others, have special demands on a compassionate reader's attention" (150). This is a generous sentiment, one that might appeal to those for whom the text in the present is more important than the time it illuminates, but it will undoubtedly make some historians wince. She then summons the same post-structuralists whom she denigrates in the introduction to call into question the veracity of written evidence. In the end she accepts the inherent limits of oral tradition with an unsatisfying literary truism: "questions of truth are not the same as questions of accuracy" (151).

Shell's conclusions, after the unconvincing challenge to factual certainty, are reasonable and modest. "Orally transmissible material" she says, can legitimately be used as "a rich source of views held about Catholicism in early modern England, and as a key means of Catholic self-definition." This is followed by the equally unobjectionable: "oral traditions were a crucial means of preserving Catholic matter in post-Reformation England" (169). More than this, Catholic oral traditions illuminate the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century struggle of faiths in a way that the purely written record does not. The presence of a vigorous Catholic oral culture argues, as do several of Shell's cited historians, for the vigor and vitality of the faith, even as official repression intensified. For this contribution, and for the sources she has brought into the light and into the scholarly conversation, *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England* is an important and largely successful book.

Elena Levy-Navarro, *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity: Body Image in Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and Skelton*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 238 pp. $80.00. Review by GARY KUCHAR, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA.

Elena Levy-Navarro's *The Culture of Obesity* deploys the insights and strategies of queer and feminist theory in order to narrate a history of the fat body from the late Middle Ages to the present. The aim of the book is avowedly activist: Levy-Navarro intends her history "to intervene in our historical moment by viewing this moment through the early modern period" (1-2). The ultimate goal of this

history is to encourage us "to place ourselves with [fat bodies] rather than against them" (19). More precisely, the purpose of the book is to leverage early modern literature and cultural analysis against what Levy-Navarro diagnoses as our current, and in her view, thoroughly pathological, "fat panic" (1). In pursuing this end, the argument takes some very ambitious turns, including a critique of historical and scientific objectivity and an attack on the linear conceptions of time apparently informing our current revulsion of fatness and our corollary obsession with thinness. In short, this is a book for those who wish to see Falstaff win out over Hal.

The book divides into six chapters, moving from a polemical introduction to readings of *Piers Plowman,* Skelton's *Elynour Rummynge,* Shakespeare's *Henry IV* parts I and II, Middleton's *A Game At Chess*, and Ben Jonson. Chapter one, "Toward a Constructionist Fat History," sets the stage for the argument by analyzing some of the moralizing hyperbole deployed in influential (contemporary North American) scientific studies of obesity. Levy-Navarro focuses particular attention on the tendency in our current "representational regime" to describe obesity as a pandemic analogous to "the worst cataclysms of human history, whether that be the Black Death, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the 2001 terrorist attacks" or other events of a similar scale (3). It is clear from the various studies Levy-Navarro adduces that our current attitudes towards fat are not constituted by value-neutral, strictly objective analyses, but are built on culturally and historically mediated anxieties that have yet to be fully grasped. Not surprisingly, however, Levy-Navarro's demonstration of this point is more effective when she is exposing the ideological assumptions behind our culture's hyperbole about fatness than when she critiques the scientific validity of particular studies. Perhaps the least satisfying feature of Chapter one is its championing of the mystifying, and ultimately teleological, vision of Christian figurality in order to establish "a history that self-consciously thwarts the regulatory imperative apparent in modern, teleological history" (24). The logic of this move is, at best, unclear, at worst, incoherent.

Chapter two, "A Time Before Fat? Gluttony in *Piers Plowman*," begins by provocatively arguing that the obese body, understood as "an individualized, self-contained object, which is seen as being

violated by fat flesh" did not exist in the premodern period (36). It is only with the rise of a "'civilized elite'—a small group of arrivistes," Levy-Navarro argues, that our modern representational regime of obesity emerged out of the "time before fat" (31). The argument here is almost exactly analogous to Foucault's claims about "homosexuality" as an historically emergent category and Levy-Navarro says as much. By following Foucault in this way, Levy-Navarro argues that the differences between premodern and modern bodily regimes are bald differences of kind. Despite this simplification of what is surely a more complex phenomenon, she makes an interesting case that the fat body becomes increasingly "marked, stigmatized, and understood to be the emblem of our collective excess" (30). This argument involves some helpful distinctions, made in reference to *Piers Plowman*, between obesity and slothfulness, physical fatness and spiritual-moral gluttony.

Chapter three, "Emergence of Fatness Defiant: Skelton at Court," interprets *Elynour Rummynge* as a criticism of the civilizing aesthetic of the emerging renaissance elite, a work that is in sympathy with the "outrageous bodily aesthetic" of the poem's tavern-women (46). Levy-Navarro concludes her reading by asking, "might we not align ourselves with the aesthetic of the tavern against the petty aesthetic of the courtier simply because the former is perhaps more fun?" thereby reversing the value-system of the court-elites (65). Although such an argument raises familiar questions about the legitimacy of reversal as a subversive strategy, the book does not take such questions into account. Nor does chapter two's discussion of the anti-court aesthetic involve consideration of poetic form—resulting in an exclusively thematic and somewhat unsatisfying reading.

Chapter four, "Lean And Mean: Shakespeare's Criticism Of Thin Privilege," offers an interpretation of the Henry IV plays that should be of real value in today's classrooms. In it, Levy-Navarro shows how "Shakespeare underscores the predatory aspect of the new bodily aesthetic, [an aesthetic] which consumes certain bodies even as it shores up the power of the new civilized elite" (68-69). In Levy-Navarro's hands, the Henry IV plays become sites in which the future of fat is envisioned even as it is powerfully critiqued. While Levy-Navarro views Shakespeare as an astute critic of an unethical

and distinctly modern thin-regime, she castigates Middleton's *A Game Of Chess* for exemplifying the Calvinist dimensions of such a regime. Focusing on the Fat Bishop of Middleton's play, Chapter five makes a persuasive case that anti-Catholic polemic in the period helped bolster what would become our contemporary bourgeois sense of revulsion towards fatness.

The book concludes by implicating readers into its argument as Levy-Navarro leads us to ask, with Ben Jonson, "Do you want to live in a world of dead objects, weighed and measured by an objective system of measurement, or do you want to live in a world where objects, things, and even bodies are animated by a lively human judgment? Are you going to be . . . a merchant, a superficial courtier, or a friend?" (149). This strategy of formulating questions which presuppose their own answers is indicative of the book's polemical ends, not to mention its relentlessly indignant tone—a tone that matches the hyperbolic moralism of our current "fat regime" toe-for-toe.

While this book is timely, and while it should be of real use in the classroom, its polemical aims tend to result in narrowly construed readings of multifaceted literary texts. And although cultural critics who are sympathetic with the book's assumptions and aims may find the moralistic tone appropriate, other readers, particularly those most in need of being persuaded, likely will not. Despite Levy-Navarro's stated aims, when it comes to the book's own rhetorical effects, Falstaffian exuberance loses out to a species of Foucauldian puritanism. That said, the book's demonstration of how fat bodies are marked in early and late modernity, over and against unmarked thin bodies, is valuable and challenging. Because such arguments have the ability to make a real difference in readers' lives, especially, I would think, in the lives of young readers, Levy-Navarro's book deserves to be engaged, however cautiously.