



BOOK REVIEW

Bradley J. Irish. *Shakespeare and Disgust: The History and Science of Early Modern Revulsion*

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“My gorge rises at it.” Hamlet’s reaction to the encounter with Yorick’s skull is one of nausea: the sight of it turns his stomach. What Hamlet expresses is, in part, a reaction to the ghastly sight of human remains. But it is also a sense of visceral disgust provoked by the moral and intellectual implications of the fact of human morality. Hamlet is sickened by the thought of the common fate of clowns and kings. *Shakespeare & Disgust: The History and Science of Early Modern Revulsion*, Bradley J. Irish’s valuable contribution to the growing body of research on early modern literature and the emotions, considers many such moments of entwined physical and moral disgust. Drawing on contemporary psychological and biological studies of emotion, Irish argues that disgust, in its most basic form, is a mechanism that evolved in human and non-human animals to prevent contact with pathogen-bearing bodies. It provokes feelings of distaste and loathing in response to spoiled foods, decaying corpses, vermin, and other potentially infectious objects. In human beings, this basic emotion evolved into a “behavioural immune system,” a set of practices that associate disgust with certain social and moral transgressions. So, for instance, a society might be predisposed to banish an adulterer who might be a vector of venereal disease. Shakespeare, the argument continues, recognized and took advantage of the dramatic potential of the twin tendencies toward physical disgust and socio-moral aversion. Dramatizing disgust, the “gate-keeper emotion,” enabled Shakespeare to explore the integrity, permeability, and violation of personal and social boundaries. The readings emphasize the way that aversive, stigmatizing, and ostracizing practices structure Shakespeare’s plots, and how the ambivalent allure of disgusting imagery makes plays like *Titus Andronicus* both repulsive and compelling.

Shakespeare and Disgust includes five chapters devoted to single plays and five shorter linking chapters that focus more generally on one aspect of disgust as it appears throughout the plays, a design balancing close analysis of language and narrative with a broader view of the Shakespearean canon. Chapter 2, perhaps the most historicist of the chapters, situates the gruesome violence of *Titus Andronicus* amidst other bloody and stomach-turning spectacles of the early modern period, such as public executions and the anatomy theatre. Chapters 4 and 6 concern *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus* respectively, arguing that the plot structures of these plays—which prominently involve acts of banishment and invasion—correspond to the regulative and purgative action of disgust, as characters are variously figured as infectious bodies or cleansing agents. Chapter 8 draws on recent work in early modern critical race studies and psychological investigation of the role of disgust in out-group prejudice in an analysis of *Othello*, showing how Iago excites feelings of racialized disgust in Venetian society to stigmatize and dehumanize Othello. Chapter 10 employs Terror Management Theory, a psychological model that suggests that people develop meaningful worldviews to overcome anxieties about mortality, to analyze the character arc of

Hamlet's protagonist. Hamlet's disgust toward the perceived moral and sexual transgressions of the Danish court and his morbid fixation on decay symptomize an existential fear of death, a fear which is eventually mastered by his turn to providentialism at the play's conclusion. The interlaced chapters address themes that scientific research has identified as key elicitors of disgust: "Food Disgust," "Disease Disgust," "Body Envelope Disgust" (pertaining to wounds and other violations of bodily integrity), "Racial Disgust," and "Sex Disgust." The discussions of race, sexuality, and disability in these chapters suggest the potential for the history of emotions to become an intersectional method, following work like that of the scholars collected in Carol Mejia LaPerle's recent volume *Race and Affect in Early Modern English Literature* (2022).

The book's synthesis of scientific and humanistic methods is premised on the notion that "the human brain has certain stable biological properties that nonetheless must inevitably develop within a particular cultural framework" (8). Disgust is a particularly appropriate object for this approach, as studies suggest that the experience of disgust is universal, but its triggers are dependent upon acculturation: what one society finds repulsive may be a rare delicacy in another. Despite the thoughtful defense of interdisciplinarity, some questions about the approach remain. The suggestion that Shakespeare anticipated many of the insights of contemporary psychology may not be an entirely satisfactory answer to the question of anachronism, though this is a challenge faced by all studies that employ contemporary theoretical methods. There is also a risk of naturalizing important political and ethical concerns by representing outgroup prejudice as "an evolutionary by-product of disgust's biologically protective functioning" (165). But one does not need to accept unreservedly the book's psycho-biological framework to appreciate its analyses of the language of disgust in Shakespeare's plays. Irish is persuasive in arguing that disgust is a crucial element in Shakespearean drama, and his readings of the plays are impressive and illuminating. *Shakespeare and Disgust* is an engaging read, vindicating its own claim that the disgusting can provoke both revulsion and interest.