is widely accepted that eating disorders such as anorexia may be related to feelings of powerlessness, and autonomy and choice remain key themes in contemporary eating disorder research (Bell 1985, 17; Bordo 1993, 68, 149-51; Orbach 1986, 14, 139).³

From the sixteenth century until well into the nineteenth century, ‘miraculous’ fasting girls gained local and national notoriety via their ostensibly long periods of food refusal. Regardless of the veracity of their fasting, it is significant that nineteenth century fasting girls such as Sarah Jacob and Ann Moore were able to exploit their fame in order to receive money, gifts and attention (Brumberg 1988, 56, 69; Silver 2004, 44-5; Vandereycken and Deth 1994, 47-50, 52). Like their ascetic predecessors hundreds of years before, these women used fasting, or the appearance of fasting, in order to gain a degree of power. Similarly, nineteenth-century psychological disorders, which often included the symptom of food refusal, may have formed a refusal to capitulate to social expectations. Women may have ‘chosen’ a life of illness rather than participating in normative gender formations, and thereby gained a certain measure of autonomy or authority (Scull 2009, 93, 99; Vandereycken and Deth 1994, 201). This manipulative potential of female illness emerges as the subversive underside to damaging constructions of femininity. Whether enacted by medieval ascetic religious women, nineteenth-century ‘miraculous’ fasting celebrities or invalids, or anorexic

³ For example, Warin et al.’s 2015 paper, titled ‘Disordered eating and choice in postfeminist spaces’, examines issues of personal autonomy and choice in the lives of women with eating disorders during a post-feminist and neoliberal era.

women in today's society, self-starvation may constitute a means of acquiring power (Vandereycken and Deth 1994, 225).

Catherine's starvation in the attic may be viewed as an attempt to gain control through self-destruction (Heiland 2004, 118-19). Catherine herself explicitly states that she hopes to influence or manipulate Edgar via her illness and starving. She wishes to "frighten" him and elaborates on her desire to exert control over her surroundings: "if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend – if Edgar will be mean and jealous, I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own. That will be a prompt way of finishing all, when I am pushed to extremity!" (*WH* 116). Though Catherine's self-confinement and self-starvation in the attic ultimately fail to effect any real change in her circumstances, at earlier times, both invalidism and food refusal hold out the promise of power. For example, following an earlier prolonged bout of illness, a doctor suggests that she should always have her own way and the Lintons consequently yield to her whims (*WH* 89, 92).

For Lucy also, illness affords some power over circumstance. The school holidays represent an acute manifestation of her general state of loneliness: for weeks, she is left alone in the deserted school, her only company a child with an intellectual disability. Eventually, the child also leaves and Lucy is utterly alone: she succumbs to insomnia, depression, hallucinations and finally ceases eating and sleeping for nine days, before venturing out and collapsing in the streets (*V* 172-81). It is this eventual breakdown in the streets that leads to a change in her circumstances. Lucy is rescued by Graham and taken to his house to convalesce, surrounded by people she holds dear; however, this only occurs when her illness reaches a certain degree of severity and publicity (*V* 199). It seems to be Lucy's very illness, exacerbated in part by inanition in the face of isolation, that gains her the help she needs. (Not-)eating and illness may therefore represent an attempt, conscious or otherwise, to gain control in a situation of extreme disempowerment.

Suffering voices: Corporeal language and protest

Voice is also of crucial significance for this discussion of (not-)eating. There exist many similarities and connections between eating and speaking. Because both are intimately associated with the mouth, and both operate somewhere between nature and culture, "it is no wonder that eating and speaking should continually cross over in metaphorical exchange" (Eagleton 1998, 207). Moreover, natural links may be drawn

between silence and starvation. Historically, female self-expression has been limited and food behaviours have therefore provided a socially acceptable and meaningful mode of expression for women (see Brumberg 1988, 2, 4, 46; Orbach 1986, 23). Indeed, food refusal amongst nineteenth-century women has been interpreted as "an intense form of nonverbal discourse that honoured the emotional guidelines governing the middle-class Victorian family" (Brumberg 1988, 140). With reference to contemporary pathology, Susan Orbach suggests that in order to decipher the anorexic's cause, we look to her body; "the text we read is the transformation of her body and her action of food refusal" (1986, 102). For these reasons, among others, female writers often utilise tropes of hunger, starvation and eating to explore issues of female identity and expression (Heller and Moran 2003, 4). Literary scenes of eating and hungering, representations of female bodies, or scenes in which eating and speaking appear as competing activities, may encode gendered conflicts between embodiment and speech (Heller and Moran 2003, 19).

In Charlotte Brontë's texts, "women's lack of appetite (or inability to eat) is not an innate sign of female 'nature' ... but represents in large part a criticism of women's social roles, most specifically women's inability, because of constructions of femininity, to speak their desires" (Silver 2004, 81). These issues find expression in Lucy Snowe's inability to speak her desires and resulting inability to eat. For much of the text, Lucy is desperately lonely, isolated and repressed. She craves human companionship, but represses her needs, like an ideal woman should, and is resigned to being alone in her lifetime: "This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head" (V 121). However, in addition to perhaps exerting some control over her awful circumstances, and gaining her the help she needs, Lucy's starvation and illness during the vacation may be seen as a way of voicing her distress. Lucy is effectively silenced by her isolation and her physical illness may be viewed as an Irigarayan 'corporeal language of [female] distress' (Heller and Moran 2003, 19). In the absence of anyone to listen or care about her psychological state, Lucy's body expresses her misery and deprivation through illness. Similarly, Catherine's self-starvation in the attic may be viewed as a bodily language of misery. Unheard and uncomprehended by her husband, who refuses to listen to her desires, she consequently retreats into nonverbal communication of distress. In this way, illness and starvation may form the expression of a deprived life, loneliness and emotional malnourishment: psychological states are written on the wasting bodies of these women, as a desperate act of communication.

The final issue I would like to consider in reference to female food refusal and starvation is that of criticism, or protest. As we have seen, fasting behaviour may have offered women in the nineteenth century some measure of autonomy, a way to reject domesticity, and a capacity for voice. Invalidism in particular may have offered women a covert opportunity to express dissatisfaction regarding the domestic role and their resulting deprived lives. Nineteenth-century psychological disorders have been interpreted as manifestations of psychic distress, in the absence of another avenue for expression: “an unspoken idiom of protest, a symbolic voice for the silenced sex, who were forbidden to verbalise their discontents, and so created a language of the body” (Scull 2009, 7). Orbach suggests that both anorexic women and hunger strikers starve in the name of some ‘cause’ (1986, 101-103, 115): anorexic self-denial “is, in effect, a protest against the rules that circumscribe a woman’s life, a demand that she has an absolute right to exist” (Orbach 1986, 107; see also Appignanesi 2008, 438).

In the case of these literary characters, we may therefore ask whether their illness and starvation may be viewed as a silent symbolic protest. Showalter suggests that fasting women of the nineteenth century “paraded physical starvation as a way of drawing attention to the starvation of their mental and moral faculties” (Showalter 1985, 128; see also Silver 2004, 19). We may thus read Lucy’s repeated wasting as criticism, not only of her emotional malnourishment, but also of the repeated attempts by her lover, M Paul, to censor her education (V 385, 390) and alter her religious beliefs (V 457). Similarly, we may read Jane’s repeated wasting as a critique of the denial of her desires and the moral danger represented by Rochester. For Charlotte Brontë, in both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, “hunger is always painful”, and it is via this pain that she criticises the reality of women’s lives (Silver 2004, 81, 101).

Could Catherine Earnshaw’s starving and illness be viewed as a form of protest in this sense: does she, by self-destructing, expose the destructive potential of normative femininity? It seems clear that Emily Brontë uses Catherine’s slow and suffering demise to criticise domestic femininity. However, the dire consequences of this ‘protest’ cannot be overlooked—Catherine dies young, miserable and suffering. If she is on a ‘hunger strike’ regarding her intolerable circumstances, does it succeed? She certainly does not effect any change in her immediate circumstances; however, she does draw attention to her misery and escapes life through death. Catherine effects a total rejection of wifhood and motherhood, but this is only achieved by exiting life itself: an ultimate state of

disempowerment. Some feminist critics have valorised the anorexic and the hysteric woman as feminist protesters, where others have warned against the reductive effects of such interpretations, suggesting that they obscure the pain of women's real lives (see Bordo 1993, 156-59; Brumberg 1988, 35; Orbach 1986, 127). Surely we want to hope for more than suffering and death for our feminist protesters? It is for this reason that I dismiss an unequivocally positive view of food refusal as protest.

The multiplicity of stories

As can be seen from my analysis of (not-)eating and wasting in these novels, "feminine wasting, illness, and death in nineteenth-century texts can register resistance to domesticity, not merely an acquiescence to its restrictions of female power" (Heller and Moran 2003, 25). In other words, it is for this reason that women who limit their food intake should not necessarily be viewed *only* as passive victims of a patriarchal society that forces them to starve themselves. These women may use control over food as a means of subjectivity construction and bodily control, and may find, in addition to privation and anxiety, self-assurance and autonomy in this way (Lupton 1996, 14; see also Orbach 1986, 25-26). Similarly, critics from Orbach to Warin suggest that anorexia registers both conformity to and rejection of normative femininity, and may relate to and cultivate both empowerment and disempowerment (Bordo 1993, 153-54, 159; Orbach 1986, 30; Warin 2010, 4, 10).

I therefore propose a need to 'complicate' readings of the Brontës' work and thus de-story these texts. As critics, we must be open to dual or even plural readings of these fictional women and experiences of fasting, in order to read both suffering and acquiescence, resistance and rebellion into the same narratives. In the same breath that these fictional women criticise oppressive social structures, they also capitulate to these structures. In starving and sickening, they draw attention to abject states of misery and perhaps regain some small measure of control, but they also adhere to expectations, wither and, in the case of Catherine, ultimately die. In this way, the fictional starving female body may gesture simultaneously toward acquiescence and resistance, suffering and autonomy, empowerment and disempowerment.

My analysis has shown that the experiences of the protagonists reflect an array of significant issues relating to women and food: the pervasive and to some extent a-historical cultural perception of female appetite as 'bad' and dangerous; conformity to nineteenth-century codes of femininity; the

attempt to gain control through food refusal; the physical expression of psychic states in the absence of a heard voice; and the potentially subversive or rebellious nature of female starvation. By positioning Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw and Lucy Snowe within a historical tradition of starving women and within a contemporary feminist framework, those aspects of their stories that speak broadly to female experience are illuminated. In literature, we may read female starvation and wasting as both literal and metaphoric expressions of core aspects of female subjectivity. In this way, the body becomes a 'mouthpiece': "living within prescribed social boundaries, women's bodies become the vehicle for a whole range of expressions that have no other medium" (Orbach 1986, 48). It is imperative, however, to allow that mouthpiece to speak more than one truth, and to listen to all of its stories.

References

- Appignanesi, Lisa. 2008. *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present*. London: Virago Press.
- Bell, Rudolph M. 1985. *Holy Anorexia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boumelha, Penny. 1990. *Charlotte Bronte*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Brontë, Charlotte. 1996. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. London: Penguin Books.
- . 2004. *Villette*. 1853. London: Penguin Books.
- Brontë, Emily. 1995. *Wuthering Heights*. 1847. London: Penguin Books.
- Broomfield, Andrea. 2007. *Food and Cooking in Victorian England*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.
- Bruch, Hilde. 1978. *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa*. Somerset: Open Books Publishing Ltd.
- Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. 1988. *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. California: University of California Press.
- Byrne, Katherine. 2011. *Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Cozzi, Annette. 2010. *The Discourses of Food in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1998. "Edible écriture." In *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, edited by Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace, 203-208. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara and Deidre English. 1978. *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Frizzell, Nell. 2014. "'Women Who Eat On Tubes' sticks in my throat". *The Guardian*, April 8. Accessed October 24, 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/women-who-eat-on-tubes-photos-women-eating-social-media>
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. 1979. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Glen, Heather. 2004. *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heiland, Donna. 2004. *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Heller, Tamar and Patricia Moran. 2003. "Introduction: Scenes of the Apple: Appetite, Desire, Writing." In *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, edited by Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran, 1-42. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kilbourne, Jean. 1994. "Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness." In *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*, edited by Patricia Fallon, Melanie Katzman, and Susan Wooley, 395-418. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Lupton, Deborah. 1996. *Food, the Body, and the Self*. London: Thousand Oaks.
- Michie, Helena. 1987. *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Orbach, Susie. 1986. *Hunger Strike*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Perlick, Deborah and Silverstein, Brett. 1994. "Faces of Female Discontent: Depression, Disordered Eating, and Changing Gender Roles." In *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*, edited by Patricia Fallon, Melanie Katzman, and Susan Wooley, 77-93. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Piatti-Farnell, Lorna. 2011. "At My Cooking I Feel It Looking: Food, Domestic Fantasies and Consumer Anxiety in Sylvia Plath's Writing." In *It Came From the 1950s: Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*,

- edited by Elizabeth McCarthy and Bernice Murphy, 198-215. London: Palgrave.
- Sceats, Sarah. 2004. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schlossberg, Linda. 2003. "Consuming Images: Women, Hunger and the Vote." In *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, edited by Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran, 87-106. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Scholl, Lesa. 2016. *Hunger Movements in Early Victorian Literature: Want, Riots, Migration*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Scull, Andrew. 2009. *Hysteria: The Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seid, Roberta P. 1994. "Too "Close to the Bone": The Historical Context for Women's Obsession with Slenderness." In *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*, edited by Patricia Fallon, Melanie Katzman, Susan Wooley, 3-16. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Showalter, Elaine. 1985. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Silver, Anna Krugovoy. 2004. *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1977. *Illness as Metaphor*. London: Penguin Books.
- Vandereycken, Walter and van Deth, Ron. 1994. *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Warin, Megan. 2010. *Abject relations: everyday worlds of anorexia*. New Brunswick, N.J [u.a.]: Rutgers University Press.
- Weisser, Susan Ostrov. 1997. *A "Craving Vacancy": Women and Sexual Love in the British Novel, 1740-1880*. New York: New York University Press.
- Wolf, Naomi. "Hunger." 1994. In *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders*, edited by Patricia Fallon, Melanie Katzman, and Susan Wooley, 94-114. New York: The Guilford Press.

Author biography

Sarah Pearce is a final year doctoral candidate at Flinders University in the English department. Her research focuses on the suffering female body in the literature of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and lies at the

intersection of Gothic studies, Victorian studies, and feminist and gender studies.

Email: sarah.pearce@flinders.edu.au