

ANOREXIA MIRABILIS DECODED: REREADING FEMALE CORPOREAL CONSUMPTION IN DICKENS'S ANGELIC DAUGHTERS¹

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Abstract: *This article makes a deconstructionist reading of anorexic women in Dickens. For this purpose, three of his novels are examined: Dombey and Son, David Copperfield and Little Dorrit. The article challenges certain feminist claims of women in Dickens being sacrificed at the expense of men and proposes a conscious postponed consumption of commodities on the part of the women through marriage. The analysis is effectuated on the basis of comparing data from the novels in question, newspapers, medical studies and Victorian culture reviews. The results ascertain the employment of feminine stratagems in promoting the body politics that help Dickens's angelic daughters to obtain the best husband for them and thus establish the successful patriarchal woman.*

Key words: *anorexia, mirabilis, feminist, patriarchal, Victorian*

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This article is a response to feminist readings of corporeal consumption in Gail Houston's highly regarded *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (1994). Houston claims that the patriarchal society represented in Dickens's works necessitated the sacrifice of women whose abstention from consumption possibly led to developing the medical condition *anorexia nervosa* and consequently to their death. Anna Silver (2004) makes a similar claim, referring to a wider range of Victorian writers, including Dickens, and determining a recurring pattern of mainstream model middle-class Victorian womanhood sharing "important qualities with the beliefs and behaviors of the anorexic girl or woman" (p. 1).

In my response I aim to refute Houston's claim by examining Dickens's urban representations of eating – corporeal consumption. While doing so, I examine three novels: *Dombey and Son* (1848), *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Little Dorrit* (1857) and trace the evolution of the woman who does not eat. As we shall see, representations of urban women subvert the established interpretation, thus revealing that this type of consumption not only performs very important functions in Victorian Society but also serves as the core of the modern patriarchal woman. In the course of my analysis, I review the evolution of gender-based corporeal consumption in *anorexia mirabilis* as feminine tactics.

In analyzing Dickensian women's corporeal consumption, Houston admits that "obviously, Dickens's heroines cannot be taken as clinical examples of *anorexia nervosa* – though Rose Maylie, Nell, and Little Dorrit come close" (1994, p. 46). They are rather in a state, which she terms *miraculous anorexia* (*ibid.*, p. 45) or as the Latin term goes *anorexia mirabilis* (*inedia miraculosa* or *inedia prodigiosa*), a revised modernized version of traditional female piety. By seemingly consuming less food or other commodities, Dickens's female urban characters consume patriarchal values as the underlining rationale for their miraculous condition. Victorian women, who did not want to be seen eating in public, often consumed food clandestinely, but the novelist does not show this masked consumption, which was a strategy winning men's admiration. I also provide counter-arguments to Gail Houston's claim that Dickens does not portray supposedly anorectic women like Amy Dorrit to be physically suffering from the symptoms of the disease whose psychic dimensions she sees in self-delimitation expressed in "self-cannibalism", "self-denial" and "self-suppression" (*ibid.*, p. 46), as this apparent lack of physical suffering very likely participates in a consistent system of food consumption on the sly aiming at winning a husband, who is taken in by ostentatious or *conspicuous unconsumption*. There is no doubt that reduced consumption by urban women and girls produced a cultural phenomenon that crystallized in the physical ideal of the modern attractive woman. In view of the claim made by Gail Houston, we should inquire whether the patriarchal women contained in the modern metropolis of the 1850s-1880s

accepted this mode of female consumption as something self-chosen or rather as something imposed upon them.

As Helena Michie (1990) suggests, Victorian women understood eating secretly to be part of their feminine nature of doing things on the sly:

It is not that they [young women] absolutely starve themselves to death, for many of the most abstemious at the open dinner are the most voracious at the secret luncheon. Thus, the fastidious dame whose gorge rises before company at the sight of a single pea, will on the sly swallow cream tarts by the dozen, and caramels and chocolate drops by the pound's weight (p. 19).

Lisa Wade (2015), a cultural critic and sociologist, provides evidence corroborating Michie's argument when she draws on Victorian medical specialists' conclusions that fasting girls are *impossibilities* (p. 1):

The competition between medicine and religion became so intense that doctors became intent on proving that these fasting girls were not, in fact, surviving on holiness, but were, instead, sneaking food. In several cases, doctors staked out fasting girls, watching her to make sure that she did not eat, and these girls, relentless in the illusion, sometimes died.

Fasting girls were indeed in fashion as testified by several newspapers. Their miraculous condition was commonly attributed to "a Visitation of God". The same newspapers corroborate Wade, since all observed cases of fasting inevitably ended in the death of the fasting girl. For example, the London *Daily News*, among others, reported the case of Sara Jacobs from Wales, viewing her case as an example of, "like her predecessors, half deceiving and half deceived" (p. 2) and implying that the girl might have taken food before a medical team observed her condition. The newspaper, disbelieving in divine intervention, puts the question of guilt and responsibility arising from the girl's possible death:

Now it is all very well that science will have their victims; but which will this poor girl be if she should die under the eyes of these nurses, and die of starvation? Probably the persons concerned have already ascertained what their legal position would be in such a case. We presume that, if the girl died, an inquest must be held; but what verdict could it return? If it were 'felo de se,' it would reflect on those who saw the suicide and did nothing to prevent it. It could hardly be death from natural causes or accidental death – there is nothing natural or accidental about it. Even the favourite formula, 'Visitation of God,' would be out of place, for the real case would be visitation of nurses. (Daily News, 1869, p. 2)

The case is followed by other newspapers, and they all confirm the subsequent inevitable death of the girl while under medical observation quoting *Daily*

News such as the *Pall Mall Gazette* or *The Western Mail* (Cardiff, Wales), the latter making an unequivocal conclusion as to the cause of her death:

After the medical evidence given yesterday at the inquest, as the result of the post-mortem examination of the body of the deceased, there seems to be but one opinion here among those who are prepared to judge the case by the clear light of scientific research, and that is, that the Welsh Fasting girl, by some means which appear tolerably clear, obtained food and drink prior to the strict watch kept by the four nurses from Guy's Hospital; that she failed to obtain it afterwards, though she might have had it if she had chosen to ask for it; and that, in the inevitable order of nature, she died in the absence of it. On one point, all, except a very few of the most skeptical, are agreed, and that is, that the girl did not exist at all without food for any great length of time; and that the story of her so-called fasting is simply and unmistakable fraud, for which the poor girl has paid the penalty with her life. (*The Western Mail*, 1869, p. 1)

Rebeca Lester's "The (Dis)embodied Self in Anorexia Nervosa" (1997) attempts to bridge the feminist cultural model of this eating disorder and its medical treatment. In her analysis she employs Foucault's "technologies of the self" (*The History of Sexuality*) and sees the conscious and deliberate transformation of an individual through "the constant perception and reevaluation of the relationship between 'the inside' and the 'outside'" (p. 483), that is between the self and the body. Although she detects *complicity* in the continued "(re)production of gender ideologies and beliefs" (p. 482) adduced to the self by feminism, I believe women freely *complied* with a patriarchal code in order to participate actively in a modern heterosexual society.

I agree, therefore, that the anorectic patterns in Dickens's representations are, indeed, gendered and embodied mainly in the Victorian feminine self, which, however, *consciously* and *deliberately* only dissimulates lack of alimentary consumption by allowing the body to consume food in secret, thus aiming to endow women with unlimited consumption sanctioned by marriage.

Dickens's urban representations created the prototype of the modern heterosexual woman in heroines such as Florence from *Dombey and Son*, Amy from *Little Dorrit*, Dora and Agnes from *David Copperfield*: all these characters embraced the slim figure produced by a frugal diet, which, although not very healthy, did not prevent women from being healthy enough to create a family, one of the main ambitions in life of a patriarchal woman. Behind the Victorian masterplot of male dominance in consumption, the modern patriarchal woman carefully and consciously chose a strategy of body politics, one that managed to attract the best partner for herself, act as his moral corrective and reproduce, consuming less in the matter of commodities or food, but also expending less energy due to lesser consumption by comparison to man. Reduced alimentary consumption

translates into *increased consumption of patriarchal values*, which ultimately results in an *enhanced corporeal consumption*, and that by *patriarchal woman*, I do not necessarily mean not modern, just the opposite: I mean a modern heterosexual woman on her way to financial independence, still choosing members of the opposite sex as partners.

Good examples of the feminine subversive tactics in relation to corporeal consumption appear in the angelic daughters referred to above, who achieve their feminine goals in slightly different ways and whose dual nature – keeping appearances and ulterior motives are locked in the significance of their names. In *Dombey and Son*, Florence, also called “Little Florence”, exhibits the mimicry of a *predatory flower* (Lat. *Florentia*, fem. of *Florentius*, lit. “blooming,” from *florens* (gen. *florentis*), pr. p. of *florere* “to flower”) developing exuberant efflorescent activities, which are sustained in consistent consumption of male praise aiming for the ultimate prize of unlimited commodity consumption realized in Victorian marriage. As a child, she frequently endears herself to others, winning their hearts by being an exemplary little girl: sad (having lost her mother), humble, docile and deferential to older members of society regardless of their sex, striving for and encouraging social inclusion rather than exclusion (Mr. Dombey) as well as abstemious in consumption, looking on the world with eyes full of wonder and affection:

The child, in her grief and neglect, was so gentle, so quiet, and uncomplaining; was possessed of so much affection that no one seemed to care to have, and so much sorrowful intelligence that no one seemed to mind or think about the wounding of, that Polly’s heart was sore when she was left alone again. In the simple passage that had taken place between herself and the motherless little girl, her own motherly heart had been touched no less than the child’s; and she felt, as the child did, that there was something of confidence and interest between them from that moment (pp. 34-35).

Her effusive sociability antagonizes her father, producing “an uneasiness of extraordinary kind” (p. 37). Some part of him knows that people like her, much more than himself or Paul, are capable of winning other people’s hearts. By ingratiating herself with others, by exuding sorrow and affection, she renders herself irresistible to compassion and admiration. Consequently, she has the option of selecting the man who manifests the strongest signs of veneration for her. In doing so, she poses an ambiguous threat to the integrity of the Dombey family, since she might remove the protective layer, she places around the male members of the family should she opt for orbiting another phallic center. Moreover, she demonstrates a rather uncanny independence by being safe even when lost in the city where Walter finds her. She is thus a Victorian precursor of Raymond Queneau’s *Zazie dans le Metro* (1972), or *Alice’s Adventures in*

Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (2009). Just like Zazie and Alice, she can handle the opportunists, such as Mrs. Brown, she encounters along the way in her own terms to come out of this adventure unscathed (pp. 79-86).

Florence's ability which makes others pity her wins the admiration and desire of a male protector – Walter, her future husband:

‘Yes, I was lost this morning, a long way from here – and I have had my clothes taken away, since – and I am not dressed in my own now – and my name is Florence Dombey, my little brother's only sister – and, oh dear, dear, take care of me, if you please!’ sobbed Florence, giving full vent to the childish feelings she had so long suppressed, and bursting into tears. At the same time her miserable bonnet falling off, her hair came tumbling down about her face: moving to speechless admiration and commiseration, young Walter, nephew of Solomon Gills, Ships' Instrument-maker in general (p. 86).

Walter, overwhelmed by her acts of *unconsumption*, manifested in her parting with her shoes and good clothes and exchanging them for old skins and bad shoes, is completely won over by her tears, which she seems to dispense at will, using them to express both grief and joy, one turning into the other in the fraction of a second (p. 86). In a preceding scene, Florence has sought male protection in the company of her brother Paul by instinctively entreating to sleep next to him, this profound yearning for the phallic center finding its consummation when she secures Walter's devotion and affection: “So Walter, looking immensely fierce, led off Florence, looking very happy; and they went arm-in-arm along the streets, perfectly indifferent to any astonishment that their appearance might or did excite by the way” (p. 87).

Florence's unpretentious manners win her another friend – Walter's uncle Gill in whose shop she dozes off before the fire (p. 90). Her very limited consumption is also accompanied by gestures of disproportionate gratitude to people who offer her basic assistance, and even though we are assured by the author that it is “the innocence of her grateful heart” (p. 92) that makes her touch Walter's face with hers whether consciously or unconsciously, the fact remains that these gestures are part of her stratagems for winning male admiration. These feminine techniques also appear in her manner of establishing immediate intimate contact with the people from the lower classes, her temporary minimal consumption of the city, overly loving nature and the urge to please everyone around by doing them little favors in which the central part is their savoring her graces: beauty while dancing, voice while reading, etc., always being by the bedside of her sick brother, Paul, later on assuming the contained comportment of a young lady – “staid and pleasantly demure with her little book or work-box” (p. 270). As a result, they win her universal approbation, providing her with numerous young men from whom she can choose (p. 607) and setting her on a fast track

to getting married to Walter, which helps her achieve her goals of a modern patriarchal woman and renders her an avid consumer of patriarchal values to be cashed in postponed increased post-marital commodity consumption.

When shown to be consuming food, Florence either does not eat at all or eats for the sake of others, thus even further winning their praise: when at a dinner table with her father and step-mother Edith, she does not consume food, but the spectacle of a family scandal during which Edith repeatedly claims that she does not eat at home (p. 682), thus taking on the gigantic proportions of a *spending ogress* who consumes only the most expensive commodities with the added money value of public labor (p. 683). Alternatively, Florence may take a morsel of deliciously cooked dinner by Captain Cuttle just to humor him (p. 711). Although she refrains from consuming food, she does not refrain from consuming men's admiration as she clears up the table and sweeps up the hearth in such an arduous manner that he sees her "as if she were some Fairy, daintily performing these offices for him; the red rim on his forehead glowing again, in his unspeakable admiration" (p. 711). Florence, more than Amy Dorrit, is a perfectionist in her consumption of men's praise as she proceeds to give the captain his pipe to smoke and makes a grog for him while he endlessly tortures her evoking the memory of the supposedly drowned Walter, knowing only too well that Walter is alive.

Pursuing her goal to the end, once married to Walter, Florence brings up the question of her being a financial burden to him:

'I don't mean that, Walter, though I think of that too. I have been thinking what a charge I am to you. 'A precious, sacred charge, dear heart! Why, I think that sometimes.' 'You are laughing, Walter. I know that's much more in your thoughts than mine. But I mean a cost. 'A cost, my own?' 'In money, dear. All these preparations that Susan and I are so busy with – I have been able to purchase very little for myself. You were poor before. But how much poorer I shall make you, Walter!' (p. 819).

Sure enough, at this point Walter remembers the presence of a purse with some savings for rainy days after which, upon hearing this news, Florence declares that she is happy, in fact, to be his burden (p. 819).

Amy Dorrit (Lat. *amita* – aunt, also a nursery name for mother, Fr. *aimée* – loved), a veritably *agony aunt*, as the name suggests, achieves her goals with an even sterner behavior and more austere diet. Her case is, however, much better justified since she is the child of the Marshalsea, just like her father, Mr. Dorrit, who is the Father of the Marshalsea. With her seemingly unobtrusive manner and abstaining from consumption, she manages to attract the attention of two suitors – John Chivery, the turnkey's son, and Arthur Clennam, a mysterious man, who has come from abroad with the experience and potential to be a

successful man of business. Unsurprisingly, Amy chooses Arthur, thus opting for the modern man of the times, undoubtedly aware of the fact that a marriage with John would mean identifying with the old world of the prison:

She, the child of the Marshalsea; he, the lockkeeper. There was a fitness in that. Say he became a resident turnkey. She would officially succeed to the chamber she had rented so long. There was a beautiful propriety in that. It looked over the wall, if you stood on tip-toe; and, with a trellis-work of scarlet beans and a canary or so, would become a very Arbour. There was a charming idea in that. Then, being all in all to one another, there was even an appropriate grace in the lock. With the world shut out (except that part of it which would be shut in) (p. 226).

One could argue that Amy's pursuit of Arthur's affection and the ultimate prize – marriage is effectuated in more devious ways than Florence could ever have devised: Little Dorrit refuses to see Arthur, thus torturing herself, but feeding fuel into the flames of his rather poorly masked desire for her. Like Florence, she also lives within a close orbit of the male members of her family, impeding Arthur Clennam's advances till the end "as suppressing her sexuality in denying his advances to her sanctifies and secures Amy Dorrit the patriarchal prize denied Little Nell from *The Old Curiosity Shop*" (Boev, 2011).

Again, like Florence, Little Dorrit is prone to *unconsumption* refusing to dress in a manner becoming the new status of her family after they temporarily move to riches. As her sister complains:

Here is that child Amy, in her ugly old shabby dress, which she was so obstinate about, Pa, which I over and over again begged and prayed her to change, and which she over and over again objected to, and promised to change to-day, saying she wished to wear it as long as ever she remained in there with you – which was absolutely romantic nonsense of the lowest kind – here is that child Amy disgracing us to the last moment and at the last moment, by being carried out in that dress after all. And by that Mr. Clennam too!' (pp. 453-454).

Her failing to consume renders Amy irresistible to Arthur in the same way as it affects Walter when he finds Florence lost on the street. However, with both heroines the logic differs: Florence consumes very little because she is to be married to someone below her status, who has to prove himself as a modern man with a profession – the one of a mariner; Amy's reduced consumption can be justified by the fact that she has spent most of her life in the Marshalsea prison orbiting her father, uncle, and brother and protecting them from the world without by being the one who always listens and gives comfort in need. This very reduced consumption has made her irresistible to Arthur since the very moment he sees her (p. 103).

A major development of the subject at-hand is the treatment of Dora Spenlow (Gk – *doron* – gift), (*David Copperfield*). Dickens's first female urbane character, she is a true *gift* for the men, enchanting her suitor in a purely modern corporeal fashion. She affects David Copperfield with the curves of her body and the sound of her name:

‘Where is Miss Dora?’ said Mr. Spenlow to the servant. ‘Dora! I thought. ‘What a beautiful name!’ We turned into a room near at hand (I think it was the identical breakfast-room, made memorable by the brown East Indian sherry), and I heard a voice say, ‘Mr. Copperfield, my daughter Dora, and my daughter Dora’s confidential friend!’ It was, no doubt, Mr. Spenlow’s voice, but I didn’t know it, and I didn’t care whose it was. All was over in a moment. I had fulfilled my destiny. I was a captive and a slave. I loved Dora Spenlow to distraction! [...] I could only sit down before my fire, biting the key of my carpet-bag, and think of the captivating, girlish, bright-eyed lovely Dora. What a form she had, what a face she had, what a graceful, variable, enchanting manner! (pp. 376-378).

The quintessence of the modern Victorian as far as corporeal consumption is concerned – food consumption shaping their physical appearance – is finely defined in the following passage in which David consumes Dora at the dinner table by being obsessed with her, and she, herself consuming nothing alimentary at all but patriarchal values:

I don’t remember who was there, except Dora. I have not the least idea what we had for dinner, besides Dora. My impression is, that I *dined off* Dora, entirely, and sent away half-a-dozen plates untouched. I sat next to her. I talked to her. She had the most delightful little voice, the gayest little laugh, the pleasantest and most fascinating little ways, that ever led a lost youth into hopeless slavery. She was rather diminutive altogether. So much the more precious, I thought (p. 378). (italics mine)

Conscious abstention from eating definitely shapes the body, and this abstention becomes one of the typical traits of the Victorian female character in Dickens’s represented spaces – *diminutive with little voice, little laugh, little ways*. The slim feminine figure could only be imagined in its synecdochal representation of a tiny waist, which only the corset made possible. The curves and shapes of women were concealed in the hooped dresses they usually wore in public. As another British Victorian newspaper, *The Graphic* (London) testifies, the ideal of feminine beauty was rather different from Dickens’s and was more truthfully articulated by Dickens’s *protégé*, Wilkie Collins:

There is one point on which we do not hesitate to join issue with Mr. Wilkie Collins. He states that “the average English idea of beauty in

women may be summed up in three words – youth, health, plumpness. The more spiritual charm of intelligence and vivacity, the subtle attraction of delicacy of line and fineness of detail are little looked for and seldom appreciated by the mass of men in this island.” (The Graphic, 1870, p. 1)

Dora, along with Dickens’s other similar female city dwellers, is rather a modern projection of Dickens’s own ideal of feminine beauty – a beauty synonymous with and consuming daintily and exquisitely, one very close to twenty-first-century perceptions of the feminine figure. Dora, unlike some other female inhabitants of the metropolis, is a veritable Victorian gift for men hunting the opposite sex, and as a reduced consumer of patriarchal values, she has to die.

Cathy Taylor (2001), a lecturer on antique clothing, points out that the feminine figure in the age of Victoria appearing in newspapers, paintings, and clothing, preserved in museums, seems quite different:

Corseting partially explains many of those tiny-looking antique clothes in shops and museums. Nineteenth-century people were probably no more slender than people of today, but fashionable women depended on their corsets, rather than diet or exercise, to endow them with the ideal figure. And the ideal figure was not anorexically lean: it was rounded and ample, with an unnaturally small waist (p. 1).

Dora is portrayed as wearing waistcoats, but no specific mention is made of corsets, since such garments were unmentionable in family literature. Still, she has a slender waist (p. 629) as a prerequisite to her feminine beauty. The waistline did play a very important part in Victorian feminine beauty and it had a very practical patriarchal purpose as illustrated with Agnes Wickfield, David Copperfield’s second wife (pp. 838-839)

The passage above and the one that follows indicate the traits Agnes possesses to win David Copperfield. She starts her relationship with him in a slightly disadvantageous position, playing the second fiddle, being a confidante until gradually her qualities of calmness, goodness, diminutiveness, docility, and modesty secure for her the prize of becoming his loving and loved wife:

I see her, with her modest, orderly, placid manner, and I hear her beautiful calm voice, as I write these words. The influence for all good, which she came to exercise over me at a later time, begins already to descend upon my breast. I love little Em’ly, and I don’t love Agnes - no, not at all in that way – but I feel that there are goodness, peace, and truth, wherever Agnes is; and that the soft light of the coloured window in the church, seen long ago, falls on her always, and on me when I am near her, and on everything around (p. 226).

Agnes (Gk *hagne* – pure, holy, Lat. *agnus* – lamb) is a much more active disguised Amy-like city inhabitant, who is rather *a wolf in a sheep's clothing* although her name suggests she should be meek as a lamb. She appears seemingly grateful to play a secondary role in Copperfield's love life, but she is in fact a woman who patiently bides her time, being well aware that she has the required patriarchal values as well as feminine beauty, qualities that should be rewarded with the ultimate prize, marriage. After she has been Copperfield's companion in grief and sorrow, the man gradually begins to appreciate her influence until he sees it as indispensable (p. 260). Finally, he realizes that apart from being the best *confidante*, she is a woman, too (p. 261).

Every time he sees her, she always seems to be occupied with womanly chores or pastimes: netting, knitting, calmly reading a book that she, just like the adolescent Florence, seems to always have with her. She is invariably happy to see him, and he is always overwhelmed by this effusive display of patriarchal submission. Confident in her charms, even though at times appearing the opposite (which prompts admiration), Agnes makes gradual advances into his affection by slowly, but surely, turning gestures of comfort and solace into ingenious seductive stratagems in which her body plays a major role: "She put her hand – its touch was like no other hand – upon my arm for a moment; and I felt so befriended and comforted, that I could not help moving it to my lips, and gratefully kissing it" (p. 354).

Agnes becomes a mirror reflecting David's emotions and then beaming back consolation, placidity, empathy, and sympathy in a way like the other angelic daughters until David succumbs (p. 495). Agnes's devious ways are detected by Dora herself, but when she sees her, she is easily fooled by her unassuming manner, and consequently, lowers her guard:

I was troubled by no doubt of her being very pretty, in any case; but it fell out that I had never seen her look so well. She was not in the drawing-room when I presented Agnes to her little aunts, but was shyly keeping out of the way. [...] Dora was afraid of Agnes. She had told me that she knew Agnes was 'too clever'. But when she saw her looking at once so cheerful and so earnest, and so thoughtful, and so good, she gave a faint little cry of pleased surprise, and just put her affectionate arms round Agnes's neck, and laid her innocent cheek against her face. (p. 592)

Dora could have had David for the rest of a long life if it had not been for the presence of Agnes, and then, conveniently, Dora, being a *gift* has to die, as the gift, once granted by God is also reclaimed by Him so that Agnes can take her place even with the benediction and kind permission of the dying wife. The question remains if Agnes would have walked an extra mile enhancing even further her powerful influence over David provoked by her beauty (continuously augmented) and her counsel (increasingly followed) and then the

answer should be positive, since David would have made the first step towards her as a love object finding her charms totally winning as it is not by accident that Agnes does not fail to register an important point by looking prettier than Dora and far superior in intellect. Indeed, the insistence on qualifying adjectives associated with her of which the most prominent is *innocent* does not really testify to innocence of mind or intention as it is just about an *innocence of looks* – *affectionate arms, innocent cheek*. After this classical love confession comes her ready-made one: that she has loved him all her life (p. 840). This last declaration suggests that she might well have increased her influence over him until he declared his love. The following passage reveals Agnes's position as an indispensable substitute:

‘When I loved her – even then, my love would have been incomplete, without your sympathy. I had it, and it was perfected. And when I lost her, Agnes, what should I have been without you, still!’ Closer in my arms, nearer to my heart, her trembling hand upon my shoulder, her sweet eyes shining through her tears, on mine! ‘I went away, dear Agnes, loving you. I stayed away, loving you. I returned home, loving you!’ (p. 839)

After this classical love confession comes her ready-made one: that she has loved him all her life (p. 840).

The above examples call into question Gail Houston, Anna Silver, and Helena Michie's assumption of forced anorexia in Dickens's female urban characters. In addition, the reduced food consumption to which these critics refer is a self-imposed one, far from being really dangerous since it is based on *what was not shown*, neither in real life, nor in fiction: women's food consumption, the *miraculous anorexia* by which Gail Houston (1994) refers to the Dickensian heroine's "silently and insidiously imposing the oscillations between desire and negation of desire upon the heroine's bodily interior" (p. 45), thus allowing the male protagonist "the luxury and implied heroism of a more exteriorized, intellectual vacillation between his own appetite and asceticism" (p. 45) confirms my analysis if we disregard its antithetical relationship to men's corporeal consumption and its signification in Dickens's novels. Miraculous anorexia in what Houston calls its "insidious nature" is based on covert food consumption. We may see the insidiousness as a matter of this covert consumption rather than the kind of insidiousness with which she stigmatizes the Dickensian representations of women, and we can interpret their consumption as these characters' conscious strategy. In other words, far from suffering from this condition, these women can reap the benefits that accrue to an adept consumer of corporeal culture, benefits ultimately realized in their increased consumption after marriage.

The lack of real symptoms of anorexic suffering in Dickens's thin female figures (which, as Victorian newspaper reports show, would have appeared in reality),

and the fact that not showing consumption does not mean there was none is corroborated by the evidence adduced by Cathy Taylor, Helena Michie, Lisa Wade, and Victorian newspaper articles. Victorian women were not anorexic but looked plump and yet slim if judged by their waists and faces. Many women did not consume food openly, but did so on the sly, aiming at securing themselves a patriarchal prize, marriage.

The angelic daughters of the house are, therefore, adept consumers of Victorian values that bring the patriarchal reward of marriage. Marriage transforms this consumption of values into regular consumption of commodities and of expensive restaurant food, as is the case with a married, but still angelic Edith (p. 400), caught in the natural metamorphosis of passing from one phase to the other described by the author as “so beautiful and stately, but so cold and so repelling” (p. 396), and describing herself as “artful, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men” (p. 418), an early foreboding of her nature of an avid consumer, as sort of a successful, but remorseful Becky Sharp from *Vanity Fair* (1992) consuming in spite of herself, who could easily be Florence’s projection of a future wife hypothesized in Edith’s numerous warnings to Florence not to follow her example (pp. 532, 679, 899). We should realize, therefore, that the odious hyper-consuming wives were angelic daughters once (Edith) and that their success as wives is, indeed, based on their triumph as angelic daughters. The only step they are to make before they reach the state of fully-fledged modern women is to stop having remorse for their consumption.

By contrast, ladies who were not designated for courtship by prospective husbands did not have to play any reduced consumption games and could enjoy the second-rate meals of the kitchen staff, which were sufficient for keeping a plump figure.

As Dickens himself aptly put it in *Dombey and Son*, “the maid who ought to be a skeleton, but is in truth a buxom damsel, is, on the other hand, in a most amiable state: considering her quarterly stipend much safer than heretofore and foreseeing a great improvement in her board and lodging” (p. 524).

Dickens’s representations of female city inhabitants are, therefore, mainly concerned with showing women in marrying age to be of small stature, abstaining from consumption, demure, pleasing and loving, which creates the image of an irresistible form and character for the prospective husband. Their aim is to enthrall a man or several men and then make the most propitious decision based on a number of choices. Behind their unconsuming guise as daughters of the house is hidden an avid consumer’s nature manifested in the portrayal of the hyper-consuming wives or elderly women – Edith (*Dombey and Son*) or Mrs. General (*Little Dorrit*). Occasionally, as Fanny, Amy’s sister, shows, this nature is revealed in the daughters themselves. The portrayal, therefore, of the angelic daughters in Dickens as seemingly reduced consumers reveals them as

only aiming to attract the best partner in marriage who would be enticed by this small consumer and assume sometimes wrongly, that he can afford to marry her (Mr. Dombey and Edith) trusting that she will not change, but she does (signs of that can be seen in Florence). By reducing consumption with the daughters even further, Dickens anticipates the image of the modern patriarchal woman: self-conscious, intelligent, slim, and always ready to enchant a prospective suitor well aware of the fact that with marital bliss comes unlimited corporeal consumption.

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