

“Tread the Ooze”: Early Modern Slime  
SAA 2020 Abstracts

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**Sweat Aesthetics in *The Rape of Lucrece***

This paper charts the emergence of sweat as a rarefied substance—erotic, aesthetically pleasing, even materially valuable—in the late sixteenth century. With a survey of Early English Books Online, I locate “sweat” as a concept under revision in the early modern period, and I demonstrate how it transitions from a marker of masculine labor to an erotic ornament associated with femininity. I examine Shakespeare’s reception of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*—where the enchantress Acrasia appears at the end of Book II as made more beautiful by her delicate perspiration—in both of his long poems, *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1594. Across these texts, we can observe new constellations of meaning attach to sweat that disrupt its medieval usage as filth (indicative of poverty, illness, decay, sin, etc.). Spenser and Shakespeare both present sweat as valuable and life-giving, replete with erotic potentialities, and in his epyllions, Shakespeare turns to *The Faerie Queene* in order to explore the ethical implications of encountering a sweating body. With extended attention to *The Rape of Lucrece*, I argue that Shakespeare responds to Spenser by unpacking the voyeuristic fantasy inherent in aestheticized usages of sweat: it is the fantasy of a dehistoricized body, abstracted from the conditions that give it vitality, that can thus be interpreted to align with the desires of the observer. Ultimately, in *The Rape of Lucrece*, Shakespeare rejects *The Faerie Queene*’s aestheticization of sweat, flattening the substance over the course of the poem, and unsettles his own use of descriptive language by presenting sweat as something that defies artistic representation.

Katarzyna Burzyńska  
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**“Led through gutters,/ Strange hidden ways...”: Middleton’s portrait of Moll Yellowhammer and the early modern scientific discourse of virginity, pregnancy and birth (A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, 3.3.30-31).**

In one of Middleton’s most acclaimed city comedies *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Moll Yellowhammer, the titular virgin, defies her parents’ authority and escapes through “a little hole [that] looked into the gutter” (4.4.8) and is literally led through the muck and slime of the Cheapside gutters. She then boards a taxi boat to be rowed through the murky waters of the Thames in order to unite with Touchwood Junior, her chosen husband-candidate. The “watery” imagery of the play, in which bodily fluids like urine and semen are conflated with cosmetic or medicinal concoctions, has been acknowledged by recent critics (see e.g. Woodbridge, Paster). The contrast of wetness and dryness has also been pointed out in older scholarship as Middleton’s trope used in order to discuss the themes of fertility and reproduction (see e.g. Chatterji, Marrotti). In this paper I wish to reconsider Middleton’s treatment of semi-viscous substances that mark gender and reproductive potential by reading it against early modern popular medical texts on female health, pregnancy and birth. I want to focus on the figure of Moll and her supposed “green sickness” in order to argue that although Middleton’s characters follow certain medical advice of the age, they actually use it topsy-turvy, thus, contributing to a

subversive, albeit momentary, collapse of social labels of virgin/whore, fertile/barren, wife/adulteress etc. The play, although parodic and farcical, 1 SAA 2020 “Tread the Ooze”: Early Modern Slime by Brent Dawson (University of Oregon) Lynn M. Maxwell (Spelman College) gives an unprecedented glimpse into actual realities of maids and wives that frequently contradict rather than confirm the prevalent definitions of humoral medicine. References Chatterji, Ruby. 1965. “Theme, Imagery, and Unity in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside”, in: Renaissance Drama, Vol. 8, pp. 105-126. Marotti, Arthur F. 1969. “Fertility and Comic Form in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside”, in: Comparative Drama, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring, pp. 65-74. Middleton, Thomas. [c. 1616] 2007. “A Chaste Maid in Cheapside”, in: Taylor, Gary and John Lavagnino (eds.). Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works. Clarendon Press, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 912-958. Paster, Gail Kern. 1993. The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. Woodbridge, Linda. 2007. “Introduction to A Chaste Maid in Cheapside”, in: Taylor, Gary and John Lavagnino (eds.). Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works. Clarendon Press, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 907-911.

Andrew Carlson  
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### **Sluggish Wit**

My paper explores the sticky, slimy materiality associated with snails and slugs in Shakespeare’s plays and contemporaneous texts. I contextualize the figure within sixteenth-century arguments for and against travel as a means of intellectual and social improvement. For example, at the beginning of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine proclaims the advantages of travel and simultaneously warns Proteus against “living dully sluggardiz’d at home.” The figure recalls, among other examples, Justus Lipsius’s deprecation of those who opt out of travel. “Glued to their home,” Lipsius writes, “they carrie (with the sluggishe and slowfooted snaile) their howses on theyr backs.” I argue that the snail’s slime and its gluey, adhesive qualities provide a material description of the link between domesticity and failed or limited cognition that Valentine elsewhere insists on when he says that “home-keeping youth have ever homely wits.”

Mary Floyd-Wilson  
University of North Carolina

### **Blasts from Hell: Infectious Evil in *Hamlet* and *King Lear***

In my current project, I consider how and why early modern writers located the devil’s powers in environmental events, whether it be the foul weather fostered by witches trading winds or the “evill spirits and Devills [that] do sometimes joyn with the tempests . . . secretly thrusting themselves into the mind of man.”<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will argue that the environmental

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<sup>1</sup> Levinus Lemnius, *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (1658)

phenomenon of “blasting” in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* signifies the presence of demonic corruption in both tragedies. In the Bible, the Lord smites people by “blasting” the crops, which results in mildew, caterpillars, drought, or plague. The bad air of blasting could also come from evil planets or stars, or be emitted from infected parts of the earth by way of hollow caves or pits. Blasted plants, especially corn, had the power to defile the whole crop so “that it will looke all black and ill-favoured.”<sup>2</sup> When blasted, plants corrupted internally with mildew, rot, cankerworms, or other vermin. Witches supposedly derived their power to blast men from the devil, and early modern writers often associate “blasting” with witchcraft.<sup>3</sup>

In delineating the contagious nature of sin, writers in the period identified the physical phenomenon of blasting as analogous to the spiritual corruption bred by demonic temptations. As Henry Holland explains, in the same way that “blasts destroy fruits and trees invisibly & strangely, so . . . do wicked spirits kill and poison the bodies and soules of men.” Observing the “blast” of Satan as “evill wind,” (220), Timothie Bright in *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1585) argues that “Sathans tempestuous malice” is the greatest “in all stormes of temptations that can befall unto bodie or soule. (201).

In *Hamlet*, the ghost functions as the most apparent presence of the devil, deemed by Horatio as capable of “blasting” and bringing, as Hamlet fears, “blasts from hell.” But the demonic corruption of Elsinore precedes the arrival of the ghost, traceable to Claudius’s primal betrayal of his brother, described by Hamlet as a mildewed ear of corn blasting his “wholesome” father. In *King Lear*, it is Lear who invokes environmental corruption with his witch-like curses of “blasts and fogs” on his daughters, which provoke not only the “impetuous blasts from [the] storm” but also Goneril and Regan’s unnaturally bred malice towards him. Edgar’s imitation of demonic possession, wherein he alludes to star-blasting and fiendish vexing, reminds spectators how true devilish rot spreads invisibly and contagiously.

Stephen Greenblatt has famously argued that “for all the invocation of the gods in *King Lear*, it is clear that there are no devils.” But false possessions and exorcisms, which have dominated scholarly discussions of the devil in this period, were deemed distractions by demonologists who contended that the histrionics of possession were, in fact, the devil’s ploy to divert attention from his more dangerously hidden assaults. Moreover, long-held assumptions about the disenchanting effects of the Reformation neglect the Protestant arguments that the devil had grown more subtle and that the faithful must learn to discern Satan’s secret operations. In recognizing “blasts” as a preternatural force that generated corruption in “apt” bodies, early modern spectators would interpret the action in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* as prompted by devilish influences.

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<sup>2</sup> Gervase Markham, *Markhams farwell to husbandry* (1620)

<sup>3</sup> *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Part II. Qn 1., Ch. 15. See also Thomas Cooper, Shakespeare in *Richard III*, *The Witch of Edmonton*. Henry Boguet observes that witches, “with Satan’s help, ‘cause cankerworms, rats, and other vermin to waste the fruit, even as they deplete the fertilization of the soil.” Cited by Lucinda Cole in *Imperfect Creatures*, 29-30.

Shannon Jane Garner  
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### **Stuck Fast: Ecomaterialism and Early Modern Lime in Shakespeare**

Taking the theme of this panel session quite literally, this paper looks at the early modern perspective on a very particular kind of ooze—lime—and illuminates how this substance, in its various forms as birdlime and quicklime, is a versatile commodity, a potent adhesive between human and nonhuman, and a persistent metaphor for entrapment and folly. Lime, as a verb or a noun, is mentioned in Shakespeare's oeuvre twenty-two times. It sticks to every genre—comedy, tragedy, history, and romance. This paper addresses lime through an ecomaterial perspective, noting how the material practices and intimacies of lime change its metaphorical meaning on the stage. Lime's material usage implies a sense of trickery: whether it was to trap birds in a passive extension of power, to attempt to make bad wine passable, or to improve by plastering an imperfect wall. Deception adheres to lime in all its forms and becomes a substance by which human and nonhuman are imperfectly stuck together.

Amy Kenny  
University of California, Riverside

### **“Appear like dead flesh”: Semi-solids in Staging Dismemberment in the Early Modern Playhouse**

Over sixty extant plays from the early modern period call for mutilated body parts to appear on stage.<sup>1</sup> Decapitated heads, dismembered hands, severed legs, detached noses, castrated tongues, a cleaved heart, and even false eyes are listed in contemporary stage directions to enhance gory spectacle. Scholarship has largely been interested in how the fragmented body is reduced to a moveable physical object, exploring the relationship between part and whole, self and Other, and subject and object, but has yet to explore the materiality of the disarticulated props in the early modern playhouse. What were these dismembered body parts made from? What materials were used to manufacture them for the early modern stage?

In his exposé of stage magic and witchcraft, Reginald Scot describes the process of pretending to disembowel somebody without harming the actor: “You must prepare a paste-board to be made according to the fashion of your belly and breast: the same must by a painter be colored cunningly, not only like to your flesh, but with paps, navel, hair, etc. so as the same (being handsomely trussed unto you) may show your natural belly. Then next to your true belly you may put a linen cloth, and [...] betwixt the plate and the false belly you place a gut or bladder of blood.”<sup>2</sup> Crucial to the success of the illusion was the type of blood used: the “blood must be of a calf or sheep: but in no wise of an ox or a cow, for that will be too thick.”<sup>3</sup> The viscosity of the blood, along with the texture of the ingredients is described by Scot as part of ensuring the trick is effective in convincing audiences of its authenticity. The proof, it turns out, is in the paste.

This paper will trace the materiality of severed body parts, considering how dismembered props such as “Argosse head,” “Old Mahemete’s head,” and “Jossess head” were constructed for companies like The Lord Admiral’s Men.<sup>4</sup> Staging these scenes utilized semi-solid materials such as paste, plaster, wax, oil, and animal intestines. The paper will explore how the materiality of these severed body parts as semi-solids impacts our understanding of them on stage during scenes of dismemberment.

Ian F. MacInnes  
Albion College

### **Waxing Fat with Rottenness: Early Modern English Poetry and the Soil Fertility Crisis**

At the battle of Aquae Sextiae in 102 BCE, a Roman army completely destroyed the combined tribes of the Teutones and Ambrones, killing so many that as Plutarch puts it,

The bodies being rotten and consumed upon the fieldes ... the ground waxed so fatte, and did soke the grease so deep in the same, that that the sommer following they did beare an incredible quantity of all sortes of frutes. And by this meanes were Archilocus wordes proved true, that the errable land doth waxe fat with such rottennesse or putrifaction.<sup>4</sup>

This image, delivered to the early moderns by North’s popular sixteenth-century translation would have been memorable because it spoke to an issue of increasing cultural attention. The early modern English, in particular, were driven by necessity to pay attention to soil fertility. England’s inefficient animal-centered economy drove an agricultural revolution focused on increasing the productivity of fields and pastures. That these were often inadequate is demonstrated by rapidly increasing prices for land and commodities in the sixteenth century. Destructive flooding at the end of the century also directed attention to fertility and mortality at the same time. And finally, the Galenic climate theory of the day also located England at the uneasy confluence of climatic zones, suggesting that its soil might be inherently problematic. In poetry, the primary reaction to this version of mortality was existential disgust. The reduction of the human body to oozy fertilizer undermined human exceptionalism in ways traditional models of mortality did not. Even the undeniable growth promoted by rot was treated as suspiciously “rank and gross in nature,” as Hamlet puts it. Under their disgust, however, the early moderns were fascinated by the connection between death and life. The great mystery of agriculture is that fertility depends ironically upon decay. And fertility itself was the fundamental basis for pastoralism, the dominant poetic response to the environment at the time. Topographical poetry like Drayton’s massive *Polyolbion* evaluates the English landscape primarily in terms of its fertility, discovering “battful meads” everywhere. Drawing on early modern agricultural works, natural philosophy, and medicine, I argue that poetic ambivalence about natural growth in

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<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, trans. James Amyot and Thomas North (London, 1579) 463.

Shakespeare's Sonnets and elsewhere is a response to rapidly evolving attitudes toward the rural environment.

Hillary Nunn  
The University of Akron

### **Reading Cataplasma: Ooze, Medical Recipes, and the Early Modern Stage**

Early modern plays routinely depict medical practitioners as frauds, and women who proclaim health care expertise are further associated with illicit sexuality. The forthrightness associated with these characters, however, often disguises the necessarily invisible nature of the treatments they prescribe. Because theatrical practices often prevent the staging of medical care, the language of plays is left to instill in audiences the sensory nature of such experiences. These presentations complicate practitioners' relationships to medical knowledge, as well as to their patients and playhouse viewers.

Recipes for these medical compounds associated with these treatments, as described in home recipe manuscripts, carry distinctly oozy qualities. The viscous nature of these remedies – applied directly to the skin through contact often described in terms of intimacy – often makes ministering to the health care needs of others a morally suspect act. Naming these topical remedies, moreover, often conjures unpleasant smells and textures for those in the playhouse audience. Not only do these female practitioners blur onstage distinctions between public and private, they also insist that audience members bring their own sensory knowledge of home medical care into the theater. Reading female healers ranging from youthful Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* to the seasoned madam/healer of *The Atheist's Tragedy* – whose name, Cataplasma, renders her the embodiment of ooze – this paper calls upon home medical manuals to further understand the properties, both healing and moral, of viscous medical concoctions on the early modern stage.

Mary Odbert  
University of Birmingham

### **“Make Thick My Blood:” Humoral Viscosity in Shakespearean Corporeal Identity**

My research explores the material viscosity of the bodily interior in Shakespearean text and performance. The humoral body encompasses a variety of viscous states and diverse organic matter, not only from the opposite ends of the blood to bile spectrum, but within each category of bodily fluid. The thick and abundant blood of nobility differs drastically in viscosity from the watery blood of common drunks. Shakespearean characterization acknowledges the physiological properties tied to selfhood in moments when Prince Hal's thicker blood outpaces Falstaff's watery drunkenness or when the presumably old and thin blood of King Duncan surprises Lady Macbeth with its bountiful outpouring. The viscosity of bodily fluids in Shakespearean text relies on early modern notions of humoral balance not only in relation to properties of disease, but at the critical intersections of personality and physiology. The ooze of

the bodily interior in every iteration of blood, sweat, and tears reflects a multitude of meanings ranging from medical health and moral values to gender and power.

Jennifer Panek  
University of Ottawa

### **The load of lust: shame, disgust, and sexual pollution in *The Rape of Lucrece***

This paper is an excerpt from a work in progress: a chapter on rape, shame, and disgust intended as part of a book on sexual shame on the early modern stage. It develops a paragraph of an earlier SAA paper I wrote for the 2015 seminar “Disgusting Shakespeare.” This section of the chapter argues that *The Rape of Lucrece* affectively engages the reader in Lucrece’s overwhelming sense of shame after her rape—a morally illogical shame, given her self-declared “spotless and immaculate” mind—by representing her as being, and feeling, physically polluted in a very material way. The “ooze” in question here is primarily semen, which, as “matter out of place,” in Mary Douglas’s famous phrase, becomes dirt in any place other than the body of the ejaculator’s wife. The paper explores how other texts of the period, and then imagery within *Lucrece* itself, evoke disgust with semen-as-dirt and the woman it defiles through associations with other, more obviously vile substances, including feces, vomit, and “putrified” blood. Ultimately, the paper turns to the desirability of the disgusting, as posited by theorists of disgust like Aurel Kolnai and Carolyn Korsmeyer, to suggest that an insistence on Lucrece’s physical pollution works to eroticize her even as it justifies her shame.

Kelly Stage  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

### **“On the Famous Voyage”: Ploughing the Ooze**

My paper begins with the “ycleped mud” of Ben Jonson’s disgusting and satirical poem, “On the Famous Voyage.” This poem documents the supposed voyage of two “heroes” who decide to take on the Fleet River, rowing upstream through the toxic sludge of the sewer to reach Holborn and central London. The poem’s interest in the foul remainders of urban life and the unrelenting exposure to the rank horror of this once free-flowing river turned quicksand of “merd-urinous” waste, catalogs an environmental disaster. At the same time, it gives rise to a reading of the city as an organic body, combining the built environment of London with the waste of its human and non-human animal parasites. “On the Famous Voyage” simultaneously combines the formulation of a satirical Horatian poem with a mocking gesture at travel adventure stories, countering the idea of “new found” discovery of virginal, precious lands with the treacherous reality of polluted, used, occupied territory typically left unmentioned as the shame of a bustling metropolis. My paper will explore Jonson’s juxtaposition of the hellscape of the city’s entrails with the heroic mode, especially examining the gendering of the explorers and the city. The poem, while equating the urban organism with female bodies (the “two wights” begin their voyage with making “their famous road” through “her womb”) also satirizes the fool-hardy heroics of the adventurers, indicating the inescapability of an early modern form of toxic masculinity notable even while it bobs in a literal river of shit.

Liz Steinway  
Colorado State University

### **“A Vent of Blood...An Aspic’s Trail”: Reading the Reproductive Body in *Antony and Cleopatra***

The historical details of Cleopatra’s suicide have long been the subject of both scholarly debate and the focus of popular imagination. By the time Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* was performed in the early seventeenth century, numerous stories about the Egyptian ruler were in circulation; in Shakespeare’s version of her death, the Egyptian queen dies from two snake bites, one on her breast and another on her arm. The men who discover her body narrate Cleopatra’s death by assembling certain clues—the marks on her body and a trail of slime. Taken together, I argue that the blood and the slime intersect and resonate as liquids associated with early modern theories of reproduction. Even in her death, Cleopatra is represented as an engendering and fertile figure; her post-mortem examination highlights the cultural desire to definitively read the reproductive female body.

Jeffrey Squires  
Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar

### **“The Minerals of Hell”: Sin, Slime, and Salvation in Early Modern England**

Perhaps the most common Christian allusion to slime is to the slime pits of Sodom in Genesis 14:10, where slime refers to bitumen, defined by Tomas Blount as a “kind of [naturally clammy] clay [...] growing in some Countries of Asia.”<sup>5</sup> In referencing the ‘slime as bitumen’ usage, seventeenth-century English religious sources tend to view slime (including the slime pits) in terms of its general usefulness as a mark of human sin, specifically as a value metaphor by which authors can express sin as a self-destructive cycle. The slime pits, clergymen Thomas Adams reasons, were the vehicle by which Sodom destroyed itself, an occurrence which Adams remarks is “strange” in that [slime] “should helpe ra[t]her to enflame” the problem than assuage it<sup>6</sup>: “And haply the nature of the [s]oile being full of pitch, slime, and other combustible matter, did much encrease [t]he burning.”<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I will explore the dynamics of the ‘slime as foulness’ usage and its usefulness to an authors’ soteriological goals, exploring how Tomas Adams and John Donne use slime to signal sinfulness. In light of this categorization, slime as bitumen and other soils could be less frequently used to maintain a different soteriological connotation, such as Robert Burton’s use of it as a mark of right living.

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<sup>5</sup> Blount, “Bitume (bitumen),” *Glossographia* (London: Tomas Newcomb, 1661) n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Adams, *A commentary [...] upon the diuine second epistle generall* (London: Richard Badger, 1633), 607. Adams glosses the passage using rough gloss of KJV Psalms 11.6 (“Vpon the wicked shall the Lord raine fire and brimstone, and stormy [T]empest.”). He is amazed by the symmetry of the punishment, that minerals “of the earth” should be “found in the aire” and “sent down afer an unexampled confu[s]ion” (607).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

