Children and Pigs, from the Victorian Age to the Twentieth Century

Francesca Orestano

The question of food is not a new subject within the area of children's literature.[1] Childhood and food intersect as different discourses, and within different genres connected through culture, religion, class, gender, race, iconology; such areas of mutual overlapping contribute, in a prismatic way, to the delineation of the identity of the child in dialectic relationship with the adult, inasmuch as both can be defined by the act of eating. Back in 1957, Roland Barthes had argued that food is a powerful cultural signifier: "When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies." As a consequence, "these acts – and the broad range of cultural representations that support and are supported by them – also serve as vehicles through which ideological expectations about those very identities are circulated, enforced, and transgressed" (Barthes, qtd in LeBesco and Naccarato 1).

My contribution focuses on the adult/child relationship in a tangential way, in order to place greater emphasis on the relationship between children and animals, namely pigs, when discourses of food are not just linked to nutrition, growth, starving or abundance, but embrace the fundamental question of identity. In order to do so, the critique of anthropocentrism and the critical perspective of post-humanism provide the relevant steps toward the core of the problem.

In a study by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals*, the author's childhood memories bring forward his sentiments about food, made of terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, love; these feelings he would revisit later in life, as "the sentimental vestiges of childhood" but never with indifference: "I didn't know what animals *were*" (9).[2] The point is conceptually relevant, as the category of anthropocentrism extends toward a very

slippery borderline, strengthened and secured by religious dogma, especially monotheism, ousting the animal out of the spiritual universe of the human. Such borderline, however, is crossed then and again in children's literature, where the frontier between child and animal is often trespassed. Not surprisingly so, insofar as children's literature, the inheritor of the oldest traditions in storytelling and myth, still revisited in today's contemporary scenario, provides the central stage where the relationship child/animal has been and is best represented without the safety net imposed by adult literature. I shall focus here on the Western tradition, specifically on Anglophone children's literature, in agreement with Erika Fudge who, in *Animal* (2002), dwelt on the fact that animals are a constant presence in children's literature. The powerlessness of the young protagonists, their innocence and lack of experiential knowledge, their apparent freedom from the laws of adulthood, allow for texts in which many back-and-forward transformations between child and animal occur, with instances of a shared language, mutual understanding, and emotional, psychological, behavioral closeness. Book illustrations, and advertising in which animals are often portrayed in anthropomorphic guise, whether owing to posture or clothes, add the visual discourse to the well-established literary connection. To conclude this preliminary view of the subject, I refer again to Jonathan Safran Foer who epitomizes the question – and his critical stance – by defining:

> Anthropocentrism. The conviction that humans are the pinnacle of evolution […]. Anthropodenial. The refusal to concede significant experiential likeness between humans and the other animals […]. Anthropomorphism. The urge to project human experience onto the other animals. (46)

Such anthropocentric attitudes operated in unison during the long Victorian century: they invested fattening procedures with capitalist and imperialist innuendos;[3] they proliferated owing to Victorian mass visual culture; they also brought forward the question of cannibalism, as the consequence of starving and famine conditions, or the habit of inferior races (cf. Orestano 25-44).[4]

In recent years, however, post-humanism, both philosophically and culturally, seems to have restricted the area of anthropocentrism. Michel Foucault unsettled its epistemic foundation and hierarchies in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.[5] Hence the critical tracks directly leading from post-humanism into animal studies, examined by Benjamin Bolton in "Post-humanism and Animal Rights: Rethinking 'The Human', Rethinking the 'Self,'" and by Anna Barcz in "Post-humanism and Its Animal Voices in Literature." Bolton's and Barcz's essays suggest a fundamental re-conceptualization of the human/animal relationship, unmasking areas in which human

supremacy is dissolved. Mieke Roscher in "Animals as Signifiers: Re-Reading Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* as a Genealogical Working Tool for Historical Human-Animal Studies" acknowledged Foucault's seminal role in opening up the epistemic area of Animal Studies. More recently, in "A Post-human Approach to Human-animal Relationships: Advocating Critical Pluralism," Nicklas Lindgren and Johan Öhman add their voices to a forum of debate that aims at shaking epistemic and religious notions, and their given hierarchies, while also materially intervening on the ingrained habits of animal consumption. By addressing the categories of human and non-human animals Lindgren and Öhman challenge the anthropocentric characterization of European education, thus entering a major area of children's literature and allowing us to adopt it and investigate it as the central area where such challenges and such epistemic questions take place.

The Victorian Age: The Child and the Pig, Literature and Science

The texts here examined from a post-humanist perspective belong, in the main, to the Victorian age, when the relationship between child and pig was invested with grotesque, jocose, and frankly gothic overtones, clearly addressing the question of "who eats whom?" Fear of being dealt with as-if-a-pig is the recurring imagery in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), a novel where the association of Pip, the human protagonist, with a "pig," is stated from the very beginning, when the starving convict Magwitch licks his lips and remarks about the fat cheeks of the boy Pip (36); it expands in the admonitory words of Mr Wopsle, who advises Pip on the detestable gluttony of pigs and boys, sanctioned by the Biblical parable of the prodigal son (58); Mr Wopsle also suggests that if Pip had been born a pig, Dunstable the butcher would have killed and bled him, and disposed of him "for so many shilling according to the market price of the article" (58).[6] With the imagery that relates Pip and pig, this novel aligns the human and the animal, both ensconced within the shrewd system of Victorian capitalism and within its scenic stage – the market place – where both child and pig are brought to, whether metaphorically or materially, as valuable articles destined to consumption (cf. Kuskey).

The classic fantasy text *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) provides the most telling instance of such transformations when Alice has to nurse the baby of the Duchess, in the chapter appropriately entitled "Pig and Pepper." With the human baby in her arms, Alice notices that

> As soon as she had made out the proper way of nursing it, […] the little thing grunted in reply (it had left off sneezing by this time). "Don't grunt," said Alice; "that's not at all a proper way of expressing yourself." The baby grunted again, and Alice looked very anxiously into its face to see what was the matter with it. There could be no doubt that it had a VERY turn-up

> nose, much more like a snout than a real nose; also its eyes were getting extremely small for a baby: altogether Alice did not like the look of the thing at all. "But perhaps it was only sobbing," she thought, and looked into its eyes again, to see if there were any tears. No, there were no tears. "If you're going to turn into a pig, my dear," said Alice, seriously, "I'll have nothing more to do with you. Mind now!" The poor little thing sobbed again (or grunted, it was impossible to say which), and they went on for some while in silence. Alice was just beginning to think to herself, "Now, what am I to do with this creature when I get it home?" when it grunted again, so violently, that she looked down into its face in some alarm. This time there could be NO mistake about it: it was neither more nor less than a pig, and she felt that it would be quite absurd for her to carry it further. (55-56)[7]

Fig. 1
John Tenniel, "Alice holding a pig in her arms". *Alice in Wonderland* (Wikimedia Commons)."

If fantasy secured the fittest ground for the transformation of a human baby into baby pig, science would offer further and poignant evidence of the species' proximity. It was Charles Darwin who remarked that "there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties" and also added that "the lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. Happiness is never better exhibited than by young animals, such as puppies, kittens, lambs, etc., when playing together, *like our own children*" (*Descent* 45, 47).[8]

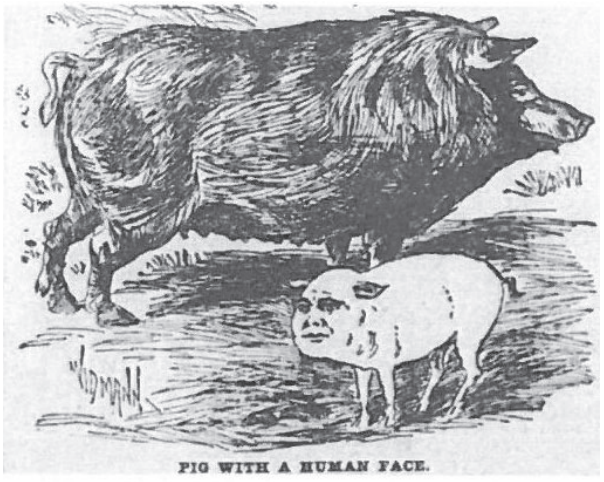

Fig. 2
"Pig with a Human Face." A picture from the St. Louis, Missouri, *Post-Dispatch*, Aug. 26, 1896, p. 29
(Wikimedia Commons)

With the Darwinian link between higher mammals, lower animals, and children, pigs and children would be intimately connected by scientific discourse, which was poetically subscribed to in Alfred Tennyson's famous line about "nature red in tooth and claw";[9] the fear instigated by the Darwinian discourse would surface in articles about pigs with human features

(cf. McCarthy) and other disturbing reports about hybrids – hybrids that even today have a much-debated role in scientific research, especially as providers of replacement organs for human animals (Armstrong 193).

The Ideology of Fatness in Victorian Children's Stories, Rhymes, and Images

Victorian food culture, loaded with symbolism, wrapped in understatement, pervasively emphasized by mass visual culture by the popular press and ubiquitous advertising, teemed with discourses of food, addressing real or metaphorical wealth and poverty, abundance and starvation. The workhouse diet kept inmates just at a bare survival level, as in Dickens's *The Adventures of Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy's Progress* (1837-1839), where children lived on a very poor diet which made them lean towards cannibalistic temptations (55-56).[10] Actually children's literature defined and dictated the norms for the diet and the body size of the child; with its extremes of starving vs. cramming, the Victorian age offered telling instances of such cultural policies.

If children were too thin, and refused eating, awful-warning stories advised on their sad inevitable destiny, as in the cautionary tale of Suppen-Kaspar in Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), soon translated into English as "slovenly Peter" in 1848; after Kaspar's death, as a last ironic touch, Kaspar's distressed but still sermonizing parents place a tureen over the dead child's tombstone. If children were too greedy, and too fat, they would be likened to pigs and also branded as "prodigals" or seen as a valuable market article.

With their combined power of word and image, popular penny dreadfuls contributed to the notion of transgressive eating habits, especially with the story entitled *The String of Pearls: A Domestic Romance*, published as a serial in 1846–47, subtitled *The Barber of Fleet Street. A Domestic Romance*. The customers of Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street, would be slaughtered and cooked as meat pies and sold to the delight of hungry London customers. Verbal descriptions of food, ensconced in a variety of literary genres ranging from fairy tale to journalism, from fiction to children's literature, and indeed cookbooks, would overflow into visual communication, not only in book illustrations but in adverts, posters, labels, greeting cards, magic lantern slides (cf. Daniel).

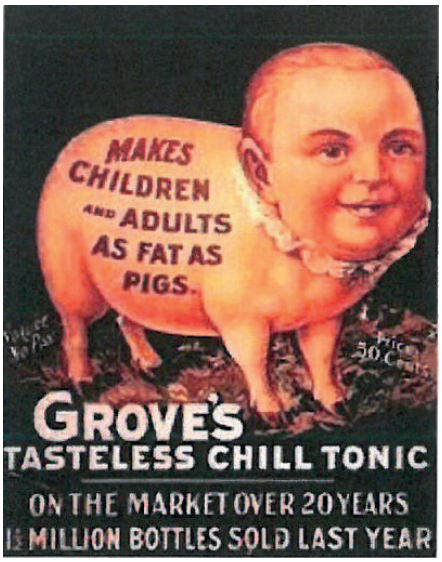

Fig. 3
Grove's Tonic, poster
(Wikimedia Commons).

Was it then desirable or dangerous for a child to look like a pig? The Victorian child, according to this bold advert, for Grove's Tonic (fig. 3) seemed to be brought up in order to look like a pig, to be round, rosy, fatty, and very happy. His education also went under the eating metaphors of "starving" versus "cramming" (De Stasio 299-306). A nursery rhyme circa 1880 tells the story of a greedy boy who becomes, even visually, similar to a pig.[11]

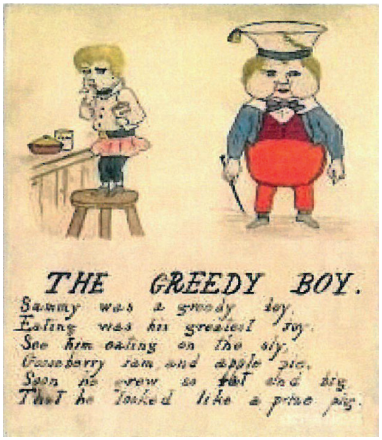

Fig. 4
"The Greedy Boy," original watercolor and lines from nursery rhyme, ca. 1880
(Wikimedia Commons).

The rhyme teaches a moral lesson (not to be sly, not to be materialistic) rather than suggesting a non-fattening diet. To become like a prize pig meant indeed to become a valuable market item. The image of a fat-child competition, with the prize-winning baby, Lottie, in the centre, tells a lot about the cultural reception of fatness and obesity.

The *topos* of the market – a dramatic synecdoche for the shrewd economic scenario of the Victorian age – is evoked once again in a popular Victorian rhyme,[12] and in the book *The Five Little Pigs*, published in London in 1866. The rhyme went in unison with finger play with the small toes of the child's feet:

Fig. 5
W. Hollmann's Giant Children and Prize Baby
(Wikimedia Commons)

This little piggy went to market,
This little piggy stayed home,
This little piggy had roast beef,
This little piggy had none,
And this little piggy cried "wee wee wee"
all the way home.
(Opie and Opie 349-50)

Ensconced in the playful tone of the rhyme there is a darker message. Inevitably, if a piggy went to market, it was to be sold and butchered at a slaughterhouse. The little piggy who stayed home had a limited chance to survive but shared the same ultimate destination. The old-fashioned book-cover (fig. 6) shows the game played by a maternal woman with the toes of a human child, while an adult male pig, in full human attire, indeed a fatherly figure, opens the house door with a complacent smile.

The proximity of human animals and non-human animals, when seen from either

perspective, charges these images with sinister forebodings; even more so in the illustration of the pig eating roast-beef at home, where fatness, greed, indeed the suspicion of cannibalism, infect the cozy atmosphere of the pigs' house. Agatha Christie would not miss the bloody innuendos of the rhyme in her crime story *Five Little Pigs* (1943); and a recent social media post reveals the unsettling truth about the first little piggy, who went to market to be slaughtered; while the second awaited its turn, the third was being fattened, the fourth was yet too small and the fifth cried in fear of its destiny (cf. Zorn). Behind an innocent nursery rhyme a dark scenario unfolded; and the face of the standing pig in figure 7 tells a lot about the dark innuendos of the scene. Meanwhile the auspicious image of the pig would be a popular favorite in greeting cards and new year cards not only in England, but soon all over Europe. The child-pig connection is emphasized in the image below by the champagne bottles drank by the pigs (fig. 8).

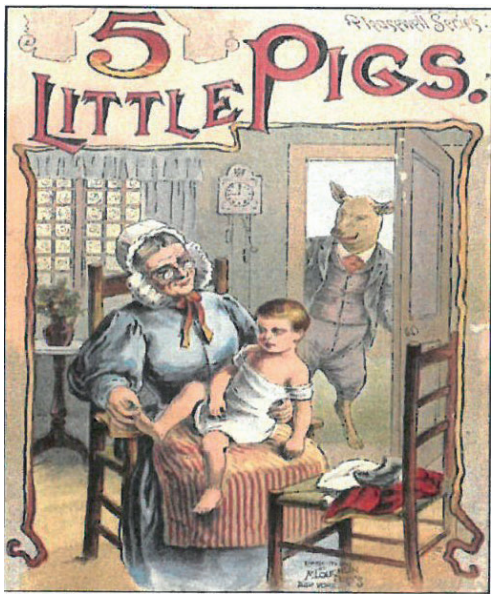

Fig. 6
Five Little Pigs, New York, McLoughlin Bros., 1890, Pleasewell Series
(Wikimedia Commons)

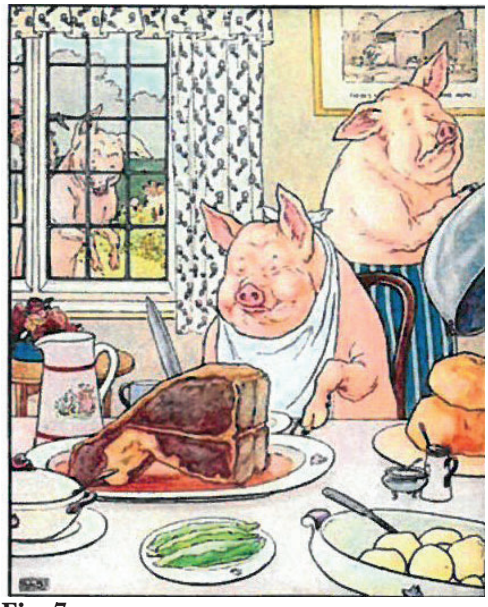

Fig. 7
L. Leslie Brooke, a picture depicting the pig who had roast beef in the nursey rhyme, "This little piggy", *Ring o' Roses: A Nursery Rhyme Picture Book*, London, Frederick Warne, [1922] (Wikimedia Commons)

Adverts were not slow in endorsing the fattening policy of the age. Food to make children fatter, hence healthier, was advertised in images of children drinking sarsaparilla in order "to quicken the appetite" (fig. 9).

The sinister innuendos of the rhymes about anthropomorphic pigs going to the market were described and illustrated by the author of children's literature who did never endorse or dissimulate the pathetic fallacy about the animal world, but rather never lost sight of the food chain, making very clear the connexions between those who eat, and those who are eaten. Beatrix Potter, whose role as a scientist is nowadays well acknowledged,

Fig. 8
Victorian greeting card (Wikimedia Commons)

wrote several stories about pigs.[13] *The Tale of Little Pig Robinson* (1893-1930) and *The Tale of Pigling Bland* (1913) have piggies as protagonists, speaking, dressing, and acting like human animals. Pigling Bland ends up at a farmer who wants to sell his sow, Pig-Wig, at the market. Bland and Pig-Wig manage to escape and regain their freedom. Little Pig Robinson's aunts, Miss Porcas and Miss Dorcas, send him to the market to sell produce from their farm, but he is kidnapped by a sailor who wants to cook him for the ship's crew. With the help of a cat, Little Pig Robinson escapes and eschews an untimely but predictable death. Both stories make clear the fact that a pig, although intelligent and capable, and depicted in human attire, is inevitably viewed as good food by other species.

Fig. 9
Advert for Ayer's Sarsaparilla (Wikimedia Commons)

In Beatrix Potter's stories, pigs are portrayed with a distinct anthropomorphic quality that makes them look like children in their posture, dress, and speech, but they are coveted, kidnapped, or sold because of their edible fatness, which makes other species of animals – human animals especially – greedy and unreliable. The cruel laws of food consumption are there, to threaten the young pigs with their

ultimate destiny.[14] In Potter's stories to be fat is not the consequence of blamable greed: the condition pertains to pigs and children within the general late-Victorian cultural context in which fatness was considered as a desirable marker of health and wealth for both children and pigs. The fattened child or pig enjoyed a positive relationship with food, whether in active or passive fashion, whether as eater, or as the eaten subject.

Today, the story that seems to best encapsulate the lesson taught by Beatrix Potter is *Charlotte's Web* (1952), by E. B. White. The friendship between Charlotte, the wise barn spider, and Wilbur, the intelligent piglet who is fattened in order to be slaughtered, is a story of animal paradise regained through human language, where the theme of death is present both as the violent destiny awaiting Wilbur at the market, and as the natural death closing the spider's life span.

Turning the Page: Fatphobia and Fat Liberation

In twentieth-century children' literature the relationship with food has undergone several eventful turns. In synthesis, these can be described at once as fatphobia *and* as fat liberation. Fatness has become a code that identifies those who are lazy, slow, gluttonous, and morally corrupt. In sum, a fat body is the emblem of negativity as suggested by Rebecca Rabinowitz in "Who's that Fat Kid? Fat Politics and Children's Literature" for the Children's Book Council Diversity Blog. Fatness seems to provide visible evidence of inner moral flaws in young protagonists. In Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) the fat boy Augustus Gloop is publicly exposed to shame by his act of eating, and the Oompa-Loompa's song makes his moral failings even more explicit: "Augustus Gloop! Augustus Gloop! The great big greedy nincompoop! Augustus Gloop! So Big and Vile! So greedy, foul, and infantile."[15] In 1974 the novel *Blubber* by Judy Blume told the story of a bully, Jill Brenner, and of the victim of the bully, Linda, a fat and overweight girl ostracized by all her classmates. More recently, in the Harry Potter series, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle are two fat boys allied with the enemy character Draco Malfoy: stupid, violent and wicked, they act as bullies and their pig-like obesity is the visible stigma of a serious moral flaw.[16]

In contrapuntal relationship with the attitude described as fatphobia, and since the 1960s, the trend described as "fat liberation" or "fat lib", under the aegis of Fat studies, is set in opposition against stories about fat bullies or fat victims of bullies, and against images in which the obese boy or girl is unfavorably portrayed, and almost becomes an invisible body.[17] Blogs and lists of books about fat children who are not stigmatized because of their body weight now abound (cf. Ashia). Fat studies is a full-fledged academic discipline, and acceptance of obesity an urgent issue in children's literature (Rothblum and Solovay). Once again, the pig, who could figure as an outdated vestige of the Victorian era owing to its anthropomorphic dress and posture, appears nowadays as an endearing and happy

character, and, more remarkably, the bearer of an entirely new message.

According to Carlson's book, pigs nowadays are energetic, even athletic; their identity provides a positive model of identification for the child, insofar as it promotes healthy exercise to lose body fat, without stigmatizing obesity (fig. 10).[18] In this case, as elsewhere, children's literature helps uncovering fractures and unbalance already existing in the past, while promoting different attitudes. Today the inclusive pluralism recommended by Bolton's post-humanist perspective reshapes not only the relationship between human and non-human animals, but the cultural stereotypes attached to the relationship between children and pigs during the Victorian age, and in Victorian children's literature. The discourses of food are extremely telling, especially when the child and the pig meet across history, fiction, and images, and when we realize that whether fat or thin, lazy or energetic, they incorporate our obsessions, fears, and desires about the bodies we inhabit.

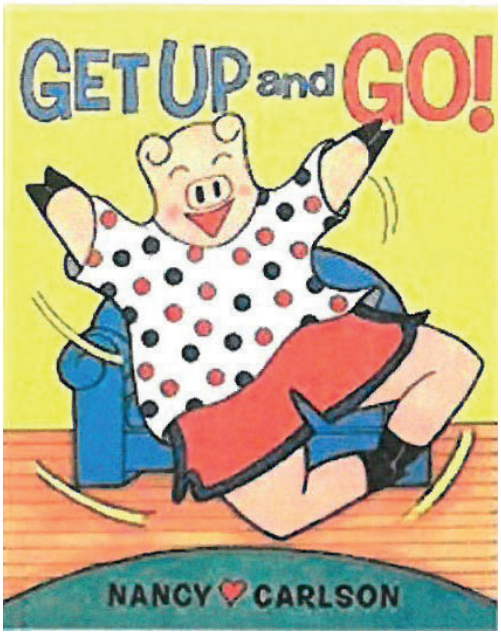

Fig. 10
Nancy L. Carlson, *Get Up and Go!* 2006 (Wikimedia Commons)

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Notes

[1] The collection *Not Just Porridge: English Literati at Table*, edited by Francesca Orestano and Michael Vickers, includes essays on Mrs Beeton (Moja), A. A. Milne (Gorini), Roald Dahl's revolting food (Iuliucci) and frozen food in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (Forni). Also see Keeling and Pollard, and Carrington and Hardy, who focus on the issue from a multicultural perspective but invoke as a preliminary step on the question of food as a cultural signifier the work by Roland Barthes.

[2] Author's emphasis; Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), provides the philosophical architecture to the question posed by Jonathan Safran Foer.

[3] In the United States, as described by Anderson; also see Mazzeno and Morrison.

[4] The notion of cannibalism would percolate from the fairy tale tradition into discourses of otherness, which would include the representation of the poor, of the Irish, especially during the famine years, and of the colonised populations, whose cultural inferiority was emphasized as a trait coincident with their cannibalistic habits and beastly animal behaviour. The cannibalistic implications of fairy tales such as "Haensel und Gretel" would also infect Victorian children's literature: *Max and Moritz: A Story of Seven Boyish Pranks* (*Max und Moritz. Eine Bubengeschichte in sieben Streichen)* is a black humour story, written and illustrated by Wilhelm Busch and published in 1865. The bad boys Max and Moritz steal, kill and eat the chicken of an old widow, but they end up being made into flour, baked, and eaten by ducks.

[5] Foucault's perspective directly led to Animal Studies, as argued by Taylor; also Jacques Derrida's L'*Animal que donc je suis (à suivre)* (1997), translated as "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", has become a foundational text in animal studies.

[6] On Dickens's response to fatness in women as a sign of capitalist economy and the "fat- emblazoned scandal" that led to his divorce in 1858, see Nayder.

[7] Far from fantasy, mammalian hybrids provided instances of the pig into human transformation (McCarthy).

[8] Darwin's perceptive statement would be later confirmed in his *The Expression of Emotions in Men and Animals* (1872). Also see Rollin's *The Unheeded Cry* and Bekoff's *The Emotional Lives of Animals*.

[9] "In Memoriam A.H.H" (1850), Canto 56.

[10] Also see Orestano 29-30, and Labbe 93-104.

[11] Another version of the rhyme goes: "SAMMY SMITH would drink and eat / From morning unto night; / He filled his mouth so full of meat / It was a shameful sight. / Sometimes he gave a book or toy / For apples, cake, or plum; / And grudged if any other boy / Should taste a single crumb. / Indeed, he ate and drank so fast, / And used to stuff and cram, / The name they called him by at last / Was often Greedy Sam" (*Land of Nursery Rhymes*).

[12] The rhyme dates back to 1728, when the first line "This pig went to market" appeared in a collection entitled "The Nurses Song". The first full version of the rhyme was included in *The Famous Tommy Thumb's Little Story-Book*, published in London about 1760. The rhyme continued to appear, with slight variations, in many late 18th- and early 19th-century collections: www.bl.uk/collection-items/tommy-thumbs-pretty-song-book (accessed February 2024).

[13] For the scientific profile and research achievements of Beatrix Potter see Lear.

[14] With a reference to Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906), Armstrong (231, n. 2) treats animals like machines in a factory, from their birth until they are slaughtered.

[15] The quote refers to the song from the musical *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971), directed by Mel Stuart, produced by David L. Wolper, and starring Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka. See https://www.wattpad.com/2639815-funny-quotes-charlie-and-the-chocolate-factory-%2B/page/2 (accessed February 2024).

[16] Also see Murray, who discusses fat characters in books and cartoons, both humans and animals, from a personal, non-fatphobic perspective.

[17] The visual issue is addressed by Herrmann.

[18] In an ulterior cultural somersault affecting traditional identities and roles in storytelling, the 1922 story *Three Little Piggies*, has become *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*. The story of T*he Three Little Pig*s has been adapted from different sources. The primary sources are *English Fairy Tales*, retold by Flora Annie Steel (1922) with illustrations by L. Leslie Brooke from the 1904 version. I am very grateful to Peter Hunt for pointing out and sending me the story by Eugene Trivizas, *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (2015).