

Shakespeare Association of America 2015

Vancouver, Canada

Disgusting Shakespeare

Thursday, April 2nd, 2015, 10am-12pm

Seminar Leader: Natalie K. Eschenbaum, University of Wisconsin, La Crosse

Description: The word “disgust” enters the English language around 1600. Yet, Shakespeare frequently makes use of this aversive affect, and contemporary studies of disgust turn to him for examples of disgusting behaviors and disgusted reactions. This seminar invites papers on any aspect of disgust in Shakespeare’s works. The papers might be informed by: topical and analytic studies; those more deeply invested in questions of history and philosophy; theoretical studies focused on the political ramifications of disgust; or, those that represent theory’s current “turn to affect.”

I. Fear and Loathing in Shakespeare

“Offended Stomachs: The Physiology of Loathing in Shakespearean Drama” - **Jan Purnis**,
Campion College at the University of Regina

I am interested in exploring the psycho-physiology of disgust that is highlighted in the term’s etymology. I concentrate on Shakespeare’s use of *loathing*, a term used to express both the emotional experience of disgust as well as feelings of aversion for food. Shakespeare investigates the experience of loathing and its relationship to love or desire through, for example, the love potion in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which in making Lysander suddenly love Helena, makes him just as suddenly describe Hermia as “loathed medicine,” while the potion causes Demetrius to explain his renewed love for Helena as a return to “health” and his “natural taste” from the “sickness” that had previously made him “loathe this food.” Similarly, the equally magical handkerchief in *Othello* is said to make a husband enamored with his wife, but if lost or given away will make her “loathed” in his sight. I will consider these and other examples of loathing in the context of early modern discussions of food aversion as a medical symptom and as an idiosyncrasy (and thus not unlike the examples Shylock gives of unexplainable reactions by particular individuals to bagpipes or cats, reactions which he likens to his “certain loathing” for Antonio). In considering the role of the stomach in the experience of disgust, I hope also to consider its role in the aesthetic experience of Shakespearean drama. The Chorus in *Henry V* claims that in transporting the audience to France and back, they will arrange calm seas: “for if we may / We’ll not offend one stomach with our play.” The goal appears to be to prevent audience members from feeling sick to their stomachs either because of sea-sickness or because of their reaction to the performance itself. The aim in a play like *Titus Andronicus*, however, is another matter altogether.

“‘Amend thy face:’ Bardolph and Discourses of Contagion” - **Ariane M. Balizet**, Texas
Christian University

Unlike the more memorably “disgusting” characters of Falstaff and Richard III, Bardolph (from *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and *Merry Wives of Windsor*) is neither a magnetic

figure nor a particularly thrilling one. Bardolph is not charming, intelligent, or devious; his only defining characteristic is his face, which inspires disgust every time he appears onstage. Shakespeare's original name for the character, Russell, means "little red," forcing a powerful connection between Bardolph's remarkably unpleasant appearance and his very identity. Indeed, Bardolph seems to exist only to provoke disgust in his peers, who berate and belittle him because of his red, swollen, pocked, and sore-ridden nose and face. Scholars have attributed this appearance to various afflictions, alone or in combination: alcoholism, rosacea, rhinophyma, syphilis, and a sin-blackened soul. Bardolph's face may serve as a site of shame (in that his disfigurement is caused by excess of alcohol or venereal disease) or a site of injustice (in that he was born with a skin condition that he cannot control). In this essay, I propose that the depiction of Bardolph's disfigurement changes over the course of the tetralogy, moving from more benign diagnoses of drunkenness and rosacea to increasingly dangerous and contagious afflictions including—finally—plague. Characters' disgust response changes as well, illustrating the range of contexts (moral, medical, religious) in which the emotion of disgust played a prominent role.

"Digging for Disgust: Discourse of Deformity and Distaste in the ULAS Richard III Excavation" - **Marcela Kostihová**, Hamline University

Shakespeare's Richard III has been vilified as one of the most disgusting characters ever. His misshapen body enveloping his devious soul has haunted stages, serving as a synonym for evil incarnate. He is hated by audiences and characters in his play alike, earning some of the most imaginative epithets ever bestowed in the English language, despite the pervasively scant evidence of the historical king's embodiment or deeds, and despite a small industry of Richard defenders who have staunchly maintained that his mainstream portrayal – perpetuated by Shakespeare—is an ugly smear by pro-Tudor propagandists. In this paper, I will analyze the coverage of the recent successful excavation of the long-thought-lost remains of the historical Richard in Leicester, UK, focusing on the pervasive discourse of bodily and moral abnormality. My preliminary thesis is that, despite decades of research and activism, the discourse generated by the scientific reports of the dig, the media heyday that surrounded it, and the cultural icons that weighed in, Western culture continues to insist on coherence between personal appearance and moral interiority, and, even more troublingly, conflates non-normative embodiment (or disability) with evil interiority. The excavation of Richard III demonstrates a widespread desire for authenticity and the erasure of ambiguity, and for science-endorsed coherence between embodiment and morality.

"Disgusted Shylock" - **Luke Wilson**, Ohio State University

This work stems from recent work I've been doing on Shylock's aesthetic sense, which is mostly a matter of what he himself finds repugnant but which he also begins to shape into the bare bones of a theory of disgust when he talks about men who hate cats or pee involuntarily when they hear a bagpipe. I've argued elsewhere that Shylock is in a special sense (with reference to the argument of Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*) what may be called *pre-cute*, both historically and structurally. Ngai's account of the cute presents it as closely connected to aggression and, because it prompts in us the desire to consume the cute object, to the commodity and its fetishization; in *Merchant* the pre-cute involves in contrast Shylock's attempt to evade not merely exchange value but use value as well by taking refuge

in a principle of the useless that, I am beginning to see, has something to do with disgust and, maybe, with the abject. In the paper for the seminar I want to think further about this, and about the relation, for Shylock and his adversaries, between disgust and hatred. William Ian Miller remarks that “What disgust adds to hatred is its distinctive kind of embodiment, its way of being unpleasant to the senses”; and he also notes that “hate bespeaks a history” in a way disgust does not, or does not necessarily. So, I wonder, what is Shylock doing when he moves from the apparently a-somatic “I hate him for he is a Christian” into the territory of an embodied hatred that looks a lot like disgust?

II. Shakespeare, Lust, and Disgust

“Shakespeare’s Disgusting *Venus and Adonis*” - **Cathleen McKague**, The Shakespeare Institute

C. S. Lewis once asserted of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, “If the poem is not meant to arouse disgust it was very foolishly written”.¹ This paper explores permutations of disgust in Shakespeare’s first epyllion, printed in 1593. It investigates Adonis’ disgust with the persistence of “[s]ick-thoughted Venus” (5), her unrelenting “vulture thought” (551) and the “aggressive and even murderous quality” to her oral fixations, in Coppélia Kahn’s words.² In the “beauteous combat wilful and unwilling” (365) between the protagonists, Shakespeare portrays Venus in a number of disgusting images as a carnivorous lover devouring her beloved; then following Adonis’ death, as one nuzzling his corpse and plucking (and thereby killing) Adonis’ floral incarnation, the anemone. It also examines the disturbing age disparity between Venus and Adonis and the notion of Venus as a “sweaty, muscular rapist”.³ In addition, the poem’s disgusting spectacles come under scrutiny, such as the boar’s “frothy mouth” (901) and Adonis’ bleeding wounds, as does Adonis’ self-disgust and ability to disgust by flaunting and tempting with his chastity. The final analysis proves both Venus and Adonis to be slightly morally disgusting figures and the epyllion to be one which leaves the reader with rather a sour taste in the mouth.

“Sexual Shame / Sexual Disgust in Shakespeare and Middleton” - **Jennifer Panek**, University of Ottawa

An offshoot of my current project on shame and sexuality, my paper will explore the relation of sexual shame to disgust, focusing on the affective experience of dramatic characters involved in scenes of perceived or actual sexual defilement. The primary emotion associated with the defiled woman is, of course, shame: Titus kills Lavinia lest she should “survive her shame” (5.3.40); “a thousand innocent shames” (4.1.159) appear in the slandered Hero’s

¹ C[live] S[taples] Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, 1954 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) *The Oxford History of English Literature* 3, 499.

² William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis, The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow, 2002 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) *The Oxford Shakespeare*; Oxford World’s Classics; Coppélia Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (California: University of California Press, 1981) 34.

³ S. Clark Hulse, “Shakespeare’s Myth of Venus and Adonis,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 93.1 (1978) 95.

face; the word “shame” and its variations are used no less than 40 times to describe Lucrece’s plight in *The Rape of Lucrece*. However, the language of disgust, as well as shame, is prominent in these scenes: in some cases, disgust would seem to play a role in the formation of shame, where the disgust is felt by witnesses (including, possibly, the audience) or even by the perpetrator of the defilement; this disgust becomes attached to the victim, whose shame is produced partly through being the object of others’ disgust. In other cases, the victim feels the disgust, perceiving the defiler as disgusting: while she herself is contaminated through contact with the disgusting object, she is able to work through this contamination to a kind of shamelessness. Benedict Robinson’s exploration of a new deployment of disgust in the early seventeenth century, as an aesthetic feeling unmoored from moral significance, has intriguing implications for a sexually defiled woman who feels disgust rather than shame. A comparison of *The Rape of Lucrece* with the Duke’s rape of Bianca in Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* will be at the centre of this paper, but I am also interested in exploring other, more loosely related moments of how “shameful” sex is intertwined with disgust in early modern drama.

“Goats and Monkeys’: Disgust and (Ab)use in *Othello*” - **Sara Eaton**, North Central College

Othello repeats Iago when he disgustedly mutters “Goats and monkeys,” convinced of Desdemona’s infidelity. In *Othello*, beginning with Iago’s early admission to Roderigo that he “abhors” the Moor, disgust is limned by race and invokes early modern experiences of mercantile imperialism. Abhorrence is also visualized and catching—it creates (re)action—and most of what is perceived as disgusting focuses on Othello’s and then women’s bodies, finally and in particular on Desdemona’s. Initially Othello and others’ Courtly Love lady, she becomes the obverse: the whore. This trajectory into abjection outlines a shared erotics of disgust; that is, what Othello desires to see in Desdemona, what Iago shows him, is what he and Iago desire to be disgusted by and are disgusted to desire. Othello’s/Iago’s desire to “use” Desdemona includes her abuse, one she seemingly participates in, her body and Othello’s “poisoning sight,” that is, made disgusting. In effect, Courtly Love’s ideological mix with (ab)use engenders disgust and “does the state some service.”

III. Disgusting *Coriolanus*

“Touching the Wound: Moderating Disgust in *Coriolanus*” - **Emily King**, Louisiana State University

Scholars understand disgust to have a protective function (e.g., identify formation) that betrays an ideological undercurrent. Yet insofar as one can never free oneself from that which disgusts – after all, life is permeated by the disgusting – one’s affective reactions must be restrained to some extent. To be too readily disgusted impedes contact with others and one’s environment; an excess of disgust generates an unlivable life. This affective restraint emerges in *Coriolanus* in the form of repulsive wounds that provoke not disgust or moral outrage but curiosity and acclaim. Although literary critics have read *Coriolanus*’ wounds as feminizing apertures, fetishes of masculinity, and anxious sites of indeterminacy, my argument is invested in attending to the corporeality of the wounded body. To ground my discussion in early modern understandings of wounds, I will make

use of medical texts that include Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (1615) and Thomas Gale's *Certaine Workes of Chirurgerie* (1563). In moving away from a theorization of disgust as a locatable event, I examine ordinary disgust that, while palpable, is disavowed to investigate the modes by which one steels (or screens) oneself against this overwhelming affect.

"Hob, Dick, and Coriolanus" - **Paul Budra**, Simon Fraser University

Coriolanus's contempt for the lower classes and the common soldiers is expressed through images of disgust: excretion, vermin, and disease. For Coriolanus, lowborn people are unstable, watery—a surfeit to be purged and vented—and their material needs and appetites “the common muck of the world.” The plebeians, at the beginning of the play, acknowledge Coriolanus' valor but castigate him for his “free contempt.” By the time of Coriolanus' banishment, however, they return the rhetoric of revulsion: Coriolanus is branded a viper and a gangrened foot to be amputated. This paper will explore the class dynamics of mutual disgust in the play as they are tied to representations of the noble and working classes of Jacobean England, paying special attention to how disgust, “the visceral end point of contempt,” itself forms a claim to superiority. I will attempt to distinguish the socially downward revulsion of Coriolanus and the upward contempt of the plebeians as two different registers of disgust. Coriolanus' is a sensory-somatic revulsion (though no doubt culturally and maternally inculcated), while that of the plebeians is socially reactive and driven by the politics of class structure. Coriolanus' disgust is a visceral reaction to the commons' essence and conditions; the contempt of the lower classes is a strategic reaction to condescension, perceived hypocrisy, and quantifiable slights.

"Disgusting Rome in *Coriolanus*" - **Bradley J. Irish**, Arizona State University

In *Coriolanus*, there are few people who aren't disgusted: the titular Roman hero is disgusted by the plebeians that so commonly invoke his ire, while those same plebeians are disgusted by the very revulsion they engender in him, and by the social and political implications of his refusal to follow the customary practices of his beloved Rome. Employing theoretical models from the contemporary affective sciences, this paper explores this crucial circuit of disgust, arguing that the emotion dominates the play's stylistic, thematic, and dramaturgical structure. Dubbed the "gatekeeper emotion" by modern emotion theorists, disgust offers the perfect emotional register for a play obsessed with gates as the site of entry and expulsion, and it offers the metaphoric lexicon—overripe with images of disease, digestion, and decay—from which Shakespeare largely builds his play. Drawing upon a robust body of empirical and theoretical research, the paper offers a disgust-based reading of Shakespeare's understudied tragedy—but more importantly, it attempts to also demonstrate how treatments of emotion in the humanities have much to gain by expanding their methodological basis, and by turning to theories of emotion anchored in the social and natural sciences.