

Disgusting John Marston: Sensationalism and the Limits of A Post-Modern Marston

Georgia Brown, *Queens' College, Cambridge University*

[The conspirators] pluck out [PIERO'S] tongue and triumph over him.

Antonio. I have't, Pandulpho; the veins panting bleed,
Trickling fresh gore about my fist. Bind fast! So, so.

Ghost of Andrugio. Blest be thy hand. I taste the joys of heaven,
Viewing my son triumph in his black blood.

Balurdo. Down to the dungeon with him; I'll dungeon with him; I'll fool you! Sir
Geoffrey will be Sir Geoffrey. I'll tickle you!

Antonio. Behold, black dog! *[Holding up PIERO'S tongue.]*

Pandulpho. Grinn'st thou, thou snurling cur?

Alberto. Eat thy black liver!

Antonio. To thine anguish see
A fool triumphant in thy misery.

Vex him, Balurdo.

Pandulpho. He weeps! Now do I glorify my hands.
I had no vengeance if I had no tears.

(Antonio's Revenge 5.5.34-45)¹

With its bloodlust, energy and violence, the murder of Piero at the climax of *Antonio's Revenge*, exemplifies John Marston's sensationalism, and its unstable, some would say incoherent, morality. This is, after all, the moment when the victims of Piero's tyrannical regime finally impose justice and achieve some kind of redress, and yet these instruments of justice are themselves tainted by cruelty and the suspicion that revenge has become the means to achieve self-glorification. When the ghost of Andrugio hails his son, Antonio, "triumph[ing] in his black blood" (line 37), is the blood Piero's, or Antonio's, and do Andrugio's words suggest kinship between the villain, Piero, and the hero, Antonio? Typically, for Marston's sensationalism, this scene combines moral confusion with generic confusion. Not only is Antonio disguised as a fool, but the real fool, Geoffrey Balurdo, interrupts the unfolding melodrama with farce and his characteristic linguistic ineptitude: "Down to the dungeon with him; I'll dungeon with him; I'll fool You! Sir Geoffrey will be Sir Geoffrey. I'll tickle you!" (lines 38-39). Just as Antonio has things in

¹ John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge*, ed. W. Reavley Gair (1999).

common with Piero, so this scene points to the cruelty that lurks in comedy, and the comedy that lurks in cruelty. Moreover, at this moment of theatrical intensity, when ideals of justice and political action are subjected to great pressure, Balurdo introduces sexuality, as well as bathos, into the equation, because the tickling, or touching, that produces laughter easily slips into sexual caressing.²

This essay returns to the old, and now rather unfashionable, issue of sensationalism in early modern drama, and explores one of the components of sensationalism that has received rather less attention from critics: the exploitation of disgust. Sensationalism, which is the drive to produce startling and violently exciting effects, does not just depend on hyperbole and a focus on extreme situations, it thrives on moral and generic confusion, and frequently exploits disgust. The murder of Piero is disgusting. It is tasteless in its mixture of sadism and laughter, and quite literally so, as the word disgusting derives from the Latin prefix “dis,” which is a prefix of negation, and the word “gustus” meaning taste. Marston is not tasteful, and his plays have largely been ignored by directors, while the study of Marston has proved to be of limited usefulness in promoting any claims to cultural standing. As the psychologist, Susan Miller, ruefully reminds us in an essay on disgust, “Contact with the disgusting makes one disgusting,” and Marston himself has been transformed into an indecorous fount of disgust, who is pictured by Iudicio, in the last of the *Parnassus Plays*, “lifting vp [his] legge and pissing against the world” like a cur.³

No doubt Marston capitalizes on sensationalism, and this contributes to his “straining for uniqueness,” to invoke T. F. Wharton’s phrase. Marston deliberately strove to make himself controversial in order to give himself a name and establish his currency in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century culture.⁴ Nevertheless, there are times in Marston’s plays when what strikes us as sensationalistic, or violently incongruous, actually operates according to a logic, albeit a form of “thinking through words,” that is unfamiliar to us. This alternative kind of reasoning tries to

² See the entries for “tickle” and “ticklish” in *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* (Partridge 2001).

³ Miller 1993: 711. For the allusion to Marston, under his pseudonym Monsieur Kinsayder, in “The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus or The Scourge of Simony,” see Leishman 1949: 241, lines 267-68.

⁴ Wharton 1994: 10.

get at the truth by unpacking the associations and etymologies of particular words, then using these to connect thought. To return to the murder of Piero, Balurdo's interruption becomes less incongruous when we remember that fools are often ticklish. In other words, they are licentious, and are both skilled in making sexual allusion, and in reading the signs of love and desire. Folly, as Eric Partridge also notes, not only derives from the French term for madness, it can refer to sexual folly or wantonness, and is ultimately derived from the Latin "follis" meaning bellows. What once seemed merely sensationalistic and gratuitous in Balurdo's speech actually operates according to unfamiliar principles of rationality. Even Marston's interest in farting starts to make sense, as it is predicted by the memories inscribed in words, which link fools, madness, sexuality and air. When Antonio enters disguised as a fool (*Antonio's Revenge* 4.2.28) he blows both bubbles and farts. The fool is full of different kinds of windiness, including the air that fills the passages of the body, the airiness of purely verbal invention, and the stinking breath of denigration and satire. Earlier in the play, elated by the fact that he has embarked on the course of revenge and murdered Julio, Antonio imagines that he has become all air and spirit: "Methinks I am all air and feel no weight / Of human dirt clog" (3.5.20-21). He imagines that he has become more than human and that he has risen above the physical, but the smell of farts hangs round his aspirations and introduces a sense of proportion which punctures any impulse, stoic or otherwise, to transcend the human.⁵

All this farting is disgusting, but it also constitutes a wonderfully synaesthetic experience, which speaks to the ears as well as the nose, as Balurdo says at the beginning of *Antonio and Mellida*, "O, I smell a sound" (1.1.44). However, farting does not only unite the senses, like all things that provoke disgust, it also unites the senses to morality. Balurdo may identify one kind of sound-smell, but Felice immediately associates bad smells with sin: "Piero, stay! For I descry a fume / Creeping from out the bosom of the deep, / The breath of darkness" (1.1.45-46). Felice's status as a moralist and as a satirist depends on his ability to identify smells. In fact, for Marston smell unites the activities involved in the

⁵ For Marston's indebtedness to stoicism, see Geckle 1980, Aggeler 1970: 507-517. However, while Marston is interested in stoicism because it focuses attention on the relationship between mind, body and action, the irruption of passion and nature in his drama exposes the limitations of the stoic code.

production of plays. The satirical playwright, the actors, and the audience all smell, in the double sense of being able to detect smells, and being smelly themselves. When Rosaline comes on stage in the entourage of the Duke (*A and M* 2.1.60-61), her first words are a comment on the bad smell that hangs around the scene: "Foh, what a strong scent's here! Somebody useth to wear socks." The stench may be the stench of corruption, the stench produced by muck-slinging satire, or the stench produced by actors and spectators who have not changed their socks.

For Marston, a bad smell hangs around the theatre, but rather than separating the playwright and his satiric mouthpieces, like Malevole, from the contemptible multitude and the contemptible players, smell serves to unite them. For example, *The Malcontent* opens to bad smells. The induction begins with references to "stool[s]," "stale suits" (line 7) and the fear of "hissing" (line 4), and later on a thought occurs to Sly: "I have an excellent thought: if some fifty of the Grecians that were crammed in the horse-belly had eaten garlic, do you not think the Trojans might have smelt out their knavery?" (Induction, lines 115-18, emphasis added). Sly's thought is prompted by the senses, by seeing and smelling this particular company. As G. K. Hunter remarks in his notes, Sly's thought is stimulated by the smell of garlic from the groundlings, and 'to smell out' not only means to smell, but also to discover. Act 1 opens in a room filled with such a foul noise and such a foul smell that it must immediately be perfumed. The noise, at least, emanates from Malevole's chamber, and the first thing he utters is "Yaugh" (1.2.5), a term of disgust, but it is also implied that the noise and smell also emanate from the audience who fill the room into which the actors enter.⁶

Malevole is not only sensitive to physical and moral stench, he enjoys the freedom of the fool. He is not only "as free as air" (1.3.2), but is equated with a fart. When Mendoza tells Malevole that Duke Pietro hates him, Malevole replies "As Irishmen do bum-cracks"(3.3.50). Usually we are disgusted by what is immoral or ugly, but Duke Pietro is so corrupt that he is disgusted by what is moral, although his disgust also conveys his social disdain for the malcontent. Malevole becomes the farty source of disgust for the Duke because he refuses to flatter him. The disgusting provokes sensory and emotional revulsion which become the vehicles for ordering the world, in other words, vehicles for ascribing

⁶ John Marston, *The Malcontent*, ed. Hunter 1999.

positive and negative values to objects and activities, although in Pietro's case, we may not approve of the moral and political hierarchy that is upheld by his own experience of disgust. Yet, whatever system of value disgust serves to construct, it draws attention to our bodily experience. Hidden in the term sensationalism is the word sensation. As all the tasteless farting reminds us, through its assault on both ears and noses, we are bodies, as well as souls, moral impulses, thoughts, and feelings. Indeed those souls, moral impulses, thoughts and feelings partly depend on the body and its senses for their activation. As Malevole surveys the court, the abominations he registers provoke his moral condemnation, and his disgust grounds that condemnation in the senses and emotions. While post-modern critics may interpret Marston's sensationalism purely in market terms, that is in terms of professional competitiveness and the economic exploitation of a particular audience, sensationalism raises basic questions about what it is to be human and foregrounds the issue of the precise relationship between body, feeling, judgement, and emotion.⁷

Criticism has never really known what to do with Marston's sensationalistic drama. Are scenes such as the murder of Piero in *Antonio's Revenge*, in fact, funny? Are they self-consciously melodramatic and parodic, or are they simply badly written? Or do they exemplify an opportunistic theatricality, and offer Marston commercial and cultural pre-eminence through notoriety? Are scenes like this a response to the more barbaric tastes of a society at an earlier stage of the civilizing process, or are they, as John Peter and Samuel Schoenbaum have argued,

⁷ In *Shakespeare and Violence*, R. A. Foakes discusses the sensationalism that manifests itself through spectacular stage violence. Although Shakespeare's later history plays and tragedies explore violence in relation to sovereignty, masculinity and the possibility of a just war, what Foakes calls "the Rose spectaculars" (2003: 9), in other words the first tetralogy and *Titus Andronicus*, do not demonstrate such a developed thematic consciousness. They show Shakespeare in competition with other dramatists, especially Marlowe, for spectacular effects. The most spectacular play of all is *Titus* which impresses with the inventiveness of its violent scenes, which are disconnected from a moral centre, and are primarily designed to shock (57). Early Shakespeare relishes "the passion for sensation and violence that was a feature of the popular theatre following the opening of the Rose" (58). Foakes is not really interested in disgust as a response to the violence.

signs of Marston's warped personal psychology?⁸ Marston studies seemed to be on the point of breaking through the embarrassment, and even disgust, with which his plays are received, with the publication of the collection of essays edited by T. F. Wharton, entitled *The Drama of John Marston*. Although some of the essays collected in this volume engage in highly productive ways with the social and political issues raised by Marston's plays, and do indeed address such topics as gender politics, the status of the individual, and the competing political values of engagement and withdrawal, Wharton presents the search for moral vision in Marston as a misguided critical strategy which is ultimately undermined by the unpredictable and shifting quality of Marston's plays.⁹ In the introduction (2000: 1-13), Wharton represents Marston as

⁸ For an early discussion of Marston's interest in parody and the way he uses it to expose human capacity for evasion, hypocrisy and self-deception, see Gibbons 1968: 87-104. For Gibbons, the mask is the central symbol of Marston's drama, and parody reveals the pervasive presence of disguise and lies in society. W. Reavely Gair argues that Marston had a very precise concern with the tastes of his audience and the potentialities of the specific playing space. The plays written for the Paul's Boys, including *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge*, are "preoccupied by an urgent need for self-display and for a predominantly sensational appeal" (Gair 2000: 39), while plays, such as *The Malcontent*, written for the older boys at Blackfriars, with a different acting style and stage, draw closer to the techniques of the adult companies, and are more interested in theme than either immediate effect, or the establishment of a personal bond between audience and dramatist (Gair 2000: 41). On the civilizing process, see Elias 1978 and 1982. Disgust is essential in constructing and maintaining civilized culture, as defined by Elias. This new cultural formation starts to develop in the Renaissance, and is characterized by the lowering of the threshold of revulsion, so that more kinds of behaviour and more modes of being are rejected by the civilized as disgusting. On Marston as a psychological pervert, see Peter 1956: 157-58, 176-86 and 253-54; and Schoenbaum 1952: 1069-78.

⁹ These productive essays include Richard Scarr's essay on gender and equivocation, "Insatiate punning in Marston's courtesan plays" (82-99); William W. E. Slight's study of the dilemmas of interiority and the relationship between self and community in the context of early seventeenth-century discourses of self-knowledge, "Touching the self: masturbatory Marston" (100-123); and rather surprisingly, given the line he takes in his general introduction to the volume, Wharton's own essay on gender, "Sexual politics in Marston's *The Malcontent*" (181-93).

the ideal post-modern subject, a writer whose time has come because we are now in a position to appreciate his playfulness, his parody, and the way he exploits self-mockery to establish a bond with the audience. This view is exemplified by the essay Wharton chooses to put first, a characteristically witty and engaging reading of the Antonio plays by Rick Bowers. Bowers argues that Marston is “sensational, not moral” (2000: 14), and that he overleaps boundaries of convention, expectation and taste, dislocating conventions through unremitting theatrical self-consciousness. In Bowers’ words, “He is the theatrical bad boy of his time, assuming his audience to be familiar and interactive with contemporary popular theatre, and using a variety of ironic techniques successfully to surprise, entertain, and emotionally unsettle that audience” (2000: 17). Self-conscious parody and theatricality, and a concern for immediate effect, mean that Marston’s characters have more in common with jugglers, clowns, and dancers, than with fully elaborated characters, and Marston remains hyper-conscious of the role his drama plays in “a “mart” of reflexive professional play” (2000: 14). (A “mart,” as Bowers explains, is a city or region where things are bought or sold.)

While the idea of a post-modern Marston has a lot to recommend it, the publication of *The Drama of John Marston* has proved a false dawn, largely because, one suspects, this kind of post-modern reading turns the plays into something inconsequential, and the post-modern rediscovery of Marston has not been followed, as Wharton hoped, by a rush of productions of Marston’s plays. The energies of the Antonio plays certainly are “parodic, melodramatic, and satirical” (Bowers 2000: 24), as post-modern readings explain, and they also strike us as inconsistent, but these things do not preclude seriousness of perspective, nor do they necessarily make a play contentless, as some post-modern approaches to Marston claim. The consequences of playfulness are potentially more varied than ridicule or deflation. Moreover, rather than simply being incoherent, Marston’s plays exploit a structure of comparison and juxtaposition which is one of the basic techniques of satire. In fact, Marston’s plays invoke varied principles of structure, which indicate varied kinds of truth and reality. These include a linear structure of cause and effect, but also other structures which highlight different forms of truth, such as the structure suggested by etymologies, discussed above, or the alternative dramatic logic to verisimilitude described by Alan Dessen. Dessen demonstrates that a scene can derive its meaning from patterning,

surprise, symbolism or iterative imagery. It can offer “a realization in action of central motifs or images or oppositions” (Dessen 1984: 129), when it is considered as part of an informing pattern, and not isolated from the rest of the play. We are not sensitive to the varied ways Marston’s plays generate meaning. Post-modern Marston is a Marston taken out of lived experience, whether that involves alienation from his socio-political context, or from the body, whereas a study of disgust reconnects Marston with the social, the political and the corporeal. Post-modern Marston celebrates relativism, formal games, plurality, hybridity, and even hedonism, whereas I would argue that Marston’s plays establish dialogues between relativism and morality, form and content, waywardness and order, plurality and identity, hedonism and obligation, nature and culture, context and artefact. After all, what is satire, if not an extended examination of the relationship between artefact and reality, text and context, surface and depth?¹⁰

Antonio and Mellida, *Antonio’s Revenge* and *The Malcontent*, which were all produced between 1599 and 1601, are not just the products of a specific theatrical moment which saw the reestablishment of Paul’s Boys as a rival to the professional, adult companies, they are also products of, and responses to, a specific historico-political moment when Elizabeth I, and her cultural forms, were on the point of passing away. The plays’ hybridity registers a situation which is unmediated, or overmediated, by conventions. The oscillation between genres, which is particularly striking in *Antonio and Mellida*, as it veers between romance, comedy, satire and tragedy, registers this moment of intense anxiety, and the difficulty of imposing a frame of reference on the world in the context of change. Courtly romance, like Petrarchanism, was one of the favoured forms in which to explore Elizabethan sovereignty, but by the late 1590s the Elizabethan consensus, like the Elizabethan era, was disintegrating, and such conventions were becoming obsolete. The frequent allusions to other texts, including the pastoral of *As You Like It* (*A and M* 5.1.62-9),

¹⁰ In Terry Eagleton’s trenchant formulation, the principle of play in post-modernism, often figures “as a cynical brand of consumerist hedonism” and “for all its talk of difference, plurality, heterogeneity, postmodern theory often operates with quite rigid binary oppositions, with “difference,” “plurality” and allied terms lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antitheses might be (unity, identity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other.” See Eagleton 1996: 25-26.

the romantic tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* (*A and M* 4.1.247-60), and, most strikingly, the prose romance of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (*A and M* Induction 2.70-85; 1.1.162-258; 5.2.160-62), are evocations of specifically Elizabethan forms which are then tested by the process of juxtaposition to expose their virtues, contradictions and omissions, both as literary genres, and as styles of government and being.¹¹

The hybridity of Marston's texts is an instance of drama trying to come to terms with the dynamics of a historical moment, as it attempts to remain open to recombination and mutation. *Antonio and Mellida*, for example, registers history, not as the static narrative it tends to become with the benefit of hindsight, but as a process, as something that is being lived out by late Elizabethans, who do not know what the future will hold. The imagery associated with Elizabeth, and the patterns of behaviour encouraged by her particular brand of courtliness, pervade both Antonio plays. In *Antonio and Mellida*, Antonio disguises himself as an Amazon, which not only recalls Sidney's *Arcadia* and the disruption of gender roles as a consequence of female rule which this disguise registers, but also the idealized accounts of Elizabeth addressing the troops at Tilbury in the guise of a martial, English Amazon, as the Armada approached. Mellida unmans Antonio through love (Induction 2.71-75), and Alberto's courtship of Lady Rosaline renders him lovesick and impotent. Meanwhile, Rosaline's demand for slavish gestures of service from the male courtiers around her, provokes Felice into a blistering attack on the identification of courting and courtiership that Elizabeth also exploited in her attempt to manage her male courtiers and advisors:

Felice. O that the stomach of this queasy age
 Digests or brooks such raw unseasoned gobs
 And vomits not them forth! O slavish sots!
 "Servant", quoth you? Foh! If a dog should crave
 And beg her service, he should have it straight.
 She'd give him favours, too, to lick her feet,
 Or fetch her fan, or some such drudgery –
 A good dog's office, which these amorists

¹¹ John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*, edited by W. Reavley Gair (2004).

Triumph of. 'Tis rare! Well, give her more ass,
 More sot, as long as dropping of her nose
 Is sworn rich pearl by such low slaves as those.
 (2.1.92-102)¹²

This negative perspective on Elizabethan conventions notwithstanding, there are occasional moments of flattery for Elizabeth, in *Antonio and Mellida*, when, for example, Antonio in his romance disguise of Florizel, explains that (s)he came to Britain “Longing to view great nature’s miracle” (1.1.191). In other words, (s)he was driven by a longing to see the paragon that is Elizabeth I. On the other hand, *Antonio’s Revenge* presents a rather more jaded version of virginity, through its more insistent and anxious repetition of scenes of non-reproductivity. The plot focuses on several instances of aborted sex. For instance, the wedding between Antonio and Mellida, which is apparently assured by the end of *Antonio and Mellida*, is turned into “a Stygian night” (1.1.89) in *Antonio’s Revenge*; Nutriche is disturbed from her dream of sexual consummation just as “’twas coming of the sweetest” (1.2.33); Maria is plagued “with abortive care” (1.2.20); and the putative sexual liaison between Piero and Maria is associated with death (3.2.50-55). Moreover, both Andrugio and Piero, the Dukes of Genoa and Venice, find themselves at the end of their bloodlines, as Antonio retreats into a life of monkish celibacy, and Piero’s son, Julio, is murdered, while his daughter, Mellida, dies from a broken heart. *Antonio’s Revenge*, like *Antonio and Mellida*, is not cut off from its political and historical context. There is even a musical allusion to the Earl of Essex in the tune and phrasing of Balurdo’s song as he is carted off to prison (4.3.153-59), and perhaps an allusion to Essex’s swaggering pride in Pandulpho’s definition of proper civil conduct (1.5.87-100). The play was probably first performed before the end of May 1601, and Essex was beheaded in February 1601. *Antonio’s Revenge* may end with praise of Elizabeth, but it is a curious form of praise which actually looks

¹² As the organ of smell, the nose plays a large role in disgust, particularly sexual disgust. In medieval theology, mucus from the nose, which Felice calls “dropping,” was so disgusting that its production came to emblemize the Fall. Along with sweat, mucus was only produced as a consequence of original sin, and neither excretion existed in Eden. See Payer 1993: 29.

forward to her death, as Antonio's final speech anticipates a proper elegy for the Queen:

And, O, if ever time create a muse
That to th'immortal fame of virgin faith
Dares once engage his pen to write her death,
Presenting it in some black tragedy,
May it prove gracious, may his style be decked
With freshest blooms of purest elegance;
(5.6.60-65)

Recent approaches to Marston's drama have all tended to pursue the post-modern model of a self-conscious, theatrical, parodic Marston. Indeed, Patrick Buckridge argues that Marston directs the readers of his satires and the audiences of his plays away from real-world applications and towards recreation, as a way of avoiding the punishment of the censors. Recreative principles govern the rhetorical and dramatic structure of Marston's early plays, he claims, which are predicated on a lack of emotional identification with the characters on stage, and the audience observes passions, rather than identifying with them (2000: 75). Detachment may well characterize the audience's response to certain characters in certain situations, but there are plenty of striking theatrical and sensational moments in Marston's plays which elicit deeply visceral sensory and emotional responses from the audience. For instance, Felice's attack on service to a lady, cited earlier, with its graphic evocation of vomit and of pearls of mucus dropping from the lady's nose, provokes visceral revulsion and a powerful identification with the disgust Felice feels, rather than detachment.

As for the incongruities identified by postmodern critics in Marston's dramatic structures, they displace both audience expectations and fixed frameworks on experience, exposing the vicissitudes of instincts, and the coming together of competing systems of value in one experience. Playfulness is distracting, both in the negative sense of being confusing, or even mad, and also in the positive sense of being diverting or entertaining. To be distraught means to be relaxed or amused, but it can also mean to be divided in attention, and even mentally dislocated. Distraction is a response to the opposing pulls of experience. As Angus Fletcher notes, it is a way of dealing with the plethora of existence, with congestion and the pressure of multiple attitudes. He sees this congestion as the consequence of emergent forms of urban existence. Marston, as a

product of the Inns of Court, who is writing for London companies and audiences, certainly voices the thickness of urban experience, but the epistemological congestion in his early plays is also the result of an impending change in the dominant political and cultural regimes.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun “disgust,” which was first used in 1598, refers to a strong distaste for such things as food, drink, and medicine, but over time it developed a stronger sense, and by 1611 had come to mean nausea or loathing, or a strong repugnance excited by that which is loathsome or offensive. In its extreme form, it is an experience of emotional, even physical, revulsion, and of powerful dissatisfaction. Marston examines the social and moral order in a way that privileges the emotion of disgust. Disgust involves horror, revulsion, contempt and fear, and can induce a physical reaction in the onlooker who might grimace, recoil or even feel nauseous. Moreover, it internalizes our attitudes to the moral, social and even political domains because the object of disgust may be physically or aesthetically repellent, like the mucus that drops out of the mistress’ nose, in *Antonio and Mellida* (2.1.92-100); or it may be socially repellent, like the stinking audience that gathers for the induction to *The Malcontent*; or it may be morally repellent, like the act of excising Piero’s tongue, forcing him to be a witness to his own anatomy, and to die a lingering death. In *Antonio’s Revenge*, Piero recognizes disgust as one of the mechanisms of morality when he and Strotzo conspire to bring about Antonio’s downfall, through a brilliant melodrama in which Strotzo will play the main role. Piero advises Strotzo how to behave to give the impression of true remorse. Just as Mellida is about to be executed for her supposed fornication with Feliche, Strotzo is to burst in “with rare passion” (2.5.6) and confess that he defamed Mellida and murdered Antonio’s father, but that both crimes were done at Antonio’s behest. Then, overcome with revulsion at his own sinfulness, he is to beg for his own death, much to the onlookers’ amazement:

Piero. But on the sudden straight I’ll stand amazed,
And fall in exclamations of thy virtues.

Str. Applaud my agonies and penitence.

Piero. Thy honest stomach that could not digest
The crudities of murder; but, surcharged,
Vomited’st them up in Christian piety.

(2.5.27-32)

Visceral disgust merges a moral and a physical response to sin. The thought of the physical consequences of murder turns the virtuous person's stomach, but so, too, does the sinfulness of the action. So Piero advises Strotzo to behave as if he is so disgusted with his actions that he is gripped by abstract, but perhaps also real, retching. Sin is recast as undigested food, as the crudities, or lumps of unwelcome matter that the body expels in the fluid of vomit.

Disgust is undoubtedly sensationalistic, but it is simultaneously a mechanism that enables us to order the world, to separate the pure from the impure, the high from the low, the physically, socially and morally repulsive from the physically, socially and morally attractive. Freud recognizes the function of disgust in structuring moral and cultural systems when he classifies it as a reaction formation which, like shame, works to obscure desire and prevent its indulgence.¹³ The implication of Freud's analysis is, of course, that the object or activity that arouses disgust is actually desirable, mesmerizing or erotic. It is simultaneously the object of revulsion and fascination. A similar confusion of attraction and repulsion is characteristic of the kind of disgust that is suggested by early modern words such as fulsome and rank. This is the kind of disgust that stems from overabundance and surfeit, and it turns the enticing into the repulsive. This kind of disgust, which is produced by the surfeit of the pleasurable, also stimulates moral consciousness, as Malevole explains to Bilioso:

Malevole. Heart a'truth, I would sooner leave my lady singled in a bordello than in
the Genoa Palace:
Sin there appearing in her sluttish shape
Would soon grow loathsome, even to blushless sense;
Surfeit would choke intemperate appetite,
Make the soul sent the rotten breath of lust.
(*The Malcontent* 3.2.28-33)

Whether things are disgusting because they are out of place, as Mary Douglas argues, or because they are mean and low, or because they have been suppressed as immoral or contaminating, they confuse attraction

¹³ See Freud 1953-1974: 7: 177.

and revulsion, and evoke powerful sensory experiences.¹⁴ The disgusting in Marston moves the audience physically and emotionally. Perception, cognition, and the imposition of order on experience are facilitated by a strong sensory response, as well as by reason. This may well lead us to refine Norbert Elias' account of the civilizing process in which the corporeal and emotional tend to stand in opposition to culture, as things that need to be refined and civilized. On the contrary, the workings of disgust suggest a process in which the body and the senses actually produce culture and construct hierarchies of order.

Marston's melancholics, including Antonio and Malevole, express their heightened moral sensitivity through intense expressions of disgust:

Malevole: Think this—this earth is the only grave and Golgotha wherein all things that live must rot; 'tis but the draught wherein the heavenly bodies discharge their corruption; the very muck-hill on which the sublunary orbs cast their excrements. Man is the slime of this dung-pit, and princes are the governors of these men.

(*The Malcontent* 4.5.110-15)

Flattery, tyranny, lust, betrayal, hypocrisy and women all provoke expressions of moral outrage that associate vice with hideous physicality, with skin eruptions, pus, slime, decay, excrement and organic matter that is rank, fulsome and abhorrent. Disgust seems to be activated by fluids that stick, and by slow-flowing liquids or semi-solids that find their way from the inside of the body to the outside. It collects around bodily orifices, those thresholds of disorder where the body's seal is broken, and where it is opened to contamination from the outside. These are also places where the body can flow outwards and pollute its own surroundings. Disgust thus also serves to mark boundaries, not just moral or aesthetic boundaries, but also the boundaries of the self, and the boundaries of privy space. However, the nature of that privy space is ambivalent. On the one hand, the internal is the seat of the soul, of depth and sincerity: "Be faithful, private: but 'tis dangerous," Aurelia advises Ferneze (1.6.49), associating constancy, true identity and privacy. However, to the extent that the internal produces excreta, like mucus, that may find their way outside, it is polluting. Indeed, the disgust

¹⁴ In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas argues that things that cause disgust are associated with dirt, which she defines as matter out of place. Dirt and the disgusting thus become a by-product of categorization.

provoked by such matter, by Malevole's apprehension of the muck-hill of excrement, for instance, also conveys a degree of horror at our own potential to be disgusting. Disgust confers a sense of superiority on those that experience it, because it defines the self against that which is low and objectionable. Malevole, for example, dismisses the disgusting conduct of his fellow courtiers as morally and socially contemptible: "How servile, is the rugged'st courtier's face!" he exclaims, with disdain (1.4.76), yet his sense of superiority is destabilized by the intimations of common bodily experience, and the realization that "all things that live must rot" (4.5.111).

As William Ian Miller points out, disgust is a term that becomes much more widely used in the seventeenth century.¹⁵ Shakespeare, he notes, does not use the word disgust, but the sixteenth and early seventeenth century vocabulary of disgust includes abomination, abhorrence, loathsomeness, rankness, surfeit, fulsomeness, irksomeness, and fastidiousness, from the Latin "fastidium" meaning nausea, as well as interjections like *fie*, and *pah*, to which I would add *faugh*, the surname of the bawd, Mary Faugh, in Marston's *Dutch Courtesan*. The etymology of disgust privileges taste as the sense through which it is felt and expressed, but in Marston disgust also involves visual, tactile and olfactory revulsion. It is unusual to taste things unless they have intentionally been introduced into the mouth, but objects can invade sight, noises can invade ears, smells can invade noses, and things can accidentally brush against hands and skin, and by shifting his focus from disgust as, primarily, a gustatory experience, Marston underlines its reactive, rather than assertive, nature. Since our senses can be invaded, we are not in total control of our bodies or ourselves, and the unsightly can unexpectedly thrust itself on us and stimulate disgust, provoking a sense of loss of control and anxiety. Marston mobilizes disgust to reflect on what it means to be human. The expression of disgust, whether it is Malevole's description of dunghills of excrement, or his invocation of

¹⁵ Miller 1997: 163-69. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Miller points out that disgust does not privilege taste until the seventeenth century, when taste itself expands to mean a general capacity for refinement and discernment. I am strongly indebted to Miller's unique and brilliant study of the cultivation of disgust. Although we differ in certain points, I also found Stephen Greenblatt's essay, "Filthy Rites" in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (1990: 59-79), very provocative.

the stench of the surfeit of lust, forces vivid, concrete, sensual descriptions on the audience which invoke intense sensory experiences. The expression of disgust mobilizes similar feelings of disgust in the audience. They are expected to concur, and the shared sensory and emotional experience establishes a sense of community by humanizing and corporealizing the audience's experience of the play, because, as Piero's description of gobbet-filled vomit demonstrates, disgust is easily experienced vicariously.

In *Antonio's Revenge*, Geoffrey Balurdo stumbles across disgust's humanizing role with his characteristic stupidity, a stupidity that sometimes actually confers insight. Specifically, he uses the term "abominable," a sixteenth century term for what we would describe as disgusting, to describe a nightmare: "For methought I dreamt I was asleep, and methought the ground yawned and belked up the abominable ghost of a misshapen Simile, with two ugly pages, the one called Master *Even-as*, going before, and the other Mounser *Even-so*, following after, whilst Signior Simile stalked most prodigiously in the midst" (1.3.62-67). Balurdo is prompted to describe his linguistic and stylistic nightmare by Antonio's account of his last sleep which "was steeped in horrid dreams" (1.3.39) and "prodigies" (1.3.56). Antonio sees two ghosts which demand revenge, and one of them has a newly punctured breast from which "bubbling gore sprang in frighted eyes" (1.3.44). Balurdo's dream is ridiculous, but it is also good humanism in that it suggests that the moral and cosmic perversions witnessed by Antonio also produce perversions of language, and his speech indulges in the kind of significant etymologizing (often based on incorrect evidence) that humanism enjoyed. The word abominable derives from the Latin "abominabilis," which means worthy of imprecation. Abominable also recalls the word omen, especially the kind of bad omen, from which we might want to escape (the Latin preposition "ab" means from). Thus it is entirely appropriate that Antonio's nightmares and his vision of horrific prodigies should suggest the word abominable to Balurdo, but as the *OED* also notes, until the seventeenth century, the word abominable was spelt as abhominable, with an extra h, because it was thought to derive from the phrase *ab hominem*, meaning away from man. The abhominable, or disgusting, defines that which is inhuman, or perhaps, more accurately, that we would like to be inhuman, because there is always the suspicion that we participate in what we find disgusting.

Disgust is part of sensationalism, but it also serves moral and even political purposes in *Antonio's Revenge*, where it is the motivating force that drives the citizens of Venice to take up arms against Piero and force a change of regime:

Pandulpho. And I do find the citizens grown sick
 With swallowing the bloody crudities
 Of black Piero's acts; they fain would cast
 And vomit him from off their government.
 (5.3.17-20)

Civil unrest is like vomiting; ideologies, aspirations, and justice are sensed through the body, and apprehended materially. Since disgust grounds the moral and political in sensory and emotional impulse, it embodies ideology, in the dual sense of expressing a particular ideology, and in the sense of giving ideology a material existence. Marston's mobilization of disgust puts the body behind words, and makes them more than mere words. His vision confuses reason and the senses, abstract and concrete, so that Piero can talk about a "sinking thought" and his "conscious heart" (*Antonio's Revenge* 1.2.76), even though a heart pumps, and may even feel, but does not think. It is precisely this sort of confusion that Jonson attacks in *Poetaster*. Indeed the bizarre idea of a "conscious heart" is specifically ridiculed in *Poetaster* (5.3.287-8). It is precisely such bizarre mixtures that contribute to Marston's sensationalism, but these bizarre mixtures implicate the relationship between morality, psychology and bodily experience, and force us to consider what that relationship might be. The emotions are physical experiences in Marston. For example, extreme grief induces Maria to swoon in *Antonio's Revenge* (1.5.16), while Antonio experiences a grief that is so strong it threatens to burst his ribs asunder (4.1.66-68).

The acknowledgement that we are embodied beings, with senses and physical impulses, which is conveyed through the mechanisms of disgust, has its own risks. At its extreme, it turns humans into objects and Piero seizes on this instrumentality, declaring that people are like wedges, and he merely uses one to drive out the other (*Antonio's Revenge* 4.3.69-73). At the same time, Marston's exploitation of disgust is part of his obsessive exploration of extreme feeling and the best means in which to articulate it. As Antonio tells his mother, decorum must be broken in order to give expression to the extreme and unthinkable, and in

order to find forms of articulation for the world of unknown emotion, existing forms and expectations must be broken. Normal modes of articulation would be distorting in the context of extreme unfamiliarity, and only madness provides an accurate form for extremity. A logic of gestures must supplement the inadequacy of words, and a logic of madness must give form to the extremities of injustice and grief:

Maria. Dost naught but weep, weep?
Antonio. Yes, mother, I do sigh and wring my hands,
 Beat my poor breast and wreath my tender arms.
 Hark ye, I'll tell you wondrous strange, strange news.
Mar. What my good boy, stark mad?
Ant. I am not.
Mar. Alas, is that strange news?
Ant. "Strange news"—why mother, is't not wondrous strange
 I am not mad, I run not frantic, ha?
 Knowing my father's trunk scarce cold, your love
 Is sought by him that doth pursue my life;
 (*Antonio's Revenge* 2.4.6-15)

Marston's mobilization of disgust is part of his exploration of the best ways of stimulating a response in the audience, whether that is through his extensive and highly developed use of music and song, through extreme and often rough-sounding language, or through the provocation of a visceral, almost instinctive, revulsion.

A more fruitful way of reading the self-reflexiveness and playfulness in Marston, than that suggested by some kinds of post-modernism, is to follow Robert Weimann's lead and to acknowledge that there are two kinds of dramaturgy available to Marston: one which privileges impersonation and the verisimilar representation of character, motivation and, what we would term, psychology; and another kind of dramaturgy that revels in the sheer bravura of performance and in which the actors have much in common with jugglers, dancers, and other kinds of entertainers. Marston seems to combine the two forms, experimenting with ways of conveying the extremes of emotion most powerfully and accurately, and then punctuating this drive for personation with highly theatrical, even parodic, set pieces in which the actors seem to be removed from the continuity of the dramatic fiction. In the battle between the learned author's pen, and the actors' bodies and voices, Weimann locates Marston on the side of the learned authors who try to

distance themselves from what is perceived to be low and contemptible in popular theatre. Marston, he argues, attempts to preserve his authority, and that of the written text, from the competing authorities of performance and audience, and tries to control the unpredictable, uncontrollable, and improvisatory practices of players by privileging words over corporeality and performance (2000: 63 and 124-139). Marston, Weimann notes, even coins the term “personation” to describe the art of individual characterization which is opposed to simple, uneducated types of playing (131-32).

However, an analysis of Marston’s use of disgust suggests that Marston is neither anti-body, nor completely comfortable with the abstract potential of words. In fact, the induction to *Antonio and Mellida* acknowledges the inadequacy of words, and the need to supplement words through signs and tokens, through visual and gestural resources: “‘Tis to be described by signs and tokens, for, unless I were possessed with a legion of spirits, ‘tis impossible to be made perspicuous by any utterance” (2.121-24). Marston’s exploitation of disgust actually argues for an interest in embodiment and an understanding of an inescapable relationship between the internal and the external, between the body and soul, between materiality and abstraction. Marston is much more conflicted than Weimann suggests, as he is obsessed by the relationship between words and action, and is worried by how to write things down, and by how best to communicate passion to an audience.

Weimann subsumes Marston under those writers who want a poetics of refinement which rejects ignorance and grossness and anything that is incompatible with Renaissance models of classicism (2000: 139), but the sensational and disgusting which play such a prominent role in Marston’s plays capitalize on grossness. It seems to me that Marston accepts play as humanly crafted, as embodied, and that he accepts and exploits the embodiment of the audience, bringing together audience, author and actor in a malodorous community united by the ability to produce and detect unpleasant smells. In fact, Marston is concerned with how one lives through the body, and how the physical, emotional and moral may indeed be linked. While Weimann argues that Marston is driven by a quest for power, Marston’s drama of disgust actually produces a more anxiety-ridden form of authorship, which is reactive, as well as assertive, which acknowledges the subject’s vulnerability to invasion by external stimuli, and the external’s vulnerability to invasion

by the subject. Indeed, the subject, including the authorial subject, is both repulsed and fascinated by the loathsome objects it abhors. Contrary to the drive for refinement that Weimann identifies in Marston, Marston's disgust connects the physiological, the psychological, the social, the moral, and the political, and unites the body with culture, subjectivity with materiality, and spirit with matter.

References

- Aggeler, G. D. 1970. "Stoicism and revenge in Marston." *English Studies* 51: 507-17.
- Bowers, Rick. 2000. "John Marston at the 'mart of woe': the 'Antonio' plays." *The Drama of John Marston*. Ed. T. F. Wharton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 14-26.
- Buckridge, Patrick. 2000. "Safety in fiction: Marston's recreational poetics." *The Drama of John Marston*. Ed. T. F. Wharton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 60-81.
- Dessen, Alan C. 1984. *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1996. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert. 1978 and 1982. *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. 2 vols. 1939. New York: Urizen. 1939. New York: Pantheon.
- Fletcher, Angus. 1991. *Colors of the Mind. Conjectures on Thinking in Literature*. Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Foakes, R. A. 2003. *Shakespeare and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1953-1974. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Translated and reprinted in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. (24 vols). Vol. 7. Ed. James Strachey. 1905. London: Hogarth Press.
- Gair, W. Reavely. 2000. "John Marston: a theatrical perspective." *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-Visions*. Ed. T. F. Wharton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 27-44.

- Geckle, George. 1980. *John Marston's Drama: Themes, Images, Sources*. London: Associated University Presses.
- Gibbons, Brian. 1968. *Jacobean City Comedy: A Study of Satiric Plays by Jonson, Marston and Middleton*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1990. "Filthy Rites." *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. New York: Routledge. 59-79.
- Leishman, J. B. (ed). 1949. "The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus or the Scourge of Simony." In *The Three Parnassus Plays (1598 – 1601)*. London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson.
- Marston, John. 1999. *The Malcontent*. Ed. George K. Hunter. The Revels Plays. 1975. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Marston, John. 1999. *Antonio's Revenge*. Ed. W. Reavley Gair. The Revels Plays. 1978. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Marston, John. 2004. *Antonio and Mellida*. Ed. W. Reavley Gair. The Revels Plays. 1991. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Miller, Susan B. 1993. "Disgust reactions: their determinants and manifestation in treatment." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 29: 711-35.
- Miller, William Ian. 1997. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Partridge, Eric. 2001. *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. London: Routledge. 1947.
- Payer, Pierre J. 1993. *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Peter, John. 1956. *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Scarr, Richard. 2000. "Insatiate punning in Marston's courtesan plays." *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-Visions*. Ed. T. F. Wharton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 82-99.
- Schoenbaum, Samuel. 1952. "The precarious balance of John Marston." *PMLA*. 67: 1069-78.
- Slights, William W. E. 2000. "Touching the self: masturbatory Marston." *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-Visions*. Ed. T. F. Wharton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 100-123;
- Weimann, Robert. 2000. *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice. Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wharton, T. F. 1994. *The Critical Rise and Fall of John Marston*.
Columbia, S.C.: Camden House.

Wharton, T. F. 2000. "Sexual politics in Marston's *The Malcontent*." *The
Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-Visions*. Ed. T. F. Wharton.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 181-93.