

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications - Modern Languages and Literatures    Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of

---

January 2004

## Scatology, the Last Taboo: Introduction to *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*

Jeff Persels

University of South Carolina, perselsj@sc.edu

Russell J. Ganim

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, rganim1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangfacpub>



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

Persels, Jeff and Ganim, Russell J., "Scatology, the Last Taboo: Introduction to *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*" (2004). *Faculty Publications - Modern Languages and Literatures*. 6.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangfacpub/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Modern Languages and Literatures by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## Introduction

# Scatology, the Last Taboo

*O what lovely fecal matter!*

François Rabelais

*Where there is dirt there is system.*

Mary Douglas

This collection of essays was provoked by what its editors considered to be a curious lacuna: the relative academic neglect of the copious and ubiquitous scatological rhetoric of Early Modern Europe, here broadly defined as the representation of the process and product of elimination of the body's waste products (feces, urine, flatus, phlegm, vomitus). Our most educated forebears, different from ourselves, did not disdain it — if such proof may be found in the mere proliferation of examples — and, further, employed it in all manner of works, not just in the crude jokes of comic ephemera. This neglect led to the idea of an anthology that would invite reconsideration of the many forms and functions of scatology as literary and artistic trope. The results emphasize that while the Rabelaisian corpus may yet serve as the standard referent, hallmark or even touchstone of the scatological in Early Modern European works, critical inquiry must move beyond this so that readers may extend and deepen their understanding of what the *Oxford English Dictionary* dismisses simply as 'dirty literature.'

Worthy children of a Classical, Romantic and, most tellingly, bourgeois aesthetic, we can hardly be blamed for several centuries of discomfort, in both our teaching and our writing, when faced with works that deal with that last taboo, what Victor Hugo evocatively called the 'last veil' clouding our vision of the truth.<sup>1</sup> Sexuality in all its myriad forms has long been the darling of academic readers, a once marginalized, now legitimate field of critical investigation, commentary and theory building. Scatology, however, arguably an even more universal function than sexuality, still retains the power to make us blush, to provoke shame and embarrassment. Discussion of excrement is generally relegated to one of two extremes: the objective, clinical discourse of medical and social sciences (e.g., gastroenterology, psychology, anthropology) or the subjective, gross indecency of infantile insult or juvenile jest (e.g., *South Park*). The contributors to this volume reconsider this last taboo in the context of Early Modern European artistic and literate expression, addressing unflinchingly both the objective reality of the scatological as part and parcel of material culture — inescapably a much larger part, a much heavier parcel than then than now — and the subjective experience of that reality among contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

If students of literature and the arts have hitherto and in the main been reluctant to tackle, or squeamish about addressing, scatology in earnest, a slowly growing number of recent works (e.g., Vigarello, Monestier, Inglis) have articulated for them and modeled, to varying degrees, socio-historical interpretations of excrement as process, product and experience. Such interpretations owe much to at least three distinct but arguably mutually compatible intellectual trends.

First, the ethnographic fieldwork and analysis of such anthropologists as Claude Lévi-Strauss (*L'homme nu*, 1971) and Bernadette Bucher (*Icon and Conquest*, 1981) but especially Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*, 1966) posit a symbolic connection between 'dirt' and 'danger' as the formative relationship of a given society's cosmology, the desired elimination of both in the search for 'purity' constituting then 'a positive re-ordering of our environment' (Douglas 2). For Bucher, as for Douglas, 'impurity,' and 'disorder' are synonymous. From a social standpoint, Bucher claims that 'what is decreed impure, [and] thus execrated and condemned by a culture, is an object out of place, a cause for disorder' (142). Excrement becomes part of this disorder and marginalization because it is both naturally present but, in most cases, socially absent. It finds itself in 'ambiguous and confusing' circumstances because it is of the body but then physically dislodged from it. Consequently, human waste is separated from the individual who created it, and from the society that rejects it. Paying close attention to this 'disorder,' understanding the treatment of impurity and its concomitant 'danger' within a given society's conceptualization of its own nature, becomes critical to a full and accurate appreciation of that society.

Second, the popular versus official cultural dichotomy of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin attempts to do just that, focusing on the subversive, 'camivalesque' nature of the grotesque body and its excrement-producing 'lower stratum' in the works of Rabelais (*Rabelais and His World*, 1965). His approach has indelibly marked scholarly readings of literary and artistic scatology, particularly that of Early Modern Europe, and its influence, as we might expect, is clear in the number of following essays that take it as a frame of reference. His early attention to the socio-historically specific culture of the 'main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama' (317), and the copious critical literature it has spawned would, in fact, seem to have all but eclipsed earlier perspectives. If Freud and psychoanalytical approaches to scatology were once the obvious interpretive choice for modern readings of primary texts such as those treated here — the standard set by Erikson's influential biography of one the Early Modern era's best-known scatologs, (*Young Man Luther*, 1958) — such is no longer the case. For a variety of reasons, many of them connected to Bakhtinian and New-Historicist attention to the recovery and explication of European 'popular' culture, the postulation of a psychological, ahistorical reading of human functions and the way individuals and groups in and across time and space perceive and interpret them has been necessarily modified. The contributors to this volume are all aware of and seek to understand the mental and physical distance that separates us from the experience of Early Modern excrement. What emerges from their work we may usefully define as a set of complementary applications — the first by the primary

authors, the second by their modern readers — of Michel Foucault's idea of 'a transformation into discourse' as outlined in his *History of Sexuality*. His consideration of the 'censorship,' 'denial,' and 'repressive hypotheses' (12) used to thwart the development of human sexual identity finds a parallel with the scatological in that the social desire to silence literary and artistic representations of it translates into an aesthetic and linguistic code whereby the purgative becomes expressive. As Douglas similarly argues, 'The danger risked by boundary transgression is power' (161). Evoking reactions of disgust and/or ribald delight, the texts and illustrations under examination unleash creative forces and responses that alter our perception of what the form and function of art actually are. Cultural suppression becomes subcultural revelation as what was once rejected as waste is now valued as inspiration. Or, rather, as at least one critic has likewise argued in a corrective to Bakhtin, the distinction between high and low culture, like the rejection and subsequent recuperation of waste, actually corresponds more to the way we have chosen to recover the past than to any real separation acknowledged among Rabelais's contemporaries. As is the case in many of the Amerindians studied in Lévi-Strauss's *L'Homme nu*, their excrement was always already useful, recyclable, both literally and figuratively; part of the effort of the following essays is to make that point.

How that always already useful and recyclable Early Modern excrement was lost, so to speak, is the concern of the third trend. German sociologist Norbert Elias (*The Civilizing Process*, 1939) developed, with an acknowledged debt to Freudian psychoanalytical theory, the seminal notion of a historically documentable European 'civilizing process,' a process very much concerned with the scatological. Most pertinent to this collection, Elias zeroes in on what he considers to be the beginnings of an historical shift in modes of social behavior in Early Modern Western European society concurrent with the literary and artistic works examined in this volume. He founds his notion of a civilizing process on a gradual modification in 'personality make-up' or 'habitus' — including, but not limited to, those involving attitudes toward the excretory experience. Motivated by the rise of a 'courtly' and/or 'bourgeois' habitus, both of which became increasingly scandalized over time by that experience and, as a result, increasingly censorious of its representation, the shift can be readily documented in the rise and proliferation of manuals of conduct. It is worth noting here that all three trends focus on varying forms of private and public control of excrement and excretion — the overall 'excretory experience,' as one author would have it — as essential to a given society's cosmology, whether literal and physical or symbolic and moral. Elias's postulation of a 'civilizing process' for Early Modern Europe hinges on this.

Building on Elias, Douglas and the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, David Inglis has most recently sought to incorporate an elemental 'ethnography' of dirt into the Elisian scheme of civilization. Elias himself points the way, as we have seen, in linking the rise of an eventual 'bourgeois habitus' to self-conscious modifications in the codes of social interaction, of which those applying to the most 'unclean' and hence 'dangerous' of them all, excretory practice, are the most problematic and so subject to most rigorous control and even repression. This, as

Inglis traces most convincingly for the modern period — his ‘history’ from Antiquity to the late seventeenth century is disappointingly thin — has been effected in the West (his examples are primarily French and English) in both the public and private spheres. Dirt hence disorder hence danger become associated with the proletariat, the proverbial ‘unwashed’ even unwiped masses, as distinct from the hygienically sound hence orderly hence safe bourgeoisie — that is, until the former, too, come to adopt Inglis’ ‘bourgeois’ now almost universal Western ‘fecal habitus,’ ultimately depriving dirt of its utility as a class distinction. The ‘civilizing process’ here becomes synonymous with the rigorous public and private effort to distance oneself from one’s own excrement, the sight and smell of which grow proportionally offensive. That offense transfers easily to those words and images that represent that sight and smell, resulting in as much discomfort with scatology as with the excretory experience itself. Rabelais’s ‘bathroom humor’ becomes the cause of an embarrassed snicker, the object of academic dismissal, the reason we read him in private but gloss over the ‘dirty bits’ in public. All the more so as he, like many of his contemporaries treated in this anthology, has the vexing habit of mixing an *altior sensus* with the quest for a perfect asswipe.<sup>3</sup> Much Early Modern vernacular art and literature is disorderly, is unclean, is thus ‘dangerous,’ subversive, and is in need of the neo-Classical bath it will receive in subsequent centuries.

Even more illuminating for the argument that links the essays in this volume, Elias’s primary cultural marker, Erasmus — whose 1530 conduct manual, the *De civilitate morum puerilium* (*On Good Manners for Boys*), is an important milestone in the ‘civilizing process’ — not only announced the advent of the specific socio-historical scatological moment, as it were, that would become ours, but also that he was himself aware of participating in one. A curiously revealing case in point, the *Adagia*, compiled over the course of his career, explicate many a proverbial scatological act (of micturition, of excretion) toward which the commentator demonstrates a predictable — following the Eliasian thesis — and telling reserve. Yet adage 3.7.1, *Scarabaeus aquilam quaerit* (‘A dung-beetle hunting an eagle’), acknowledges, as much as any other contemporary work treated in the following pages, a relationship to excrement different from our own:

The fact that it [the dung-beetle] uses the droppings of animals for its own purposes is a matter of praise, not accusation. As if doctors do not do exactly the same, not only making ointments with a variety of animal and even human excrement, but prescribing it in medicines for the sick (297)<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, he continues, in explicit recognition of his own historically determined, and thus intrinsically mutable, relationship to the scatological:

But is it also true that men are offended not so much by excrement itself as by the current view of it; to the earliest mortals this substance was not so disgusting as it is to us, for they called it by the very auspicious name of *laetamen* [‘manure,’ from *laetare*, ‘to gladden’] and they had not hesitation in giving the god Saturn the nickname of ‘Sterculeus’ [from *stercus*, ‘dung, shit’], and this was a compliment if we believe Macrobius. (298)<sup>5</sup>

Erasmus, both harbinger and codifier of a ‘civilizing process,’ of a new ‘scatologically-challenged’ habitus-in-the-making that would forever distance us from our excrement, noted himself, and with all the troubled ‘objectivity’ of an ethnographer, his own and his contemporaries’ distance from an earlier scatological golden age, ‘if we believe Macrobius.’

That this Erasmian/Eliasian shift coincides with the same historical moments and spaces inhabited by the works discussed in this anthology — works constitute so many witnesses to and agents of that change — is worth exploring as a hypothesis for dispelling some of the inevitable and discomfiting ‘ambiguity’ surrounding excrement, for clearing away, as it were, the taboo on serious treatment of scatology in art and literature. What ‘clouds’ our ability to appreciate the frequent Early Modern recourse to excremental rhetoric, whether in text or in image, is, as Erasmus suspected, our own socially, culturally and historically determined distance from an earlier scatological golden age. Traced anthropologically, sociologically, culturally and historically, the Early Moderns arguably shat differently (not to mention ate, drank, digested, pissed, farted, vomited and spat differently) as well as inherited and cultivated a different understanding of those paradoxically both natural and grotesque acts. Explorations, however tentative, of that difference should render Early Modern Europeans’ less abashed use of scatology less ambiguous, less unsettling, more meaningful. Although far from comprehensive, the following essays on some of the period’s cultural artifacts begin to do just that, looking for, to paraphrase Douglas, the system in the dirt, for ‘. . . if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order’ (40).



For ease of consultation, the editors have decided to group the essays geographically and chronologically with regard to authors and works treated. That a good half of them focus primarily on the French tradition — in inverse proportion, one might argue, to the importance of scatology as recognized in national stereotypes — is as much a reflection of the editors’ own fields of inquiry as it is indicative of the relative lack of attention Early Modern French scatology has hitherto received, as opposed to the German and, to a lesser extent, English varieties.

Both Barbara C. Bowen and Geoffrey R. Hope, tracing the fortunes, respectively, of comic flatulence and of one specific political and moral excretory anecdote, cross national, generic and linguistic frontiers in pointing out important Classical and neo-Latin antecedents, influences and parallels in a subject most often associated with early vernacular ‘earthiness.’ The result opens up a large body of scatological material that was as familiar to the Humanist contemporaries of Rabelais as it is most likely unknown to, or certainly underappreciated by, modern readers. In both authors, the seeming off-color or embarrassing joke takes on unexpected rhetorical and social importance.

A trio of essays focuses specifically on sixteenth-century France and Francophone Switzerland. David LaGuardia takes on the former’s most celebrated scatolog, François Rabelais, in a syncretic reading of *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*

that contributes to two major trends in Rabelaisian scholarship, the medical and anatomical subtext articulated by Rabelais the professionally-trained and practicing physician, first systematically approached by Roland Antonioli; and the eschatological 'design' drawn by Rabelais the Evangelical Humanist, most recently and methodically explicated by Edwin Duval. For both approaches, as LaGuardia demonstrates, the giant princes' digestion and its discontents, manipulated by contemporary dietary prescription and proscription, are critical to a full understanding of the chronicles.

Jeff Persels uses one particularly vivid anti-clerical anecdote of vomiting, exploited by Calvinist theologian Pierre Viret, as a springboard for discussion of the polemical uses of scatology. As a useful figure for referencing the critical controversy surrounding the Catholic mass, it is but one example of the evocative power of 'vulgar' language in framing many issues of contemporary doctrinal difference.

Emily E. Thompson shifts scrutiny from the religious and the medical issues of the preceding two essays to the social, glossing both the moral implications and the class consciousness of scatological anecdote in tales by Marguerite de Navarre and Philippe de Vigneulles. She argues effectively that figurative Early Modern use of the excremental was not limited merely to obscene humor nor to Evangelical proselytism. From a psychological standpoint, the scatological transforms pride into humiliation, thus emphasizing the personal and collective 'instability' Marguerite and Vigneulles saw as typical of Renaissance France.

Continuing into the seventeenth century, Russell Ganim reads against the critical grain in privileging the scatological motifs of the baroque as exemplified by Théophile de Viau's 'cabaret' poetry, verse that contemporaries (and not a few modern critics) of the *Grand Siècle* would have preferred to relegate to the preceding era of the less 'civilized' authors examined by LaGuardia, Persels, and Thompson. His consideration of Théophile's long-neglected 'crass' libertine works argues for their inclusion as a necessary component of the Baroque aesthetic, fleshing out the anatomy of the baroque body much the way Peter J. Smith does in the reading of English cavalier poetry that concludes this volume.

Jeanne Morgan Zarucchi uncovers and interprets an unknown 'scandalous' piece of political commentary on the reign of Louis XIV long hidden in a modified catalog of laudatory medals. A representation of the king shitting into a chamber pot held by the pope protests the 1689 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, perpetuating the polemical utility of scatology, and to much the same ends, echoes the sixteenth-century Calvinist polemicists discussed by Persels.

Crossing the border into Early Modern Germany, both Glenn Ehrstine and Josef Schmidt survey and remap the familiar territory of Lutheran scatological rhetoric. Schmidt looks to common traditions in medieval piety and medicine — specifically the understudied *Dreckapotheke*, too innocuously translated as 'Filth Pharmacy,' he argues — for sources of popular expressions of Reform issues, many of which left a mark on the language down to the present day. Ehrstine takes on scatological motifs in the corpus of German *Narrenliteratur*, recalling and

assessing physical cures for folly, many involving purges such as those LaGuardia examines in Rabelais. In this discussion of corporeal purification, Ehrstine comes to similar conclusions about the meaning and usefulness of bodily catharsis and its relation to rhetorical strategy.

Alison G. Stewart carries these concerns over into the visual arts, reading representations of vomiting, urination and defecation in peasant festival images from Germany and Flanders. Working from pre-Bruegel prints and paintings, she traces the waxing and waning of moralizing scatological motifs, seeking cultural explanations for their explicitness and ubiquity in German art and their understatement and scarcity in Flemish art.

Across the channel, Joseph Tate reviews the state-of-the-art Early Modern science of uroscopy, the specialty of the 'Pisse-Prophets,' as background for understanding the detailed diagnosis, prognosis and death of Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine. He thus grounds a new interpretation of Marlowe's original addition to the possible source materials for the play on a reading of contemporary medical and popular culture, restoring the importance of an overlooked but vital Early Modern scatological frame of reference. Finally, Peter J. Smith closes the volume with a speculative reading of English Cavalier verse that posits a shift in sensibility with regard to the use of scatological rhetoric effected between Sir Thomas Urquhart's 'jubilant' and carnivalesque 1653 translation of Rabelais and the dark, sterile scatological verse of the post-Restoration Cavalier poet John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. Smith effectively alludes to the topos evoked by all essays in the volume, that of the scatological as a fertile trope of both renewal and decay.



It is perhaps not merely serendipitous that the collection of these essays should follow so closely on the English-language publication of Dominique-Gilbert Laporte's brief but meditative 1978 essay, *A History of Shit*, and Ralph A. Lewin's light yet informative *Merde: Excursions in Scientific, Cultural and Socio-Historical Coprology*. The latter's adjective-laden subtitle would, in fact, with the addition of 'literary' or 'rhetorical,' serve this volume equally well. These are essays informed as much by close attention to Early Modern 'sciences' — diet, hygiene, uroscopy, nascent etiology and pathology, even the German tradition of *Dreckapotheke* or 'Filth Pharmacy' — as by the associated psychological implications for language, poetry, narrative and the arts. There is decidedly both an individual and collective effort on the part of the contributors to account for the rhetorical recourse to images of physical elimination in contemporary terms, thereby enriching our understanding of many familiar works and seeking a place in the canon for some hitherto neglected or underestimated ones.

Historically we humans have gone to great lengths to render civilization synonymous with the marginalization of human waste and its production, restricting it to discrete corners of our lives and minds, banishing it from our educated, polite discourse. We might recall here that the publication of Erasmus'

book of manners mentioned earlier, the 1530 *On Good Manners for Boys*, rubbed shoulders with Rabelais's 1532 *Pantagruel*: scatological expression was thus already marked for the suppression we 'cultivated' moderns seem to prefer, though as these essays show, it was a long and glorious decline. That decline may seem well and good to us now but it has not come without cost, part of which is arguably our willful deafness and blindness to the richness of the scatological as metaphor, to how the expression to 'cheat' came to be expressed as *bescheissen* or 'to shit upon' in German, to why knowing the mettle of a man by his urine could be expressed in French as *Je voudrais bien voir de son urine*, that is, 'I would like to see his urine.' Achieving a new respect for, contributing knowledge to and fostering interest in Early Modern scatology within the realm of literary and art history studies would mean, without blush or shame, that this collection has been 'well shat' (*bien chié*). To each generation its idiom; for discerning readers and spectators to gauge its value without prejudice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in a chapter devoted to the semantics of the nineteenth-century sewer, 'The City: the Sewer, the Gaze and the Contaminating Touch,' *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*: 125-48: 'But in describing the functional process of cleaning, [author of *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1861, Henry] Mayhew articulates the sewers as symbolic system. Indeed, he repeats one of the dominant tropes of western metaphysics: truth lies hidden behind a veil. But "truth" is now conceived materially, as excrement. In *Les misérables*, in what might be called, without irony, one of the most brilliant explorations of the semantics of the sewer, Victor Hugo wrote that there could be no "false appearance" in the "vast confusion: of the 'ditch of truth': '[the] last veil is stripped away...' (140).

<sup>2</sup> Although far from numerous, serious historical considerations of the Western excremental experience, including accounts of the Early Modern period, do exist, and have been on the increase most recently, from an important nineteenth-century account of Paris by Alfred Franklin's 1873 'Étude sur la voirie et l'hygiène publique à Paris depuis le XII<sup>e</sup> siècle' to David Inglis's 2001 *A Sociological History of the Excretory Experience: Defecatory Manners and Toiletry Technology*, and including George Vigarello's 1985 *Le propre et le sale: l'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen Âge* (translated as *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France Since the Middle Ages* in 1988), as well as Dominique-Gilbert Laporte's 1978 tantalizingly brief essay *Histoire de la merde* (tellingly translated into English only in 2000), and Martin Monestier's richly illustrated 1997 *Histoire et bizarreries sociales des excréments, des origines à nos jours*, which is much indebted to Franklin's pioneering work.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. especially folklorist Claude Gaignebet's *A plus hault sens: l'éso-térisme spirituel et charnel de Rabelais*.

<sup>4</sup> *Adagia* 3.7.1.486–89: *Porro quod animantium excrementis ad suam commoditatem abutitur, ingenii laus est, non crimen. Quasi vero non idem faciant medici, qui cum multorum animantium tum hominis etiam excrementa non illinunt solum, verum in potione ministrant in morbis.*

<sup>5</sup> *Adagia* 3.7.1.499–503: *Quonquam homines quoque non tam res offendit quam opinio; nam priscis illis mortalibus res ipsa non perinde atque nobis visa est abominanda, quam auspicatissimo vocabulo laetamen appellarunt. Nec dubitarunt Saturno deo Sterculei cognomen addere, nimirum honoris causa, siquidem Macro-bio credimus.* The Macrobius reference is to *Saturnalia* 1.7.25: *Hunc Romani etiam Sterculium vocant, quod primus stercore fecunditatem agris comparaverit* ('Moreover, at Rome men call him 'Sterculius,' as having been the first to fertilize the fields with dung' [59]).

Published in *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*, ed. Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim. Studies in European Cultural Transition, Volume Twenty One, General Editors: Martin Stannard and Greg Walker. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004.

ISBN 0 7546 4116 3

Copyright 2004 Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim. Used by permission.