

Elena Levy-Navarro. *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity: Body Image in*

Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and Skelton. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60123-9; xi + 238 pp. US\$74.95.

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Since I will be making some rather critical observations about this book, let me begin on a positive note. *The Culture of Obesity* is an extremely ambitious work, one that attempts an analysis of the obesity crisis in contemporary America and links that crisis to a survey of (mostly) major works of early modern English literature from *Piers Plowman* to Ben Jonson. If its scope is too great for two hundred pages of text, that length may have been imposed by the publisher. Its stated intent is to present a partisan case and to provoke disagreement. In that, it certainly succeeds with me. If you regard fairness and balance to be things fit only for Fox News, this may well be the book for you. Considered strictly as polemic, at least the chapters on the *Henry IV* plays and Ben Jonson are worthy of a place on a longish list of recommended reading that includes alternative points of view.

This work is, essentially, a grudge with a book of essays attached. Its primary purpose is cultural: to “transform our political and aesthetic commitments” (p. x). That statement can be counted as fair warning:

I make no pretenses toward writing a study that is objective. Rather, I seek to write a history that is rooted in our own historical moment as I understand it. I also intend my history to intervene in our historical moment. (1)

Any literary criticism that may be involved is secondary to the task of writing a history and analysis of what she sees as the suffering and resistance of fat people in history. This polemic drives the

criticism, shapes it, and with some frequency misshapes it, just as it drives a “constructionist fat history” that is as remarkable for its omissions as for its distortions.

Levy-Navarro’s basic thesis can be simply stated. Our culture—she claims universality but her focus is exclusively American—is governed by a “representational regime” (30) that privileges and normalizes thin bodies while stigmatizing fat ones. We are currently undergoing a “fat panic” (1) about a purported obesity epidemic that is, in fact, a dehumanizing moralistic attack on the fat (and indirectly on the poor and non-white who are more likely than middle-class whites to be overweight). Under this regime, “the fat body is marked, stigmatized, and understood to be the emblem of our collective excess” (30). What we take to be a health crisis—the fact, for example, that 66% of Americans are now classified as overweight—is an illusion fostered by government propaganda disguised as medical science to promote the authority of what she calls “thin elites” (9). This arrangement, in turn, reflects a pervasively ascetic culture of “reproductive futurism” (23) in which straight Americans habitually defer gratification in the name of their future children while punishing the fat and gay for appearing to enjoy themselves. The roots of this “lean, mean,” militaristic culture lie in the Reformation and in the protestant valorization of discipline, self-containment, and progress. The emergence of this tyranny—and this finally brings her to the body of the book—can be traced in a small selection of literary texts from the sixteenth- to the mid-seventeenth century: Skelton’s *Elynour Rummyng*; Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Parts I and II*; Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*; *Bartholomew Fair* and the later (i.e., the pudgy period) poems of Ben Jonson.

The problems with this argument, as you may already have gathered, are legion. Anyone who thinks Americans habitually sacrifice the present to the future has not watched the Bush administration running up trillion-dollar debts to finance its wars of choice. For that matter, no

consumer culture ignores the present in the way she says ours does. Consumption is about consuming now; it is about just doing it, because “you only go around once in life.” It only promotes deferral when it is selling insurance, pension plans, and sub-prime mortgages.

More troubling is an attitude toward science that resembles nothing so much as climate change denial. Levy-Navarro wants to get beyond what she calls “mere objective data” (27) because queer theory has taught her that data—especially data you do not want to hear—is just a form of rhetoric. Inconvenient facts are habitually dismissed. Statistical studies do not show things, they “are made to” show things (25). Words like ‘proof’ and ‘health’ habitually appear in scare quotes. “[T]hose biomedical experts who give ‘sound medical reasons for watching weight’” (21) are mentioned only to be dismissed. In a way that will strike many foreign readers as peculiarly American, the only thing that ultimately matters is feeling good about yourself. Fatness is just a “cultural construction” (30) and only wimps worry about longevity (see p. 5). If there are no objective definitions of health, if fatness carries none of the medical consequences implied by a clinical term like obesity, then the only possible reason for calling anyone overweight is to make them feel bad. Of course, if you are literal-minded enough to believe that having a body mass index more than ‘30’ lowers your life expectancy by as much as ten years and greatly increases your chance of suffering heart disease, stroke, bowel cancer, breast cancer, type-2 diabetes, arthritis, hypertension and (at the very least) elevated serum cholesterol, you may find her argument at best silly and at worst pernicious. As someone who has recently survived an entirely non-rhetorical heart attack directly traceable to being overweight, I would opt for the latter judgment.

Levy-Navarro’s cultural history, unfortunately, is not much better than her science. It is not true, for example, that thin bodies are customarily unmarked. Think of the negative connotations that attach to a term like “fashion model,” only beginning with anorexic. Skinny male bodies are

marked as unhealthy and/or non-virile. While American popular culture indeed stigmatizes fat people (as the recent work of Eddie Murphy reminds us), it also contains a long line of iconic lovable ones, from Oliver Hardy through Fats Waller and Jackie Gleason to Seth Rogan. Those may not be sufficiently defiant, heroic examples for Levy-Navarro's taste, but they do suggest that the culture's attitude, like Hal's toward Falstaff, is considerably more complex than she is willing to admit.

As she regularly reminds us, however, she does not intend to be objective, much less fair or comprehensive. Her readings of individual texts, though considerably better than her reading of contemporary culture, reflect that attitude. *A Game at Chess* is treated as a pro-protestant, anti-fat treatise; all the other texts are treated as subversions of anti-fat prejudice. She has great difficulty getting away from the idea that any text is not, however covertly, polemical.

The most interesting of several ambitious chapters argues that Shakespeare privileges Falstaff's "fat-witted" humanity over Hal's cold militarism in the *Henry IV* plays. Like those other chapters, it is marred by Levy-Navarro's eagerness to subordinate critical analysis to fat activism and wish fulfillment. She insists throughout on a danger that Falstaff does not pose and a virtue he does not possess. Contrary to her repeated assertions, he never threatens to "absorb" or even "obstruct" Hal (see, e.g., 89) and Hal cannot seriously imagine that he does. The arc of their relationship is from the promised rejection in Hal's first soliloquy in *Part I*—and the mockery that precedes it—to the fulfillment of that promise at the end of *Part II* (and beyond that to Jack's death in exile at the beginning of *Henry V*). Any audience is expected to know that mythic history. If they are ever tempted to forget it, Hal is there to remind them. "Banish not him thy Harry's company," cries Falstaff at the climax of the greatest of the tavern scenes. "I do. I will," replies Hal, speaking for the present and the future. Falstaff is always already rejected. He is not a threat to Hal, though Hal is

certainly one to him. And, by the way, it is not warmth and companionship that the future Harry rejects in Eastcheap. Pervasively, what happens in the tavern scenes are baiting, cheating, sponging, and manipulation. Hal is simply better at most of those nasty arts than his companions. Falstaff, for his part, makes it clear to those willing to listen that he will throw anybody under the bus to preserve his relationship with the prince. “Banish Poins,” banish them all, he pleads, but not *me*. If Levy-Navarro does not hear that plea, it is because she is too busy listening for a kind, fat, feudal contrast to her lean, mean villain, a tendency that reaches an ironic climax when she denounces Hal for paying the Hostess what Jack owes her (98-9). Mrs. Quickly, she thinks, would rather be cheated “warmly” than paid coldly. Fat chance.

Elsewhere, the book is marred by great and small omissions, as when Hotspur is omitted from her version of Hal’s career or the Sons of Ben from her account of Jonson’s. A larger example is the absence of any cited experience of the plays in performance. She habitually talks about how audiences “would” respond to a given point (e.g., 106, 179) but not about how they “do.” The largest omission is, of course, the three hundred and fifty years between *A Game at Chess* and the Zone diet. Anti-fat prejudice seems, as a result, to have been passed directly (and quite improbably) from Jacobean playwrights and courtiers to contemporary nutritionists. When you omit that great space of literary and cultural development, you are liable to miss certain obvious facts such as that jolly fat men and thin, pinched meanies are perennial staples of the “modern” culture, she insists, has relentlessly stigmatized the fat and endorsed the thin: Squire Western, Uncle Toby, and Mr. Pickwick (not to mention, the Pilgrim Chaucer) on the one hand; Blifil and Scrooge on the other. Even sinister fat men like Count Fosco in *The Woman in White* and Sidney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon* play off the expectation that they must be kindly because fat. Similarly, you will also ignore that Victorians and Edwardians, like modern-day Tongans, regarded fatness as a sign of

prosperity and success. There was, after all, a time when the king of England was Edward and the president of the United States was William Howard Taft. If the universal dominance of the thin ever arrived, it must have been after that time and not before Henry VIII. If World War I produced a demand for a leaner, fitter populace, this demand is more likely to have been a response to the culture that immediately preceded it than to Jacobean drama.

For the time and research that went into it, this is an unfinished book marked by yawning gaps of attention. How, for example, does she write an entire chapter on the emergent thin, fat-hating aesthetic of Henry VIII's court without asking herself what happened when Henry became the most prominent fat man in Europe. What aesthetic is Holbein's famous, full-frontal portrait of the king supposed to represent?

For that matter, if she wishes make large claims about Middleton based on one very atypical play in a large canon, she needs to refer to *some* of the others. Vindice has a famous speech about skulls as the "terror of fat folks." DeFlores is not fat, but his body is literally marked and he displays many of the qualities—defiance, pained self-consciousness, a refusal to be confined—that Levy-Navarro finds in fat characters, defiant or otherwise. What does she think the connections are?

If, similarly, she wants to derive Shakespeare's attitudes from fat and thin bodies in the two *Henry IV* plays, she should at least remember that Falstaff also appears in *Merry Wives of Windsor* as well as being recalled in *Henry V*. What do the middle-class Windsorites think of Jack's girth and how does that compare with what his prince thinks? I do not necessarily expect her to notice that Hal and Falstaff—the chilly representative of the new age and the superficially generous representative of the old one—are replayed by Octavius and Antony, but I would certainly expect her to comment at some point on Caesar's preference for "fat, sleek-headed men" over the likes of

lean and hungry Cassius. Mostly thin and generally angry Hamlet, come to that, has a plump, placatory, non-combatant antagonist.

In all these cases, great inverted pyramids of generalization about authors, periods, and indeed Western Civilization are being erected on small points of reference. When an author bases an account of the entire “premodern” (aka medieval) period on a dubious reading of one passage in *Piers Plowman*—in which she insists that Gluttony is not fat because “gret” could (also) mean strong (42)—then some spoilsport like me is going to remind her that there are a fat Monk and a thin, choleric Reeve among the Canterbury pilgrims and that the former’s bulk is moralized in a way she claims does not happen until the sixteenth century. I might also remind her that Robyn the Miller, Harry Baillie, and Geoffrey are all plump and ask what she thinks that tells us. What Levy-Navarro does not have to say about the nineteenth century is as nothing compared to what she does not know about the Middle Ages.

She is, however, intermittently capable of shrewd and thoughtful analysis. If she filled the gaps in her “fat history,” she might write a book that is persuasive rather than merely argumentative. That task would require a much longer narrative, but eliminating the extraordinary wordiness and repetition that marks this one would free a great deal of space—perhaps fifty or more pages. In the present work, no point is made concisely and every point is repeated endlessly. A single phrase—“wealthy, plump plebeians”—may be repeated four times within two pages (136-7), as if the reader had the attention span of Justice Shallow. Palgrave should find an editor who is willing to edit. This one has done Levy-Navarro no favors. The result is a very fat thin book.