

# Chapter 1: Everybody Eating Everyone Else

Aïcha Bouchelaghem, University of Geneva

Theophilus Savvas. *Vegetarianism and Veganism in Literature from the Ancients to the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge UP, 2024. 1-19.

VLS Webinar, 3 July 2025, Online

# Problematic

"This book is concerned with how the various forms of this ['natural'] diet have been represented in literary texts." (2)

"This book is not intended... as [a] history of vegetarianism (although it is clearly historical in its scope)... What such books generally chart... is the history of the *advocacy* of vegetarianism. This book, however, is about *literary representation*, meaning that it offers something rather different." (emphasis added 2)

"Art - and literature in particular - provides a space for a variety of ideas to be rehearsed without being advocated, and thus offers a space for reflexive thinking about the coherence and legitimacy of those ideas" (2)

# Methodology: historical scope

“the pattern of associating vegetarianism with paradise – that went directly back to Genesis (and indirectly to Hesiod) and forwards to Shelley, who drew upon Milton’s vegetarian images for *Queen Mab* (and which persists today in utopic veganism)” (3)

“while the histories document a decline in the practice of vegetarianism until the nineteenth century... we can see here that its spirit is kept alive through the discursive space of literature – *even literature which is not wholly sympathetic to that spirit, or which does not directly name it*” (emphasis mine 3)

“That these instances of representation [which do not directly name vegetarianism] are here deemed more significant than they might have been at the time is admittedly in part the consequence of the greater significance of vegetarianism and veganism in the present, and this may strike some as teleological. There is no comeback to that, other than to say that there is something inevitably teleological, whether acknowledged or not, about all inquiries of the past” (3)

# Methodology: historical scope

“critics have frequently refused to engage with the representation in literature of [vegetarian] dietary doctrines on their own terms” (8)

>> “One who sees less *social significance* to vegetarianism and veganism - or who is simply not convinced by the doctrines - is likely to see less *literary significance* in it too” (emphasis mine 8)

# Methodology: literary analysis

“While there are certainly times where I have greater patience for the ridiculed character than for the ridiculing author, this is a work of literary criticism and not of moral philosophy; its aim is to provide persuasive interpretations of the literary texts under discussion, not to persuade its reader to abstain from the eating of meat or engagement with animal agriculture” (3)

# Methodology: key terms

“The majority of this book is focused on literature after ‘vegetarian’ was coined and popularised in the middle of the nineteenth century... the broad historical sweep of this book means that I have tended to stick to ‘vegetarian’ as the more commonly used term; ‘vegan’ is reserved for those twenty-first-century texts which themselves use the term, and a few special cases, such as Gilman's *Herland* (1915), where it is clear that what is being described approximates more closely to what we now call veganism.” (10)

# Main arguments: literary significance

“representations [of vegetarianism] frequently are important for the literary texts qua literary texts, whether that be as constitutive of a poetics for Shelley, as a generic trope of the utopian novel, or as a problematisation of the individualist ethic in the twenty-first-century realist novel” (3)

# Main arguments: critique of Orientalism

“the influence of the east” (4)

“a vague, often amorphous, east”

“while the dietary proclivities and ethical sensibilities of the west were indeed reshaped by a vegetarianism which developed through various contacts with the east, the east was in turn reconfigured in the western imaginary by that vegetarianism functioning *as a tool of orientalism.*” (5-6)

# Main arguments: vegetarianism or veganism as disruptive methodologies

“dietary doctrines work as critical *methodology*: as, for instance, a tool for female liberation, à la Carol J. Adams, or, for decolonialisation, as I suggest in my reading of Octavia Butler... vegetarianism may be deconstructive according to David Wood, and veganism has potential as a queer methodology according to Emelia Quinn” (4)

Vegetarianism is “often construed to be socially interruptive (and indeed may be intended as such)” >> as “[e]ating is an act of *companionship*” (emphasis in original 7)

“primarily... the Anglo-American novel” (6) >> “Vegetarianism (and Pythagoreanism and veganism) have developed as strange modes of eating in the west, and that is why those who have followed such diets have historically been seen as ‘outside of the dominant forms of being a subject’, as Matthew Calarco, glossing Derrida, writes” (7)

# Main arguments: vegetarianism or veganism as disruptive methodologies

“vegetarianism as an alternative (to) religion” (7)

Writers such as Lord Byron “disrupt... the too easy equation of carnivorism with aggressive masculinity and patriarchy - an equation which has been the mainstay of much work on vegetarian and vegan theory since Adams published her pioneering *The Sexual Politics of Meat* in 1990” (8)

“Heterosexual masculine moral imperatives often involve a performative element which redounds negatively on the women in their lives” (8-9)