

Subject: New Book Proposal Entry

Date: Tuesday, September 12, 2023 at 2:58:32 PM Eastern Daylight Time

From:

To: Nobles, Heidi Gabrielle (hn3dg)

Name

Jessica Mehta

Email

Working Book Title

Women Poets and Eating Disorders

Brief Overview

Are you up for taking on a kind-of monograph written by a poet? If so, this might be for you. Ever wondered why so many women poets seem to have eating disorders? No matter the answer to that question, you might be curious now. My doctoral work addressed the meeting point of female poetics and eating disorders, taking into consideration poetic archival drafts from around the globe ranging from the Victorian period to mid-century. You'll find Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Marianne Moore, Anne Sexton, and my girl Sylvia Plath in here (hey, Sivvy). It encompasses the medical history of eating disorders, the most under-diagnosed and deadliest of all mental disorders (including depression). Lots of theology, too, because #forbiddenfruit. But I'm a poet. So this isn't the totally dry type of research you've seen before.

This manuscript's first draft is complete. It incorporates some pop culture references and an interview with a living poet with an eating disorder in the final chapter. And if you need a reminder of how depraved Victorian poetry was, here you go. Or if you check my Instagram and wonder why I have a portrait of Sylvia Plath on my leg, this project might answer that question,

too.

This work was called extremely well-researched. I spent five years physically in library archives. You'll find transcripts from research out of Puerto Rico that has never been seen by anyone who hasn't visited that library in-person. It's pretty dope, but that's the author's opinion.

About the Author

Jessica Mehta, PhD is an Aniyunwiya (citizen of the Cherokee Nation) poet, artist, and scholar. Indigenization and dismantling what has been silenced are the driving forces behind her work. She has published several books, articles in peer-reviewed journals, and has a smattering of exhibitions on her CV. Currently, she is the inaugural poet-in-residence at The Martin House (Buffalo, NY), the incoming Bayard Rustin Penington Friends House artist-in-residence, and a Peace Studio Fellow. Find out more at <http://www.thischerokeerose.com>, IG @thischerokeerose, Twitter/X @cherokeeroseup.

Additional work

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Current Word Count

99,991

Projected Word Count

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Additional Details

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Keywords

poetry, eating disorders, women's studies

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INTRODUCTION

I initially fell in love with Sylvia Plath's work—and poetry at large—at the same age as many other young women: during my first year of college. I was full of post-adolescent angst, on a clichéd mission to (as they say) find myself when introduced to *The Bell Jar* and the trials of Esther Greenwood. It was the first time I ever felt such a connection. There was another person who had the same thoughts and fears as I did. Like Janet Badia says, Plath's writing "inspires *young* women especially, and it inspires them not only to read but to write" (83). I went on to study many more poets in graduate school, then to have my own poetry collections published, but I will always consider *The Bell Jar* my first and favourite dance with Plath. However, unlike the thousands of others who found themselves in this book, it was not Esther's grappling with her love life, depression, or suicidal leanings that hammered so close to home for me. It was her obsession with food.

The Bell Jar and much of Plath's poetry is brimming with such an intense preoccupation with food, hunger, and a teetering between gluttony and starvation—which is echoed in her personal letters and journals—that it was impossible to ignore. Examples of Esther's engrossment with food abound, from the binge-eating caviar scene to a paragraph describing the perfect browning of a hot dog before she secretly buries it (22, 47). Another example is in chapter seven:

I don't know what I ate, but I felt immensely better after the first mouthful. It occurred to me that my vision of the fig tree and all the fat figs that withered and

fell to the earth might well have arisen from the profound void of an empty stomach. (63)

Gitanjali Shahani neatly summarises the importance of food for some literary characters: “Some of their most memorable words and scenes are gastronomic” (3). Eighteen years after first reading *The Bell Jar* (and Plath’s oeuvre) I started my PhD. During the interim, I worked to foster a so-called poet’s voice by reading the works of the greats—my beloved Plath, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Marianne Moore, Emily Dickinson, and Anne Sexton (to name just a few). At the same time as my own writing career took root, eating disorders unraveled within me.

I swung from exclusively binge-eating as an undergraduate to severe restriction with anorexia nervosa (anorexia) and exercise-induced bulimia nervosa (bulimia) in my thirties, often bouncing from each of these disorders to the other at a rapid pace. Such co-morbidities are common, with binge-eating slowing down the end result of anorectic restriction—death. It was not until I fitted into only children’s clothes and my heart began to fail that I sought help. I was still devouring the works of what I had come to consider “my” poets, expanding to contemporary best-sellers like Melissa Broder. As I read their words, now imbued with the insight of someone struggling to dig my way out of a slow death, something new stood out to me. Why did it seem like so many of these poems were about eating disorders, subtly or overtly?

I knew I may be projecting my own experiences and put the idea aside. However, as my eating disorder management continued to improve, I kept seeing facets of what might be described as an eating disorder *style* within the works of certain poets. Maybe

there was something more to this persistent theme than a transference of myself to their work. Did eating disorders and obsession with food restriction, compulsion, and hunger actually play a role in their writing? I knew the answer when it came to Broder, who speaks (and writes) bluntly about her struggles with eating disorders with great transparency—but what about her predecessors? I began to pore over critical analyses of poets from the Victorian era to mid-century, surprised to find an examination of poetry through an anorectic lens almost entirely lacking. In fact, of these poets, only Emily Dickinson and to some extent Elizabeth Bishop had garnered any substantial attention when it came to addressing the meeting point of eating disorders and poetry. There is some investigation into Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862) and eating disorders, mostly from Paula Cohen Marantz in the 1970s, but the rest of Rossetti's oeuvre is overlooked in this regard. It seems that a critical avenue for approaching the works of these poets, save for Dickinson and Bishop, has long been ignored. "Literary food studies" is in its infancy according to some, bringing to light the burning question posed by a small handful, including Shahani. In the introduction to *Food and Literature*, which she calls "one of the first collections to take up food and literature as theme and method"—and just published in 2018—she asks, "What accounts for these early reservations about food as a legitimate object of academic inquiry?" (8–9, 18). Others disagree, like Kate Thomas who claims that beginning in the Victorian period, the so-called age of consumption, "Gastronomy was a literary genre" (73). Still, even Thomas admits that "writing that is subject to voracious appetites, to the extremes of starvation and greed, was new and particular to the nineteenth century" (77). There is a difference between what is deemed normal and abnormal eating, just as there is a divide between

academic enquiry of normal gastronomy as a literary genre and the analysis of abnormal consumption. This gaping disparity in how we approach poetry, foregoing eating disorder presence within works until recently, is the catalyst for this thesis—and my selection of poets.

I chose these writers because I appreciate their work, I see it through an anorectic lens, and for the most part an examination of their work with eating disorders in mind is not widely addressed. Although Dickinson and Bishop might fit quite well into such research, I am interested in poets who are not routinely included in the camp of those with eating disorders. Such a lens is a means of analysing a poem with the understanding of what various eating disorders entail, particularly during each poet's era, and how medical theories during these years constructed conditions for the poets to reveal realities in their writing. I focus exclusively on female poets for a few reasons, including the unfortunate fact that "food studies is considered a natural fit with women's studies" (Shahani 9). Additionally, to this day women still make up most eating disorder patients. However, this is not meant to suggest that men, non-binary, and Two-Spirit poets do not suffer from eating disorders. Men and non-binary individuals are notoriously under-diagnosed at an exceptionally higher rate than women (Strother 346–353). Susan Bordo noted in the 1980s that, finally, "boys and men are developing body-image problems" (*Unbearable Weight* xxiv). Although he was not anorectic, consider Frank Bidart, a man who took on the voice of female anorectic Ellen West in his long poem by the same name. West (1888–1921) gained notoriety when she was posthumously diagnosed with eating disorders by Ludwig Binswanger via existential analysis. West's short life (death by suicide at age 33) inspired Bidart to write his famed

persona poem “Ellen West” (1975). The opening lines attempt to capture West’s experiences as an anorectic, bulimic woman at the turn of the last century:

I love sweets,—

heaven

would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream ...

But my true self

is thin, all profile

and effortless gestures, the sort of blond

elegant girl whose

body is the image of her soul.

—My doctors tell me I must give up

this ideal;

but I

WILL NOT ... cannot.

Only to my husband I’m not simply a case.

But he is a fool. He married

meat, and thought it was a wife.

(Bidart 96)

Bidart says that in the creation of his poem, “I could say things that in fact I think are true, but I couldn’t say in my own voice, because I couldn’t justify them” (Hix 192). He clarifies in an interview with H.L. Hix that even though he claims to not have an eating disorder, he identified with West when reading Binswanger’s studies. Bidart reports being “heavier” prior to graduate school and that he “hated it” (192). He further reveals, “I was certainly obsessed with food, and with both losing weight and eating. I found a mirror in the case of Ellen West” (192). He goes on to explain:

Ellen West as a person did exist—but the crucial thing is not whether she literally existed, but that she corresponds to my sense of human experience, and the nature of human experience and the possibility of human experience. In the distinction between fancy and imagination that Wordsworth makes, I hope she’s an act of imagination, not fancy. (192)

Bidart is clearly an intriguing figure in the history of poetry and eating disorders, yet to include male and non-binary poets within the breadth of this thesis would lead to a large, messy result.

I also only examine white female poets in this thesis for similar reasons, though there is some debate over Barrett Browning’s ancestry (Markus 106). This decision was not made lightly. As an Aniyunwiya (citizen of the Cherokee Nation), I experienced an intense moral struggle over my decision to include Moore, who worked at the Carlisle

Indian Industrial School (though the term “school” is debatable). My father was a survivor of such “schools,” institutions designed for assimilation and genocide, to “kill the Indian, save the man” (Peterson 86).¹ However, adding myriad cultures and so-called races into this thesis would expand it beyond its necessary parameters. Additionally, and unfortunately, there is also a lack of non-white female poets publishing from the Victorian period to mid-century America who also showed markers of eating disorders and left drafts to be archived. Quite simply, an exploration of non-female and non-white poets and eating disorders is, I believe, in great need but simply does not fit into the requisite confines of this thesis.

Alexandra Rigl coined the term “anorexic aesthetic” in 2014 to refer to shared themes and choices made by some writers she calls “anorexic poets,” including Louise Glück, Emily Dickinson, and Frank Bidart (10).² Rigl’s interest in the intersection of poetry and eating disorders stems from “the idea of an anorectic repurposing her deviant behavior toward creative ends” (3). For example, Rigl points out that there is an abundance of em-dashes in these poems, allowing for a removal of excess (words or punctuation) while mirroring the appearance of the anorectic (14). Ann Keniston examines an em-dash in the “Lady Lazarus” (1962) lines “Ash, ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—” (*Collected* 246). She says,

The dash after “there” elides a series of conflicting ways that flesh and bone—
already synecdoches for the speaker’s body—might be linked to the images of

¹ The phrase “Kill the Indian, save the man” is attributed to Richard Henry Pratt, founder of Carlisle.

² The terms “anorexic” and “anorectic” are often used interchangeable, though I prefer “anorectic.”

soap, ring, and filling. Flesh and bone have vanished completely (“there is nothing there”), yet the phrases after the dash undermine this claim. (148)

Keniston, like many others, does not stretch further to address eating disorder imagery in this (or any) Plath poem.

I do not aim to put poets into a new classification, but I agree with J. Michelle Coghlan’s view that “food has long served as a cultural marker of complex and oft-conflicting desires, affiliations, and identities” (*Literature and Food* 1). Like Rigl, I do not claim to retroactively diagnose any poet with an eating disorder, a task that I am unqualified to undertake. Such an attempt would furthermore serve no purpose in the pursuit of what this thesis aims to do: take an often-overlooked approach to analysing the works of five poets publishing from the 1840s to the 1970s using medical texts and archives. As Jane Dowson says, “the best use of archival writing is to open up, rather than close down, interpretive possibilities” (107). Stephen Dilks sums up how we, and I, are using such archives: “When a new generation of readers rediscovers [literature’s] meaning in a new historical context, it partially remakes its meaning; it extends its meaning into the present; it makes it live again, and not precisely as it ever lived before” (4).

I hypothesise that my three-part methodological approach culminates in a unique way to examine these poets’ work. My steps include analysing (oftentimes handwritten, unpublished, and non-digitised) archival drafts; comparing drafts to the published version(s) of poems; and examining these poems (both via the comparison of draft progressions to published poems *and* the completed poems as they stand) alongside

various medical theories related to eating disorders during the poets' eras. Dilks stresses that when we read, it is with "an incomplete sense of the context" which is "one reason why experts continue to debate the meaning or meanings of texts that have been read thousands of times" (4). Similarly, archives and drafts are key to a close exploration of a poet's work because they reveal process, not just in a poetic sense but in terms of the writer's internal progression. Wim Van Mierlo says, "Literary archives allow us to study that writing not only in its finished, but also in its inchoate, embryonic state ... the *avant-texte*, the text before it is 'the text'" (15–16). Derrida famously dubs such places home to *Archive Fever* (1995), which he claims, "verges on radical evil" (19–20).

I took a traditional approach to archival exploration, travelling the globe in my quest. Sadly, as Carolyn Steedman bemoans, "Many modern historians simply never use the[se] kind of archives," suggesting that the "majority" of historians today "have never set foot in a *départementale* or national archive" (x). Derrida wonders how Freud might view today's archives, asking, "Do these new archival machines change anything?" (14). Madelon Sprengnether says, "It may seem ungenerous to fault Freud for not having imagined the world we inhabit today" (253). However, it was in this approach, in becoming Steedman's "figure solemnly hunched over a list of names, compiled a long time ago for a purpose quite different from the historian's," where I truly connected with my poets (xi). Here, I felt that I, too, was gaining "entry to an inner world" (Anderson 1). There are several personal notes made in the drafts I examined, such as Sexton's underlined demand that a manuscript should not be read under any circumstance. Such a plea underscores the intimate nature of drafts and the vulnerability of the poet when

creating them. It suggests that drafts provide a more honest peek into the poet's world, letting us unearth realities and perhaps truths not yet buried in the polished poems. After my time in the archives, I wholeheartedly agree with Helen Taylor's summation that, "This generation of scholars perhaps needs to be reminded of an age when scholarship involved long train journeys to archives" (198). Digital records are simply not the same.

My months spent in the archives led to uncovering notes jotted in margins, unpublished journal entries that touched on poems, yes, but also family issues and other insights not intended for the general public. Here, I was tasked with avoiding the trap of, as Steedman puts it, feeling "able to speak on behalf of the dead, and to interpret the words and the acts they themselves had not understood" (38). These archives reveal how poets were responding to world events and their own flourishing knowledge and experiences. The labour of drafting poems gives us the opportunity to watch the evolution of an "anorexic aesthetic" within works and the chance to see how choices (such as adding more em-dashes or capitalising certain food- or hunger-centric words) led various poem iterations to become increasingly reflective of the processes and results of eating disorders. The work these writers undertook often mimics the presentations and cycles of an eating disorder, beginning with the most overt aspect of the editing process: the scraping away of excess fat. Moore said it best when she wrote in her essay "Idiosyncrasy and Technique" (1958) that "to delete is the instantaneous cure" (*Moore Reader* 170).

Of course, it is natural for any draft to become tighter and smaller with more deletions in every version. Alternatively, poets may add to later drafts, welcoming a rich

abundance that could be considered reflective of bingeing. I am not interested in the common poetic tightening of a work, but rather the specific choices made as they align with what was understood of eating disorders at the time. For instance, has the poet changed punctuation around words that address food, hunger, or an obsession with bodily form? Hélène Cixous urges, “woman must write her body” (94). Parentheses could be seen as a sign of containment while colons appear cage-like. I further hypothesise that stylistic and editing choices may reveal a preference for an aesthetic that mimics ambitions and results of eating disorders, such as an explosion of em-dashes, and that it is an evolution trackable through draft comparisons.

Ultimately, it is nearly impossible for any of us to completely separate our own experiences, cultures, and struggles from reading poetry. However, drafts let us see the poet putting up protective barriers. Steedman reminds us that it is in the drafts, the archives, where we find “myriads of the dead, who all day long, have laid their concerns upon you” (17). We are, of course, not the intended audience—or, as Steedman puts it, these writers “had nothing like [us] in mind at all” (150–151). Published poems are what writers allow us, the readers, to see. Drafts are raw, comparably uncensored; in many cases the poets trusted that they were for their eyes alone (or a select audience), and in that trust they were free to let their demons sing. I am grateful to the many supporters of my research for allowing me into this inner circle, welcoming me to the posthumous drafting table of some of the world’s greatest poets. This support includes an Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship with rarely-granted photography permissions at the Lilly Library (University of Indiana, Bloomington) where Plath archives are held, as well as an Eccles Traveling Centre Fellowship at the British Library to explore the Barrett Browning and

Rossetti archives. I was able to visit the Rosenbach Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to view the Moore archives—a location Moore chose herself in part because of its “suspended magnifying glass,” urging us to look closer (Leavall 383). The Harry Ransom Center at University of Texas, Austin, kindly digitised Sexton archives at my request in the midst of a pandemic, which canceled my travel plans and temporarily closed the Center. Each of these archives led me to revelations I would not have otherwise uncovered.

Compared to many other mental disorders, eating disorders are relatively young in terms of medical analysis. Anorexia, as we discuss and understand it today, was the first named eating disorder, but not coined as such until 1874 by British physician William Gull (*Transactions* 22). Gull acknowledged that his findings were the same as those of his French neuropsychiatrist contemporary, Ernest-Charles Lasègue: “It is plain that Dr. Lasègue and I have the same malady in mind, though the forms of our illustrations are different” (“Anorexia Nervosa, Apepsia Hysterica” 135). Both physicians studied what came to be known as eating disorders during the latter half of the nineteenth century, with Lasègue initially dubbing the disorder “anorexia hystérique” in 1873 (143). Gull and Lasègue are often considered the forefathers of anorexia, but just 15 years earlier *Louis-Victor Marcé was studying patients with seemingly the same symptoms and behaviours as Gull’s and Lasègue’s. Marcé is rarely mentioned in eating disorder research, earning him the nickname “anorexia’s forgotten man” by Joseph Silverman (833). Prior to these Victorian researchers, other physicians appear to have been interested in eating disorder behaviours but did not coin a term for them. British*

physician Richard Morton is the most prominent predecessor, describing this condition in Phthisiologia, Or, A Treatise of Consumptions (1689) as such:

A Nervous Atrophy, or Consumption, is a Wasting of the Body without any remarkable Fever, Cough, or Shortness of Breath; but it is attended with a Want of Appetite, and a Bad Digestion, upon which there follows a Languishing Weakness of Nature, and a falling away of the Flesh every day more and more.

(4)

It would not be surprising if eating disorders were as old as (or pre-dated) poetry. It is not my intention to pinpoint a beginning to these disorders, but rather to consider how the understanding of them—from various historical treatments to how they fit in society—might have informed the works of my poets. If we operate with the understanding that many writers write what they know, then omitting eating disorders from critical analysis is a sorely missed opportunity.

Does it matter if any of these poets have eating disorders? In my opinion, it matters just as much as considering any other aspect of their lives because experience informs art. Scholars repeatedly examine poetical works with foundational knowledge of the writer's personal lives. Consider Plath's interest in the occult and how it drove Timothy Materer's "Occultism as Source and Symptom in Sylvia Plath's 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board'" (1991) (which won the year's TCL Prize in Literary Criticism) or Helen Sword's "James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija" (1994). Personal information feeds analysis, and yet eating disorders are left by the wayside in favour of

more common, popular themes. What would analysis of Rossetti's poetry look like if her faith was ignored? What would be made of Barrett Browning's work if her Greek knowledge was bypassed? There are parts of these poets' lives which are forthrightly true, such as the fact that Barrett Browning, Sexton, and Plath became mothers and, in turn, began to write about motherhood with a new, personal understanding. The same cannot be said of eating disorders, which none of these poets were diagnosed with in their lifetime—an unsurprising truth given the short amount of time eating disorders have been diagnosable and the fact that they remain under-diagnosed to this day. Regardless of whether these poets suffered from an eating disorder or not, I maintain that my methodological approach of considering poetic drafts alongside medical texts of the poets' eras give us another means of inspecting their work that has not been widely addressed by scholars to date.

Each of these poets exhibited markers of at least one eating disorder, but the eras of their career and other connections to one another also played a role in my selection. The Victorian period, when the first diagnosable eating disorder (anorexia) was named, provides a natural starting point. Francis O'Gorman claims, "The sense that the Victorians are important shapers of the modern world had added further consequence to our reassessment of their legacy" (277). Barrett Browning's death in 1861 occurred in the same decade as *Marcé's research and shortly before the work of Gull and Lasègue*. Barrett Browning's and Rossetti's works serve as a precursor to the official naming of anorexia in 1874. Rossetti undertook her poetical labour during the dawning of eating disorders as diagnosable diseases, providing an ideal arc to consider how poetry might be analysed during these crucial, medically formative years. As

anorexia *nervosa* was named in England by a British physician, it is fitting that its traces in Victorian poetry are a natural start to this thesis. O’Gorman reminds us, “in terms of both the familiar and the surprising, the Victorians are still active among us” (278). However, anorexia and other eating disorders are a prevalent disorder in all developed countries, with anorexia having the highest mortality rate of any mental disorder (not just eating disorders) according to current research (Smink 412). As such, a trans-Atlantic approach to this thesis is important. This offers a wider viewpoint than a strictly British approach while also maintaining a reasonable and targeted focus on strictly English and American poetry. A trans-Atlantic as well as a trans-historical analysis also demonstrates how quickly the acknowledgement of eating disorders spread in the past 150 years. Finally, my choice of poets is also informed in part by Morton’s early work as a trans-Atlantic antecedent of sorts to eating disorders. He noticed in the seventeenth century a prevalence of such disorders in both countries:

Which kind of consumption I have sometimes observed in England, but most frequently amongst those who have lived in Virginia, after they have come over hither ... in the beginning of this Disease the State of the Body appears oedematous and blouted. (4)

There are additional threads that connect my poets to one another. Rossetti saw Barrett Browning (and Barrett Browning’s works) as both inspiration and competition (*Complete* xlv). This view is understandable given their similar stations and the fact that Rossetti succeeded Barrett Browning as an unofficial female poet laureate. This

closeness has led to countless comparisons, such as Marjorie Stone calling them “Sisters in Art” (339). Moore’s oeuvre is also reflective of her British predecessors, particularly Rossetti. Linda Leavall quotes Moore as naming a handful of poets as inspirators for her writing, including Rossetti and “Browning” (which may be Robert Browning or Barrett Browning, but more likely the former), dubbing them her “household companions” (43). T.S. Eliot ended his 1923 review of Moore’s “Marriage” and collection *Poems* with the summation, “And there is one final, ‘magnificent’ compliment: Miss Moore’s poetry is as ‘feminine’ as Christina Rossetti’s, one never forgets that it is written by a woman; *but* with both one never thinks of this as anything but a positive virtue” (*Dial* 597).

Neither Moore nor Rossetti needed Eliot to remind them of their sex. Both were acutely aware of the constraints placed on them as women, which is reflected in their works. The frustration of living within the western patriarchy is explored to some degree in all my poets’ writings, which is unsurprising. Still, what is worth exploring is that each poet overtly wrote at least once that she wished she were a man—though, of course, such a desire is a complex one, particularly given the eras. This wish may not be in reference to gender or sexuality, but rather access to education, opportunities, power, and control (power and control also being hallmarks of eating disorders). The inclination to be a man is also a common refrain of women with an eating disorder, as the physical results of malnourishment vanquish the most obvious signs of femininity including curves and a menstrual cycle. Ceasing the menstrual cycle (amenorrhea) and reverting to a childlike state (or manly/boyish state) also complements the common anorectic’s fear of womanhood, maturity, and pregnancy. Queer readings of work by Rossetti and

Moore are vast, with Susan McCabe bluntly calling Moore (and Elizabeth Bishop) “modern queer women poets” (“Survival of the Queerly Fit” 546). Frederick Roden’s Rossetti chapter in *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* is boldly titled “Christina Rossetti: the Female Queer Virgin” and spans 20 pages of exploring her sexuality (35–58). Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” has especially long been tied to lesbian themes, such as when Rebecca Little dubs the poem “homoerotic vampirism” or when Antje Lindenmeyer includes the poem in examples of “lesbian appetites”—each of which occurs in the respective articles’ titles.

Moore was coming to the end of her career when confessional poetry birthed in M.L. Rosenthal’s “Poetry as Confession” in 1959. The term is most closely associated with Robert Lowell, Sexton, and Plath. Rosenthal’s rather brief review of Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) describes the collection as being “grotesque glimpses,” “impure art,” “unpleasantly egocentric,” and compares it to the “triumph of the skunks over the garbage cans” (a reference to Lowell’s “Skunk Hour”) (109-110). Such descriptions, which often demand a heavy emphasis on the personal and “I” narrative, is in stark contrast to Moore’s work where there is often an unidentified speaker. For example, in Moore’s “An Octopus” (1924), there is a clear assertion in the voice yet not a single “I” or visible speaker in its 230 lines. Moore was obviously not a confessional poet *avant la lettre*, but she did have ties to the younger poets of the time—including Sexton and Plath. Both mid-century poets began their career in the shadow of greats like Moore, often attending her poetry readings.

The relationship between Moore and Plath was tense. Plath asked her for a recommendation for a Guggenheim application in 1961. Moore agreed, but in her

statement suggested Plath should not be subsidised simply for being a mother and recommended the award instead go to Plath's husband, Ted Hughes (who had received a Guggenheim award the previous year). Moore called Plath talented and her work attractive, but also wrote that Hughes had twice Plath's talent. In 1962, the editors at Knopf approached Moore for a blurb for Plath's *The Colossus*, but Moore refused, calling the collection "bitter, frost-bitten, burnt-out, averse" (Bayley 22). Hurt by the criticism, Plath sought revenge in "The Tour" (1962) where she thinly veils Moore as a tottering auntie and flings the insults back at her: "I am bitter? I'm averse?" (*Collected Poems* 238). This was not the first time Plath took Moore's words as her own, but it may have been the first intentional instance. In a serendipitous coincidence, Moore wrote to her brother, John Warner Moore, on 4 October 1914, "Mole pin points me a good deal but my ribs would never show" (*Selected Letters* 97). Plath's "The Jailer" (1965) includes the famed lines, "My ribs show. What have I eaten? / Lies and smiles" (*Ariel* 23). Moore's letters were not published in Plath's lifetime, making it impossible for Plath to have known whose words she echoed. As for Sexton and Plath, they enjoyed a friendly rivalry. Curiously, Marsha Bryant considers Moore Plath's rival, but not Sexton. The two younger poets often went for drinks together at the Boston Ritz-Carlton after attending Lowell's poetry seminar. They were bonded not only by their gender in the male-dominated seminar, but also by their obsession with death. This dynamic of them both being highly competitive (generally and against one another) did not fully end with Plath's death. Sexton told her psychiatrist, Martin Orne, " Sylvia Plath's death disturbs me. Makes me want it, too. She took something that was mine, *that* death was mine" (Middlebrook 200).

Plath, the last poet analysed in this thesis, brings my research full circle, setting the foundation for today's understanding of eating disorders. She started her career in America—alongside Sexton and in the footsteps of Moore—and completed it too early across the Atlantic in Barrett Browning's and Rossetti's England. In the decades between Barrett Browning's and Plath's careers, common poetic approaches, as well as the ways in which medical experts viewed eating disorders, shifted greatly. However, there are still some similarities between the two. Barrett Browning's most famed work, *Aurora Leigh*, adopts a third-person narrative (common for the era) in an epic poem featuring a young woman vehemently opposed to marriage and committed to succeeding as a female poet with all odds stacked against her. It is not until the final stanzas that she realises her love for her cousin-cum-suitor; a traditional happily ever after is apparently the key to a fulfilled life. Plath's likely final surviving poem, "Edge" (1963), sits in sharp contrast, though it rejects her beloved first-person narrative for a third-person approach. It focuses on death and biblical images (such as the serpent), and yet echoes Barrett Browning's adoration of all things Greek—creating an ouroboros of sorts from the beginning to the end of my research.

These poets have many additional connections to one another, no matter the trans-historic and trans-Atlantic divides. Barrett Browning embraced what could be conceived as a metaphor for anorexia and bulimia through her love of monster imagery. Rossetti's "Goblin Market" features instances of eating disorder behaviour (specifically anorexia and binge-eating disorder, or BED) hiding in plain sight. It is the quintessential fairy tale if one considers the genre to, as Frances Dolan puts it, "famously rely on starvation, cannibalism, and hunger" (296). There might not be any overt "cannibalism"

in the poem, but it is hinted at in the juice-suckling lines. Much ink has been spilt over “Goblin Market,” particularly when considering it as a metaphor for sexuality and/or lesbianism. However, viewing the poem as it is—without symbolism, as we will see that Rossetti repeatedly stressed herself—is suggestive of how an obsession with hunger and food presents itself on the page. A person in starvation mode has their every thought preoccupied with food, and a similar fascination can be found in the works of each of these poets. Moore’s consistent, persistent food and eating imagery are ingrained throughout her work, though usually widely accepted as simply nature poems. Consider “The Plumet Basilisk” (1933) which includes repeated feeding images, ending with a stanza that describes a final quenching.

Of course, the fantastical themes of “Goblin Market” and Barrett Browning’s poems are very different from the approaches of Sexton and Plath. Moore serves as a link not just across the Atlantic, but arcing over the turn of the last century, ushering readers out of the Victorian era into a time when transparency and secret-spilling was accepted and even encouraged in poetics. This forthrightness is found when addressing virtually all subjects including sexuality, depression—and food. Sexton’s poem for her daughter “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” (1966) literally turns her offspring into food, vacillating between seeing her as “too many to eat” and noticing the loveliness of her bones. Plath’s work is stuffed with food imagery, from her personal letters and journals that are inundated with careful record-keeping of how much she ate (a tremendous lot), to *The Bell Jar* where Esther is infatuated with how to secure the entirety of the rich caviar for herself, layering it thick as peanut butter. Poetry trends certainly evolved in the years spanned in this thesis, but no matter the era or the

country, poets are drawn to themes that spark passion—and perhaps poems that are acutely personal.

Gull's anorexia definition is still sometimes adhered to today, in that he claimed anorexia mostly occurs in young women between the ages of 16–23 and that common symptoms include fatigue, weight loss, and amenorrhea (*Transactions* 132). This is a simplistic description at best. Today, experts know that eating disorders have no bias. More people of all ages are benefitting from quicker, correct diagnoses so that treatment can commence. Yet Gull's markers do perfectly align with Rossetti's description of Laura in "Goblin Market" and the poem reflects what was thought of anorexia at the time. It would still be more than a century before Albert Stunkard coined the term "binge-eating disorder" (BED) in 1959, and longer still before bulimia was named as a variant of anorexia in 1979 by Gerald Russell (the "variant" aspect has since been voided) (429, "Eating Patterns" 289). However, BED was not added to the *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), the bible of the American Psychiatric Association in the United States, until 2013. Still, Stunkard was BED's primary researcher in mid-century America, and he coined the term just four years before *The Bell Jar* was published.

My methodological approaches of using poetic drafts and several decades of eating disorder research organically brought forth several sub-issues and questions. Do these drafts reveal an unfolding of honesty or more closely-held secrecy when discussing food? How was American society at the time responding to the idea of binge-eating, considering that the country was just shedding the necessary restrictions of the Great Depression and able to indulge in many ways—from decadent food to the baby boom—

for the first time in years? Did the medical texts and theories of eating disorders available and published during the poets' times influence their work? This is not to say that each of these poets sat down and read the latest research on eating disorders, but such case studies do reflect the timely cultural happenings and societal views on food, bodies, hunger, and self-image. These theories and studies show how eating disorders evolved in nearly real-time and how they exist(ed) in the world. Given that art, including poetry, often tackles critical, emerging timely issues, I hypothesise that the poets' work might covertly and/or overtly respond to the changing ideas of eating disorders. Is the naming of bulimia in the twentieth century reflected in the writings of Moore, Sexton, or Plath? Might the idea of parentectomy, the removal of an anorectic child from their parents (a common treatment for anorexia at the turn of the twentieth century), have played a role in the themes relevant in writings by twentieth-century poets?

There are many questions I address in this thesis, all related to eating disorders and poetry in some regard, such as what are the indicators of food compulsion and restriction within the writing of these poets? How might compulsion/restriction have influenced their work? After all, depression and suicide are often linked to eating disorders—restriction can be, in itself, a very slow suicide. What role did food in general play in the poets' work? It is clear in many instances that Plath considered food an experience, not merely sustenance. As Molly Wizenberg says, "Food is never just food. It's also a way of getting at something else: who we are, who we have been, and who we want to be" (2). Plath was also highly preoccupied with appearances, another common theme in those compelled by controlling food, or grasping for such control, but also common amongst American women of her age, class, and era. How can the

metaphors within food compulsion be unearthed and explored in these poets' writing?

Ultimately, the most pressing question is this: how does viewing the poems through the lens of eating disorders shift or expand our understanding of the work?

The Many Mouths of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Dead Pan" and "Runaway Slave"

"What pagan poet ever thought of casting his gods out of poetry? In what Pagan poem, do they not shine & thunder?" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 21). Elizabeth Barrett Browning challenged John Kenyon, a close friend she considered her cousin, in letters throughout the spring of 1843 as he helped her shape the poem initially titled "Pan is Dead." He suggested titling it "The Dead Pan" (1844), which she ultimately accepted. She dedicated this closing poem of the first book of her two-part collection *Poems* (1844, 1850) to him—also crediting his poem "The Gods of Greece" (1843) in a headnote to "The Dead Pan." I chose "The Dead Pan" as one of two poems to examine in this chapter because it exemplifies Barrett Browning's fascination with Pan and all that he entails, from panic (disorders) to unabashed indulgence. Both panic and indulgence have intricate ties to eating disorders, a condition that I and many others suspect Barrett Browning to have suffered.

Carol Lewis made a retroactive diagnosis, calling Barrett Browning anorectic in 1982. Lewis called the eating disorder a "family disease," citing Barrett Browning's reported adult weight (87 pounds) as well as the family's display of an "abundance" of typical "characteristics of anorectic families: enmeshment, overprotection, rigidity, and a lack of conflict resolution" as her means for diagnosis (129). However, this chapter (and thesis) does not aim to diagnose anyone with any sort of disorder, which would be an

impossible and pointless task. Rather, and more importantly, I will explore how eating disorders may have informed Barrett Browning's writing.

There are two drafts of "The Dead Pan" held at the British Library, dated between 1842 and 1844. I compared these drafts to the published versions, the latter of which includes 200 stanzas and 1,400 lines. The poem with its unusual, Byronic rhymes (such as "Aethiopia" and "mandragora") begins with the poem's speaker declaring her love for Greek philosophy and literature (much like the Romantics did) and mourning the passing of the classical age. However, by the end, the refrain of Pan's death morphs into hopeful celebration of a new era rooted in Christianity. Now, it is decreed that poets might be inspired by the present instead of an antiquated bygone era. "Pan" appears 31 times in the poem and, although he is not the only pagan god Barrett Browning makes reference to in this poem and her oeuvre, he is by far the most popular. She routinely describes him lovingly, not as the "cruel" and "terrifying" beast with a "crudely and frighteningly animal nature" that Patricia Merivale claims (84, 82). It is, in fact, not so clear that "Mrs. Browning very obviously prefers the Pan-devil identification" as Merivale further asserts (104). In fact, unless Pan was meant to symbolise "all the Greek deities" (as is quite possible, and as Merivale suggests), Pan is not described in the poem at all (105). However, the many gods Barrett Browning *does* depict do not appear disparagingly, such as Apollo whom she characterises with angelic "mist-like" golden hair (*Collected* 209). Her much later Pan poem, "A Musical Instrument" (1860), shows Pan wreaking havoc, but she still calls him, "Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan!" (*Collected* 660). It is a precursor of sorts to the early twentieth-century trend of female poets calling on Pan to ravish them. One example is Amelia Burr's "Syrinx" (1915), in which the

speaker demands, “Blow, Pan, blow! I am thy pipe, / Let me thy music be” (77). Barrett Browning and Burr were not alone in their devotion. Barrett Browning wrote a total of circa 400 lines of poetry in which Pan was the primary subject, and none of her poems call him by name more so than “The Dead Pan” (Merivale 81). Merivale refers to this recurrence as “monotonous,” but it is not unlike the early stages of infatuation in which a beloved’s name cannot be said too many times (84). Barrett Browning repeats “Pan is Dead” (in some variant) at the end of each stanza in a prayer-like mantra. Sadly, Merivale credits Aleister Crowley’s “Hymn to Pan” (1913) as having the “dullest refrain since Mrs. Browning’s ‘Dead Pan’,” overlooking how Barrett Browning used this method in a way not unlike indoctrination techniques (123).

The shorter draft of the poem held at the British Library titled “Pan is Dead” includes revisions to stanzas 33–39 (British Library Add MS 60391 S [T]). The librarians believe that the longer version was copied and expanded from the shorter draft, which includes revisions throughout. Kenyon’s “The Gods of Greece” paraphrased Friedrich Schiller’s “*Die Götter Griechenlands*” (“Gods of Greece”) (1788), and Barrett Browning also credits Schiller for inspiring “The Dead Pan” in her published headnote. “The Dead Pan” celebrates—on the surface—“Christian Truth” over “Pagan Mythos” by the recurring declaration that, “Pan is dead” (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 70, 21). However, shortly before her own death, Barrett Browning resurrects Pan in her last published poem, “A Musical Instrument,” as a new sort of goat-god (*Collected* 660).

The Evangelical-raised Barrett Browning seemingly tried to, but ultimately could not, turn her back on her favoured pagan gods. Donald Shaw cannot be more wrong by claiming she “had no time for paganism” and wrote strictly of Christian righteousness.

She made plenty of time to explore paganism, both in her personal and creative life. Such study informed much of her mentorship with Greek tutor Hugh Boyd. The highly educated mentor 25 years her senior has been called a substitute father by Robert Cole, though Barrett Browning's initial youthful infatuation is palpable in her diary (xlili). Lewis stresses in her anorexia diagnosis of Barrett Browning that the poet's environmental dynamics were typical of what is known today of families where a child has an eating disorder, with one parent "overinvolved with the children, [and] the other parent emotionally peripheral" (131). Barrett Browning was 22 when her mother died, so if her father was (or became) the "overinvolved" parent, perhaps a better term for Boyd would be a substitute mother.

Barrett Browning's (platonic) relationship with Boyd spanned over two decades from 1827 until his death in 1848. During that time, he moulded her with a diet of encouragement and chastisement. Emotions ran deep during those years, particularly for Barrett Browning. She wrote that at one point she was "very unwilling to read Greek" even at Boyd's direct request, claiming, "I fancied that he proposed it as if it were a self infliction [sic]" (*Diary* 77). Greek was their primary discussion in the first years of letters, and Boyd questioned Barrett Browning extensively about her reading and study habits. When they began meeting in person, she read Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* aloud to him, then translated it in just 13 days. This keen interest exemplifies what would become a recurring theme in her own work: macabre mouth imagery. The "horrible jaws" found in *Prometheus Bound* could just as easily be applied to the various Greek figures found throughout her poems. The eponymous heroine of *Aurora Leigh* first describes a painting of her mother as, "A still Medusa with mild milky brows / All curdled

and all clothed upon with snakes" (*Collected* 307). From Tereus to Kronos and even Pan in some instances, like in "A Musical Instrument" where his mouth on the reed creates a "piercing" sound, gruesome mouths abound in Barrett Browning's work (46, *Collected* 660).

Schiller and Kenyon shared a "Lament for Gods of Greece" in their poems, whereas Barrett Browning revealed in a letter to Mary Russell Mitford on 11 April 1843 that she considered the "false Gods well gone," preferring to stand in the "Truth" (*Brownings' Correspondence* 70). Her faith appears strong here, but it is tempered with a lifelong fascination with Greek and pagan gods. It is no surprise that Pan, the "father of poets" according to Robert Louis Stevenson, has long been captivating to those with ill health, from Barrett Browning to Sylvia Plath (19). Johan Ludvig Heiberg's "Gudstjeneste" ("Religious Service") (1841) declared Pan the official poets' god just two years prior to Barrett Browning's drafting of her own Pan poem:

Pan ...

Kom, o Digter, da herud! ["Come, o Poet, out of there!"]

Digteren ["Poet"]

Ha! hvo taler her? ["Ha! Who's talking there?"]

Pan

Din Gud ["Your God"]

(qtd. Jon Stewart 122)

Pan is, etymologically and in many examples metaphorically, at the root of “panic.” Well over a century after “The Dead Pan” was published, Plath would claim that her makeshift Ouija board and spirit guide was named Pan, going on to mention him 25 times in her oeuvre (*Journals* 401). His derivative also appears, of course, in the title of her short story collection *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977). Merriam Webster states that panic stems from Pan because the Greek god was known for causing humans to flee in unfounded fear. Rachel Pollock says that to panic means to be metaphorically “possessed by the god Pan” (34).

Not everyone agrees that Pan is tied to panic, or at least not exclusively. Merivale claims that there is much “etymological confusion” when it comes to the meaning of “pan” and that the “correct” derivation is from “pa-on” or “grazer,” though she gives no reference for this assertion (9). However, a “grazer” would certainly reflect Pan’s ties to herding and his propensity to over-indulge. It is no surprise that Pan is (and was) routinely linked to the unabashed joys and innocence of a pre-civilised world throughout much of literary history. Consider the poetry of the Romantics, like Percy Shelley’s “Hymn of Pan” (1824) or John Keats’s “Hymn to Pan” in Book I of *Endymion* (1817), and the reverence of an unindustrialised world these poems celebrate (169, 66). Pan was subsequently a fitting figure for the Victorian poets who often used their craft to embrace a wholly natural yet animalistic tendency that society dictated should be suppressed. There are many facets of Pan’s traits (and ours) that were especially repressed during this period, and they should be considered when analysing Barrett Browning’s work—and life. These details could mirror not only her intentions, but also

intimate, underlying influences. Her enchantment with mythology was particularly strong when it came to pagan deities like Pan and Bacchus who exemplified the unbridled consumption she could not herself enjoy. “The Dead Pan” was drafted 30 years before Charles Ernest Lasègue first wrote of “anorexia hystérique” in 1873 (*Archives générales de médecine*) and before the disorder was permanently dubbed “anorexia nervosa” shortly thereafter by William Withey Gull in 1873/1874 (*Transactions of the Clinical* 22). It would be well over a century before bulimia nervosa (bulimia) was named as a variant of anorexia in 1979 by Gerald Russell (429, “Eating Patterns” 289). Today, of course, much more is known about eating disorders than during Barrett Browning’s, Lasègue’s, and Gull’s era, such as the fact that an overwhelming majority of those with eating disorders also suffer from anxiety disorders—including panic disorder. One recent case study found more incidents of panic disorders in both anorectics (34 percent) and bulimics (15 percent) than any other type of anxiety disorder (Godart 38).

There are several markers for eating disorders, and co-morbidities like anxiety disorders are just one. Curiously, in Lewis’s diagnosis, she quotes Lasègue’s research but overlooks the anorectic’s tendency to exhibit bursts of energy in the early stages. Lasègue’s account of “anorexie hystérique” *finds that as anorectics eat less and less, “this abstinence tends to increase the aptitude for movement”* (148). Gull described his own case studies as “restless and active ... it seemed hardly possible, that a body so wasted could undergo the exercise which seemed agreeable” (22). Lasègue outlines three stages of anorexia, with the third and final stage including amenorrhea (menses ceasing) as the regression to a pre-pubescent childhood comes complete. He calls most of these third-stage patients semi-docile, equally in control of and subservient to

their desires (153). Lewis repeatedly mentions Barrett Browning's notorious ill health, claiming that her health was "never robust" (130). The poet was actually quite active at times, reportedly running up hills and partaking in what would have been exhilarating activities for a Victorian woman. Since this seemingly *unusual surge of energy was first included* Lasègue's research, it has been recorded by multiple researchers in the past century, such as Regina Casper ("Restless activation" 750). Elizabeth Berridge also notes Barrett Browning's active phases, commenting that when Barrett Browning was 25 years old, her "energy at this period of her life was remarkable ... she seemed able to undertake extremely energetic exercise" (*Diary* 30). Such an anecdote is a far cry from the image of the oft bedridden and delicate "Ba," as Robert Browning called her (a derivative of "Baby"), that is so much more familiar.³ The ability to be "Ba," a baby forever, closely aligns with what was thought of anorexia during the nineteenth century, full regression fulfilled.

Superficially, "The Dead Pan" in both draft and published form details the death of the Greek god (perhaps all pagan gods) and, as can be inferred, the death of our own wants. However, Barrett Browning tucked in a myriad mythoi and symbols that go far beyond the simplicity of what the title suggests—but not all are trustworthy. She reveals to readers that yet another inspiration for her poem is the treatise of Plutarch (*De Oraculorum Defectu*), but much liberty is taken in her reading of it. She writes in the

³ Carol Lewis reports that "Ba" was a family nickname for Barrett Browning and was a "contraction of 'Baby'" (129). In a letter to her sister, Henrietta Browning, Barrett Browning wrote, "And now Robert is as pleased as I am, after all his jokes against 'his little Ba-lamb' (one of my names!)" (*Twenty-two Unpublished Letters* 17).

headnote for “The Dead Pan” that, “at the hour of the Saviour’s agony, a cry of ‘Great Pan is dead!’ swept across the waves in the hearing of certain mariners, and the oracles ceased” (qtd. *Brownings’ Correspondence* 21). G.K. Chesterson echoes this sentiment 80 years later, saying, “Pan died because Christ was born” (316). In truth, Plutarch, the Greek Platonist philosopher who lived during the time of Christ, did not actually specify Jesus/Christ in his treatise—nor, technically, did Barrett Browning with her use of the term “Saviour.” “Saviour” is derived from Soter (Σωτήρ), a Greek figure who personified safety, but Plutarch does not make any mention of Soter. Barrett Browning perpetuates a rumour in her headnote that the repetition “Great Pan is dead!” happened at the hour of the “Saviour’s agony” (Plutarch 403). There is simply no mention of anything like Christ or a Saviour by Plutarch, but Barrett Browning was not alone in placing Christ there (no matter the facts). Edmund Spenser claimed in the sixteenth century that “all Oracles surceased ... about the same time that our Lord suffered his most bitter passion for the redemption of man” (qtd. James Baldwin 178, 179). The reign of Tiberius is mentioned in *De Oraculorum Defectu*, and in the fifteenth century Felix Fabri notes, “Christ was crucified in the nineteenth year of Tiberius’ reign” (234). If this is true, this does place Christ as living at the same time as Tiberius.

However, these details alone do not mean that Pan died at the same time Christ was crucified (and, in turn, rose). Some scholars believe this was only partially the case because the two (Pan and Christ) were twinned. There is a sustaining interpretation of a Pan-Christ duality throughout literary history, such as *Françoise Rabelais’s* claim in the fifteenth century, “*Car cestuy très bon, très grand Pan, nostre unique Servateur, mourut lez Hiérusalem, régnant en Romme Tibère César*” [for this most good, most great Pan,

our only Saviour, died near Jerusalem, while Tiberius Caesar was reigning in Rome] (407). Barrett Browning appears aware of a similar duality within herself. “In writing him [Pan] out ... may I not have disgraced myself by ‘immortality,’” she wrote to Kenyon on 10 May 1843 (*Brownings’ Correspondence* 117). James Thomson’s polemic “Great Christ is Dead!” (1875) further touches upon this duality (while also answering the declaration of Barrett Browning and others). Merivale considers Barrett Browning as having a “clear Pan-Christ opposition,” counteracting Rabelais (74). Margaret Morlier agrees, claiming that, “In rejecting Pan, Barrett Browning rejected a well-established literary tradition associating Pan with Christ and with the artist” (136). However, this was an attempted separation at best, from both Barrett Browning’s faith and herself-as-artist, that she could not maintain throughout her life—as becomes evident in “A Musical Instrument.” It is not that “Pan did not die so easily in 1844” as Morlier suggests, but rather that (like Christ) for Barrett Browning he never truly died at all. It would be she and other poets who resurrect him in later poems, not a specific god—unless, of course, poets/Poets (or the “artist”), Pan, and Christ are a holy triffecta. Such an intersection is suggested by Barrett Browning in her struggle to decide whether to capitalise “poets” in the shorter, earlier version of “The Dead Pan.” Stanza 34 reads in published form:

Earth outgrows the mythic fancies
Sung beside her in her youth;
And those debonair romances
Sound but dull beside the truth.
Phoebus’ chariot-course is run:

Look up, poets, to the sun!

Pan, Pan is dead.

(*Collected* 214)

Barrett Browning experimented with this stanza intensely before deciding on its final form. Lines 5 and 6 in the stanza read in draft form, “~~Put away~~ Poets, leave your Tereus’ tale’— / Listen to the nightingale.” Her initial urging to an anonymous person or persons to, “Put away your Tereus tale!” is redacted as she redirects the command to all “Poets.” One can assume she includes herself in this group. Two stanzas later, it is declared that “God Himself is the best Poet,” which aligns the “Poets” with God but also echoes polytheism with the plurality of “Poets.” The “Poets” of Barrett Browning’s draft is also reminiscent of the capitalised “P” of Heiberg’s “Digteren” (“Poet”) as well as the final line in Kenyon’s paraphrase, “Ye live in Poet’s dream alone” (80). The capitalisation does not persist to published form, suggesting a touch of humility or, perhaps, a fall from godhood. Ultimately, Barrett Browning was part of a lineage that placed a shaky interpretation of *De Oraculorum Defectu* into the literary canon, inserting Christianity where it may not have been intended by Plutarch. One must wonder, then, in what other ways her poetry might reveal personal biases or, perhaps more aptly, hidden personal truths.

Corinne Davies says that Barrett Browning’s Pan addresses “complex cultural issues of sexual desire and violation of the woman,” and while that may be correct in part, it is not a complete assessment (561). Pan embodies overindulgence of every common vice. Barrett Browning’s preoccupation with gods like Pan should not be

considered solely in connection to the overt sexuality they represent, as has been suggested by many scholars such as Davies. It has been argued by some, like Merivale, that “sexuality is, for poetic purposes, the most vivid aspect of our animal natures,” but to consider just sex is to ignore the rest of our bestial selves, and that would be a disservice to ourselves and to poets like Barrett Browning (90). Susan Bordo has found similar oversights of hunger when teaching. For instance, when she presents Delmore Schwartz’s “The Heavy Bear” to her students, most interpret it as the “sufferings of an overweight man” (*Unbearable Weight* 4). She must then explain, that “the hunger for food is just one of the body’s appetites; for [her] female students, it is *the* most insistent craving and the preeminent source of their anger and frustration with the body, indeed of their *terror* of it.” Our root instincts are also intricately intertwined. Today, for example, it has been widely observed that anorectic patients have a low libido, often substituting “anorexia for sexual behavior” (Abraham 10). We simply cannot bypass Pan’s (and our) other base instincts, such as eating and all the complexities—and disorders—that may accompany it. Food is a necessity for living, while sex is purely a necessity for creating life. Both are requirements for perpetuating mankind, and both were staunchly discouraged for Victorian women except in approved, restricted, and acceptable means and measures.

The demand to be frail and the denial of blossoming sexuality (or attempted reversal in adult patients) often overlaps for the anorectic. During the Victorian era a scant diet was prescribed to “ladies” since a “healthy appetite in a woman was often seen as an unacceptable sign of sexuality and a lack of self-restraint ... ladies were taught to feign lack of appetite” (McEachern 141). It was an era when talking (or writing)

about food was one of the few ways to talk about sex, so it is no wonder the two became such close bedmates. Katharina Vester contends that “like their sexuality, women’s hunger was meant to remain invisible in the late nineteenth century” (136).

According to Olga Vera-Auger:

Rituals for food intake restrictions and other forms of appetite suppression (such as inhibition of certain foods, self-starvation, and even purging) were encouraged to delay the process of sexual maturation in young girls to prolong their purity (fear of early menarche) and to control female sexual urges in order to avoid carnal sin. (46)

Victorian women were not to avoid eating entirely, of course, but rather to eat the right foods in the right quantities at the right time and place. Anna Silver stresses that, for women of a certain class, “Not to eat *at all* was extremely disruptive of social norms [in the Victorian period], specifically middle-class norms. A woman who did not eat disobeyed her family’s directives and did not conform to rules of passive and obedient female behavior” (15). These societal expectations and restrictions can kickstart or exacerbate the development of an eating disorder, although that of course was not the goal of the Victorian diet when eating disorders were yet to be named. However, these culturally sanctioned dietary restrictions provided an avenue for self-starvation—as well as a means to delay responsibility and adulthood. Such a postponement was achieved by Barrett Browning via a lifetime of ill health, as she certainly did not take on the typical role of the Victorian lady. Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds note in their

introduction to the anthology *Victorian Women Poets* (1995) that in the poetry of these women, “home is either an ideal that is yearned for, or else it is a prison-house from which to escape” (xxxvi). Barrett Browning experienced both: the bedridden imprisonment of her father’s home and, later, her idyllic home with her husband where she could eschew typical obligations associated with her station. She wrote to Elizabeth Ogilvy in 1858, “It’s a privilege on my part and an advantage on my husband’s that I have never ordered dinner once since my marriage ... what would become of me (and of the house) I wonder, if I had a house to manage” (Berridge 19). Susan Bordo suggests

Yet female bodies [of the 1980s], pursuing these ideals [of thinness], may find themselves as distracted, depressed, and physically ill as female bodies of the nineteenth century were made when pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency domesticity, and delicacy. (*Unbearable Weight* 184)

Writers, and particularly women writers, have long used their craft as a tool for rebellion. However, such dissent is not often examined through the lens of potential eating disorders. It is simply and literally sexier to focus on sex, particularly when examining Pan poems (though sexuality and gender can and do certainly play a role in eating disorders). Although Lasègue and Gull are usually credited with naming the first studied eating disorder (anorexia) in the 1870s, eating disorders were clearly prevalent well before and during Barrett Browning’s lifetime. Recall *Louis-Victor Marcé, who was researching what appears to be anorexia* at the same time Barrett Browning was writing

“The Dead Pan.” Joseph Silverman *claims* Marcé’s “Note sur une forme de delire hypochondriaque consecutive aux dyspepsies et caracterisee principalement par le refus d'aliments” (“On a form of Hypochondriacal Delirium succeeding Dyspepsia”), published in 1860, “clearly establishes *Marcé’s* role as a pioneer among the nineteenth century’s limners of anorexia nervosa” (833). Rachel Ablow says that during the Victorian period some writers “associated the term ‘hypochondria’ with what we might call anorexia” today (18). *Marcé’s predecessor, Richard Morton, claimed in the seventeenth century*, “The immediate cause of this Distemper I apprehend to be in the System of the Nerves,” making him the first to connect anorexia with nervousness (nervosa) (5).

Health, or lack thereof, has long been a hallmark of “confessional” and personally charged poetry—in Plath’s case to such a degree that some call part of her oeuvre, such as “In Plaster” (1961), “hospital poems” (Perloff 102). Barrett Browning was published over a century before the school of “confessional poetry” was named, but she can and should be considered a predecessor of sorts to the genre. The term and, in turn, sub-genre of “confessionalism” is shrouded in subjectivity and a touch of controversy. Rosenthal initially claims in “Poetry as Confession” that Lowell finally “removes the mask” previously sported by Symbolists like Eliot and Pound where a “certain indirection masks the poets’ actual face and psyche” (109). He references the Romantics (Barrett Browning’s predecessors) who “spoke directly of their emotions but did not give the game away even to themselves” (109). He opens by quoting Dickinson, who called publication “the auction of the mind” and compared it to what he deemed Lowell’s quest for “soul’s therapy” (109). His review was at times brutal, saying Lowell’s

“self-therapeutic motive is so obvious and persistent” and noting one poem’s revelation of “grossly sensual, mindlessly grasping egotism” (110–111). Ultimately, Rosenthal finds that Lowell “casts his autobiographical prose a certain whimsy (though often morbid) and childlike half-awareness” (112). One decade later in 1969, he backtracks, but by then it is too late. His review was the springboard for a school of poetry impossible to leash in from the world. This time, he admits, “confessional poetry was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school of poetry has by now done a certain degree of damage” (The New Poets 25).

Moore did not “smash at the reader’s feelings,” as Rosenthal said of Lowell, but rather hinted at a more intimate realm in her work during a period when it was not proper or safe to do so (110). One way of achieving this was to use Greek and pagan gods as avatars—in much the same way that Marianne Moore used animals (as we will see). She succeeded, much like Algernon Swinburne, in what Catherine Maxwell calls “an uncanny reinvigoration and reworking of complex antique and historic verse forms such as classical Greek tragedy” (“Decadent” 185). Such avatars can be found in abundance in “The Dead Pan,” among many other poems, and are traceable throughout the drafts. Avatars protect the poet, as do some word choice changes from draft to publication. One draft of “The Dead Pan” at the British Library has, in stanza 29, pagans who wail “cloak-like, their Divine!” (Ashley MS 213). By publication, they wail “vest-like,” exchanging the secrecy of being cloaked with the more shell-like armour of a vest. Secrets and protection were core elements of not only Barrett Browning’s poems but her life and the life of most, if not all, Victorian women. This reticence extended to her inner world to which we are partially privy to thanks to her diary and letters, materials

that Mary Eagleton claims “complicated our understanding of literary history”—and where evidence is especially clear that she may have had an eating disorder.

Punctuation is a critical component of the anorectic’s writing as some scholars like Alexandra Rigl report, and we can see Barrett Browning pay special attention to these choices throughout the drafts. For example, Stanza 34 of “The Dead Pan” reveals a curious incident where she exchanges a dash for a colon in the final version. She usually favoured the dash in all her writing. The editors of her diary, Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson, point out that “her principal tool in punctuating [in her diary] was the dash, used either by itself or in conjunction with other punctuation marks; the dashes in her Diary vary from the merest elongation of a period to a continuous dash of over one and a half inches” (*Diary* xxvii). According to Rigl, “the dash constitutes a punctuation device rooted firmly” in this aesthetic and echoes fellow nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson’s rampant use of the dash as a quintessential anorectic styling (51). The aesthetic of the dash mirrors the effects and goals of anorexia with its long, lithe appearance and ability to do away with unnecessary excess, whether it be text or body mass. Foregoing a dash for a colon suggests an abrupt stop or shift. An elongated dash visually urges one on, while a colon calls to mind a caging. When the line becomes “Phoebus’ chariot-course is run: / Look up, poets, to the sun!” in publication, the dash is subdued, neutered, tucked as a hyphen between “chariot-course” as Barrett Browning shuns Tereus, the Thracian King she alone injected into the continuation of the Schiller and Kenyon poetic meeting point.

“Phoebus’ chariot-course” is a nod to Schiller’s “The Gods of Greece” where we find “Phoebus Apollo, in his golden car” and Kenyon’s paraphrasing of a Phoebus that

“urged his chariot on” (Kenyon 78). Neither Schiller nor Kenyon reference Tereus in their poems. In fact, Schiller does not mention Pan in his poem either—that was an addition by Kenyon. As the tale of Tereus goes, he was tricked into eating the flesh of his son, Itys. This blasphemy occurs after his wife, Procne, discovers that Tereus had raped and cut out the tongue of her sister, Philomela. Procne rescues her sister and the two plot their revenge. In their distress, they decide that sacrificing Itys will be the most agonising fate for the Tereus. They serve him a meal that they stress is only fit for kings so that they do not have to partake. After unknowingly consuming Itys, Tereus at first does not believe it when he is told that he ate his child. When he realises the truth, Tereus overturns the table and chases them with swords—but in the end, all three turn into birds. Tereus becomes a hawk, Philomela a swallow, and Procne a nightingale.

Barrett Browning does not “listen to the nightingale” or instruct the characters of her poem to do so, but instead rescues the “poets/Poets” of her poem by removing mention of “Tereus’ tale” entirely. This redaction keeps the poets from following in the footsteps of those who committed an abomination through food. She rejects her preoccupation with the mouth as unnatural and grotesque with this decision. Her fascination with myths and figures known for devouring heinous foods can be found throughout Barrett Browning’s writing to such a degree that, had Freud analysed her work, he may have considered her enchantment akin to “phantasies” of oral impregnation—and, as Derrida says, “because he is dead and thus incapable of responding, Freud can only acquiesce” (41). Such “phantasies” would later be strongly linked to eating disorders in the twentieth century. Freud coined the term in 1899 in his letters to Wilhelm Fleiss:

Do you know, for instance, why XY suffers from hysterical vomiting? Because in phantasy she is pregnant, because she is so insatiable that she cannot put up with not having a baby by her last phantasy lover as well. But she must vomit too, because in that case she will be starved and emaciated, and will lose her beauty and no longer be attractive to anyone. Thus the sense of the symptom is a contradictory pair of wish-fulfilments. (278)

By 1938, John Waller had equated two common side-effects of anorexia with Freud's oral impregnation: constipation and amenorrhea. He saw constipation "equated with the pregnant abdomen" and the stopping of menses that occurs with many anorectic women as similar to the temporary cessation during pregnancy (259). The neglected *Marcé* had already made note 80 years earlier in his 1860 case studies of constipation and amenorrhea in such patients. According to his findings, this made it "difficult to provoke the expulsion once a fortnight or once a month of matter hard and ovular" (264). Stanley Cobb asserted in 1950 that kissing and swallowing are also "fantasied as ways of becoming pregnant," and that this often leads to anxiety, dieting, food refusal, and even "orgies of eating" (binge-eating) (*Emotions and Clinical Medicine* 180). Swallowing and gulping are recurring themes not only in Barrett Browning's poetry—often through avatars—but also in Plath's poetry, such as "Mirror" and "Gigolo," as well as the binge-eating caviar scene in *The Bell Jar*. Researchers in the twentieth century found that anorexia and BED were not the only eating disorders correlated to oral impregnation. At a Mt. Sinai Seminar Group in 1964, it was suggested that, "Since

eating symbolizes pregnancy—oral impregnation—one can understand the periodic breakthrough on an unconscious level of the need to gratify this impulse and relate it to the periods of bulimia” (*Evolution of Psychosomatic Concepts* 131). At the time, this “bulimia” referred only to seemingly uncontrollable and unprovoked vomiting, not bulimia nervosa (commonly referred to today as simply bulimia), an eating disorder which was not deemed as such until 16 years later.

Purging in Barrett Browning’s poetry was not attributed to Tereus alone. “Wine of Cyprus” (1844), where Pan also appears (he is, after all, the pagan god of wine), details an elixir that is too decadent for the poem’s speaker, but not so for the large “mouth of Titan” (*Collected* 196). Barrett Browning wrote “Wine of Cyprus” the same year as “The Dead Pan,” and the Titan might be an avatar for Barrett Browning, Boyd, or both. She penned a letter comparing Boyd to a god gifting her, a lowly human, heavenly ambrosia, calling the wine a “divine nectar, which was sparingly tasted” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mr. Boyd* xxxvi). The king of the Titans featured in “Wine of Cyprus” was Kronos, known for eating his children to ensure his own safety. His wife, Rhea, eventually tricks Kronos into eating a stone that forces him to vomit up their offspring. The twindom of Kronos and Tereus is quite clear. From birth (Kronos) to death (Tereus), the cycle of life is facilitated by the mouth—just as Freud would suggest less than 40 years after “The Dead Pan” was published. Kronos has also been associated with Chronos since antiquity, which led to the image of “Father Time” holding a scythe during the Renaissance period. As Kronos consumes and regurgitates his children, Chronos reminds us of the inherent destruction that time inflicts upon all—even the homophonic Kronos. Much like Titan king attempting to stop the result of time (old age, death, and

being replaced) by eating his children, a person with an eating disorder tries to do the same by *not* eating much at all.

As for the “Wine of Cyprus” speaker, she remains “sipping like a fly,—” at the Cypriot wine throughout the poem, the same wine that Boyd gifted Barrett Browning (*Collected* 196). In a letter to Boyd dated 3 April 1845, she wrote, “I have been intending every day to write and tell you that the Cyprus wine is as nectareous as possible,—so fit for the gods, in fact, that I have been forced to leave it off as unfit for *me*—it made me so feverish” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mr. Boyd* 275). We cannot know how much of the wine she drank, but what is evident is that the gift sparked a desire to empty herself of it. Barrett Browning not only dedicated this poem to Boyd but included in the headnote that the “Wine of Cyprus” was “Given to me by H.S. Boyd,” suggesting that the poem is a fantastical type of personal narrative (*Collected* 196).

The following stanza in “Wine of Cyprus” finds Pan bingeing on the wine, which is reminiscent of the “orgies of eating” that Cobb would later describe in the twentieth century:

Pan might dip his head so deep in
That his ears along pricked out,
Fauns around him, pressing, leaping,
Each one pointing to his throat:
While the Naiads, like Bacchantes,
Wild, with urns thrown out to waste,
Cry, ‘O earth, that thou wouldst grant us

Springs to keep, of such a taste!’

(*Collected Poems* 196)

Today, we know that bingeing is a common event for many with eating disorders. It often directly precedes a bulimic episode and anorectic restriction periods, but BED is also now its own diagnosable eating disorder.

The first three stanzas of “Wine of Cyprus” show myriad Greek gods and figures craving the wine to such an intense degree that all reasoning is forgotten—which is similar to a BED episode in which instances akin to blackouts have been reported, dubbed “blackout eating” by Natalie Gold (312). However, the speaker of the poem resists the temptation to binge like Pan, largely because she believes herself “not worthy” of indulging—much like Barrett Browning told Boyd his gifted wine was fit for gods, not her (197). This speaker is no goddess, just a meagre fly who can only sip, but even those small sips do not come so easily. It might seem as if eating like a fly means eating very little, but consider how, what, and the amounts flies eat, particularly since Barrett Browning uses the refrain “sipping like a fly” thrice verbatim within “Wine of Cyprus.” It is a simile that climaxes in the final lines with “That, in drinking from *that* beaker, / I am sipping like a fly” (*Collected* 201). The common house fly eats anything from human food to garbage and faeces, and is notorious for dining on rancid items. However, it is the process by which fly eats that is most telling. They have a type of sponging mouth that does not allow for solid foods. Flies liquefy their food through a routine regurgitation process. In other words, vomiting and purging are constant, requisite aspects of a fly’s life. They cannot live or eat without vomiting. By way of the

repetitive mention of the fly, it (and its digestive process) is a noteworthy part of Barrett Browning's macabre mouth- and vomit-centric imagery and avatars. Kronos and the fly are featured in the final, published "Wine of Cyprus," but the Tereus of "The Dead Pan" is not deemed worthy (or perhaps suitable) to stay beyond draft stage.

...chapter continues (but cutting it off here due to submission call requirements)