

Abnormal Appetites: Foucault, Atwood, and the Normalization of an Animal-Based Diet

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Abstract

In his lecture series *Abnormal*, Michel Foucault argues that the abnormal individual is the descendant of the monster, and that the monster came in two types: sexual and alimentary. While Foucault traces the genealogy of the sexual monster into the sexually abnormal individual, the alimentary monster is forgotten. This paper thus takes up Foucault's work on normalization in order to consider the genealogy of that other monstrous heir, the alimentarily abnormal individual, and pursues it into the twenty-first century. In particular, this paper examines the pathologization of vegetarianism and veganism in the writings of Margaret Atwood and in the invention of a new mental illness, orthorexia nervosa.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Margaret Atwood, vegetarianism, veganism, sexual politics of meat, orthorexia nervosa

Introduction

In his lecture series, *Abnormal*, Michel Foucault argues that the monster is the genealogical predecessor of the abnormal individual targeted by modern psychiatry. According to Foucault, the paradigmatic monster during the Middle Ages was a fusion of man and beast. During the Renaissance it was the fusion of two humans in one body (the conjoined twin), followed by the fusion of man and woman (the hermaphrodite). By the time of the French Revolution, however, Foucault argues that monstrosity transitioned from being about hybrid morphologies to violations of laws of consumption. The monster became a creature of aberrant appetites. This appetitive monster took two major forms: the sexual monster and the alimentary monster. These two forms of monstrous appetite were sometimes separated by class, with sex being the privileged vehicle for affluent monstrosity, and food being the means of monstrosity for the starving classes. Thus the sexual monster was captured by the figure of the incestuous aristocrat while the alimentary monster was imagined as a cannibalistic peasant. Often, however, the two forms of monstrosity fused in the social imaginary, as in the propaganda about Marie-Antoinette, accused both of committing incest with her son and of having drunk blood from the skulls of

Frenchmen. (Avramescu, 203) “What created a problem,” Foucault writes, “what constituted the point of formation of legal medicine, was precisely the existence of these monsters recognized as monsters precisely because they were both incestuous and cannibalistic, or because they transgressed the two great alimentary and sexual prohibitions.” (101-102)

In his *Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, Cătălin Avramescu argues that the alimentary monster is one of the “great forgotten figures of philosophy” and that “this disappearance has a significance of a philosophical order, since it is within its space that we now think about good and evil.” (3) For Foucault too, and although he does not express this explicitly, the alimentary monster seems to have vanished from history, for while the transgression of alimentary as well as sexual prohibitions is foregrounded in his discussion of monsters, when he traces his genealogy from monstrosity to the pathologization of abnormalcy, he considers only the sexually abnormal individual; the alimentarily abnormal individual remains unthematized. The questions with which I begin this paper are therefore: what became of the alimentary monster? Did the cannibal give birth to no “little abnormal,” to use Foucault’s phrase, in the way that the sexual monster did? Can we trace a history of pathologized alimentary consumption, the way that Foucault traces a history of pathologized sexualities?

In fact, reading Foucault’s lectures, we come across at least one case of a nineteenth-century individual singled out for psychiatric treatment based on his rejection of alimentary norms: in *Psychiatric Power*, we read of a thirty-six year-old melancholic who spent his nights reading and refused to consume animal foods. Harangued by his housekeeper on the subject of his unwholesome lifestyle, he became paranoid that she would poison him. (34-35) Part of his psychiatric cure was the prescription of a regime that precluded further relapses into folly. Since his refusal of animal foods is singled out as one of the contributing factors in his madness, we can be sure that the psychiatrically prescribed diet included a return to consuming meat, eggs and dairy. What cases such as this suggest is that abnormal alimentary appetites were, like abnormal sexual appetites, pathologized by psychiatry from its birth. Indeed, Avramescu would have needed to look no further than the case of the child who breastfeeds “too long” to find a “little cannibal” whose alimentary desires are deemed abnormal today, and are widely supposed to give rise to abnormal sexualities, showing the fusion of alimentary and sexual abnormalcy in the modern imaginary, as in the eighteenth-century conception of monstrosity. Avramescu might also have considered the mother who eats her placenta after giving birth. While placenta-eating is completely normal mammalian behaviour, and seems uniquely ethical as far as human meat-eating goes, it is cannibalistic and deemed abnormal—indeed, abject—in the human species.

What I would like to do in what follows is to take up these suggestive ideas from Foucault's writings on nineteenth-century psychiatry and pursue them into the present. I will argue that alimentary appetites, like sexual appetites, continue to be sites of normalization, or that how we eat is a target of what Foucault calls disciplinary power. Moreover, as I have suggested elsewhere, just as the sexual and alimentary monsters were frequently fused in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century popular imaginary, so today the abnormalities of eating and sex are often conflated, with male vegetarians in particular suspected of being "queer." The normalization of sex and eating are thus not only analogous but inter-related and mutually reinforced. While we might discuss alimentary normalization and the disciplining of diet in various ways, such as the assimilation of immigrants into a North American diet and the deeply ambivalent biopolitical investment in women's breastfeeding practices, I will focus in this essay on vegetarianism and veganism.

I have chosen to focus on the regulation of the animal-food norm in contemporary Western societies, rather than other examples of the normalization of diet that I might have examined, for two reasons. First, it seems to me that in a discussion of alimentary normalization, vegetarianism is in many ways the equivalent of homosexuality in Foucault's discussion of sexual normalization. That is, vegetarians are the most prominent and the most politically visible group of alimentarily abnormal individuals, much as homosexuals are the most prominent and politically visible group of sexually abnormal individuals. Vegetarians and vegans have made the most headway as a political movement and community (e.g. restaurants are more likely to include vegetarian and vegan options today than to have options for raw foodists, locovores, freegans, or people who only eat seasonal foods, and there are more exclusively vegetarian and vegan restaurants today than raw, freegan, local or seasonal food restaurants); this is comparable to the way that the gay liberation movement has made the most political gains in the sexual liberation movement more broadly conceived. We can thus see mechanisms of alimentary normalization and resistance to that normalization most clearly by taking the example of vegetarianism and veganism, since this is where the stakes are arguably the highest.

Second, and more importantly, I focus on the normalization of an animal-based diet because of the overwhelming ethical stakes of this example. While I am troubled by the assimilation of immigrants into Western diets and dietary practices and I am also worried by the ways that mothers are biopolitically managed to breastfeed even while disciplined to not do so (in public, after the child is a certain age, etc.), the industrialized breeding and slaughter of billions of animals every year and the environmental devastation caused by this industry (with the additional consequences that this has on

wildlife) are, without a doubt, the issues that concern me the most within the realm of food politics. These concerns are what motivate this essay.

Expanding on Foucault's example of the psychiatric treatment of a nineteenth-century vegan melancholic, I will thus take two examples to explore the normalization of an animal-based diet, both of which take us into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. First, I will consider representations of vegetarianism (and of empathy for animals more generally) as symptom of mental illness in the writings of Margaret Atwood. Second, I will examine popular and medical discourses on "Orthorexia Nervosa" that pathologize the elimination of animal products from diets. I focus on the discovery, coining or invention of a new eating disorder that pathologizes vegetarianism because of the obvious parallels with Foucault's own discussion of the normalizing and normative role of nineteenth-century psychiatry. I also focus on this example because of the enormous prestige of medical knowledge, and thus the power that medical diagnoses can have in shaping society. I focus on Atwood's fictional writing, although these are on the surface very different from the kinds of texts that Foucault analyzes, because they seem to me symptomatic of wider cultural currents and because they are particularly illustrative of the ways that alimentary normalization intersects with gender and sexual normalization. Attending to Atwood's work thus helps to illustrate my argument that the disciplining of diet is not only analogous to the regulation of gender and sexuality that Foucault has described, but that all of these forms of regulation are interconnected and function to reinforce one another.

1. 2. Margaret Atwood's Edible Animals

A continuous theme in Margaret Atwood's fiction is that food reflects power relations. As Emma Parker writes,

For [Atwood], eating is unequivocally political. Atwood defines 'politics' as 'who is entitled to do what to whom with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what.' Women are rarely depicted eating in literature because, as Atwood's comment implies, consumption embodies coded expressions of power. (1)

A male character in Atwood's 1981 novel *Bodily Harm* states, "I eat well, so I must have power." (241) Men decide what women will eat in Atwood's books: after her boyfriend leaves her, in *Bodily Harm*, Rennie realizes, "From now on she would have to decide what to eat. Jake decided before: even when it was her turn to cook he decided." (235) Deciding for themselves what to eat (and how much) is also a way that women assert power, for Atwood: in *Lady Oracle* (1976), Joan over-eats to resist her mother's

manipulation of her to lose weight. As Joan narrates, “I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body.” (69) Later, Atwood has Joan lose weight to get money to become independent of her mother. Gendered power relations are particularly marked by the eating of meat in Atwood’s novels: men eat steaks while women eat egg salad sandwiches. Several of Atwood’s fictional works describe women becoming vegetarians out of identification with nonhuman animal victims. From an ecofeminist or critical feminist vegetarian perspective, we might say that these female characters are insightful, recognizing the interconnections between the domination of women and the mastery of nature. Indeed, this is Carol Adams’ interpretation of Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*. (*The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 142-143) What Adams does not see, however, is that in Atwood’s writing the female characters’ identifications with nonhuman animals were only ever delusional fantasies of victimization and early signs of mental illness. While Atwood sympathetically describes women becoming vegetarian out of empathy for nonhuman animals, these women are ultimately not presented as ethical in any admirable sense, but as neurotic and self-deceived. They are not really concerned for other animals, moreover, but are projecting their own psychological needs onto the figures of their furry and feathered kin.

It is significant to note that Atwood has made a similar argument about Canadians—and this time in a nonfictional work—as she implicitly makes about women in her fictional writings. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood observes that nonhuman animals are omnipresent in Canadian literature, but, unlike in British and American literature, they are consistently represented as victims with whom the reader is meant to identify. Atwood is adamant with respect to Canadian literature that this identification with nonhuman animal victims is neurotic and has more to do with Canada’s sense of exploitation and endangerment (as a colony with a difficult climate and an aggressive neighbour to the south) than with a genuine concern for nonhuman animals. Identifying with dying animals is not really an expression of compassion for animals on the part of Canadians, Atwood argues; after all, Canada is a country “founded on the fur trade, and an animal cannot painlessly be separated from its skin. From the animal point of view, Canadians are as bad as the slave trade or the Inquisition.” (95) She insists that Canadians must overcome their victim mentality and desist in their delusional and self-defeating identification with nonhuman animals. Women are represented in Atwood’s novels much as Canadian writers are described in *Survival*, with femininity figuring like Canadianism in relation to a masculine Americanism. Atwood’s work suggests that since nonhuman animals are paradigmatic victims, group of humans who feel victimized are likely to identify with them. While this is

understandable, Atwood also feels that such identifications are out of proportion with reality and are disempowering. As she bluntly describes her attitude in *Survival*, such people should “pull up [their] socks and quit whining.” (9) Vegetarianism and compassion for nonhuman animals are thus consistently represented by Atwood in her fiction as a self-defeating persecution-paranoia and a loss of touch with reality. In the semi-happy endings of her novels and short stories, from *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* to “Moral Disorder” and *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood has her female vegetarian characters overcome their mental turmoil and return to eating meat. She describes this reintegration into omnivorism as empowering, pleasurable, and entailing a renewed grasp on reality.

In Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), Marian McAlpin is a young woman working for a consumer survey company following the completion of her B.A. Early in the book, Marian’s lover Peter describes killing a rabbit on a hunting trip to a male friend, Len:

“So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place. All over me, what a mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god the trees were red for yards...”

He paused to laugh. Len bared his teeth....

“God it was funny. Lucky thing Trigger and me had the old cameras along, we got some good shots of the whole mess...” (81)

Marian realizes to her own surprise that she is crying, and leaves the table, afraid to make a scene. In the bathroom “The roll of toilet paper crouched in there with me, helpless and white and furry, waiting passively for the end.” (83) When Peter, Marian, her roommate and Len leave the bar, Marian bolts like a hare, and is pursued by the two men who corner and catch her. The same night she hides under a bed, and needs to be extracted again by the men. Dropping her off at home that night, Peter, who had previously been hostile towards romantic commitment, proposes marriage to Marian—her rabbit-like flight, which had allowed him to hunt her down, has made him see her in a new light. Although she agrees to the engagement, from this point onwards Marian identifies with animal victims and cannot eat them. When Peter orders them each a steak in a restaurant:

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. Of course everyone knew that. But most of the time you never thought about it... She set down her knife and fork. (191)

Reading a breakfast menu with “‘Bacon and Eggs, Any Style’... ‘Our Plump Tender Sausages.’ She thought of pigs and chickens. ... She closed the menu.” (333) While grocery shopping she is aware that the music in the store is meant to lower her sales resistance, and thinks of studies showing that cows produce more milk when played music. (219) Having her hair cut, she feels “like a slab of flesh, an object” (269). Having her hair dried, “She passed along the gently-frying line of those who were not yet done.” (270) If she is an animal, Peter is a hunter, and she thinks of the “face of Peter with its hunting eyes.” (331) Peter’s cameras become conflated with his guns, and she is petrified of being “shot” by him when he wants to take her photograph. (299)

As the days go by, Marian’s aversion to animal foods extends beyond meat:

The next morning... when she opened her soft-boiled egg and saw the yolk looking up at her with its one significant and accusing yellow eye, she found her mouth closing together like a frightened sea-anemone. It’s living; it’s alive, the muscles in her throat said, and tightened. She pushed the dish away. (204)

Marian compares cooking turtles to the deaths of Christian martyrs—“What fiendishness went on in kitchens across the country, in the name of providing food!” (196) Although involuntary, she recognizes her vegetarianism as moral: “she... concluded that the stand [her body] had taken was an ethical one: it simply refused to eat anything that had once been, or (like oysters on the half-shell) might still be living. But she faced each day with the forlorn hope that her body might change its mind.” (227) Marian’s desire to eat meat and eggs again is motivated by a desire to be normal:

What was essentially bothering her was the thought that she might not be normal. This was why she was afraid to tell Peter: he might think she was some kind of freak, or neurotic. Naturally he would have second thoughts about getting married; he might even say they should postpone the wedding until she got over it. She would say that, too, if it was him. (261)

Marian is thus unable to admit her vegetarianism to anyone except to an equally abnormal English student, Duncan. She goes to elaborate measures to conceal her vegetarianism from Peter, from her family at Christmas, and from her own dinner guests, rolling her meatballs under lettuce leaves, throwing pieces of meat across the table when her host is not looking. “‘I’m turning into a vegetarian,’ she was thinking sadly, ‘one of those cranks; I’ll have to eat at Health Bars.’” (193)

In a slippery slope argument, Atwood implies that once you stop eating meat, not only will eggs follow, but so will everything else. Peeling a carrot,

[Marian] was watching her own hands and the peeler and the curl of crisp orange skin. She

became aware of the carrot. It's a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn't die right away, it keeps on living, right now it's still alive...

She thought she felt it twist in her hands. She dropped it on the table. "Oh no," she said, almost crying, "Not this too!" (227)

Later "her body... put its foot down on canned rice pudding," previously acceptable because of its synthetic flavour. "But all at once... her eyes had seen it as a collection of small cocoons. Cocoons with miniature living creatures inside." (261) Soon after, she attempts eating cake, but "it felt spongy and cellular against her tongue, like the bursting of thousands of tiny lungs. She shuddered and spat the cake out into her napkin and scraped her plate into the garbage..." (267) A few days later we find that she cannot even wash her dishes or throw out mouldy items in her fridge: "Perhaps the mould had as much right to life as she had." (279)

Although feminist readers such as Sarah Skeats and Emma Parker have argued that Marian becomes anorexic and schizophrenic because she realizes that as a woman she is an object of consumption for men, Atwood in fact has no patience for such victim-identification. As in *Survival*, Atwood's attitude seems to be: "*pull up your socks and quit whining.*" In *The Edible Woman*, she makes it clear that the women are consuming and hunting men as much as the men are hunting and consuming women, and thus if the women feel victimized they are deceiving themselves. Peter is described as "a nice package" and Marian reflects on the lifestyle that his future income will provide her. Marian's roommate Ainsley manipulatively pursues a man to impregnate her when she decides to have a child, and then aggressively pursues a husband once she decides that her child needs a father. Other single women pursue mates in the novel with equally military vigour. At a party, "Marian saw that Leonard had been spotted at once by the office virgins as single and available. They had him backed against the wall... two of them on the sides cutting off flank escape and the third, in front." (303) While one of the office virgins, Lucy, quickly "abandoned the siege of Leonard" (307), setting her sights on Peter instead, "Millie and Emmy were still tenaciously holding [Leonard] at bay. Millie had moved round to the front, blocking as much space with her wide skirt as possible and Emmy was side-stepping back and forth like a baseball guard; but one of the flanks was unprotected." (308)

Nevertheless feeling victimized by Peter, Marian eventually breaks off her engagement by telling him he was trying to "destroy" her, and offers him a female body made out of cake to consume instead of her. As soon as she refuses to be "food" for Peter, she is able to eat again. She starts by eating the

cake she had baked for Peter, but soon after she eats a steak. Duncan tells her that her explanation is “ridiculous.” (362) “Peter wasn’t trying to destroy you,” he says, “That’s just something you made up. What does it matter, you’re back to so-called reality, you’re a consumer.” (362) Reality for Atwood is that we need to consume others to survive, so we might as well stop being squeamish about it. In this conclusion to the novel, we find that Marian was unable to eat meat and other foods because she identified herself as a victimized animal and as an object of consumption, however this identification was delusional. Once she rejected the role of the consumed animal, she is able to consume again, and is able to consume animals in particular. While Carol Adams reads this ending to *The Edible Woman* as a capitulation on Marian’s part to patriarchy, Sarah Sceats writes that Marion learns that “sexual politics means eat or be eaten” (99). On this reading, eating meat is a way for the woman character to assert her equality with men and to refuse to be a victim. As Parker writes:

As Atwood illustrates how consumption embodies coded expressions of power which have served to subordinate women, she subtly urges women to reclaim the right to eat and to proudly re-inhabit their own bodies. Women have been driven away from their bodies as violently as they have been driven away from food. Atwood shows them the path back to both. By demonstrating how consumption is related to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way into the world. (367)

So long as this female empowerment through eating is indifferent to the suffering of those who are eaten, it is obviously a problematic, de Beauvoiresque kind of feminism—an uncritical assimilation of women into violent, masculine values. As Maria Comninou writes in “Speech, Pornography, and Hunting,”

we see the phenomenon of successful women adopting the standards of men with a vengeance. Will women’s march to power ascendancy, won against all odds, mean that they too will choose to flaunt their preferences for red meat, animal skin, sport hunting, and even bullfighting? [...] Will animal exploitation become the ultimate symbol of equality with the white male? (142)

Indeed, this seems to be the form of feminism that Atwood envisions, and not just in *The Edible Woman*. Consistently in Atwood’s works, the alternative to meat-eating for women is not just a self-imposed victim mentality, but madness.

In Atwood’s next novel, *Surfacing* (1972), an unnamed woman returns to her childhood home in Québec along with her lover and another couple. Early in the novel she is described cooking meat, impaling worms and frogs on hooks, and hitting a fish in the head with a knife with no qualms. As the novel progresses, however, the character comes to identify with nonhuman animal victims. Initially,

much like a number of the Canadian authors whom Atwood discusses in *Survival*, she thinks of American bounty-hunters as the ones who harm animals, and her identity as Canadian, as one of the victimized rather than the victimizers, is entrenched. Later, however, she is forced to realize that Canadians harm animals too; Atwood repeats a point made in *Survival* when she has a character in *Surfacing* ask: “Do you realize... that this country is founded on the bodies of dead animals? Dead fish, dead seals, and historically dead beavers, the beaver is to this country what the black man is to the United States.” (39-40) Later, coming across a crucified heron, the nameless woman character of *Surfacing* assumes that the bird was murdered by American hunters. She is shocked when she discovers that culprits are from Ontario. Unhinged by this event, Americans and humans become conflated as hunters and Atwood’s character casts her lot with the hunted to feel exculpated of the crime. She is no longer able to kill fish and sets frogs free rather than using them as bait. Another slippery slope ensues, and the woman flees her human companions to live outside, naked, believing that she will grow fur, captivated by magical forces and visions. Her insanity is explored through the growing number of foods that she cannot eat: at first artificial food is forbidden; then she won’t kill animals and lives off vegetables in the garden; soon vegetables too are forbidden and she scavenges for roots and berries, starting to starve. As in *The Edible Woman*, the female character’s hatred for hunters and her empathy for nonhuman animals mean insanity, a loss of touch with reality, and the threat of self-induced death. In her delirium, we realize that this character’s refusal to see herself as a harmer of animals is related to her refusal to accept that she has aborted a fetus. She recalls that her lover had assured her that “it wasn’t a person, only an animal,” but she reflects, “I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it.” (144-145)

Realizing that she will end up in a “hospital or a zoo” if she continues in her madness, Atwood’s character eventually gets her wits together, goes back to the house and returns to wearing clothes, eating canned meat, and to her relationship with a man in the city. The last chapter of *Surfacing* begins with the words, “Above all one must resist seeing oneself as a victim”: the female character of this novel has to face reality, which means to realize that she isn’t the one victimized, but is a harmer who eats meat, who impales worms and frogs, who is a citizen of a nation founded on cruelty to animals, and who consented to abort the mouse-fetus burrowed in her womb. As in *The Edible Woman*, we see an identification with nonhuman animal victims by a woman, but in the end it is necessary that she rejects this identification in order to return to reality and to survive.

The theme of lapsing omnivores who feel a temporary compassion for animals but eventually

face “reality,” disidentify with their victims and return to eating meat, can be taken up in more recent works by Atwood. Most recently, in *The Year of the Flood* (2009), male and female members of the religious cult, God’s Gardeners, start out as idealistic vegetarians, but by the end of the novel are killing and eating animals to survive, and are more joyful as hunters than in their pacifist cult days. In a short story, “Moral Disorder” (2006), Atwood describes a young woman who feels manipulated by men, boys and stronger women. She focuses her energy on growing vegetables and feels sympathetic to the farm animals whom her husband and other farmers kill. Her emotional response to the slaughter of an abandoned lamb whom she had nursed and who saw her as his mother is presented by Atwood as a displaced maternal desire: as it turns out, she is not upset about the lamb’s death, but by her own childlessness; she is not sad that her husband takes the lamb-child to be slaughtered, but that he does not give her a human child. Once she tells her husband that she wants a child, she eats the dead lamb who had loved her and finds his flesh delicious.

What is the “moral disorder” in Atwood’s work by this title? It seems that it is not the extensive and needlessly cruel acts done to nonhuman animals in the course of the narrative. It is not the chickens running around with their heads cut off, gushing blood. It is not the trusting lamb lured by his surrogate human-mother to be slaughtered by the men. And it is not the cows who are named and then eaten by the human family, to the delight of the man and boys, to the discomfort of the woman. The moral disorder in this story is this womanly discomfort itself, this human (female) identification with nonhuman animals, which violates accepted (masculine) moral norms and must eventually be resolved through maternity. As in *The Edible Woman*, the story concludes with a woman eating a slaughtered animal, and liking it, as the men have done all along. As in *Surfacing*, concern for a nonhuman animal and revulsion for butchery turns out to be longing for a future or lost child. As Atwood argues in *Survival*, interspecies affection is in fact displaced human love—love for nonhuman animals arises when love for a man or a human child is failing or absent: it fills a gap or a lack and remains anthropocentric. Various kinds of delusion that, for Atwood, seem to particularly afflict women—delusion that one is a victim, delusion that a fetus is an animal or that an animal is a child—result in vegetarianism, and vegetarianism is just a quick slide from insanity. Once the delusion of animal- and victim-identification is overcome and normalcy is regained, the women in Atwood’s fiction enjoy eating lamb cutlets (“Moral Disorder”), steak (*The Edible Woman*), and SPAM (*Surfacing*). By eating meat again, these women not only avoid becoming “freaks” or “cranks” who eat in Health Bars, they also avoid death by starvation or institutionalization in “a hospital or a zoo.” In more than one case, a female character’s return to eating

meat also enables the reconciliation of a marriage or other heterosexual relationship.

As Foucault argues of modernity more generally, abnormalcy in Atwood's fiction is conflated with mental illness, and abnormal appetites are indicative of pathology, while the "norms" of normalcy are political and oppressive (in this case speciesist and masculinist) though passed off as natural and inevitable. What this consideration of Atwood's fiction suggests is that Foucault's arguments about normalization are as true of alimentary appetites as they are of sexual appetites.

3. 3. Righteous Appetites

While Atwood's two novel-length pathologizations of vegetarianism date from the late 1960s and early 1970s, we might think that by now vegetarianism has become relatively normal. However the 1997 coining of a new eating disorder, orthorexia nervosa, suggests that vegetarianism continues to be pathologized. The "orthorexia nervosa" diagnosis was proposed by medical doctor Steven Bratman and effectively suggests that most vegetarians and even more vegans are mentally ill. The term "orthorexia" derives from the Greek *orthos* for "right" and *orexis* for "appetite." It is used to describe persons who are unhealthily "fixated" on "righteous eating." Although "orthorexia nervosa" has not yet been taken up by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association, doctors are already diagnosing and treating the disorder in patients, and a number of articles accepting the diagnosis and studying its prevalence have appeared in scientific and medical publications (*Science Direct, Medical News Today, Palo Alto Medical Foundation*). Eating Disorder societies and journals have also accepted the diagnosis: an article on orthorexia has been published in the *Journal of Eating [and] Weight Disorders*, and a handout has been prepared by the National Eating Disorders Association for use by doctors treating orthorexia in their patients. The disorder has also received largely uncritical attention by prominent media organizations such as *The Guardian, The Observer*, and the BBC, to name only a few.

Symptoms of orthorexia nervosa include: eliminating entire food groups or categories of food from one's diet; spending more than three hours a day thinking about healthy food; planning tomorrow's menu today; feeling virtuous about what one eats; continually limiting the numbers of food one eats; experiencing a reduced quality of life or social isolation because one's diet makes it difficult to eat outside the home; feeling critical of others who do not eat as well as one does; skipping foods one once enjoyed in order to eat the "right" foods; feeling guilt or self-loathing when one strays from one's diet; feeling in "total" control when one eats the correct diet. An individual who suffers from three of these

symptoms has at least a mild case of orthorexia nervosa. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, one indicator that you are orthorexic is if it is “beyond your ability to eat a meal prepared with love by someone else—one single meal—and not try to control what is served.” Once recovered, the same handout tells us that the former orthorexic will discover herself to be “a person who loves, who works, who is fun.” Orthorexia is thus associated with a failure of love for other humans. While many of these symptoms could also describe weight-loss dieting and anorexia nervosa, the difference is that the anorexic and the dieter refrain from eating foods that are fattening, while the orthorexic is more concerned with the “rightness” or “virtue” of what she eats.

Of course, vegetarians and vegans are not always perceived as fun, particularly when they are criticizing the eating habits of meat-eaters. They are very likely to reject a meal prepared with love or otherwise by someone else, if that meal is, say, a turkey dinner. By definition vegetarians and vegans eliminate entire food groups from their diet, whether meat or eggs and dairy. Vegetarians and vegans who avoid animal products in a society whose main protein sources are derived from animals are obliged to spend considerable amounts of time thinking about getting food they can eat and must often plan their meals ahead of time; for instance, if one studies or works on a campus with no vegan food options, one needs to shop for and prepare a lunch before leaving for campus, which may mean thinking about tomorrow’s lunch the day before. An ethical vegetarian or vegan who believes eating animals is wrong will necessarily be critical of others who eat animals and animal products, and will very likely feel good (or at least better) about herself for not doing so. Likewise, she will feel guilty if she lapses back into eating meat, eggs or dairy, or fails to live up to her ethical convictions. By definition a vegetarian or vegan who was raised eating animals and animal products will skip foods she once enjoyed. And of course, choosing not to eat what the majority of people in one’s society eat will necessarily entail a certain amount of social isolation; a vegetarian or vegan may decline certain social invitations, or abstain from eating on those occasions, if only animal products are on the menu or are being served by one’s hosts. An ethical vegetarian or vegan whose dietary choices are based on deeply held ethical beliefs will very likely not want to attend events where animals are being cooked and eaten, such as barbecues, much as a feminist will likely not want to attend an outing to the strip club. Vegetarianism and veganism as ethical and political positions are thus socially isolating, much like other ethical and political stances, and may result in a reduced quality of life for the human if the oppression she resists is widespread. An ethical vegetarian or vegan is willing to accept such a reduced quality in life in order to boycott the unacceptably poor quality of life of nonhuman animals in farms and

slaughterhouses, the diminution of her own quality of life paling in comparison. Any “modification of social and personal relationships” caused by self-imposed alimentary restrictions is a sign for worry, according to an Italian medical study of orthorexia, however, while an article on orthorexia nervosa in *Medical News Today* states that “eating more healthily should have a positive effect on health without reducing the enjoyment of life or affecting relationships with others.” (1)

Also suggesting the link between orthorexia nervosa and vegetarianism or veganism, media stories on the diagnosis are frequently illustrated with images of people consuming vegetables: one article shows a man carrying carrots, for instance, while another shows a person eating a Spring mix salad. In other cases the connection between orthorexia and abstention from animal products is explicit: several articles on “orthorexia” have been published on the on-line site *Beyond Vegetarianism* (www.beyondveg.com), including an article by Steven Bratman, coiner of the “orthorexia” diagnosis. Bratman confesses in his *BeyondVeg* article that he is a former orthorexic himself. When he was orthorexic, he tells us that he was strictly vegetarian, whereas today he tells readers that he recommends no more than “semi-vegetarianism.” An Italian study of orthorexia undertaken by researchers at two institutes of food science allow that ethical vegetarians may not be orthorexics if they are genuinely motivated by compassion towards other animals, however it also notes that an individual’s proclaimed reasons for eliminating food groups may be “alibis” for the truth, and thus orthorexia may be masking itself under guises such as ethical vegetarianism in a phenomenon that might be compared to “passing.” In contrast, the Italians are clear that vegans are “frequently” orthorexics, whatever their proclaimed motivations.

The modern conflation of mental “pathology” with abnormality that Foucault observes is very apparent in the writings on orthorexia. In the Italian study of orthorexia, “normal eating” is opposed to “fanatic” eating and orthorexia (155). There is nothing in between “normalcy,” fanaticism and mental illness. In a Turkish study of orthorexia undertaken by a group of medical researchers, it is stated that the desire to consume healthy foods “is only defined as orthorexia nervosa when it causes a person to give up his or her normal lifestyle.” (2) One indicator of orthorexia, in the Turkish study, is the habit of skipping a hot lunch or dinner in favour of a salad and/or piece of fruit, suggesting that one need only stray from the norm in trivial and perfectly healthy (albeit vegetarian) ways in order to be pathologized. The handout for doctors published by the National Eating Disorders Association states that “the orthorexic must admit there is a problem, then identify what caused the obsession. They must also become more flexible and less dogmatic with their eating. There will be deeper emotional issues, and

working through them will make the transition to normal eating easier.” An article in *The Guardian* warns us that “orthorexics can be overweight or look normal” (1), and cites the founder of the National Centre for Eating Disorders who states, “It’s everywhere, from the people who think it’s normal if their friends stop eating entire food groups, to the trainers in the gym who promote certain foods to enhance performance, to the proliferation of nutritionists, dieticians and naturopaths.” (2) The implication of these texts is to warn us that there may be orthorexics passing unnoticed in our midst who *appear* normal, but are not. We are called upon to be vigilant in our role as detectors and policers of abnormalcy.

According to a 1992 study commissioned by *Vegetarian Times*, 68 percent of vegetarians are female and only 32 percent are male. It is estimated that 75-80% of animal activists are women. Single women in particular are likely to be vegetarian, as many women lapse back into meat-eating when they enter a stable relationship with a man who eats meat; often this is because women are expected to prepare meals with meat for their male partners or there is marital and familial pressure to cook meat for their children. Because of the gendered nature of vegetarianism, pathologizing this diet (and pathologizing compassion for nonhuman animals more generally) has gendered implications. On the one hand, more women than men will be pathologized. On the other hand, it is likely that men who take on the identity of vegetarian or vegan, and who are compassionate towards nonhuman animals, will be more pathologized than women given that they are flouting gender norms as well as more general societal norms. If this is so, the pathologization of vegetarianism is comparable to masochism, which is more common in women but, and consequently, is more prone to be considered a serious pathology in men. Because anorexia nervosa is strongly associated with women, the choice of orthorexia nervosa as the name for a new eating disorder, which resonates with the better known eating disorder, also genders it feminine. This suggests once again that alimentary normalization will be caught up with sexual and gender normalization, as was also indicated in the analysis of Atwood’s fiction.

3. 4. Conclusions

What I have tried to show in this paper is that much as Foucault genealogizes the normalization of sexuality under modern, psychiatric regimes of knowledge/power, so we can trace a history of the normalization of diet, the production of alimentary identities, and the pathologization of abnormal appetites such as (but not only) veganism. This essay offers only two fragments of such a genealogy, and yet this is perhaps enough to suggest that from the great incestuous and cannibalistic monsters of the early modern era, we can trace the birth of “little abnormal” of not only the sexual variety but of an

alimentary type as well; indeed, these two types are frequently conflated and the normalization of each is mutually reinforced.

I began thinking about this topic because I wonder why more people aren't vegetarian. A clue for me was that several people told me that they attempted to be vegetarians, but gave up because they were asked if they were "crazy." One man was asked this by a male friend and felt his masculinity was being challenged; another man was asked this by the woman he loved. The latter, like Marian McAlpin in *The Edible Woman*, feared that remaining vegetarian might cost him his relationship. Another man told me that he avoids eating meat but does not admit that he is vegetarian since this would make him an "odd duck" in the cattle-raising province where we live. Also like Marian, he goes to great lengths to hide his vegetarianism socially. Several meat-eating students have told me that their vegan cousins (or sisters, or friends) who claim to be avoiding animal products out of compassion for animals are *really* orthorexics, thus showing that ethical vegetarianism is coming to be seen as a kind of "passing" phenomenon masking underlying pathologies. A woman acquaintance told me that she had been vegetarian until she went through a period of depression and a doctor, upon hearing that she was vegetarian and without asking further questions about her life or inquiring into how she meets her nutritional needs, assured her that her *diet* was the cause of her mental health problems and that the only way for her to not be depressed was to eat meat. So she began to eat meat again. As Foucault has demonstrated with respect to the psychiatrization of sexuality, this story—like the case of the orthorexia nervosa diagnosis—suggests that with respect to alimentary norms as well, doctors may exploit medical diplomas to pass off their own mores for science, and this is facilitated by the way that pathology has been conflated with abnormality in psychiatric discourses and more generally in our culture, as seen in the writings of Margaret Atwood.

The hypothesis I have explored in this paper is that at least one reason why more people are not vegetarian—despite what we know and deplore about the living and dying conditions of animals in factory farms and factory slaughterhouses, and despite what we know and deplore about the impact of the animal agriculture industry on the environment—is that, like Marian McAlpin, they fear being abnormal. If this is so, I would conclude this paper on the normalization of speciesism through the disciplining of our alimentary appetites in the same way that Ladelle McWhorter concludes her book on racism and sexual oppression, which is to insist that we must reject "the very notion of normality as a coherent concept or a standard of human worth" (322). In a speciesist society, as in a sexist, racist and heterosexist society, we must strive to be "maladjusted."

Bio

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