

Elisa Heuser (University of Tübingen)
PhD Student under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Monique Scheer

« Sarah Jacob (1857- 1869) - The Welsh 'Marvellous' Fasting Woman. Performance and Politics of Wonder »

The aim of my PhD is to investigate the phenomenon of 'miraculous' fasting by women, so-called Fasting Girls or Miraculous Maids in the second half of the 19th century in Western-Europe and North America. These women declared that they were eating and drinking very little or nothing over a period of several months to several years. They received regional, national, and sometimes even international attention from journalists, newspaper readers and visitors, as well as from doctors, clergy, and lawyers.

The truthfulness of the Fasting Women's statements was verified by watches, during which local men of honour or medical personnel observed the women in their homes continuously for several days or weeks. In the process, some women were exposed as impostors, while others were considered to be 'officially' recognised miracles - although rather involuntarily confirmed by medical experts who simply weren't able to expose any fraud.

I want to analyse the Fasting Girls neither within the history of medicine nor the history of religion. Rather the new approach I follow in my PhD is a focus on the spectacle and considering the Fasting Women as kind of tourist attractions. The METIS doctoral school gave me the opportunity to talk about one particular Fasting Woman and the relation to the spectacular. In my opinion, specific to the spectacular and the Fasting Women is the emphasis on theatrical elements of her performed fast in the descriptions of the contemporaries. On one hand I'm interested in the codes and uses of the spectacular by the Fasting Women as well as the spectators and on the other hand on the commercial organization of the performed fasts.

The story of Sarah Jacob¹ can be described as a tragic one.² On the seventeenth December of 1869 eighteen-sixty-nine, when she was not yet thirteen years old, she died of starvation. There was no shortage of food or unwillingness to provide her with food. Her family, trained nurses and medical men were around her when she passed away, but they all quite literally watched her die.

Sarah Jacob and her family claimed that she had not eaten the preceding two years, two months, and one week.³ She had become a national celebrity when newspaper published articles about the "wonderful little girl"⁴ known as the "Welsh Fasting Girl"⁵. Clerics as well as medical men

¹ Most of the sources and secondary literature e.g. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography use the last name 'Jacob' but there are some sources e.g. newspaper articles who use 'Jacobs'. I will only use 'Jacobs' when quoting the corresponding sources.

² For example: "The *drama* of the Welsh fasting girl [...] has ended *tragically*." Anon, "The Week. Topics of the Day", *The Medical Times and Gazette*, 25 December 1869, p. 738; "Carmarthen Tragedy" Anon, No Title, in: *The Western Mail*, 27 December 1869, p. 2.

³ Cf. Robert Fowler, A Complete History of the Case of the Welsh Fasting-Girl (Sarah Jacob) with Comments thereon; and Observations on Death from Starvation, London 1871, here: p. 7.

⁴ Evan Jones, "A Strange Case. To the Editor of the Welshman", in: *The Welshman*, 19 February 1869, p. 8.

⁵ Anon, "Sarah Jacob, The Welsh Fasting Girl", in: *The Welshman*, 23 April 1869, p. 3.

and other gentlemen were arguing with each other in journals and newspapers whether the prolonged self-preservation without nourishment was possible or not. Jacob was then put to the test in a watch in spring 1869. Local gentlemen observed her for a fortnight but could not prove fraud. In a second watch half a year later in winter, she was monitored by four nurses from a hospital in London and three local doctors. It was then after eight days that she died.

I would argue that a key element of understanding Jacob's fast lies on the appeared and performed, its circulation and discussion in the printed media, and the audience that gazed at the spectacle.

It is said that hundreds of visitors came to the Welsh farmhouse during the year of her stardom. The first visitors gave Jacob little presents, e.g., books, finery, clothes, and flowers which were used to decorate her room. But after the first watch, people also left money when they visited the Welsh Fasting Girl. Unfortunately, it is not transmitted what they thought about Jacob's fast and how they reacted when they saw her. Consequently, I can only speculate why so many visitors came to the Welsh farmhouse to see the 'miraculous' girl for themselves. I would argue that the readers and visitors might have experienced 'wonder' in the sense of felt *admiratio*: admiration and entertaining astonishment. Seeing a Fasting Women could be seen as an experience of threshold: Wondering and inquiring what is possible, and what was not possible positioned these spectators on the point of transition between two different states: recognition and estrangement, knowledge and imagination, as well as faith and doubt.

The METIS doctoral school helped me to strengthen the gaze of the spectators and to further investigate in their interest and their activities surrounding the performed fasts. In accordance with other researchers at the Doctoral School, I position myself against Guy Debord's notion of spectators as being passive and ignorant in the sense of only wanting to enjoy mindless entertainment.

I'm very thankful for the opportunity to present my PhD topic for the first time in front of other scholars and receive engaged and interesting questions and remarks that will strengthen the further critical preoccupation with my PhD topic.