

CH

Fosco's Fat: Transgressive Consumption and Bodily Control in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*

Joanne Ella Parsons

There has been much written on women, food, and bodily control in both the Victorian period and beyond, however with the rise of fat studies and scholarly research into masculinity academia has begun to recognise that there is also a discourse that is deeply embedded in men's relationship to food and the body.¹ This relatively new field of scholarship has produced many insightful and highly pertinent readings of the fat male body. In the Victorian period, in particular, one focus has been on that Dickensian favourite, Joe from the *Pickwick Papers* (Dickens 1837). Fat boy Joe is easily categorised partly due to the fact that sleep apnoea was latterly entitled Pickwickian syndrome by Burwell et al., which helped to align the reading of his corpulent form with a medicalised interpretation of his fat (Burwell et al. 1956). In addition to this type of reading, critics such as Sander L. Gilman have dwelt on Joe's indolence and dubious voyeuristic sexuality (Gilman 2004: 159–60). Jos, the 'fat gourmand' from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* has also received critical attention because his indulgence in dubious foreign foodstuffs, such as curries, is written on his corpulent form (Thackeray [1848] 1968: 93). Scholars, such as Annette Cozzi, have attributed his fat as being due to both the dangers of empire and his unrestrained appetite (Cozzi 2010). Both Jos' and fat boy Joe's largesse can be said to be gained from over-indulgence and a lack of will but Fosco's fat is less easy to attribute to lack of self-control and regulation. Collins' corpulent Count is instead a wearer of 'fat drag' which Huff considers to be both exploitative of, and 'disrupt[ive] of dominant narratives of fatness (Huff 2010: 93; 104). I wish to now

extend this argument further as I will consider how Fosco's fat engages with discourses of power and gender, through both its performativity and his transgressive consumption of feminine treats.

The first accurate weighing scales were developed in the eighteenth century, but increased in popularity and use in the nineteenth century due to the contemporary obsession with quantification and categorisation (Rogers 1993:172). Rogers comments on how

As the nineteenth century proceeded, new quasi-scientific theories would supply a new buttress for traditional sizism, but also ways of confusing the simple readings of the body: this was the period in which endomorphs, ectomorphs and pynik types began to be catorgorized. (Ibid. p. 181)

It has been often recognised in scholarly and non-scholarly circles that the Victorian era was defined and policed by the compulsion to control. Discipline over the body was perceived as essential in fulfilling the strict boundaries of prescribed manliness and failure to adhere to dietary and bodily restrictions meant a rejection of the privileged contemporary categories of social acceptability. By the 1860s insurance companies capitalised on this and began to devise height and weight charts in order to both prescribe acceptable norms and also indicate deviation. Huff considers that '[t]he corpulent body was seen as particularly resistant to normalization, because it was visibly individuated; it would not resolve itself into the supposedly universal body defined as average' (Huff 2001: 48). This individuated body showed its visible rejection of Victorian standards in two ways: firstly physically, the corpulent body is conspicuous through its sheer consumption of physical space, and secondly through the rejection of dietary rules which, again, were written on the body of the fat man. In an era where, in essence, the central core of manliness was defined by discipline and self-control, it stands that Count Fosco's fat exists as a visible symbol of lack of gastronomic

control and therefore tends to act as an indicator of other undesirable traits which serves to reinforce the boundaries of acceptable dietary consumption.

Clyde K. Hyder informs us that ‘Collins gave [Fosco] a Falstaffian physique, because, [as he himself had noted] the popular notion [was] that a fat man could hardly be villainous’ (Hyder 1939: 302). If Collins considered it to be unusual to create a corpulent criminal mastermind, then he could be playing into longstanding existing discourses on the transgressive nature of the fat body. Broadly, the perception of the corpulent male body falls into two distinct categories; firstly that of the jolly fat man as indicated by William Wadd in his 1816 preface to the third edition of *Cursory Remarks on Corpulence* who apologises for the prior ‘imperfect state’ of the previous edition and resubmits this amended edition to the ‘corpulent, good-humoured part of the community’ (Wadd 1816: iv). This text is one of many that reference the good humour of the larger gentleman. One such example is the gentle and well-regarded Daniel Lambert, who Wadd refers to as ‘prodigy of clogged machinery’ (Ibid. p. 9). Lambert was born in 1770 and died in 1809 weighing between fifty-two to fifty-six stone, depending on which report is consulted, despite claiming to only drink water and consume very little food. Although he died at the beginning of the nineteenth century he was an important figure for the Victorians, as Huff states, ‘[Lambert’s] 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.’ (Huff 2008: 39). Indeed, Lambert was often referred to in weight management books through the Victorian period. Contemporary reports indicate that not only was he good natured, compassionate and sincere but that he was also known for ‘acts of great heroism and strength’ (Ibid. p. 38). Secondly, the other type was a man whose excessive frame enables him to literally throw his weight about. This can manifest in a particular type of domineering, excessive and transgressive consumer, who could crave power and control over others. These may be read as indicators of his over-

indulgence, which conversely has been associated with lack of control over food and the body. As David Haslam, in his sweeping survey of literary fat men and women throughout the ages, states:

EXT It would seem that, in many instances, in literary terms, for men to be ‘big’ is commendable, powerful, rich and influential, but to be grossly big, obese or corpulent is to be set apart from the normal, and such men’s habits and other attributes are more gross. Fat men in literature are extremes, and if not jolly or villainous are extremely weak-willed or socially inept. (Haslam 2009: 231)

Count Fosco is undoubtedly villainous, but he is additionally a bodily mass of contradictions and as Meckier states he is ‘the novel’s staunchest proponent of duplicity’ (Meckier 1982: 115). Indeed he is not only duplicitous in his criminal activity, but also through his body since his fat does not fit his inner self. His exteriority is at odds with his interiority. Fosco is said to be ‘silent and sensitive, and ready to sigh and languish ponderously (as only fat men can sigh and languish), on the smallest provocation’ (Collins [1860] 1973: 263). The outward emotions that Fosco displays through sighing and languishing are feminised, however, his silence indicates that his true nature is concealed from others. It is important to note that ‘languishing’ on sofas was indicative of moral collapse.² At other times, conversely, Fosco can be extremely active in the text and ‘his movements are astonishing light and easy’ (Ibid. p. 197) like a woman’s, but despite his ‘great, big body’ (Ibid. p. 198) he manages to creep up on people with his disturbingly quiet footfalls, ‘his horribly silent tread’ (Ibid. p. 261). Fosco is able to be both the lazy, gluttonous sloth and perform the role of the cheery fat man, while, at the same time, infiltrating society and managing his true role of criminal mastermind.

Marian Halcombe has a complex relationship with Fosco, and her masculinised femininity is mirrored in his feminised masculinity. She openly admits her prior prejudices towards fat individuals,

EXT Before this time, I have especially disliked corpulent humanity. I have always maintained that the popular notion of connecting excessive grossness of size and excessive good-humour as inseparable allies, was equivalent to declaring, either that no people but amiable people ever get fat, or that the accidental addition of so many pounds of flesh has a directly-favourable influence over the disposition of the person on whose body they accumulate. I have invariably combated both these absurd assertions by quoting examples of fat people who were as mean, vicious, and cruel, as the leanest and the worst of their neighbours. (Ibid. p. 196)

But despite these prejudices, Marian says the Count became ‘established in my favour, at one day’s notice, without let or hindrance from his own odious corpulence. Marvellous indeed!’ (Ibid. p. 196). Marian is very confused by her attraction to the Count, which is in opposition to her aversion and rational repugnance of ‘corpulent humanity’ (Ibid. p. 196). In order to try to understand this, she attempts to analyse her positive inclination towards the Count, which goes beyond his ‘remarkable likeness’ to the ‘Great Soldier’, Napoleon (Ibid. p. 196). This connection reinforces the extent of the Count’s control in the text as he is literally wearing the mask of the French dictator. Although, Napoleon, like Fosco, is an ambivalent figure as he is read in a variety of different ways: he is feared, admired, and an object of miniaturist ridicule.

Marian’s description concludes by describing his ‘unfathomable grey eyes ... [which] have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them, which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel (Ibid. p.

197). These sensations indicate both the strength and the potential sexual nature of her attraction to him. His eyes also have a mesmeric quality indicating their power; it is also surely significant that hypnotism was frequently performed publicly in the nineteenth century, thereby constructing Fosco as a piece of theatre.³ The desirability and seductive qualities that the corpulent body exudes was not unknown in Victorian culture, however, as Joyce Huff elaborates,

EXT It has frequently been noted that the corpulent body was sometimes presented as desirable in nineteenth-century erotic painting and literature. But its presentation was framed in such a manner that even in its desirability, corpulence maintained a stigma. The fat body could not represent normative sexuality for the mid-Victorians. It must represent an excess that was taboo. The eroticizing gaze that the nineteenth century directed at the corpulent body was thus also an exoticizing one. (Huff 2001: 50)

Fosco is, of course, exoticized; he is clearly and unashamedly foreign despite his ‘unusual command of the English language’ (Collins [1860] 1973:197), he strolls ‘backwards and forwards across the grass’ in Nankeen trousers and ‘purple morocco slippers’ exaggerating and embracing the foreign, and therefore, the exotic which may be coded for the reader as threatening (Ibid. p. 205). Marian says that ‘[h]e is as fond of fine clothes as the veriest fool in existence’ (Ibid. p. 199) and this statement acquires extra resonance when the reader later learns of Fosco’s financial problems. Fosco’s expensive and gaudy dress is a significant indicator of his fiscal greed so, in a sense, his clothes act as a marker of his immorality, in the same way as he stands out because of his fat and his eating habits.⁴ Fosco reflects Eastern excess, in his feminine exotic clothes, as his ‘blue blouse, with profuse white fancy-work over the bosom, covered his prodigious body’ (Ibid. p. 205). This body is so ‘immensely fat’ (Ibid. p. 196) that it transgresses gender boundaries as his bosom manoeuvres his body into

feminine territory. As he suns himself on the grass he sings 'Figaro's famous song in the Barber of Seville...like a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire' (Ibid. p. 205) thereby displaying his abnormal sexuality and transgressive gender unashamedly. The opera proudly and loudly proclaims his Italian nationality and notably. It is also surely significant that he is not likened to one of the celebrity tenors circulating at the time and is instead compared to the Roman martyr and patroness of musicians; the irony being that, while feminised, Fosco is no martyr. Huff summarises that '[w]hen fat is enticing it is the lure of something out of bounds, the excitement of slumming among the marginal' (Huff 2001: 50) and Fosco's sexuality is marginalised and forbidden due to his transgression of gender boundaries. It is made clear in the text that it is Marian, with her own transgressive gender status, and Madame Fosco, an 'impertinent' (Collins [1860] 1973: 171), 'vain and foolish' (Ibid.194) woman, who are attracted to the Count, not Laura who is an idealised portrayal of appropriate Victorian femininity.

To a great extent, *The Woman in White* is about the compartmentalisation of the sexes. D.A. Miller states clearly that the novel concerns itself with

EXT enclosing and secluding the women in male 'bodies,' among them institutions like marriage and madhouses. And the sequestration of the woman takes for its object not just women, who need to be put away in safe places or asylums, but men as well, who must monitor and master what is fantasized as the 'woman inside' them. (Miller 1986: 112)

This notion had been commented on by other critics, such as Tamar Heller, who perceives that when Walter Hartright encounters Anne Catherick at the crossroads outside of London what he fears most is the 'infection of her femininity, which he symbolically catches from her along with her, and Laura's nervousness' (Heller 1992: 125). But the Count, who is the

driving force behind the attempt to erase Laura's identity and secure her femininity first within the boundaries of marriage and latterly within an asylum, demonstrates absolutely no inclination to master the 'woman inside' himself. He instead, actively ingests femininity and therefore partakes of its nature symbolically infecting himself, while at the same time continuing to enclose the feminine within his own male body. Fosco's corpulence has not been gained through overindulgence in a manly diet, rich in meat. In their famous book of English dietary habits through the ages, Drummond and Wilbraham state 'one can clearly trace the belief ... that the eating of meat arouses and stimulates the animal passions' (Drummond 1991: 396) and this belief was put into practice throughout the nineteenth century as women were told to avoid protein and meat in their diets, while it was positively encouraged in men's consumption. Bourdieu in his study of class and consumption patterns insists that '[m]eat, the nourishing food par excellence, strong and strong-making, giving vigour, blood, and health, is the dish for the men, who take a second helping ... men, the natural meat-eaters' (Bourdieu 2005: 75). However, there were still limits to its suitability for consumption as even in men's diets meat was seen to be harmful in excess because it was perceived to "turn the blood", overexcite' (Ibid. p. 75).⁵

So, Fosco does not indulge in manly appetites with regard to gustatory consumption and instead he prefers to greedily swallow sweet treats and quench his thirst with 'eau sucrée'-sugar and water- rather than the brandy that Percival offers (Collins [1860] 1973: 295). As he is 'devouring' a fruit tart and cream (Ibid. p. 263) he declares to Marian that '[a] taste for sweets,' he said in his softest tones and tenderest manner, 'is the innocent taste of women and children I love to share it with them—it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me' (Ibid. p. 263). This uncomfortable statement indicates that the Count aligns himself with the feminine through food. Soft and tender tones and manners are associated with women and it is through his masquerade of ideal feminine qualities that he proves to be most

repugnant and at his most dangerous. Eating brings us back into a close connection with our bodies as the act of consumption forces the consumer to focus upon the tastes, sensations, smells, and feelings of satisfaction, or discomfort that the gastronomic experience provides. It is an essentially corporeal experience. Elspeth Probyn reflecting on the corporeality of eating and sex states, 'the point of which is the opening up of the body to reveal a multitude of surfaces that seek out contact with other surfaces near or far' (Probyn 2000: 61). But Count Fosco goes beyond 'seek[ing] contact with other surfaces' as he opens up his bodily experience to symbolically consume and control women and children. He literally ingests their innocence and this, rather than creating the bond that he suggests, actually serves to render them powerless in the face of his cannibalistic consumption. Fosco does not merely eat his food, he instead, 'devours pastry as I have never seen it devoured by any human beings but girls at boarding schools' (Collins [1860] 1973: 201), consuming it aggressively and greedily; his sexual deviance and feminised status explicitly displayed through his appetite. The reference to 'girls at boarding schools' implies secretive behaviour and the yet to be controlled prodigious and unfeminine appetites of young girls.

Count Fosco is a voracious consumer of sugar and luxury foods and, as has been pointed out in Judith Flanders' excellent discussion of Victorian domesticity, '[i]t was notable that expensive foods, or ones that tasted good enough to be consumed from desire rather than hunger, were often considered the most unwholesome' (Flanders 2003: 45). He delights in foods that are meant to be occasional treats, such as the consumption of sugar plums. Sugar-plums were actually comfits, rather than the usually assumed sugared plums, so they are essentially a hard sugar sweet with no connection to the fruit (Mason 2004: 120). This 'false' naming reflects Fosco's 'false' presentation and it is another clear example of how his true character is revealed through the food that he ingests and gives to others. Mason discusses how comfits had a history of adulteration and quotes Frederick Accum, who published his

famous *A Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons* in 1820 found that ‘the white comfits, called sugar pease, are chiefly composed of a mixture of sugar, starch and Cornish Clay’ (qtd Mason 2004:131). These sweets proved to be not what they seem and their participation in the great food adulteration scandal connects them to questions of unhealthy food as well as foodstuffs that literally poison, which foreshadows Fosco’s later use of drugs to subdue and control.

These sugary indulgences stand as symbol of his debts and his extravagant habits which in Victorian terms are indicative of his immorality. According to Flanders, ‘Extravagance was immoral; thrift was moral; the greatest good was knowing ones place and living up to it precisely’ (Flanders 2003:132). Despite his titled nobility, Fosco does not know his place: he lives beyond his means and his immoral greed and extravagance is written on both his clothes and his body. He stands as a spendthrift in the field of food, shamelessly gorging and feasting upon sugar plums, pastries and tarts, however, he is not an indiscriminate consumer as he targets food that is unwholesome, lacking in nourishment and decadent.

It has been advocated since the eighteenth century that refined foods and sugar should be avoided and the consumption of these is linked to a lack of the discipline and control that marks acceptable Victorian masculinity. George W. Burnap in his *Lectures to Young Men on the Cultivation of the Mind and the Formation of Character and the Conduct of Life* (1840) instructs; ‘[i]t is in vain that you nourish the body with the greatest variety of the most luxurious food. Sickness will be produced not health, weakness not strength’ (Burnap 1840: 19). Therefore Fosco’s pursuit of shameless pleasure in the sweet foods he consumes transgressed strict Victorian dietary codes.⁶ His focus should have instead been on abstinence and control as evidenced in Wadd’s *Cursory Remarks on Corpulence* where he insists that,

‘the only certain and permanent relief [from corpulence], is to be sought in a rigid abstemiousness, and a strict and constant attention to diet and exercise’ (Wadd 1816: 31).

Fosco also transgresses the strict boundary of ideal Victorian manliness in his interactions with his pets and is a perverse, lascivious, monstrous image of corrupted maternity. The Count bestows parental care onto mice and a ‘vicious cockatoo’ (Collins [1860] 1973: 203) who can merely ‘ruffle his clipped wings’ in protest against his unnatural mothering. While his relationship with his wife remains barren, the Count houses his ‘poor-little-harmless-pretty-Mouseys’ in a ‘little pagoda of gaily-painted wirework’ and ‘feeds his white children’ (Ibid. p. 207; 198; 207) as a mother tends her young. Pamela Gilbert states that ‘food is primarily associated with the female body and breast’ (Gilbert 1997: 20) and in feeding his aberrant ‘white children’, Fosco once again transgresses the acceptable limits of Victorian gender codes.

The Count possesses an extraordinary power over animals as he is able to silence a ‘savage’ bloodhound and inspire devotion in his ‘treacherous’ cockatoo (Collins [1860] 1973: 198 –9) but he is, however, not above using animals as vehicles for unprovoked spite. When he gives up his own lunch to a ‘little shrivelled up monkey’ in the street (Ibid. p. 528) it is, according to Harvey Peter Sucksmith ‘an empty gesture of capricious malice’ because he feeds the monkey not from kindness but instead to punish the organ grinder (Sucksmith 1973: xix). The other motivation behind the Count’s willingness to share food is because he perceives its value as a mechanism for manipulation and control. Fosco when talking quietly to his mouse declares, ‘[a]h, nice little Mousey! come kiss me. What is your own notion of a virtuous man, my pret-pret-pretty? A man who keeps you warm, and gives you plenty to eat’ (Collins [1860] 1973: 211). This could also be a description of his relationship with his wife as there are descriptions of Fosco feeding her in the text (Ibid. p. 200). By treating his wife in the same manner as his mice, it serves to demean her position. Marian states that his

‘management of the Countess ... is a sight to see’ although she qualifies this with the parenthesis ‘in public’ suggesting either the limitations of his control, or, perhaps, the use of more violent methods, as she also states that his ‘private rod’ of iron is ‘always kept upstairs’ (Ibid. p. 200). But, in public, he controls her with kind words, calling her ‘my angel’ and feeds her with the same unseasonal sugar-plums that he consumes, ‘which he puts into her mouth playfully, from a box in his pocket’ placating her jealousy and ensuring her silence (Ibid. p. 200). Nicholson in his comprehensive survey of the power relations that exist with regard to the control of food perceives that sweet foods are often used to lure others into danger as they are what he terms ‘compulsive foods’ and as such are connected with obsession and enslavement (Nicholson 1992: 46). It is no surprise Nicholson writes that sweet foods are frequently associated with deception, which means they, therefore, serve as an overt signifier of the Count’s dishonesty, literally marking his body with duplicity (Ibid. p. 46).

Fosco’s act of feeding his wife also illuminates the irregular nature of their relationship as typically, ‘[t]he woman offers cooking in exchange for sex; the man offers sex in exchange for cooking. It follows that women ‘receive’ sex as men are ‘fed’ food. Eating can be spoken of as synonymous with the sex act itself’ (Visser 1991: 273). Fosco upsets the order of natural matrimony, he supplies the food and he mothers his pets while she remains barren, sitting childlike beside him engaged in the submissive and yet ambiguously masculinised role of rolling his cigarettes (Collins [1860] 1973: 240). However, he still retains his masculine control and dominance in the relationship because as Marian states he

EXT looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married me, I should have made cigarettes as his wife does—I should have held my tongue when he looks at me, as she holds hers. (Collins [1860] 1973: 195)

Madame Fosco, who prior to her marriage, ‘was always talking pretentious nonsense, and always worrying the unfortunate men with every small exaction which a vain and foolish woman can impose on long-suffering male humanity’, has been transformed into a ‘civil, silent, unobtrusive woman’ although Marian does question how much she ‘really is reformed ... in her secret self’ which is suggestive of limitations to the corrupt power that the Count wields (Collins [1860] 1973: 194; 195).

Margaret Visser reveals that, ‘Food is a female concern, and often one of the main sources of a woman’s power in the household’ (Visser 1991: 276). She elaborates,

EXT Because food and drink usually reach the family through the woman’s hands, fear of women usually translates into suspicion that they are poisoners ... Poison ... is a secretive, sneaky way of killing anyone, in addition to which it is often liquid and administered in food—all of which makes poison a peculiarly ‘female’ weapon, certainly in the folklore and mythology of all races, and possibly in fact as well. Fear of poison can strengthen the pressure upon men not to rove, but stay with their families: they might eat only what is prepared for them by their wives or mothers, or by women otherwise in their control. (Ibid. p. 277–8)

Fosco, in an additional expression of his transgressive gender status administers a poisonous substance to Laura when she arrives in London. He offers her water which ‘had so strange a taste that it increased her faintness’ which leads her to take the smelling salts that have been laced with either toxic ether or chloroform and ‘her head become giddy on the instant’ (Collins [1860] 1973: 393). In his later narrative and confession, Fosco extolls the virtues of chemistry and in doing so he transforms this murderous female method into man’s noble pursuit of science and art. Reframing it as ‘scientific knowledge’, Fosco claims that he was

‘indebted to [his] Art’ of using noxious drugs on only two occasions: on the maid carrying Marian’s letters so that they could be intercepted by Madame Fosco and when he rendered on Lady Glyde unconscious so that she could be secured in an asylum (Ibid. p. 561). However, the Count has proved to be an unreliable narrator and the reader is left unable to fully trust his proclamations. He assumes a god-like status when talking about his chemical prowess as he argues:

EXT Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body. The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of all potentates—the Chemist. Give me—Fosco—chemistry; and when Shakespeare has conceived Hamlet, and sits down to execute the conception—with a few grains of powder dropped in his daily food, I will reduce his mind, by the action of his body, till his pen pours out the most abject drivel that has ever degraded paper. Under similar circumstances, revive me the illustrious Newton. I guarantee that, when he sees the apple fall, he shall *eat it*, instead of discovering the principle of gravitation. (Ibid. p. 560)

Here, Fosco clearly indicates that even for great minds such as Shakespeare and Newton, the drugged body is stronger than the natural will. He asserts that ‘it is lucky for society that modern chemists are, by incomprehensible good fortune, the most harmless of mankind’ (Ibid. p. 561) thereby undermining his argument as we know that Fosco, the chemist, is far from ‘harmless’ and is, instead, a force to be reckoned with.

The danger he poses is also revealed in the fact that his power is not only exerted over women. Fosco governs English nobility in the form of Sir Glyde in an equally forceful manner and so Madame Fosco is not the only character in the text that Fosco treats like one of his animals. For instance a word from the Count can temper Sir Percival’s reaction in the

face of Laura's female resistance, making him submit like a 'tamed animal' when she refuses to sign the legal document so that Percival can borrow money: 't]hey both looked at each other. Sir Percival slowly drew his shoulder from under the Count's hand; slowly turned his face away from the Count's eye ... and then spoke, with the sullen submission of a tamed animal' (Ibid. p. 222). The Count as well as exerting an inordinate amount of control in the text also dominates the textual space in the novel. Descriptions of his gargantuan physical appearance consume Marian's diary entries which becomes a space that is, in turn, invaded by Fosco and, in doing so, he commits what Miller perceives to be a metaphorical textual rape (Miller 1986). Elizabeth Anderman has since expanded upon this and has discussed how this feeling of rape is made more explicit due to the layout of Marian's narrative because its 'disjointed nature and breathy dashes' indicate her inability to control her narrative voice, which in turn excites the senses of the reader,

EXT The reader rushes through the dashes and gaps hoping to discover that Marian has overcome her body. The lines run together as the reader tries to make sense of the repetitive language and circular images. So, like Marian the reader is breathless and agitated—embodied. Therefore when Fosco inserts himself into the pages of the diary, he enters a written space where both Marian and the reader are focussed upon their bodies, making his transgression overtly physical. (Anderman 2009: 86)

This is an extension of the theme of the troublesome female body being controlled and contained by the male. Fosco is not merely content with the theft of Laura's identity in exchange for financial reward, but he penetrates Marian's personal thoughts and private textual space. He invades the space of the reader as we discover that he has also crept up on us with his 'horribly silent tread' and has stood reading over our shoulder as he has previously intruded upon his fellow characters and, as Anderman states, the focus at this

point in the text is upon bodies which makes his intrusion more transgressive and sexual in nature. Fosco's penetration of Marian's diary is not just the exertion of his very masculine force but because he is so closely connected with the feminine it renders this act all the more perverse.

But while Fosco has forcibly and bodily intruded upon Marian's private space, it is also Marian that he identifies with. He toasts her with his feminine sugar and water,

EXT Can you look at Miss Halcombe, and not see that she has all the foresight and the resolution of a man? With that woman for my friend, I would snap these fingers of mine at the world. With that woman for my enemy, I, with all my brains and experience—I walk, in your English phrase, upon eggshells! And this grand creature—I drink her health in my sugar and water—this grand creature, who stands in the strength of her love and her courage, firm as a rock between us two, and that poor flimsy pretty blond wife of yours—this magnificent woman, whom I admire with all my soul, although I oppose her in your interests and mine. (Collins [1860] 1973: 296)

In this speech Count Fosco acknowledges that Marian's virtuous masculinity complements his corrupt feminised sexuality and he recognises her superiority to other women. Marian is, indeed, worthy of his admiration although it helps to cause his downfall. She comes closer to understanding the Count than any other character in the novel. It is Marian who observes the Count in his guise of a 'Man of Sentiment', she writes in her diary that she feels that this facet of his character was 'not assumed for the occasion' and so, if this is, as she suspects, a revealing moment where she is able to detect some genuine feeling within the Count then surely it is significant that this is also the evening where '[h]e ate little or nothing' (Ibid. p.

260). This indicates that Fosco is a conscious eater rather than a man who is subject to chaotic disordered consumption.

In *Fat Boys: A Slim Book* Sander Gilman discusses how by the mid nineteenth century psychology began to focus on diseases of the will, which became categorised as ‘abulia’ (Gilman 2004: 100–1). This pathological condition meant that ‘there is no ability to move from motive and desire to execution’, which meant that obese men were often said to suffer from abulia (Ibid. p. 101). This was an affliction that was considered to affect more men than women, and ‘it was in the promise of execution, of being able to act, that the fat man now showed his masculinity’: so by overcoming obesity through manly action masculinity was restored (Ibid. p. 101). However, this category of abulia may not be conveniently imposed upon Fosco as there are indications in the text that his considerable mass has been gained, not through the lack of will, but because of it. Hartright reflects on the Count’s ability to avoid detection after Pesca fails to recognise him at the opera,

EXT It was easy to understand why that recognition had not been mutual. A man of the Count’s character would never risk the terrible consequences of turning spy without looking to his personal security quite as carefully as he looked to his golden reward. The shaven face, which I had pointed out at the Opera, might have been covered by a beard in Pesca’s time; his dark brown hair might be a wig; his name was evidently a false one. The accident of time might have helped him as well—his immense corpulence might have come with later years. (Collins [1860] 1973: 538–9)

While Hartright attributes the Count’s ‘immense corpulence’ to an ‘accident of time,’ the evidence in the text, such as his inability to eat as the stereotypically emaciated ‘Man of Sentiment’ and the manner in which he eats suggests otherwise: Fosco ‘devours’ his food as

if his life depended on it (Ibid. p. 201). However, Rachel Ablow points out that his ‘attempts to disguise himself by becoming enormously fat can be foiled by the red mark on his arm that proves his membership in, and betrayal of, an Italian secret society’ (Ablow 2003:170).

While the Count has attempted to hide his criminality under a great visible mass, and his tattoo under his flamboyant clothes, he is still unable to disguise certain aspects of himself, which hint towards the truth of the man beneath the masquerade.

Despite his superficial mastery of his bodily disguise it is Laura, with ‘the child’s subtle faculty of knowing a friend by instinct’ who instantly recognises an enemy in him, and so renders him conspicuous by failing to mention him in her letters home to Marian, thereby rendering him the rather large elephant in the room (Collins [1860] 1973: 181). Her ‘strange silence’ and instinctive dislike, while being a significant indication of his later textual dominance, serves to illustrate the limitations to his disguise and influence (Ibid. p. 181). However, this is not the only chink in his armoury of control as the Count participates in what Daly refers to as the ‘[c]ommunity of nervousness’ in the text (Daly 1999: 463). *The Woman in White*, as previously discussed, is partially concerned with the fear of ‘infection’ from femininity (Heller 1992:125), so the Count, who actively ingests femininity through his diet, is also infected with the feminine nervousness that pervades the text. While Hartright believes that the Count was ‘born without nerves’ (Collins [1860] 1973: 324), Fosco actually ‘starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself’ (Ibid. p. 198) throughout the novel and as Miller elaborates, ‘nervousness is not so much missing as mastered’ (Miller 1986:109). Eventually it is this feminine nervousness that triumphs when he sees the Brotherhood so that, ‘A mortal dread had mastered him, body and soul’ (Collins [1860] 1973: 531).

This feminine triumph has been indicated earlier in the novel when Marian suffers a strong reaction observing Fosco's unnatural children, his 'pretty mouseys', climbing over his body. She declares that

EXT They are pretty, innocent-looking creatures; but the sight of them creeping about a man's body is, for some reason, not pleasant to me. It excites a strange, responsive creeping on my own nerves; and suggests hideous ideas of men dying in prison, with the crawling creatures of the dungeon preying on them undisturbed. (Ibid. p. 208)

Marian's repulsion at the sight of the Count foreshadows his later death when the corpulent consumer becomes the consumed cadaver. The femininity within himself that the Count transgressively embraced has gained control over him, so, like a woman, he falls victim to male dominance, when the power of the masculine Brotherhood overwhelms him and punishes his corrupted and feminised masculinity leaving him to be discovered in the Paris Morgue. Words are not able to reveal the truth at the heart of the Count, his wife's biography of him, published after his death, remains a closed book by maintaining the illusion he created, throwing 'no light whatever on the name that was really his own, or on the secret history of his life' (Ibid. p. 582). His confession is merely another version of whatever 'truth' he is choosing to present.

It appears that the only hope of revealing the true Count is through his body lying naked in, what Dickens later termed, the 'obscene, little Morgue' after he has been found in the Seine (Dickens 2014: n.p.). This is a reading that has appealed to Vicky Greenaway as she argues that the exposed Count's body strips him of his outer disguises and, in doing so, unmask him, thus ironically reducing him to his corpulent transgressive body, which is laid bare for consumption by others. She suggests that:

EXT Fosco's death is similarly an excision of his capacity to dissemble and proliferate. His murder ruthlessly localises his identity to the locale of the fixed and unchanging corpse. Fosco's body on the Paris morgue slab is a naked and transparent object open to the voyeuristic consumption of the Paris mob: 'There he lay ... exposed'. His clothes are hung above his naked body: there will be no more disguises or dissimulations. (Greenaway, 2008: 50)

However, I contend that the text actually provides a less neat conclusion to his masquerade which is evident in the scene where Hartright joins the crowd to observe the body of the Count,

EXT There he lay, unowned, unknown; exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob! There was the dreadful end of that long life of degraded ability and heartless crime! Hushed in the sublime repose of death, the broad, firm, massive face and head fronted us so grandly, that the chattering Frenchwomen about me lifted their hands in admiration, and cried in shrill chorus, 'Ah, what a handsome man!' The wound that had killed him had been struck with a knife or dagger exactly over his heart. No other traces of violence appeared about the body, except on the left arm; and there, exactly in the place where I had seen the brand on Pesca's arm, were two deep cuts in the shape of the letter T, which entirely obliterated the mark of the Brotherhood. (Collins [1860] 1973: 581)

And it is this complex final reaction that undermines Greenway's assessment. Fosco remains closed and his body is able to transform itself, even in death, to a 'handsome man': awesome in his sublimity and grandeur (Ibid. p. 581). His last transformation is to both the honourable Hartright and more morally dubious voyeuristic Frenchwomen. So it is made clear that Fosco

will never be fully ‘exposed’ and this is underpinned by location. The Paris Morgue is considered to be a ‘spectacle of the real’ but as Schwartz argues, it is also a place of theatre as the real bodies lead to a creation of a drama of mystery and uncovering for the greedy spectators (Schwartz 1998:48).⁷ Fosco participates in this theatre, as his audience tries to uncover meaning in his form, thereby indicating that until the moment his body becomes subject to the gradual dissolution of the flesh from the bone which death will bring and is no longer able to transform and deceive, he will continue to defy explanation and understanding.

¹ For scholarly work on women’s consumption and bodies see Krugovoy Silver, A. (2002) *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Talairach-Vielmas, L. (2007) *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

² For more information on languor and languishing and its connections to moral collapse, particularly with regard to masturbation see Mason, D. (2008), *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian fiction and medical culture* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

³ For a detailed discussion on mesmerism in the nineteenth century see Hughes W. (2015), *That Devil’s Trick: Hypnotism and the Victorian Popular Imagination*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁴ Extravagant, inappropriate clothes and the fat man is a recurring trope in the literature of this period, *Vanity Fair*’s Jos Sedley is one such fine example of a man marked by his ridiculous clothing. Although this, of course, is framed somewhat differently as the focus has mainly been on his ridiculous performance as a Dandy.

⁵ I have already discussed extensively the connection between meat and ‘over-excitement’ in my article on Surtees (Parsons J. (2014), ‘Eating Englishness and Causing Chaos: Food and the Body of the Fat Man in R. S. Surtees' *Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities, Handley Cross, and Hillingdon Hall*’ *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 36:4, 335–46). Roast beef in particular is associated with the English and John Bull is often seen in illustrations and caricatures to be consuming vast quantities of this British staple.

⁶ See Charlotte Boyce’s chapter in this volume

⁷ See Vita, P. (2010), ‘Returning the Look: Victorian Writers and the Paris Morgue’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25:3, 241–55 as well as Schwartz (1998) for more information on the Paris Morgue and its ‘theatrical’ qualities.

Works Cited

- Ablow, R. (2003), 'Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity and *The Woman in White*', *Novel* 37:1/2, pp. 158–81.
- Anderman, E. (2009), 'Hysterical Sensations: Bodies in Action in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*', in Marilyn Brock (ed) *From Wollstonecraft to Stoker: Essays on Gothic and Victorian Fiction*, North Carolina: Jefferson McFarland & Company, pp.79–88.
- Bourdieu, P. (2005), 'Taste of Luxury, Taste of Necessity' in Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed) *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, New York: Berg, pp. 72–8.
- Burnap, G. W. (1840), *Lectures to Young Men on the cultivation of the Mind and the Formation of Character and the Conduct of Life*. Baltimore: John Murphy.
- Burwell, C. et al. (1956), 'Extreme Obesity Associated with Alveolar Hypoventilation-A Pickwickian Syndrome', *The American Journal of Medicine*, 21, pp. 811–18.
- Collins, W. [1860] (1973) *The Woman in White*, Oxford: Oxford World's Classics- Oxford University Press.
- Daly, N. (1999), 'Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses', *ELH* 66:2, pp. 461–87.
- Dickens, C. [1837] (1986), *Pickwick Papers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dickens, C. [1863] (2014), 'Some Recollections of Mortality' *The Uncommerical Traveller*, The University of Adelaide Library, Available at:

<<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/dickens/charles/d54ut/chapter19.html>> (last accessed 28th May 2017).

Drummond, J.C. and Wilbraham A. (1991), *The Englishman's Food: Five Centuries of English Diet*. Rev. ed. London: Pimlico.

Flanders, J. (2003), *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed*. London: Harper Perennial.

Gilbert, P. K. (1997), *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gilman, S. L. (2004), *Fat Boys: A Slim Book*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Greenaway, V. (2008), 'The Italian, the Risorgimento and Romanticism in *Little Dorrit* and *The Woman in White*' *Browning Society Notes* 33, pp. 40–57.

Haslam, D. and Haslam F. (2009), *Fat, Gluttony and Sloth: Obesity in Medicine, Art and Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Heller, T. (1992), *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Huff, J. L. (2001), 'A "Horror of Corpulence": Interrogating Bantingism and Nineteenth-Century Fat Phobia' in Jane Evans Brazier and Kathleen LeBesco (eds), *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, Berkeley LA: University of California Press, pp. 39–59.

Huff, J. L. (2010), 'Fosco's Fat Drag: Performing the Victorian Fat Man in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*', in Elena Levy-Navarro (ed), *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

- Huff, J. L. (2008), 'Freaklore: The Dissemination, Fragmentation, and Reinvention of the Legend of Daniel Lambert, King of Fat Men' in Marlene Tromp (ed), *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press pp. 37–59.
- Hughes W. (2015), *That Devil's Trick: Hypnotism and the Victorian Popular Imagination*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hyder, C. K. (1939), 'Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*' *PMLA* 54:1, pp. 297–303.
- Krugovoy Silver, A. (2002) *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mason. D (2008), *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian fiction and Medical Culture* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mason, L. *Sugar-Plums and Sherbet: The Prehistory of Sweets* Devon: Prospect Books, 2004.
- Meckier, J. L. (1982), 'Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*: Providence Against the Evils of Propriety' *The Journal of British Studies* 22:1, pp. 104–26.
- Miller, D.A. (1986), 'Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*' *Representations* 14, pp. 107–136.
- Nicholson, M. (1992), 'Magic Food, Compulsive Eating, and Power Poetics' in Lilian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham (eds), *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, pp. 43–60.
- Parsons J. E. (2014), 'Eating Englishness and Causing Chaos: Food and the Body of the Fat Man in R. S. Surtees' *Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities, Handley Cross, and Hillingdon Hall*' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 36:4, pp. 335–46.

- Probyn, E. (2000) *Carnal Appetites: Food, Sex, Identities*. London: Routledge.
- Rogers, P. (1993), 'Fat is a fictional Issue: The Novel and the Rise of Weight-Watching' in Marie Mulvey-Roberts and Roy Porter (eds), *Literature and Medicine During the Eighteenth Century*, London: Routledge, pp. 168–187
- Schwartz, V. (1998), *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Sucksmith, H. P. (1973), 'Introduction' in Harvey Peter Sucksmith (ed), *The Woman in White*, Oxford: Oxford World's Classics- Oxford University Press, pp. v–xx.
- Talairach-Vielmas, L. (2007), *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Thackeray, W. [1848] (1968), *Vanity Fair*, London: Penguin.
- Visser, M. (1991), *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners*. New York: Grove Weidenfield.
- Vita, P. (2010), 'Returning the Look: Victorian Writers and the Paris Morgue', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25:3, pp. 241–55
- Wadd, W. (1816), *Cursory Remarks on Corpulence or Obesity Considered as A Disease with a Critical Examination of Ancient and Modern Opinions Relative to its Causes and Cure*. 3rd ed. London: J. Callow.