Shakespeare in Another Sense:  
A Study of Physical and Textual Perception in Four Plays

by

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This dissertation investigates how the sensory body informs an audience’s reception, and perception, of Shakespearean drama. Specifically, I question the nature of subject/object relations through a comprehensive study of all five senses in Shakespeare. Positioned as mediators of knowledge between body and mind, the senses provide a means to examine the relationship between self-constituting subjects “in here” and exterior world objects “out there.” I believe that early modern authors, and Shakespeare foremost among them, used the liminality of the physical senses to test newly emergent ideas of inwardness and individual consciousness. My dissertation upends the sensory hierarchy assumed by Western tradition by arguing that smell, taste, and touch are crucial to theatrical experience; indeed, they invite a deeper form of theatrical receptivity through subject/object interpenetration than the senses of hearing or seeing. This is because sights and sounds distance the perceiving-subject from the perceived-object onstage, inviting us instead to reflect upon the theatrical medium that fills the divide. My project places the bodily senses and affective faculties in conversation in order to explore the sensory metaphors that motivate character judgements and plot understandings at a level of felt engagement. Braiding together early modern medical conceptions of the senses with literary analysis and stage history, my dissertation reconstructs bodily
experience in the past on historically informed terms. Recognising the inherent diversity of perception, my chapters advance a set of original arguments: that palpation leads to jealous cognition through the skin-web in *Othello*, that colonial tastes merge with the pleasures of speech on the double tongue in *Antony and Cleopatra*, that the smell of blood harbours the infection of evil in *Macbeth*, and that sensory intelligencers subtly couple two media – read script and heard play – in *Hamlet*. In sum, by analysing how a modern appreciation of Shakespeare’s drama differs from the embodied perspective of earlier audiences, I hope to provide a new understanding of early modern subjectivity through early modern sensory experience.
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INTRODUCTION

“[The senses] have always been, and remain now, among the most difficult to understand of all things human. Because they are the medium through which we perceive, they cannot easily be perceived themselves. Being our conduit to reality, they stand somehow apart from, behind, above, or around reality, never visible on its surface. We can look through the spectacles, but when we take them off to examine them, we become too blind to see them” – Mark Caldwell

How is reading Shakespeare a sensory experience, and how does his language evoke sensations that change an understanding of the play? This question is the starting point of my dissertation, which examines the role of the five senses in Shakespeare’s art. My project has a twofold aim: revivifying the historically- and culturally-specific associations carried by each sense that shaped play meaning for his earliest audiences and exploring how those bodily sensations continue to resonate with us today as they materialise on the page and in performance. Indelible physical impressions are left as marks within the play-texts just as a phonograph records sound or as a fingerprint registers touch.¹ For example, the practice of reading Shakespeare’s words aloud begins to recover a heard past through the cadences of lines, the rhythm of meter, or the way vowels and consonants combine to place particular demands on our lungs, diaphragm, and vocal chords in delivery. Listening to these acoustic cues, however, provides only one piece of the full sensory puzzle. I contend that traces of early modern touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing survive in Shakespeare’s lines, expressing themselves as metaphor and in its subtending figures of synecdoche and metonymy. Attending to the sensations archived within Shakespeare’s metaphors provides a means of access to embodied experience in the past, and further generates new meaning when these metaphors become actualised onstage for audience perception.

¹ On Shakespeare’s plays as a type of acoustic recording technology akin to a phonograph that allows readers to not only listen to history but to listen “through history as well” (Folkerth 6), see The Sound of Shakespeare.
That sensation is realised by metaphor is in many ways a longstanding belief. Both of the most popular rhetorical guides in Shakespeare’s day, namely George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) and Angel Day’s *The English Secretary* (1599), define metaphor with reference to sensing: “For what els is your Metaphor,” Puttenham attests, “but an inuersion of sence” (128)? While his term “sence” puns on both mental connotation and physical perception, he soon clarifies the relationship he sees between the two: a metaphor is – in his words – a “sensable” figure that appeals to a greater range of senses than the “auricular” figures he discusses that engage the ear alone because it compares two things in “cross-naming” or “transport” so as to “affect the minde by alteration of sence” (148). Day’s definition is a little simpler. He explains that “metaphora” is “when a worde from the proper or right signification is transsferred to another neere vnto the meaning, as to saie: We see well, when wee meane wee vnderstande well, or to call them eaters […] who vndo the poore, or […] as if we should say, the ground wanting wet, doth thirst for raine” (77-78). Notably, each of the examples Day provides returns to the body, and specifically to the senses in seeing and tasting, as the basis for metaphor. Puttenham likewise summons taste, hearing, and touch in his list of primary examples, such as “the man of law said, I feele you not, for I vnderstand not your case” (148). Given that metaphor is typically understood as a rhetorical device that arbitrarily links terms, why is it that Shakespeare’s contemporaries consistently turn to the body in order to define its function?

Recent research into neurology offers one possible answer. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in *Metaphors We Live By* that conceptual metaphors arise from the

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2 I preserve original spelling for all primary citations, except for the long [s].
subjective experience of living in a body, where sensations of up and down, warmth and cold, and movement toward a goal pattern the ways in which we not only perceive but describe our world: “metaphor is as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious” (239). Indeed, the relationship between the body and literary metaphor seems to work both ways; metaphor not only derives from an experience of sensing the world, but metaphor becomes the source of sensations evoked by language in reverse. Holly Dugan points to this phenomenon when she avers that metaphors can yield a history of sensation, noting that “if interpreted thoughtfully, metaphors demonstrate the potential of literary history to offer ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ contributions to other fields,” even science (Perfume 5). That some scientists cannot help but cite Shakespeare to detail the perceptual effects of synaesthesia demonstrates the reciprocal nature of metaphor and sensory experience. Neurologists V.S. Ramachandran and E.M. Hubbard quote from Romeo and Juliet, “It is the East, and Juliet is the sun,” in their study where they assert that synaesthetes are more common among artists and poets (17). Certainly, imagining Shakespeare as an individual prone to synaesthesia – the condition where the stimulation of one sensory pathway causes a second sensory experience, such as a blue sight at the sound of C minor or palpated shapes when tasting flavours – offers one tempting explanation for the richness and variety of his metaphors. While accounts of the number of adult synaesthetes in a population vary widely, ranging from one in twenty-thousand to one in twenty-three, synaesthesia is not an uncommon process. Psychologists have determined that all humans, and some higher mammals, undergo a period of synaesthetic perception in utero and in infancy while the brain forms its cognitive pathways; these areas of physical and logical association simply become pruned away as
a consequence of aging and neural development. From this perspective, everyone is – or at least was – a synaesthete. These early linkages help to explain the relative ease with which most people interpret cross-sensory metaphors: “we all understand what is meant by a ‘warm color’ or a ‘loud tie’” (Rosenblum 289), or Hamlet’s “biti[ng]” and bitter “cold” (1.4.1). As Ramachandran and Hubbard attest, synaesthesia is a real perceptual phenomenon that illuminates how metaphor works because both processes involve the “cross-activation” of “conceptual maps” (17). They go so far as to argue that language evolved from synaesthesia, noting the consistent associations between sounds and visual patterns where people overwhelmingly align a rounded figure with the name “bouba” and an angular one with “kiki.” That the movement of the mouth and tongue in articulating these sounds duplicates the shapes (sharp or rounded) that people identify with the image pair lends credit to a lingering association between hearing and sight in language.

These findings attest to the fluid relationship among the senses. For instance, Lawrence D. Rosenblum’s study See What I’m Saying considers how people can hear colours, touch speech, taste odours, and smell symmetry: “many of the skills we’ve long assumed to be the purview of one sense are now known to also be performed by the other senses” (267). Nevertheless, synaesthesia does maintain consistent directionalities: vision most often maps onto hearing and taste modifies touch – and unsurprisingly patterns of cross-sensory metaphor correspond to these orientations of experience. Twenty-first century experiments in neuroplasticity reveal that the brain readily processes

3 This and all succeeding references to Hamlet are from the Second Quarto in the three-text Arden Shakespeare edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (Third Series, London: Arden, 2006). However, all other citations to Shakespeare’s works in this dissertation are taken from The Oxford Complete Shakespeare edited by John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). Where The Oxford Complete Shakespeare is my guiding text for this project, I make an exception for Hamlet because it prints the Folio copy alone and my analysis considers sensory passages only available in the Second Quarto. For a further explanation of this choice of editions, please see page 183.
multisensory input and compensates for one sense (even if reduced only for a short time) by the others. Yet this is hardly a new insight. It was clear even to the earliest Greek philosophers that the senses must somehow cooperate and pool their knowledge in order to perceive coinciding qualities, as in Aristotle’s famous example of bile as “yellow” and “bitter” in *de Anima* (145). He elaborates: “the senses perceive each other’s proper objects incidentally, not in their own identity, but acting together as one, when sensation occurs simultaneously in the case of the same object” (145). Thus the senses, paradoxically but necessarily, must act as five separate things and as one unified whole.

This is the understanding upon which I base the organisation of my chapters. Even though my study initially divides the sensorium, coupling one sense and one play for the first three chapters so as to analyse the proper objects of each sense, one sensory discussion necessarily bleeds into another. For example, the foggy fumes of *Macbeth* blur vision and smell, and hearing stories becomes a form of gustatory pleasure in *Antony and Cleopatra*. My fourth and final chapter embraces this synaesthetic turn by marrying sight and hearing in order to compare their relative efficacy in mediating experience. As the structure of my dissertation evidences, I work to test the relationships among the senses while acknowledging the benefit of considering each in isolation.

A grounding tenet of my dissertation is that sensation is inherently synaesthetic. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “synaesthetic perception is the rule, and if we do not notice it, this is because […] we have unlearned seeing, hearing, and sensing in general” (238). Reprising Aristotle’s riddling conception of the senses as both unified and discrete, Merleau-Ponty explains “sensing in general” by saying that “the senses are distinct from each other and distinct from intellection”
insofar as each of them brings with it a structure of being that can never precisely be transposed,” while at the same time, “the senses communicate” as one “unit” (234). Comparing the indiscernible cooperation among the senses to binocular vision, he reasons “the vision of sounds or the hearing of colors comes about in the same way as the unity of the gaze through the two eyes […] my body is not a sum of juxtaposed organs, but a synergetic system of which all of the functions are taken up and tied together in the general movement of being in the world” (243). This five-as-one communication among the senses Merleau-Ponty draws has much earlier origins in philosophical tradition and, I maintain, the same sensory interdependence is often reflected in Shakespeare’s writings. When Hamlet castigates his mother for her faulty perception, repeating incredulously “Have you eyes?” while confronting her with the twin portraits of the two brothers, he aligns her failure to “see” the unsuitability of her suitor with a collapse of just this sort of sensory cooperation:

What devil was’t
That thus has cozened you at hoodman-blind?
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope. (3.4.74-79)

In this instance, the senses not only converge synaesthetically, but multiply – like mirrors within mirrors – where each organ becomes a synecdoche for the whole including its own supporting parts. The “ears” have “hands,” touch is blind without “sight,” and the “eyes” have lost their noses, “smelling sans all.” The implication here is that even when the senses are divided into separate entities, they still contain vestigial parts of each other, such that “but a sickly part of one true sense/ Could not so mope.” As this moment of metaphor and synecdoche in Hamlet reveals, perception is never a matter of one sense
alone, and it is therefore necessary to consider the five senses as a collective entity. To do so is also to investigate the senses as Renaissance authors most often did: as a pentarchy.

“If the field is to advance,” Dugan asserts in her literary survey of “Shakespeare and the Senses” from 2009, then we will need to consider “what we have learned about each of the sensory modes towards further study of their interrelatedness” (734). The readings that follow are designed to respond to this call. In contradistinction to the growing number of single-sense monographs in early modern studies, my dissertation offers an extended analysis of all five senses in Shakespearean drama. Certainly, the last decade has witnessed a surge of interest around questions of sensate history. What does it mean to approach a play “with one’s nose” (Harris, Untimely 121)? How could early modern authors have “listen[ed] for green” (Smith, Key 168)? When does a physical touch compensate for unexpressed emotion (Mazzio, Inarticulate 181)? If the criticism of the 1980s and 1990s was invested in theorising gender, identity, and material culture, then the new millennium has funneled these concerns toward the senses in particular as a rich and productive avenue of inquiry. Topics explored by recent works in this field include: the acoustic dynamics of Shakespeare’s England; the ambivalent status of touch in early modern culture; the material history of smell and perfume; the role of taste in influencing reader expectation; and the function of sight metaphors in Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton (Bruce R. Smith and Wes Folkerth; Elizabeth D. Harvey; Dugan;

4 While sociologists have published influential studies of the five senses, such as Constance Classen’s Worlds of Sense or David Howes’s Empire of the Senses, no literary critic to my knowledge has yet tackled the full sensorium at length in Shakespeare’s drama. Caldwell evaluates the role of sense imagery in Hamlet, and Frederick Kiefer analyses the sensory dumb-show in Timon of Athens, but these are articles that address only one pattern in one play. As a broader study, my work is anticipated by Caroline Spurgeon’s Shakespeare’s Imagery and What it Tells Us, whose fifth chapter links Shakespeare’s senses to his biography, Louise Vinge’s The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition, which spans sense literature from classical antiquity to the present, and especially Charles Frey’s Making Sense of Shakespeare, which connects Shakespeare’s poetry to an enlivened form of sense-reading designed to be applied in the classroom.
Johann Gregory; Marcus Nordlund). This emphasis on sensation draws from a rich tradition of scholarship on medicine and embodiment, epitomised by Gail Kern Paster, but it also dovetails with a critical practice known as historical phenomenology: the criticism preoccupied with first-person experience – especially sensory experience – as a process of subjective engagement that determines structures of consciousness. By addressing the moment-to-moment sensory phenomena that an embodied subject encounters in the world, and in the text, within a situated historical context, this type of phenomenology seeks to recover how “texts not only represent bodily experience; they imply it in the ways they ask to be touched, seen, heard, even smelled and tasted” (Smith, “Premodern” 325-26). What my project shares with work in this vein is the conviction that the senses offer a unique window into understanding life in the past. This is because the senses act as the portal through which lived experience was mediated for past perceivers and, as Smith’s language hints, the texts’ ongoing invitation to participate as perceivers makes the material of history recognisable through parallel and present structures of engagement. My dissertation undertakes historical phenomenology, draws from the wealth of findings advanced by these precursors (Dugan, Harvey, Paster, Smith, and others) and contributes to the field by placing different sensory readings of Shakespeare’s plays in concert with one another. Moreover, I argue that studying the combined role of the five senses in Shakespeare’s drama affords a significant payoff: understanding how early moderns sensed the world around them illuminates in turn how early modern individuals sensed themselves as newly emergent subjects.

In what follows, I will survey historical evidence from a variety of sixteenth and seventeenth century English allegories, anatomy treatises, essays, plague pamphlets,
poems, and religious sermons alongside my close-reading of Shakespeare’s texts in order to determine how early modern men and women conceptualised the senses in general and imagined themselves in particular as perceiving subjects. Interpreting this spectrum of historical material sheds valuable light on cultural associations, but I recognise that dealing with such disparate texts also presents certain methodological challenges. There may appear to be a discord between the narrow time-frame around which my study centres – namely 1600-1607, or Shakespeare’s middle period, when he produced his most famous tragedies, his emphasis on the visceral body intensified, and his sensory language changed – and the wide range of documents, roughly 1550-1700, that I cite as situating material. Yet I contend that this breadth of evidence better allows the modern scholar to identify consistent ideological trends and to contextualise Shakespeare within the shifting grounds of the period as a whole. The material that preceded *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* undoubtedly shaped how the playwright understood the senses as a construct and, as I will come to show, his work directly engages these antecedent traditions. For instance, *Othello* carefully reworks the medieval spider-touch motif. Conversely, while those texts published after Shakespeare’s plays could be dismissed out of hand as anachronistic, they emerge from the same assemblage of ideas circulating when Shakespeare wrote; moreover, they are significant to my study in that they reflect the enduring nature of the sensory representations found in his drama. Indeed, while embodied metaphors are a common feature of early modern writing and sense descriptions are hardly unique to any one author, I have chosen to focus on Shakespeare precisely because his work endures so powerfully both in the literary canon and in today’s performances; that is, he makes culturally distant sensations come alive.
for modern perceivers in a way distinct from his contemporaries. Contextualising Shakespeare within such an historical frame, as Folkerth attests, illuminates “the kinds of associations” his sensory references “would have preconsciously generated in the minds” of “the average playgoer” (10). I intentionally avoid hierarchising these sources, refusing to give anatomical texts authority over religious essays or folk wisdom. Instead, my chapters accord each of these period voices equal footing as contributors to a shared sensory conversation. That being said, my five-sense project logically quotes most extensively from texts that contemplate the full sensorium, such as Edmund Spenser’s “House of Alma” episode from the *Faerie Queene* (1590), Sir John Davies’s philosophical poem *Nosce teipsum* (1599), Thomas Tomkis’s *Lingua* (1607), Helkiah Crooke’s *Microcosmographia* (1615), Richard Brathwaite’s *Essaies Vpon the Fiue Senses* (1620), and Phineas Fletcher’s *The Purple Island* (1633). In short, I draw upon an array of primary documents because I want to establish how the sensory ideologies and epistemologies latent in Shakespeare’s plays coincide with – or exhibit tension against – the prevailing understanding of the senses at the time.

Rather than ordering my dissertation along the chronology of Shakespeare’s plays, my chapters chart Plato’s ascending ladder of the senses endorsed by Western literary tradition – touch, taste, smell, hearing, and then, above all, sight – although I consciously upend this hierarchy by insisting upon the value of cumulative perception. Why should the senses always appear with sight in the highest position and touch as the most debased? Crooke, an anatomist and personal physician to King James I, asks much the same question in 1615, wondering about the uninterrupted “order of the Senses” (661). The answer lies primarily with the authority of the Greeks as the progenitors of
Western philosophy. Plato’s *Timaeus* evidences a distrust of the body and where his writings separate sight and hearing as spiritual senses associated with knowledge at a distance from smell, taste, and touch as agencies mired in the flesh, he establishes a dichotomy that resurfaces again and again in sensory discourse. Aristotle names touch the most necessary sense, but he likewise promotes vision as superior, and, hoping to resolve dispute around the number of the senses, insists that the relationship between microcosm (man’s body) and macrocosm (the wider universe) mandated that there must be no more, nor less, than five senses because each corresponds to a particular element (141-43). Sight, in this doctrine, is king. Where Caldwell helpfully points to the complex nature of examining the senses in my epigraph, his metaphor of the spectacles reveals the bias toward sight drawn from Plato and characteristic of early sensory criticism. It is in the desire to trace a counter-narrative to this visual hegemony that I undertake a study of the full sensorium, arguing for the re-evaluation of assumed sensory hierarchies in theatrical experience. The critical task of interrogating vision’s primacy through the ostensibly “lower” senses is already underway in single-sense volumes like *Sensible Flesh* and *The Ephemeral History of Perfume* that give due consideration to the long-overlooked senses of touch, taste, or smell. However, because my project seeks to flesh out Shakespeare’s conception of a full sensory world, querying how the five senses work together or against each other, I intentionally challenge vision in a manner more consistent with medieval and early modern depictions of the senses as warring agencies each desirous of supremacy.

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5 On the nobility of sight in Greek philosophy, see phenomenologist Hans Jonas; for more background on the evolution of sensory hierarchy up to present day, see Classen, *Worlds of Sense*; and for an in-depth treatment of touch’s contradictory position in this schema, see Harvey, *Sensible Flesh*. 
Tomkis’s raucous comedy *Lingua: Or the Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses for Superiority* (1607) crowns Visus as most deserving. Not only does his judge, Common Sense, echo Plato’s belief that “as the Soule is more excellent then the Body, so are the Senses that proffit the Soule to be estimated before/ those that are needefull for the Body” (4.7.5-6), divorcing the perceptions of “commoditie” from those of mere “necessitie” (4.7.8), but he also uses Aristotle’s theory of universal concordance to dismiss Lingua’s claims to the position of a sense:

The number of the *Senses* in this little world, is answerable to the first bodies in the great world: now since there bee but fiue in the Vniuerse, the four elements and the pure substance of the heauens, therefore there can bee but fiue senses in our Microcosme, correspondent to those, as the sight to the heauens, hearing to the aire, touching to the earth, smelling to the fire, tasting to the water. (4.7.23-26)

Common Sense reaffirms the pentarchy and offers Lingua, or speech, the small consolation of becoming a specialised “feminine” faculty (4.7.29). 6 The assignment of the various elements literalises a spatial move downward from the “heavens” to the “earth,” even as it traces a parallel trajectory among the senses. All the more importantly, what plays like *Lingua* bring to light is the essentially arbitrary nature of sensory classification. Given that the reasons offered are axiomatic, simple repetitions of the time-honoured wisdom of the ancients, it becomes all the easier to recognise that the enumeration and hierarchy of the senses – as Classen demonstrates through her survey of world cultures like the olfactory based Ongee of the South Pacific or the tactile oriented Tzotzil of Mexico (*Worlds 1*) – are determined by tradition rather than biology.

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6 Tomkis’s play was designed for a university audience, but the play’s success in multiple editions (1607, 1610, 1617, 1622, 1632, and 1657) bespeaks a wider interest in sensory issues at this time. *Lingua* is in keeping with the medieval allegories that depicted the senses vying with one another for preference, making the “ranking of the senses” itself a “popular literary theme in pre-modern Europe” (Classen, *Worlds 3*).
Lingua also places an instructive emphasis on the deciding figure of Common Sense. Embodied onstage as a judge who first hears the testimony of each of the senses and then syncretises it in order to form his opinion, Tomkis’s depiction of Common Sense epitomises early modern ways of thinking about the physical production of sensory perception. Crucially, this is not the “common sense” we think of today as the plain wisdom found in the average person able to discern or discriminate among obvious facts. Rather, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “common sense” was the name of a precise faculty of sensation that collected impressions from all five senses in order to yield summative conclusions about multi-sense qualities. Based on the Aristotelian concept of common sense or “koinē aesthēsis,” the early modern take on this faculty personified in plays like Lingua offered a compelling explanation for the perceptions of motion, rest, movement, and number. It also made cogent the five-as-one model of sensory communion (“white” and “sweet”), although the additive interdependence seems itself a variety of synaesthetic experience (“white” as “sweet”), derived from the Greek “aesthēsis” sensing and “syn” together. The Renaissance author Lodowick Bryskett describes “common sense” in his Discourse of Civill Life (1606) as “a power or facultie of the sensitiue soule […] called common, because it receiueth commonly the formes or images which the exteriour senses present vnto it” (123). Acknowledging the power of common sense as a unifying faculty that encourages sensory cooperation and recombination not only validates the idea of synaesthetic perception by default, but further raises intriguing questions about its affinity to our modern notion of consciousness. Daniel Heller-Roazen masterfully addresses this latter point in his account of classical ideas of common sense, The Inner Touch. He ponders how our
beliefs about ourselves would change should we, like the Stoics, reimagine consciousness not as a product of cognition but sensation: *sentio ergo sum.* Theorising common sense as a kind of literal “inner touching,” by which we are able to grasp “ourselves” (40), Heller-Roazen aligns this sensitive faculty with sentience. My dissertation builds upon his highly suggestive work by examining how Shakespeare’s dramatic representations of the five physical senses help to define an inchoate experience of self-awareness, which I call “self-sense.”

“Self-sense” emerges from common sense insofar as an individual begins to understand his/her own presence, and subjective position, as a thinking, breathing, embodied entity moving within a world of objects through an awareness of perception. When the eye sees a mountain in the distance, for example, sight interiorises an image of that mountain and reproduces it as thought and, more importantly, common sense provides the means for the viewer to “know” not only what he is seeing but to sense that he is “see[ing]” (Aristotle 145). The physicality of the body through the senses both affirms the subject through perceptual activity and situates that first-person perspective. 

Critics dealing with early modern epistemology often separate out cognition, in the brain, from sensation, in the body, mapping this binary onto the border of inside and outside.7 Jean Starobinski explains that “internal sense (*sensus internus*), referred to the conscious activities of the mind developed in and of itself (reason, memory and imagination) on the basis of information provided by the *external senses* (sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell)” (354). To a certain extent this is true, because without perceptions of the world in sensory experience and objects ferried inward by the senses, thought would have no basis

7 For variations on this theme and critical questionings of the sense/mind relationship see Lowell Gallagher and Shankar Raman’s *Knowing Shakespeare: Senses, Embodiment and Cognition.*
and imagination would become void. Sensation is actual in the world, but it is also the latent potential, the fuel, upon which thought and self-awareness burn. For Aristotle and for those early modern authors like Shakespeare who used these ideas of common sense to understand and represent self-orientation, thinking was not only contingent upon but continuous with sensing. Addressing the relationship between sensation and thought, Aristotle insists that “thinking,” both speculative and practical, is “a form of perceiving” (155). In a literal way, the subject begins to recognise himself just as “a sense must perceive itself” (Aristotle 147).

Each of my chapters returns to period-specific questions about how the physical senses mediate subjectivity. Chapter one, which considers skin as an interface between touch and cognition in Othello, links mental and manual forms of “apprehension” – playing upon Heller-Roazen’s notion of grasping ourselves – by foregrounding their shared etymology. As mentioned above, language arises out of physical embodiment and correspondingly sensory metaphors underpin the lexical development of many words in English. Tracing the etymological roots of such key terms in the plays as “apprehend” related to touch, “discandy” as evolved from taste, and “foul” as redolent of smell helps to elucidate the wider implications of Shakespeare’s vocabulary through its sensual foundations. Chapter two focuses on taste in Antony and Cleopatra and reveals how Roman and Egyptian self-definitions are tied to dietary codes based on their rival Stoic and Epicurean philosophies. I suggest that Shakespeare reinvigorates national identity through inwardness for Jacobean Englishmen in his depiction of vicarious forms of imperial eating and tasting. Chapter three connects self-perception to olfaction by scrutinising the material linkages believed to exist between nose and brain, joining the
crux of the hero’s agency to the invisible action of smell in the environment of *Macbeth*. Macbeth’s troubled soliloquies about the “dagger of the mind” expose the intersection of self-identificatory thought and sensed experience ironically by pointing to their disjuncture in a moment of uncanny sensation (2.1.40). Chapter four widens the consideration of individual perception and self-sense into concerns about mediation in *Hamlet*. The complementary aural and visual media that receive communications shape both how characters perceive themselves – as when Gertrude arrives at a new self-awareness by hearing and seeing her sins in tandem: “O Hamlet, speak no more./ Thou turn’st my very eyes into my very soul” (3.4.86-87) – and how Shakespeare encourages his audience in turn to perceive those characters as hearers or seers.

This move from considering readerly perception toward audience reception structures my project. All of my chapters negotiate the overlap between the textual metaphors that invite sense-reading and their additional materialisation onstage, exploring how those dynamics of performance were perceived by, and made real within, the bodies of early modern playgoers. This involves a three-part methodology: first, building an historical foundation for a given sense in the culture, second, using that sensory context to enrich dedicated close-readings of the play’s metaphors and, third, taking these facets in combination in order to theorise how sensation ultimately changes an early modern audience’s engagement with Shakespeare. My research is distinctly historical in its aims; to clarify, whenever I address audience response, I am speaking of theatrical reception *then* rather than now. Of course, given the “shared fact of a human body” (Smith, “Premodern” 325) and my own position as a researcher with twenty-first century biology and modern reactions to these sensory traces, the conclusions I reach
about Shakespeare’s metaphors open up relevant – though not equivalent – considerations for performance today. That is to say, while I do believe that the sensations generated in our bodies by the language of these plays provide a means of access to earlier domains of experience, I also seek to differentiate these perceptions. Recent studies of early modern embodiment walk a thin line between proposing correspondence and assuming uniformity across bodies in the past and present. Even some of the most eloquent articulators of early modern inwardness, such as Michael Schoenfeldt in *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, have been faulted for blurring the historical distinctions between the body and its boundaries (Dugan, *Perfume* 8). In Schoenfeldt’s view, “bodies have changed little through history, even though the theories of their operations vary enormously across time and culture. We are all born, we eat, we defecate, we desire, and we die” (6). By contrast, Mary Thomas Crane signals her unease at such an identification in her careful word choice, acknowledging that “using this research to retheorize authorship does involve a potentially essentialist assumption that most human brains share biological and chemical components” (10), even though her work depends on the association between “sixteenth-century brains” and “modern ones” (14). The historian Peter Hoffer succinctly reports the problem: “If in the past our predecessors’ use of the senses was culturally bound, how can we, bound as well by our culture, recover what others long ago saw, heard, and smelled?” (6). My work endeavours, alongside Hoffer and Dugan, to remain self-conscious about modern perceptions even as I employ them as one tool to uncover early modern embodiment.

The senses are a particularly useful lens through which to consider the interactions between subjects and objects in drama because they are the body’s own
threshold between self-constituting identity “in here” and world experience “out there.” Sensation foregrounds the permeability of this boundary. The domain of “inwardness,” “interiority,” or “subjectivity” probed by critics like Schoenfeldt, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Elizabeth Hanson has been fruitfully complicated by the current turn toward outwardness, or environmental scholarship, such as Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garret Sullivan’s *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*. My project sits at the nexus of these critical concerns; that is, I use the senses as a means to investigate the merger of perceiving subject and perceptual object categories as a criterion for successful theatrical engagement. While it seems intuitive that drama should primarily involve the eyes and ears, my first three chapters advance a counter-claim for full-bodied perception, concluding that it is in fact the senses of smell, taste, and touch that demand a greater immediacy and reciprocity between “self” and “other.” By virtue of biological necessity, smell, taste, and touch bring the subject and object together through contact, whereas seeing and hearing operate at a remove, seemingly isolating the perceiver from the experience. The distal sense of sight is uniquely able to wander over a visual field and choose different objects to assess without directly engaging or internalising them: “neither invades the sphere of the other: they let each other be what they are and as they are, and thus emerge the self-contained object and the self-contained subject” (Jonas 516). The ears may not wander as the eyes do, but the oft cited difference between hearing and listening illustrates that the ears are far from limited in their ability to exercise selective attention. Both vision and hearing segregate subject from object more so than the other senses, though it is a mistake to interpret either of them as free from sensory-affection in consequence.
All of Shakespeare’s plays employ sensual language and embodied metaphors that invoke feeling so as to bridge the subject/object divide. This is, no doubt, a large part of their poetic richness and, I sincerely believe, any of the plays could benefit from the type of sensory consideration and methodology I apply here. However, the four texts I have chosen – *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* – contain a statistically high number of sense references and condense them into clusters around sense themes (such as spider-touch imagery or smell miasmas) that suggest Shakespeare may have been working more deliberately with sensory invocation in these plays than others. Moreover, physical sensation, as I will come to show, often crosses into and augments affective experience. Sense description intensifies around moments of high emotion – such as jealousy, fear, sadness, love, or despair – and these feelings make themselves known in bodily terms as Leontes’s “tremor cordis,” Lear’s “hysterico passio,” Macbeth’s fevers, Othello’s fits, and Hamlet’s stiff “sinews.” Indeed, metaphors of bodily sensation frequently provide the means through which characters in Shakespeare’s plays articulate their passions. Because tragedy is a genre that exaggerates these moments, it provides an especially rich terrain to mine for sensory metaphor.

Dealing with select plays in one genre within a focused range of seven years means that I am better able to localise my arguments.

Throughout my dissertation, I pay special attention to metatheatrical moments because they overlap the materiality of the body onstage with the audience’s experience of theatre offstage as sensation. In a moment of characteristically high passion, Cleopatra uses gustatory language to imagine her staging at Caesar’s triumph:

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8 Caldwell notes that *Hamlet* has both the highest frequency of sense-words and the greatest absolute number (141).
[...] Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
Ballad us out o’ tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I’th’ posture of a whore. (5.2.210-17)

Explicitly metatheatrical in its references to the Jacobean (rather than Roman)
performance conventions – including “rhymer,” “comedians,” staged “revels,” and boy
players in women’s parts – Cleopatra’s speech is also an object tacitly crafted to taste.
She conceives of the crowd around her as eaters with “greasy aprons” who smother her
“in their thick breaths,/ Rank of gross diet” (5.2.206-08). Cleopatra conflates the
represented Alexandrian banquet with the consumption of performance in her taste-laden
words: sauce, lick, grease, diet, drink, revels, and drunkenness. Where I will come to
define the oral implications of theatrical consumption more fully in chapter two, this
passage illustrates how experiencing theatre shares in audience sensation. The
overarching metaphor here, voiced by both protagonists, is that the play provides
physical nourishment: they invite the playgoer to “please your thoughts/ In feeding
them” (4.16.54-55). Furthermore, this invocation of taste goes beyond the expected
visual or aural aspects of the stage so as to enrich play experience through the five senses
and the full body.

My dissertation investigates the ways in which Shakespeare’s language generates
physical feeling in metaphor and, concomitantly, how that feeling colours theatrical
meaning as intuited sensation. In the first chapter, I examine crisscrossing webs of touch
and thought in Othello in order to argue that Shakespeare redeployes the early modern
association of spiders and tactility to materialise jealousy as the felt pressure of weight.
Drawing from Brathwaite’s essay on “fellow-feeling,” I show how the play’s sensorimotor metaphors of “oppress[ion]” (1.1.145) generate sympathy through both physical and psychical identification. Attention to this language of touch within the context of early modern understandings of skin helps to clarify what Brabanzio means when he asserts that his conclusion is “palpable to thinking” (1.2.77). For Brabanzio to claim that thought can be palpated necessarily confounds modern categories of body and mind. The cognitive science I use to return to pre-Cartesian thinking may thus seem surprisingly current, but the latest findings actually repeat early modern beliefs by noting convergences in body/brain activity. Using an interdisciplinary approach that yokes this modern cognitive science to early modern skin anatomy and spider allegory, I contend that the imagery of webs provides Shakespeare a sophisticated means to depict affect. The touch-in-web occurs both on an individual level, where the play’s epistemological grasping mimics the desire to hold woven properties like the handkerchief and wedding sheets, and on a communal level within the shared body of the audience, where threads of feeling create networks among theatregoers. The touching witnessed onstage, I argue, motivates a felt response in the audience as well, uniting subject and object into one realisation of “this heavy act” (5.2.381).

Chapter two likewise examines the merger of subject and object, self and other, but makes this unification political by revealing how national identities combine in *Antony and Cleopatra*’s gustatory theatre. The action of taste breaks down boundaries, and chemical absorption upon the tongue is essential to flavour perception. Colonial action, in parallel, requires the absorption of one entity into another gluttonous body. In the early seventeenth century, when Shakespeare was writing *Antony and Cleopatra*,
King James I sought to unify the “Empire of Great Britain,” and his expansive initiatives abroad furthered Queen Elizabeth’s hopes by establishing American colonies, founding trade companies, and working to control the precious spice trade. Situating Cleopatra as a “Salt” queen (2.1.21) in command of “Epicurean cooks” and “cloyless sauce[s]” (2.1.24-25), I note how the Romans describe Egypt and its ruler as a meal to be savoured.

Drawing from discussions of taste and cookery in the writings of Davies, Crooke, Fletcher, and Tomkis, I contend that Shakespeare structures his drama around the early modern concept of the double tongue. He intensifies the flirtatious rivalry of the lovers by referencing popular allegories that pitted Gustus (the tongue of taste) against the verbose woman Lingua (the tongue of speech). The conflict between these tongues works in tandem with the play’s abundant representations of food and rhetorical devices that foster emptiness to stimulate what I call an “imaginative hunger.” Characterising this theatrical desire for words as a gustatory longing is appropriate to Shakespeare’s theatre given that antitheatricalists denounced plays for feeding Epicurean appetites. In short, my chapter theorises the role of the tongue in early modern culture in order to suggest how Antony and Cleopatra’s interest in taste changes a Jacobean audience’s experience of the play within an imperial context.

My third chapter interprets the sense of smell as a gateway between bodies and spirits in Macbeth, arguing that the weird sisters exert their influence through a physical form of inspiration. More so than any of the other senses, smell invites reflection on the relationship between man and his surrounding environment; the invisibility of scent – as Dugan and Jonathan Gil Harris suggest – is in part what troubles boundaries within an olfactory atmosphere. The central claim of this chapter is that smell has the endless
capacity to blur and exceed borders, deconstructing difference. The smell of squibs in the playhouse introduces the audience into the uncanny world of the performer by sharing the same air. With these concerns in mind, I analyse Shakespeare’s representation of the weird sisters as foul agents with reference to contemporary ideas of plague and miasma. Miasma theory, also known as zymotic medicine, maintained that bad smells were harbingers of disease. Wrapped in the sisters’ “fog and filthy air” (1.1.11) Macbeth loses grip on himself, becoming “rapt withal” and brain sick (1.3.55). Physical symptoms begin to manifest in both Macbeth and his wife as shakes, fever, insomnia, and sleep-walking. Yet the nature of smell infection has all the stronger connections to mental unrest through the anatomical definition of its perceptual apparatus in the brain. My study links these olfactory processes, animal spirits, and so-called “evil” scents together in order to provide a new reading of Macbeth that poses questions about agency and culpability. This third chapter also enlarges our understanding of Lady Macbeth’s role by contrasting her activity against that of the witches and problematising Alain Corbin’s notion of the odour of femininity. Ultimately, this chapter unveils a threatening evil within the play that encroaches on the playgoer as the smell of blood.

The fourth, and final, chapter departs from the structure of the preceding sections both in that it shifts into the higher half of Plato’s body/soul sense dichotomy, and in that brings hearing and sight together to contemplate the pair simultaneously in Hamlet. Treating vision and hearing together – where these two senses usually dominate the discussion – allows for more room in the earlier chapters to address the understudied senses of touch, taste, and smell. Hamlet contains the most references to all of the senses, but even then eyes and ears appear with unusual frequency and, in almost all cases,
together. Why does *Hamlet* make such a point to couple seeing and hearing as means of gaining knowledge? What purpose could Shakespeare have in calling attention to the mediums through which information is communicated – highlighting the senses as intelligencers in a play filled with spies, messengers, and mediators – rather than calling into question the information itself? The answer I propose in my study of spies, eyes, and ears is that Shakespeare engages an early modern concern with print media. My fourth chapter explores the espionage network within *Hamlet* to trace the body politic unfolding in the synecdoche of hearers or seers, finding that hearsay proves a vital counterpart to the visual form of letters. In the realm of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the role of the senses themselves as mediators reinforces the value of conjoined listening and seeing, attending in full to live theatre through multiple sensory registers.

To turn for one brief moment to modern performance, a poignant example of this type of full-bodied engagement can be seen in Stratford, Ontario’s 2011 Shakespeare festival staging of *Titus Andronicus*. At the start of the play, Tamora, the queen of the Goths and prisoner of war, pleads for the life of her eldest son, Alarbus, but Titus refuses mercy. Instead, he proudly hears, watches, and smells how his son Lucius has “performed/ Our Roman rites”:

[…] Alarbus’ limbs are lopped
And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,
Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky.
Remaineth naught but to inter our brethren
And with loud ’laurms welcome them to Rome. (1.1.142-47)

Lucius’s account of dismemberment highlights the “perfume” of burning “entrails,” foreshadows cannibalism in the association of “feed[ing]” and sacrifice, and ends on the “loud” alarums of his brothers’ service. The smell of cooking flesh may well have been a
sensory reality for Shakespeare’s audiences, given that the odour of lambs roasting on spits outside the theatre could have wafted into performance (Templeman, “Culinary Shakespeare”). In this case, the olfactory metaphors coincide with literal smell experience. This layering of the real smells and tastes perceived by bodies in the theatre onto sensory metaphors of a staged human sacrifice would, in all likelihood, have produced discomfort or even nausea in the attendees. This type of physical engagement with performance is what director Darko Tresnjak sought to recuperate by serving food to the audience immediately before the scene where Titus “play[s] the cook” (5.2.203). Tresnjak chose both to leave the house lights up to encourage interaction between performers and audience in the spirit of the Elizabethan stage and to distribute miniature pies that invite the playgoer to incorporate, physically, Tamora’s horror of discovery. Surely, those audience members at Stratford who sampled the tarts before learning of Titus’s intent to “make two pasties of your shameful heads” (5.2.188) would have felt the interpenetration of subject and object more forcefully in a deepened, albeit exaggeratedly material, moment of receptivity. This reintroduction of taste and smell into audience experience activates lost registers of performance. Where I do not seek to characterise modern-day staging by and large, nor do I need to in order to further the recuperative aims of this historical project, this brief example reveals how the close attention to sensory metaphors my dissertation produces helps to rethink the role of all five senses even for contemporary theatre. Ultimately, then, to attend to the way Shakespeare’s language evokes sensation is to provide new understandings of the plays, of early modern staging, and of our own “self-sense.”
CHAPTER ONE

“Palpable to Thinking”: Palpation, Cognition, and Webs of Touch in Othello

In 2009, nearly four hundred years after Shakespeare wrote his drama of jealousy Othello, a scientific discovery confirmed what the play intuits about this “painful emotion” (Takahashi et al. 937): namely, that there is a material connection between touch perception and jealous cognition in the brain. The study, published in Science, demonstrates that the neural structure which processes envy and jealousy (the anterior cingulate cortex) directly overlaps with the somatosensory area that detects real physical pain, “perhaps explaining why feeling envious of your lover’s philandering hurts so much.”9 Using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), these experiments suggest an association between physical and mental suffering; they reveal a crossover from emotional activation into “painful feelings” of bodily “discomfort” (Takahashi et al. 939). Psychologists’ case studies of extreme conjugal paranoia – dubbed the “Othello Syndrome” by John Todd in 1955 – corroborate these findings, observing a correlation between spousal jealousy and lesions in the brain’s parietal lobe that receives touch sensation. In one profile, a male patient experiencing homicidal jealousy also exhibited a change in skin perception, feeling a “decreased sensation on the left to light touch, and pinpricks worse on the shin” (Leong, Silva, and Garza-Trevino et al. 1447). While Shakespeare could not possibly have known of these neural conditions, the cingulate cortex, or even the syndrome that has come to bear his tragic character’s name, his representation of jealousy as a form of cognitive (and cutaneous) pressure in full connection with the register of touch is strikingly modern, and seemingly prescient.

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But what is the real relationship between affective feeling and sensory feeling? Or, in other words, when does a feeling become touch? This slippery terrain becomes all the more difficult to negotiate when we return to the early modern definitions of touch as a sense. “To touch” was a verb used interchangeably with “to feel” in the early Tudor period, as Carla Mazzio reminds us, and both terms implied “physical as well as emotional sensation” (*Inarticulate* 180). Thomas Cooper’s 1578 definition provides a ready example of this interpenetration of passionate and sensate experiences since, for him, “to touche” meant equally “to mooue or grieue” (“tango” sv). Brathwaite likewise writes in his 1620 *Essaies Vpon the Five Senses* that “the Touches mouingst action” is “the feeling of his passion,” and he includes the irascible and concupiscible among the unique “objects” of “this Sence of Touch” (A2, 31). The turn from somatic to affective touching in Brathwaite’s essay hinges on the mind’s susceptibility to being inwardly “moued” even as the body outwardly touches, and so too Shakespeare’s *Othello* calls attention to the productive ambiguity of psychophysiological “feeling” through its own metaphorics of touch. When Iago winces at the close-felt pain of a verbal challenge saying, “Touch me not so near” (2.3.213), for instance, he means to show his supposed sensitivity as a friend through a metaphor of physical proximity even though he escaped the true hurt of injury in the brawl. What Iago here perceives as a “touch” is not tactile pain in the purest sense, but rather the mental feeling of pain through emotion realised in sensory metaphor – his touch becomes feeling when *Othello* bodies forth the point of contact between palpation and cognition.

My consideration of Shakespeare’s *Othello* centres on precisely this aspect: the intersecting webs of touch and thought that foster a particular “feeling” in the audience.
I aim, somewhat counterintuitively, to revisit a pre-Cartesian understanding of an embodied mind through current cognitive science. For just as seventeenth-century philosophers, such as Thomas Wright, studying jealousy or other Passions of the Mind in Generall (1604) considered affect to be “a sensual motion” and linked the “stirring in our minds” to the passionate “alteration” in “our bodies” (94), twenty-first century scientists are now returning to “body in mind, mind in body” as a means to uncover the “feeling body” in an “enactive approach to emotion” (Colombetti and Thompson 45). Touch, even more immediately than the other senses, invites a rethinking of binaries such as body and mind, activity and passivity, agent and recipient. Contact is in its very nature dependant on a degree of reciprocity or, to invoke Merleau-Ponty’s term, intercorporeity: to touch is always also to be touched (Visible 141). As Eve Sedgwick argues in her consideration of affect and texture in Touching Feeling, the sheer complexity of “touch” necessitates non-dualistic thinking: “To perceive texture is never only to ask or know ‘What is it like?’ it must also raise the question “How does it impinge on me?” (13). Mazzio brings Sedgwick’s “touchy-feely conception” into an analysis of early modern theatrical experience through “tact” in what she calls an “aesthetics of feeling” (Inarticulate 180-81). Both Mazzio and Sedgwick emphasise the resistance of touch to definition, treating touch as a subset of the unspeakable or inarticulate. My reading of

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10 The term “cognitive science” was coined by Christopher Longuet Higgins in his work on Artificial Intelligence in 1973. The study of “cognitive linguistics” and “cognitive theory” followed soon thereafter, named largely for Lakoff and Johnson’s research on neural structures in language formation. This field investigates “the ways in which the mind (the conscious and unconscious mental experiences of perception, thought, and language)” is produced by the “brain and other bodily systems” (Crane 4).

11 Merleau-Ponty explores the reversible nature of touch relations in The Visible and the Invisible, inquiring: “If my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangibles, can touch it touching, can turn palpation back upon it, why, when touching the hand of another, would I not touch in it the same power to espouse the things that I have touched in my own?” (141).

12 In an oft-cited passage, Didier Anzieu notes in The Skin Ego that “touch” has one of the longest entries in the Oxford English Dictionary (13).
touch in *Othello*, by contrast, is grounded in the opposite belief that touch is precisely what underpins the embodied metaphors that influence language formation. Noting this divergence, I nevertheless endeavour to create a parallel aesthetics of feeling.

Linguists, philosophers, and literary critics within cognitive theory agree that metaphoric language develops out of the sensorimotor experience of living in a human body, even shaping neural structures. According to recent neurological studies, “models of perceptual mechanisms and motor schemas” perform “conceptual work in language learning” (Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy* 38). Crucially, the sense of touch not only uses webs to extend physical perception from body into the environment but further touch furnishes the web of cognitive metaphors we use to define that same environment. Johnson notes in his integrated theory of primary metaphor that for a young child the “subjective experience of affection is typically correlated with the sensory experience of warmth” in physical touching, or “the warmth of being held” (*Philosophy* 46). This gives rise to linguistic forms later in life such as a “warm smile,” a “close” acquaintance, or even an old “flame.” Shakespeare’s love of puns and fascination with homonymy make his drama ideally suited to explore the multiple meanings of particular words through cognitive theory, as Crane has deftly illustrated in *Shakespeare’s Brain*. Of all Shakespeare’s plays, *Othello* is the most densely packed with touch metaphors that intertwine the holding of thoughts with the beholding skin as a way to convey “touching” affect to the audience.
Touch is the dominant sense in *Othello*.\(^{13}\) Literal contact abounds: Brabanzio begrudgingly gives his blessing to Desdemona and Othello by joining their hands (1.3.192), Cassio makes “bold show[s] of courtesy” with Emilia in kissing her and with Desdemona in “tak[ing] her by the palm” (2.1.102, 170), Othello grabs Iago “by the throat” (3.3.363), strikes his chest (4.1.179) and slaps his wife (4.1.240) to name but a few examples. The quantity of touching is not in itself remarkable except that it serves as implicit stage direction. What makes Shakespeare’s punning on outward and “inward touch” (Sidney 158) in *Othello* unique, I argue, is the way in which he combines these touch metaphors with an imagery of spiders and webs appropriate to the Renaissance iconography of touch – at once overlying the fibrous web of skin, the neural web of ideas, and a social network within the theatre – in order to materialise jealousy as the felt pressure of weight and “[t]his heavy act with heavy heart relate” (5.2.381).

In this way *Othello* experiments with the possibility of changing the status of touch in the period. Where Shakespeare creates a link between touching and thinking, proposes touch as a corrective to the eye, and suggests the promise of touch for erasing boundaries of colour, the play would seem to intervene in early modern debates on sense hierarchy and join with those who seek to elevate touch from its debased position. Yet upon closer inspection, *Othello* tests this advanced potential of touch only in order to reject it in turn. The play reveals that touch is frequently tainted by carnal desire and can troublingly serve as a means of violent destruction. My analysis of *Othello* offers a

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\(^{13}\) This foregrounding of touch may seem surprising in *Othello*, a play so often thought about by scholars in visual terms of black and white (see, for example, Doris Adler). This play contains extensive references to characters touching, kissing, smothering, stabbing, or caressing each another through various tactile means; and – while I primarily address the cutaneous material of webs – hands appear virtually everywhere in this play as another early modern iconographic agent of touch. Hands and the metonymic handkerchief are invoked more than sixty times, more than any other Shakespearean play save *Titus* where literal dismemberment occurs.
means of understanding touch perception as it was questioned in the period, and – more importantly – a new method of reading central cruxes in the play: a different model of appreciating jealousy as felt within the brain, a different way of envisioning race, and a different means to decipher the ways characters touch and are touched by each other.

My chapter braids three lines of criticism – touch criticism (Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, Harvey, Mazzio), affect studies (Floyd-Wilson, Paster, Katherine Rowe, Sedgwick) and cognitive theory (Giovanna Colombetti and Evan Thompson, Crane, Lakoff and Johnson) – in order better to explore the nebulous interactions among cutaneous, cognitive, and affective perceptions in Othello. Part of the difficulty of addressing the subject of touch is that it is not one sense but many senses. Touch is a broad heading that covers sensations as diverse as proprioception (balance and the positioning of our body in space), interoception (visceral feelings in the gut, such as nausea), kinesthetics (perceptions of movement and motor coordination), and somesthetic skin senses (or touch as we usually think of it, including pain, pressure, heat, and cold). While I attend to each of these capacities to a degree, the focus of my chapter is on the final and most vital form of touch. Uniting the fabric of the play, and my analysis of the play in turn, is skin. Skin is an agile interface between tactile feeling and mental grasping in Othello. For this reason, I have structured my chapter according to the layers of depth in skin. Beginning with a consideration of skin through touch’s depiction in spider motifs, I then move from the surface sensations of pain found in free nerve-endings, into temperature whose larger nerves extend into the flesh, and finally to pressure with its specialised corpuscles. All of these layers of bodily touch map onto the
cognitive experiences of touching in corresponding webs of jealousy that are only fully embodied, and felt, when the assembly comes to the stage.

Skin and Spiders: “There’s magic in the web of it” (3.4.67)

In Renaissance allegory and iconography touching and arachnoid sensitivity are consistently linked. Davies outlines this correspondence in his poem *Nosce teipsum* (1599), describing “the Feeling Power” in his catalogue of the five senses:

   Through euery liuing part it selfe doth shed,  
   By sinewes which extend from head to foote,  
   And like a Net all ore the body spred.  
   Much like a subtill Spider, which doth sit  
   In the middle of her Web, which spreadeth wide,  
   If ought do touch the vtmost threed of it,  
   She feels it instantly on euery side. (45)

In this layered simile touch is like both the “web” itself, spread across the body in the skin’s “sinewes,” and the “spider” that “instantly” feels any disturbance. Made to act as both the instrument and the means of deciphering stimuli delivered by that instrument, touch is uniquely self-reflexive. Through the web’s extension of the body, the spider senses with remarkable range and nuance. Moreover, it not only “feels” but infers changes in the surround with a power homologous to the thinking brain. In Davies’s words, “touch” is the “outward Instrument of Sense” through which “euery thing must passe,/ Ere it approach the mind’s intelligence,/ Or touch” our “wits” (46). The web symbolises both touching and knowing because its outward-reaching tactile filaments allow the perceiver to gather “intelligence.” Davies’s spider-touch draws from a long philosophical tradition that likened the fibrous skin to a net and further used that simile to explain intellectual apprehension. Davies borrows this parallel from medieval depictions of tactile webs, which derive in turn from Aristotle’s fourth-century treatise *de Anmia*.
that associates exactness of “discrimination” in “touching” with the keenness of man’s “intelligence” (121). Davies also equates the defensive, recoiling nature of a spider in her web to the mind’s action when distressed: “The Mind contracts her selfe, and shrinketh in, […] As Spiders toucht, seeke their webs inmost part” (7). An image of both cutaneous and cognitive sensitivity, webs represent the powers of extension available to the spider through touch.

Touch is traditionally imagined as the only unmediated sense because it brings two bodies into direct contact without the intervening air or water necessary for other perceptions. For this reason, touch is the defining trope of contiguity. Yet, as Davies’s web analogy suggests, touch is not always bounded by the body that makes contact. Rather, prosthetic technologies of extension such as the web can artificially enlarge and stretch touch across the air into the environment, moving from the physically immediate to the relatively distant in a corresponding shift from sensory to “extrasensory” gathering (Mazzio, Inarticulate 195). The spider’s web offers an exceptionally clear example of what I call extramediated touch, although the same principle inheres in skin and other forms including (as I will come to show) Othello’s handkerchief. The web is, in Sigmund Freud’s familiar words, an “auxiliary organ” or “artificial limb” because, while it is not quite “part of” man, it is nevertheless what “man has become” (36). Like the technologies of extension Freud lists in Civilization and Its Discontents – the microscope that improves vision, the telephone that allows the ear to hear across distances – extramediated organs draw the external world nearer to the point of “touch[ing]” our

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14 On the medieval history of touch and its visual representations, including the famous Longthorpe tower painting, see Sharon Assaf, “The Ambivalence of the Sense of Touch in Early Modern Prints.”
“wits” (Davies 46). The spider’s web, as an embodiment of both pure and extramediated touch, supplies Shakespeare with a provocative sensory image to test the limits of jealous sensitivity.

Early in the second act of *Othello*, there is a moment in which Iago reveals to the audience how touch inspires his plot against the moor. Watching Cassio caress Desdemona in the ritualised gestures of a courtier’s welcome, Iago whispers in his aside: “He takes her by the palm […] With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio” (2.1.170-72). The web of her skin, as “smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.5), carries the associations of erotic entanglement familiar from Spenser’s allegory of seduction in the Bower of Bliss, where Acraisa’s “alabaster skin” becomes the “subtile web” that enfolds her lovers (2.12.77). Seeing sex as the subtext to their exchange, Iago mocks “well kissed, an excellent curtsy” (2.1.177-78), and sneers in a bawdy reference: “yet again your fingers to your lips? Would they were clyster-pipes for your sake” (2.1.179-80). Comparing the touching fingers to pipes used in the late Elizabethan period to administer enemas or vaginal douches, Iago converts an innocent touch into a perversely penetrative gesture. Yet he does not plan to “strip [Cassio] out of [his] lieutenency” (2.1.174) by manipulating Desdemona’s charms, or by having him caught up in these flirtations in earnest. Rather, Iago uses the substance of Cassio’s physical “tricks” with Othello’s wife to spin a tale of adultery (2.1.174).

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15 The *locus classicus* for technologies of extension is Freud’s work on civilization. He writes that through science man has made himself into a god of sorts: “With all his tools man improves on his own organs, both motor and sensory, or clears away the barriers to their functioning” (35).

16 Spurgeon devotes just two pages to touch in *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What it Tells us*, but she notes that “there is one substance in especial to which he is markedly sensitive, and that is the texture of the skin” (82). Shakespeare’s heightened awareness of the feel of skin is likely a consequence of his upbringing given that his father was a glover who tanned goat and deer hides. John Shakespeare was “a whittawer (that is, a specialist in the preparation of soft, white leather)” (Thompson and Taylor 37).

17 See Harvey, 87.
Iago is in many ways an ideal spider; early modern literature on “spiders and their several sorts” aligned these “venomous” creatures with cunning intelligence and entrapment as well as touch (Topsell 769). Edward Topsell’s description of the spiders who observe “very diligently the stirring of their deceitful webs, and perceiving them moving, though ever so lightly” (769) equally applies to Iago as he threatens the great “fly” Cassio: “it had been better you had not kissed your three fingers so oft, which now again you are most apt to play the sir in” (2.1.175-77). To Topsell arachnid success depends upon web sensitivity and a contingent deceptive ability. Iago’s word “apt” emerges in this context in its original sense meaning to fasten or bind (from Latin apo “fitted”). As Joel B. Altman notes in his study of improbability, “apt does not purport to describe the thing as it is in itself but rather as it is in relation to other things” (90). Our mental assessments necessarily move between categories of probability in determining a course of action: if something is “apt” then it seems likelier to be true. Iago seizes upon this web of “apt” neural relations between suspicion and “other” apparently true “things.”

Uniquely inclined towards logical supposition and an accompanying language of ligature, Iago is the only character to use the word “apt” in the play. In this respect, Iago troublingly resembles the playwright because he not only recognises plausible fictions, but delights in the art of weaving lies and puppeteering other characters within a web of invisible “strings” (1.1.3). Whenever “apt” appears it signals a turn in Iago’s reasoning that advances the jealousy in Othello’s brain and shapes in turn the larger plot. Iago creates conflict by using Cassio’s “apt” intimacy (2.1.177) to develop a credible story – “she loves him, ’tis apt” (2.1.286) – and remarks on Desdemona’s murder: “I […] told no more/ Than what he found himself was apt and true” (5.2.183-84). Just as Shakespeare
brings together his play around Othello’s paranoid sensitivity, so too Iago uses his sensitive touch to gather a web of text. The frequently cited origin of “text,” as Harvey explains, is “from the Latin tex-ere (weaving)” that evokes a “sense of the literary work’s tactility, its woven, web-like, or indeed, cutaneous properties” (14). When Iago advises Cassio to seek Desdemona’s aid, “so kind, so apt” (2.3.313), her appeals become the web that substantiates his accusations:

And by how so much she strives to do [Cassio] good
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all. (2.3.349-53)

The sticky texture of “pitch” makes the inevitability of capture all the more frightening: “striv[ing]” to break free of the fibres that entangle them, Desdemona and Cassio pull the net only tighter by trying to escape. Iago’s language of aptness in Othello offers a representation of textual entrapment based on the linkages between ideas within the brain that tie suggestion to inference, even in the same instant that it depends upon tactility to give the impression of jealousy or “her body’s lust” physical form (2.3.348).

What Iago is manifestly able to do is lead other characters through a series of “probable” thoughts into the false surety of “palpable” belief (1.2.77). When Brabanzio mulls over Roderigo’s calls that his daughter has been carried off in “the gross clasp of a lascivious Moor” (1.1.128), he remarks: “‘Tis probable, and palpable to thinking” (1.2.77). How is thought palpable? Brabanzio’s word “palpable” conflates webs of skin and mind into felt conviction. Even as his brain grapples with the thought and apprehends it, he orders the guards in turn to “apprehend” and “attach” Othello (1.2.78). The imperative charge to “hold” the criminal (1.2.81) continues the pun since “holding”
derives from the Old French “hend” and Old English “healdan” that give rise to “ad + prehend- ēre.” His crossover between manual apprehension – “the true office of the Hand is to apprehend or to holde” (Crooke 730) – and mental comprehension reveals how the cognitive metaphors arising from lived experience create their own touch-web as neural tapestry. To speak of touch and tapestry, of course, invokes the classical figure Arachne: the unfortunate maiden of Lydia who challenged Minerva to a weaving contest, lost, and became a spider.\(^\text{18}\) Topsell retells this story from book six of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.\(^\text{19}\) He claims that Arachne was at fault because of “pride,” fearing “not to challenge her Mistresse Goddesse to […] all manner of Embroidery,” and because of her sexual naughtiness, depicting Jove’s rapes and the adultery of various Gods, “at which, Mistresse Minerva being netled” – in Topsell’s clever misspelling of “netted” that meshes her anger with the “net” – broke “to pieces the wenches imagery” (777). By making her sexual charges palpable, the story implies, Arachne took her talent too far. Some versions of the myth explain her transformation as an act of divine mercy where Arachne hung herself but was restored by the goddess to continue spinning. But in Spenser’s intriguing “Muiopotmos” (1591), the maiden converts herself into a spider through “the sheer poison of envy” (Dundas 34).

\(^\text{18}\) Figure 1: In *Othello* the early modern conceptualisations of the skin and web become entangled in much the same fashion as in Georg Pencz’s 1544 woodcut representation of touch above. Pencz depicts touch as a nude female, possibly Arachne, whose exposed skin implies eroticism. A large spider sits in her web at top left, and its filaments surround the title: “TACTVS.” The woman’s coiled braids and circular piles of yarn repeat the web’s concentric construction, heightening the connection between her activity at the loom and the spider’s spinning. Pencz’s “The Sense of Touch” is here reproduced with permission from the series *The Five Senses*, Nuremberg. Copyright the trustees of the British Museum: AN621838001.

\(^\text{19}\) *Othello* also invites comparison to Vulcan’s myth from book four of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The lame blacksmith god creates an invisible net to trap his adulterous wife, Venus, in coitus with Mars. See Garber, *After All* esp. 589.
To Shakespeare the spider is primarily a creature of poison and deceit, but it is also – because of its very association with these characteristics alongside erotic touch – an especially fitting emblem of sexual jealousy. The most explicit example appears in *The Winter’s Tale* where Leontes is convinced of his wife’s infidelity:

[...] There may be in the cup
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
Is not infected; but if one present
Th’abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider. (2.1.41-47)

Leontes’s spider doubly embodies erotic touching and his jealous awareness of that erotic touching since the poisonous effect of the spider depends upon his condition of knowing.

In Shakespeare’s original twist, the spider is only venomous if the consumer knows it is there, echoing Othello’s pained assertion that “I had been happy if the general camp,/ Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,/ So I had nothing known” (3.3.350-52).

Shakespeare combines two old wives’ tales to form this conceit: that a spider in a drink would poison its contents and the adage that a spider by “touching doth infect with poysnon, and will break any Crystal glasse, if it run over it” (Topsell 770). The touch Leontes internalises has “violent” bodily consequences. Like the crystal, he “cracks”; and like the spider Arachne who discerns touch from all sides, Leontes feels himself converted by such “trick[s]” into a “pinched thing” (2.1.53). The web bridges the apparent remove between signifier and signified, bringing the two into contact to render the gap between vehicle and tenor imperceptible. The spider manifests Leontes’s paranoid “over-sensitivity to the environment around him” even as it informs his consciousness as a “poison” within him (Mazzio, *Inarticulate* 195).
Whereas Leontes’s jealousy takes the form of a spider that poisons its own mind, Othello is infected by Iago: the same man who ironically warns him, “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy./ It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on” (3.3.169-71). Othello’s “green-eyed monster” participates in the same arachnid/touch/jealous knowledge cluster evinced elsewhere in Shakespeare’s canon. Spiders are notoriously cruel eaters, indefinitely holding their prey captive while “mocking” the meat they feed on. Whether or not Shakespeare envisaged the monster of jealousy as a spider, its green eyes offer a clue as to the way Othello’s passions obscure vision to turn the body instead towards touch. Wright notes that individuals suffering from an “inordinate affectation” have increased errors in judgement because they “seeth all things convenient most aptly” as if wearing “green spectacles, which make all things resemble the colour green” (126). If someone is already slightly jealous, then they are more prone to viewing any action in the green light of their jealousy. This is what Iago relies on when he tells Othello: “Look to your wife. Observe her well with Cassio./ Wear your eyes thus: not jealous, nor secure” (3.3.201-203). His instructions impose Wright’s spectacles, calling Othello’s jealous mode of looking into effect paradoxically by

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20 Topsell notes that spiders not only delay in her consumption of trapped insects, but further use touch to seduce the prey before it is devoured: “so soon as they espy their enemy to be caught in their nets, they do not first of all bite and prick him to death in any hostile manner, but they seem with their feet gently and softly to stroke him, yea even to intreat and allure him with tickling […] until they have throughly insnared him within their clammy and viscous gins” (78).

21 René Descartes defines jealousy in his treatise Passions of the Soul (1649) as an inordinate affection for some object or person. He elaborates that “jealousy is a species of apprehension,” arising from “our great esteem for it, which causes us to examine even the slightest grounds for suspicion, and regard them as reasons worth serious consideration” (111).

22 The association of the colour green with jealousy is often attributed to Shakespeare from Iago’s phrase the “green-eyed monster” and Portia’s similar invocation of “green-eyed jealousy” in the Merchant of Venice, but this relationship has much older origins. Galenic medicine believed that the humoral build-up of bile resulting from jealousy or envy gave the skin a distinctive green hue. Further, the word “green” in Middle English and Scots was not merely the name of a quality but a verb: “it was an action you could do” or something you could perceive “with […] ‘to green’ was ‘to desire, to long’” (Smith, Key 37). The idiom “green with envy” persists in English.
claiming to safeguard against it. Accepting Iago’s “convenient” evidence, Othello cannot see the difference between “apt” and “true” because his eyes are clouded with a “mist” descending from his “evil humour” (Wright 128).

Othello’s consistent integration of touching and knowing implicitly proposes touch as an alternative to, or supplement for, the unreliability of “ocular proof” (3.3.365). Wright’s green spectacles question the assumed impartiality of sight by implying that the eyes too are tinged by passionate yearning, making them blind to “even gross blocks” (126). Othello reinforces that we should know better than to trust vision: Brabanzio warns, “Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds/ By what you see them act” (1.1.172-73), the senators compare differing reports of the Turkish fleets that “keep us in false gaze” (1.3.20), and the Duke overlooks a man right in front of him, admitting to Brabanzio “I did not see you,” as his eyes fixate on Othello (1.3.49). Iago too underscores the limits of vision when Othello commands: “Make me to see’t, or at the least so prove it/ That the probation bear no hinge nor loop/ To hang a doubt on” (3.3.369-71). The elusive metaphors here of “hinge” and “loop” reprise the tactility of webs and weaving, moving between “probation” (or the probable) and the concretely palpable, although what Othello asks for is visual certainty. Iago presses the issue of how much he must view to believe: “how satisfied, my lord?/ Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,/ Behold her topped?” (3.3.399-401). Iago leads Othello right to the bedroom “door of truth” (3.3.412), and taunts him with witnessing Desdemona in the sexual act. Recoiling from these thoughts, Othello instead demands “a living reason she’s disloyal” (3.3.410). Where “living reason” is often glossed to mean substantiated proof, it could just as easily be taken as a demand for a definitive, tangible trace.
Touch tests and confirms the materiality of what sight can only distantly perceive: “it assures perception, gives solidity to the impressions provided by the other senses” (Mandrou qtd. in Jay 35). The archetype for affirming touch is doubting Thomas: “Except I shall […] put my finger into the print of the nailes, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not beleueue” (John 20.25). For Thomas visual evidence is insufficient unless it can be grounded in tactility, and even then, as Ellen Spolsky maintains, Thomas’s offensive probing of the resurrected body of Christ is a “tragic interpretation of human cognitive limitation” (44). It is in response to this tenuous grasping after truth that Iago recounts Cassio’s dream in the play’s most graphic description of bodily touch:

In sleep I heard him say “Sweet Desdemona,  
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves”,  
And then, sir, would he grip and wring my hand,  
Cry “O, sweet creature!”, then kiss me hard,  
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots,  
That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o’er my thigh,  
And sigh, and kiss, and then cry “Cursèd fate,  
That gave thee to the Moor!” (3.3.423-30)

The proliferation of parts (hands, lips, leg, thigh) and active verbs (kiss, grip, wring, and pluck) convey touch with immediacy, although it is important to remember that this touch does not physically occur. In all likelihood Iago fabricates the report. Still this touch evidence “thicken[s]” (3.3.435) the proof that has begun to accumulate in Othello’s brain, compelling him to grasp the falsehood as a “foregone conclusion” (3.3.432) as his hands reach aggressively for an outlet: “I’ll tear her all to pieces” (3.3.437).

The violent turn in Othello’s request for proof ultimately undoes the earlier promise of touch as corrective. Bound up with violence and sexuality, epitomised by

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23 However, some productions have Iago mime the actions he describes. In Trevor Nunn’s 1990 RSC Othello, Iago (Sir Ian McKellen) presses his hands together and twirls his thumbs to show the action of griping and slowly, deliberately crosses one leg over the other at the line: “lay his leg o’er my thigh.”
Othello’s suffocation of Desdemona, the surety touch provides is undercut by its own passionate “greenness.” Spenser’s allegory of the body in the *Faerie Queene* (1590) uses a troop of “Snailes” and “spyders” to embody the fallibility of touch in eroticism’s slimy traces: “With stings of carnall lust, and strong effort/ Of feeling pleasures” (2.11.13). The same threat of feeling pleasures undergirds Iago’s assessment of sensuality: “If the beam of our lives had not one scale of reason to peise another of sensuality, […] our natures would conduct us to the most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts” (1.3.326-31). His speech not only links sex to overturned reason; it identifies touch more generally as the enemy to accurate perception by uniting the sensations of pressure (the weighted “scale”), temperature (“to cool”), and movement (“raging motions”). Unchecked tactility leads us to the most “preposterous conclusions,” and this is indeed the touch strategy Iago employs to delude Othello.

In the fourth act, when Iago repeats Cassio’s sexual confessions (4.1.30-33), Othello suffers an epileptic fit that closely resembles the effect of spider bites: “the patient is much disquieted […] the tongue faltereth and stammereth,” they fall “down in great perplexity,” and the “heart” is “turmoiled with an extraordinary kind of furious passion” (Topsell 771). Othello embodies all these symptoms, even replicating the web through his speech pattern:

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Lie with her? ’Swounds, that’s fulsome!
Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief. To
confess and be hanged for his labour. First to be hanged
and then to confess! I tremble at it […]
It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish!
Noses, ears, and lips! Is’t possible? Confess? Handkerchief? (4.1.35-41)
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His language weaves back and forth upon itself in repetition. The alternation of “handkerchief,” “confess,” “handkerchief,” and then the “hanged”/“confess” chiasmus, mimics the shuttle and bob of Arachne’s loom. Interfolding the criminal erotic touch (linked to the tangible evidence of the handkerchief) and the punishment (hanging, like Arachne), Othello’s language fashions a web that maps out his mind’s suspicions in torn threads of logic: “Noses, ears, and lips! Is’t possible? Confess? Handkerchief?”

Envisaging what Iago suggests, Cassio lying “on her,” Othello’s mind collapses into pure “feeling” expressed bodily as trembling, shakes, and foaming at the mouth (4.1.34). All this Iago observes with satisfaction: “my medicine works. Thus credulous fools are caught” (4.1.43).

Near the end of the play, Othello avows that he is a man not easily made jealous, but one “wrought” to extreme perplexity (5.2.354). “Wrought” suggests that Othello’s jealousy has been twisted into being by Iago’s spider-like activity. “Ensnaring[ing]” his “soul and body” (5.2.307), Iago works upon Othello’s wits the same way one might have “wrought” a textile through spinning or embellishing (OED 3.a.b) – a pointed example of which is the sibyl’s embroidery work upon the fabric of Desdemona’s handkerchief. The sibyl, who could “read/ The thoughts of people” (3.4.57-58), invites comparison to spiders because arachnids were thought to possess foreknowledge due to their extended network of fine touch. Appropriately, the physical extension of the body’s touch into the handkerchief here continues as psychical extension in that Othello’s brain is

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24 “Perplexed” (5.2.355) in this instance continues the “wrought” imagery as it signifies more than a confused mental state; in Latin, as Natasha Korda reminds us, “per, thoroughly” and “plexus” means interwoven, entangled, or intricate (134).

25 On the ability of the spider to predict “things future,” see Topsell, 781-82.
“wrought” like a web.\textsuperscript{26} Iago’s apt suggestions made Othello desperate for an epistemological certitude founded not only upon “ocular proof” but “feeling out” the transgression (3.3.365). It is in the service of providing Othello with such an item of contact that Iago first mentions the handkerchief.

At the very heart of \textit{Othello}’s problems of touch and sexual jealousy lies the handkerchief as a prosthetic piece of skin. Desdemona’s handkerchief actualises two early modern understandings of touch in one palpable object: it is both a somesthetic web and a concrete item metonymically connected to acutely sensitive hands. Constantly passing from one character to another, stroked lovingly by Desdemona, snatched up by Emilia, grabbed by Iago, held by Cassio, Bianca, and then Cassio again, the handkerchief remains quite literally the “matter at hand.” Many scholars have read the handkerchief as either a replacement for, or extension of, Desdemona’s private body: as an item of contiguity forming part of her domestic corpus or a physical “fetish” (Berger 244). Where psychoanalysts have interpreted the strawberry spots as representing the virgin’s blood-stained sheets or even her torn hymen, the handkerchief has typically been thought of as a continuation of the female body.\textsuperscript{27} The napkin can also be read, however, as a pliable stand-in for Othello’s body. This makes all the more sense because Desdemona personifies the prop and “reserves it evermore” about her person to “kiss and talk to” in her husband’s absence as a material, and distinctly tactile, object (3.3.299-300). If the

\textsuperscript{26} Medical authors since the nineteenth century have described the brain in terms of webs and weaving. While the neural network analogy was first proposed by Alexander Bain in 1873 and William James, independently, in 1890, the language of neural “webs” has come to define the articulation of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cognitive science. For example, Richard Gregory asserts that “sensory experience” is linked in the brain through “tenuous threads of nerve” (27) in the \textit{Oxford Guide to the Mind} and Michael Posner regards memory as “active and continuously changing, like the weaver’s loom” (2) in \textit{Cognition}.\textsuperscript{27} On the significance of the handkerchief as tied to marital blood, see Lynda E. Boose, “\textit{Othello’s Handkerchief: The Recognizance and Pledge of Love}.”
handkerchief is a piece of the body contiguous to but still somehow foreign from the whole, then can it also be taken as a prosthetic hand or woven skin graft?

Othello’s curiously exotic explanation of the handkerchief’s origins would seem to imply: yes. The handkerchief is an embodied object. As Paul Yachnin notes, it is not simply a “square of embroidered cloth in a nation whose primary industry was the production of textiles” (202). Rather, it is a carefully preserved, composite fabric made out of embalmed flesh. Othello describes his gift as having been sewn together from threads “dyed in mummy” – a powder reduced from dead bodies – and the red upon the fibres emerges as blood conserved skilfully from “maidens’ hearts” (3.4.74-76). Where the texture of the handkerchief mimics the sinewy nature of skin in its threadlike properties and its apparently silken surface, it is also infused with blood from others’ hearts to become a living membrane. Simultaneously a very ordinary, English-style bit of “frippery” (Korda 125), and also an extraordinary object of wonder, sexual investment, and somatic extension, the handkerchief works – borrowing the anatomist Crooke’s words on skin – to “knit” up “the whole body” and play “together” through touch (71). Skin covers the body, enfolding it like a fabric “Curtaine,” “vnseamed garment,” or “winding sheete wherein nature hath wrapped this liuing body of death” (Crooke 61, 72).

When Desdemona feels at her most vulnerable, her cheek still stinging from Othello’s slap in 4.1, she pivots from one mode of touch (the brutality of the hand) to another (the enveloping sheet of skin). By asking Emilia to dress her bed with her wedding sheets, she symbolically harnesses the material witness of her chastity and nuptial touch so as to overlap the skin of the body and the skin of the bed. Invested with this meaning as a wrapping complex of fabric sensuality, Desdemona’s hypothetical
request “If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me/ In one of these same sheets” (4.3.23-24) becomes a knowingly defensive request for a second skin. Read in this context, Emilia’s realisation about the true monstrosity of Othello’s jealousy, that some “squire” has “turned [his] wit the seamy side without” (4.2.150), acquires richer significance. Othello’s mind is not only perverted by his suspicions of Desdemona’s infidelity, but inverted. His brain, in Emilia’s view, has been flipped around like that of her husband; through the web of touch and text the seamless garment of the skin has painfully twisted itself inside-out.

Pain

Human skin has more nerve endings devoted to pain (or nociceptors, from the Latin *nocere* “to harm”) than any other type of touch. Evolution favours an acute cutaneous sensitivity because it is vital to self-preservation: pain, albeit unpleasant, is the body’s main preventive system to warn us of tissue damage or danger. As Aeschylus reminds us, the only body not to feel pain is a “corpse” (Frag. 250). But how does pain really work? This question has bedevilled philosophers and scientists alike for many centuries. Plato wondered in *Philebus* if any man would willingly “consent to live” without pain, Aristotle considered pain an emotion rather than sensation, which Wright repeats in 1601 “Aristotle reduceth all the passions to pleasure and pain” (107), Epictetus described pain as a mental commotion, and many religious leaders in the medieval Christian church viewed pain as a divine punishment or means of spiritual

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28 Roderigo likewise believes that death is the only cure for constant pain, and explains why he would “incontinently drown” himself to avoid the pangs of unrequited love: “It is silliness to live when to live is torment; and then have we a prescription to die when death is our physician” (1.3.305, 308-10).

29 Offering a physical explanation for Aristotle’s classification of pleasurable versus painful emotions, Wright clarifies that certain passions (such as sadness, envy, or fright) cause an uncomfortable “contraction” or “compression” in the heart, whereas other passions (such as joy, love, and hope) allow the “dilatation, enlargement, or diffusion of the heart” in a way that generates a satisfying feeling of flow in the body (107).
purification (Bouman and Eifert 488). Surely all these understandings of pain – as a physical sensation, emotional experience, and cognitive activity linked to the soul – inform Shakespeare’s representation of touch. Yet in the history of science, it is the seventeenth-century figure Descartes who most eloquently articulated the specificity pain receptor theory, which dominated medical understanding until the mid-nineteen sixties, and which, I believe, finds parallels in Shakespeare’s earlier figurations of pain within webs of tactile communication. Descartes described the experience of pain within the body in his Treatise on Man as an interaction among “threads” of feeling. He wrote in 1640:

If for example fire comes near the foot, minute particles of this fire […] have the power to set in motion the spot on the skin of the foot which they touch, and by this means pulling on the delicate thread which is attached to the spot on the skin, they open up at the same instant the pore against which the delicate thread ends […] and thus] external objects are able to impress the mind. (qtd. in Wall, Pain 18-19)

Picturing the body as a mechanical system of fibres, pores, and pulleys, Descartes asserts that the skin is the site where noxious contact can proximally affect the brain. To paraphrase: the fire touches skin, the skin touches a thread, that thread touches a valve, and the neural valve opens to spirits that in turn “impress” our thoughts in an ever-narrowing channel of touch.

The relationship Descartes imagines between body and mind in his model of pain, however, nevertheless maintains the dualistic hierarchy for which he is famous. Many current critical studies of pain likewise return to these assumptions, in what David Morris calls the “Myth of Two Pains,” either by continuing or problematising the supposed divide between somatic and psychological hurt (12). Physical pain, as Elaine Scarry argues in her ground-breaking study The Body in Pain, shatters language. The
sheer urgency of extreme pain forces the body to trump the mind: “world, self, and voice are lost, or nearly lost, through the intense pain of torture,” reducing the perceiver to all-body/all-now feeling, and more generally, “to witness the moment where pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language” (Scarry 5, 35). “‘Swounds, I bleed still. I am hurt to th’ death” (2.3.156), “O, help, ho! Light, a surgeon!” (5.1.31), “O Lord, Lord, Lord!” (5.2.93), “O! O!” (5.2.288): these are but a few of the cries of pain voiced by Othello’s characters as they are slapped, cudgelled, stabbed, or smothered. Scarry’s assertion that intense pain has no voice and thus, dramatically, is best represented by reference to its inexpressibility holds true here in the resounding “O!”: 30 While “O” was a fraught letter in the early modern period, signifying the mouth, the naught, the female genitals or “nothing,” it is nevertheless an alphabetical marker; the “[O]s” of pain act as an interface between the expressible and inexpressible in language. There are many other instances in Othello, I suggest, that unite and intentionally confuse corporeal and cognitive forms of suffering. Rather than halting language in every case, as Scarry proposes, descriptions of tactile pain become the perfect forum to express emotional anguish in Othello, especially when that pain is shared within a culture or social web dependent upon “threads” of feeling.

At the level of plot, Montano, Cassio, and Roderigo cry out as they are injured in the two brawls, and the stage directions for these scuffles [“Attacks,” “Wounds,” “Stabs” (5.1.23, 27, 29)] suggest the type of pain these figures experience – or in the

30 As a general rule, Shakespeare avoids giving long speeches to characters in their death throes. Where a character in his final moments of suffering might be able to offer a few stoic words or even a quip, such as Mercutio’s “Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man” (3.1.97-98), to have him say too much while supposedly dying calls attention to theatrical representation, undoing the illusion of real pain. It is bad acting to ham up a death scene with too many words: an element Shakespeare himself lampoons in A Midsummer Night’s Dream where Bottom (as Pyramus) exclaims, “Thus die I: thus, thus, thus./ [He stabs himself]/ Now am I dead./ Now am I fled./ My soul is in the sky./ Tongue, lose thy light:/ Moon take thy flight./ Now die, die, die, die, die” (5.1.295-301).
terminology of the McGill-Melzack standard – “stabbing,” “cutting,” “sharp,” “splitting,” or “piercing” pain (Morris 17). The numerous invocations of blood, “bleed[ing],” and “spoil[ing]” (seven mentions in the two scenes 2.3 and 5.1) insistently call attention to broken skin even as they foreground “mangled” (5.1.80) and “maimed” (5.1.27) bodies. Presumably Cassio’s whole “leg” has not been actually been “cut in two” as he states, but his stabbed calf hurts to such an extent that it feels as if it were entirely split (5.1.73). Violence registers with the witnesses as they hear the sufferers vent their pain aloud, for Graziano affirms “the voice is very direful” (5.1.39), Lodovico listens to “two or three groan” (5.1.43), and Iago hears them “cry so grievously” (5.1.54). These moments of bodily pain are soon eclipsed by the lingering “pain” of Desdemona’s murder (5.2.97). Physical pain is crucial to the action in Othello, as it is to all tragedies, and here it seems to move beyond the pain felt in the flesh alone by gaining affective signification.

One such moment of affective pain occurs after the first brawl, when Iago responds to Cassio’s moans:

IAGO: What, are you hurt, lieutenant?
CASSIO: Ay, past all surgery.
IAGO: Marry, God forbid.
CASSIO: Reputation, reputation, reputation – O, I ha’ lost my reputation! […]
IAGO: As I am an honest man, I had thought you had received some bodily wound. There is more sense in that than in reputation. (2.3.253-57, 260-62)

The immediate contrast between the physical injuries Montano suffers in the duel, for which Othello promises “Sir, for your hurts/ Myself will be your surgeon” (2.3.247-48), and the cognitive “hurt” beyond “all surgery” that Cassio feels at his demotion causes a crossover between pain categories for both characters and audience. The audience, like
Iago, might first assume that Cassio “received some bodily wound”; his speech pattern of repetition, exclamation, and “O” mimics the cries of pain they have just heard issue from the fray. By having Iago momentarily mistake Cassio’s twinned forms of suffering, Shakespeare pauses to invite reflection on the differences (if there are any true differences) between tactile pain and mental pain.

Cassio’s perception of pain foreshadows another, subtler moment of wordplay; Othello tells Desdemona that his head aches with a “pain” literalised “upon my forehead here” (3.3.287). The indicative “here” implies a physical gesture, touching his hand to his forehead. The movement collapses touch external into mental pain through the “forkèd plague” of imagined cuckold’s horns (3.3.280). Desdemona, unaware of the context of Othello’s suffering, assumes that her husband speaks of a physical ailment and prescribes an appropriately physical cure: “Let me but bind it hard, within this hour/It will be well” (3.3.290-91). In much the same way that we might rub a bruise in order to dull sharp skin pain, Desdemona proposes applying an even and tight pressure to the head by “binding it hard” with her handkerchief.\(^3\) Whereas Iago confuses an affective pain for a bodily wound, but then revises his initial impression, Desdemona cannot recognise this pain as a felt symptom of Othello’s jealousy. The irony here too, of course, is that by taking out the “napkin” in order to bind his headache, she lets fall the prop that Iago uses to exacerbate the pain of Othello’s horns (3.3.291). Shakespeare foregrounds the connection between Othello’s jealousy and somatic distress again when Othello falls into his epilepsy. In response to Iago’s query about his bodily state, “How

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\(^3\) When a woman hits her arm, for example, she might instinctively rub the area or apply firm circular pressure to alleviate cutaneous pain. The reason that this distraction technique works is because pain nerve endings are associated with thinner fibre signals whereas deep pressure is associated with thicker fibre signals, and the ratio of large to thin signal fibres can change pain intensity by overwhelming the dorsal horn (spinal cord) that receives the stimulus data.
is it, general? Have you not hurt your head?”, Othello snarls “Dost thou mock me?”,
referring again to the head-hurting “horn[s]” of cuckoldry (4.1.57-60). The language of
tactile pain upon the forehead and within the brain has become for Othello more than a
means to express his jealousy; it registers as a direct embodiment of pain across multiple
orders – sensate and passionate.

It is no accident that both Cassio’s fears of losing his reputation and Othello’s
alarm about his possible cuckoldry are communicated in a language of tissue damage
and bodily injury. Strikingly, both men are concerned with their perceived pain in a
social system that positions them vis-à-vis other men. While Scarry defines pain as a
quintessentially isolating experience, Othello’s representations of affective pain
expressed via tactile suffering create a means for the characters to empathise with one
another within social networks. Scarry is right to observe that one person in a room can
be entirely oblivious to the suffering of someone else in the same room, and she points
to this divide, “even within the radius of several feet” as “pain’s triumph,” since this
unawareness signals an “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the
reality of other persons” (4). This potential to remain unaware of another’s suffering
does not, however, necessitate the “unsharability” of pain in all instances because
“directed against the isolating aversiveness of pain, mental and material culture assumes
the sharability of sentience” (326). Do we not reflexively wince when we see another
person’s stab wound, or gasp when we hear the crack of a skull as it fractures in a fall?32

Even images of pain, such as Carvaggio’s vivid paintings of doubting Thomas forcing

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32 Smith notes that, in Michel Montaigne’s essays, the witnesses who observe the mutilation of a criminal’s
body respond as if they themselves were being hurt: “the executioner gave no blow that was not
accompanied with a piteous voice, and hearty exclamation, as if every man had had a feeling of sympathy
or lent his senses to the poor mangled wretch” (qtd. in Smith, Phenomenal 149).
his finger into Christ’s side, can cause revulsion and discomfort in the viewer, stimulating “one’s sympathetic kinaesthetic sense – a bodily knowledge of how it would feel to be either the prober or the probed” (Spolsky 36). Rather than isolating individuals from one another, pain can provide a system of reference for sympathy and fellow-feeling through touch.

“Fellow-feeling” is the phrase Brathwaite chooses to describe how one person can vicariously “suffer” another’s “infirmitie” (125). The second edition of Brathwaite’s Essaies (1625) enlarges his consideration of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch into several new senses, including “The Sense of Others Misery” (124). What Brathwaite interprets as “compassion” is more than metaphorically a “sense” because he avers that “men can resolve into teares, through their sensible feeling of others griefs” (133). True fellow-feeling involves a sharing of pain experienced by touch as it is “sensible”; the sympathetic observer comes to “bear” the “burden” of another’s sorrow “in his mind” (125). Desdemona exemplifies this capacity for fellow-feeling in that she is sufficiently “pliant” (1.3.150), like warm wax, to “subdue” her heart “Even to the very quality of [her] lord” (1.3.250-51). It is by communicating to Desdemona the hardships he endured that Othello woos her: “I did consent,/ And often did beguile her of her tears/ When I did speak of some distressful stroke/ That my youth had suffered” (1.3.154-57). By recounting past events in a language of pain, “strokes,” and “suffering,” Othello’s former experiences are shouldered by the weeping listener as he beguiles her “of her tears.” The overflow of feeling generated within Desdemona finds an outlet in her physical touch, converting the healing kisses of a mother for her child’s skinned knee into a form of erotic consolation: “My story being done,/ She gave me for my pains a
world of kisses” (1.3.157-58). The powerful fellow-feeling that Othello arouses in Desdemona through his tragic stories serves, of course, as a model to touch the audience as well – a subject to which I return when I consider Othello’s ability to “impress” its audience – but more clearly in this instance, her tears and kisses reveal how a network of feeling among the characters transmits touches shared between bodies.

The premise that the transference of pain along threads of fellow-feeling is akin to the spread of pain across the nerves within one body is what underlies both Braithwaite’s conception of sympathy and Desdemona’s metaphor of the throbbing finger. Braithwaite concludes his essay on “The Sense of Others Misery” by noting “Members of one body suffer mutually” just as “wee will acknowledge ourselves to be united members” tied together by Christ our “head” (134-35). The familiar Renaissance trope of the body politic is here put to a new use through the imagined dispersal of pain, and likewise, “‘Tis even so;” Desdemona determines when she observes the change in Othello’s spirits, “For let our finger ache and it indues/ Our other, healthful members even to a sense/ Of pain” (3.4.143-46). Unsure why it is that Othello appears so hurt, Desdemona reasons that there must be “something sure of state” that affects him, attributing the cause to another’s pain by association (3.4.138). Her analogy of the hurt finger implicitly positions Othello within a social web of military relations where men are the corporeal units that make up the body that suffers as a whole entity.

Somatosensory metaphors of ties, bonds, and “cables” continue to materialise touch within this relational web, as when Iago vows: “I confess me knit to thy deserving with cables of perdurable toughness” (1.3.336), or Cassio declares: “I am much bound to you” (3.1.55). This same imagery helps to clarify Brabanzio’s recourse to the legal
system in order to right his pains, seeking out fellow-feeling from the counsel: “The Duke himself,/ Or any of my brothers of the state,/ Cannot but feel this wrong as ’twere their own” (1.2.96-98). Admittedly, it may seem strange to associate the webs of skin which perceive the touch of pain to the threads of feeling that connect men to each other as members incorporate in one shared “body” of sympathy, but period authors other than Brathwaite and Shakespeare use similar language to figure emotional receptivity. Francis Bacon, for example, writes that English law should govern the relations between men in a way that discourages hypersensitivity, because a gentleman’s honour should be a “strong warp or web,” not a “cobweb lawn […] so tender that it feels every thing” (299). Comparing the oversensitive web to a “sick man’s body” where the members feel “every touch or light blow” as “great matter,” Bacon castigates the duelist who appeals to the court at the mere “apprehension of a disgrace, that a fillip to the person should be a mortal wound to the reputation” (298-99), conflating terms of physical and affective pain in a story remarkably akin to Cassio’s tenderness after the brawl.

Temperature

The pain pathway imagined by Descartes begins with the touch of fire, a stimulus that combines both intense heat and pain. One common hypothesis for the relationship between pain and temperature, or pain and pressure, is based upon thresholds. In other words, pain happens when the sensation in any touch receptor exceeds a certain limit – if we experience too much pressure, too much heat, or too much cold. This non-specialised method of touch perception was first advocated by William Erb in 1874, but it would appear that Descartes’s seventeenth-century model was actually closer to the mark.

33 For more on webs and hypersensitivity, including a discussion of Bacon’s quote, see Mazzio, *Inarticulate* 195.
because “receptors with particular shapes” do “specialize” in their differing sensations (Coon and Mitterer 148). While the principles underlying thermoception remain mysterious today, modern science holds that the nerves and corpuscles for touch’s different functions are associated in such a way as to cause crossover firing transitions between groups: “if the skin is slowly heated from room temperature (typically about 20ºC), then the stimulus will start off feeling neutral, then warm, then hot, then painful, and finally intolerably painful” with a “transition between hot and painful sensations” around “42ºC and 44ºC,” but there are “several quite distinct populations of fibres” that maximally activate at fixed temperatures within this range: the first are heat receptors, the latter pain receptors (Woolf 31). The distribution of these fibres within the skin at varying depths also helps to explain why cold feels more superficial than warmth, which radiates deeply into the flesh. In short, cutaneous receptor specialisation suggests an affinity rather than unity of touch experience.

But regardless of how temperature is understood today, the tactility of hot and cold meant something very different to early modern people. In Shakespeare’s day, temperature was assumed to correspond with temperament – or complexion.34 The term “complexion” signified not only skin tone in outward appearance, but moreover an inward determination of personality traits aligned with hot (choleric, sanguine) or cold (phlegmatic, melancholy) humours. In this respect, taking someone’s temperature was less of an indicator about homeostatic health than it was a gauge of interior, ontological being. A feverous body was certainly still a sign of illness, and Galenic medicine used “exceedingly sensitive touch” to take the temperature by “palpating the body” and the

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34 As Wright notes, “we may confirm that old saying to be true, Animi mores corporis temperaturam sequuntur, ‘The manners of the soul follow the temperature of the body’” (117).
“palm” in particular (Boyle 135). At its most basic excessive heat signalled an imbalance and too-cold flesh meant the approach of death – a simple fact Shakespeare uses to dramatic effect when Leontes touches the apparently inanimate statue of his wife and registers his surprise at her live flesh: “O, she’s warm!” (5.3.109). Temperature renders palpation more than skin-deep. Beyond this, however, skin temperature also came to signify hidden dimensions of another’s interior perceptible only by touch.

In Othello’s quest to unveil his wife as an adulteress, he begins to read her body in a palmistry of temperature. “Give me your hand” (3.4.36), he orders:

This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart.
Hot, hot and moist – this hand of yours requires
A sequester from liberty; fasting, and prayer […]
For here’s a young and sweating devil here
That commonly rebels. ’Tis a good hand,
A frank one. (3.4.38-44)

Othello takes the heat and moisture of Desdemona’s palm as confirmation of her lasciviousness. Her liquidity does not so much imply the leakiness associated with early modern women in general, as Paster has demonstrated, as it does a dissolute “sweating” sexuality. Whereas ancient medicine and Renaissance belief in turn held that women had colder bodies than men, Desdemona’s hand feels troublingly “hot.” He interprets her temperature as a sign of fruitfulness, liberality, and youth – all qualities associated with the sanguine humour – but he also infers that this heat emerges from illicit sexual activity. In a contemporary medical account of generation, John Sadler details the role of women’s rising heat: “handle her secret parts and dugs, that she may take fire and be inflamed in venery, for so at length the wombe will strive and waxe fervent with desire”

35 In the historical “one-sex model” traced by Thomas Laqueur, sexual differentiation was determined by temperature (8). Women lacked sufficient heat to thrust out the sexual organs and thus remained inverted, not achieving manhood. See Crooke’s controversies “Of the Temperament of women, whether they are colder or hotter then men” (272) for an English take on this same subject.
(qtd. in Laqueur 11). Chiding Desdemona for too much “hot” liberty in both the humoural and erotic senses with his doubled insistence of “here” and “here,” Othello prescribes the correctives of “fasting” and “prayer.” In its open confession through touch, her palm seems a “good hand” and “frank one.”

This is the same heat Iago primes Roderigo to feel issue from Desdemona when he baits his listener: “Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand?” (2.1.253-54). Roderigo at first dismisses this action as mere “courtesy,” but soon he too comes, like Iago, to read the touching of palms between Cassio and Desdemona as “an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts” (2.1.257-58). The insinuation Iago uses to lead others into jealousy is that Desdemona’s gently warmed palms in such “mutualities” anticipates the heat of sexual friction: “hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, th’incorporate conclusion” (2.1.261-63). Shakespeare repeats this set of associations in The Winter’s Tale when Leontes remarks:

Too hot, too hot:
To mingle friendship farre is mingling bloods.
I have tremor cordis on me. My heart dances,
But not for joy, not joy. This entertainment
May a free face put on, derive a liberty
From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,
And well become the agent. ’T may, I grant.
But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers… (1.2.110-17)

The “too hot” feeling Leontes senses in his own scalding pain of tremor cordis, or heart ache, arises from the latent heat of the couple’s touching palms – and so too his wife’s “bounty,” liberality, and “liberty” recall the palpable character of Desdemona’s “sweating devil.”
Shakespeare capitalises on the association between fire, heat, and sexuality throughout *Othello*, linking rising temperature to Othello’s mounting fears of infidelity.\(^\text{36}\) From the first, Othello insists that he “begs” Desdemona’s company for his travels not to “comply with heat,” where heat is synonymous with sex, but instead for her “bounteous mind” (1.3.261, 263-65). Cassio too imagines the reunion of Desdemona and Othello after the storm as a fiery embrace, wishing Jove to guard Othello and “swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,/ That he may bless this bay with his tall ship./ Make love’s quick pants in Desdemona’s arms” with “renewed fire” (2.1.79-82). His imagery of the docking ship, swelling sails, tall mast, and love’s panting “fire” is almost uncomfortably overt. So too Iago imagines Desdemona first burning in lusty heat for Othello and then Cassio as her affection sways its course: once her body “is made dull with the act of sport, there should be again to enflame it” fresh “loveliness” (2.1.228-30). Yet, even if Cassio and Desdemona were “as hot as monkeys,” Iago acknowledges, “it is impossible you should see this” (3.3.407-8).

It is impossible for Othello to experience the heat of Cassio and Desdemona in the act itself, of course, because there is no real transgression to find out. Her “hot” palm is not “frank” or “honest” because she is not unfaithful. Or, if her warmth is a true signifier of her internal state, then Othello misreads the signs of temperature. Othello feels this disparity and corrects his earlier reading when he “[touches]” Desdemona again in 5.2, this time taking her temperature as a corpse: “Cold, cold, my girl,/ Even like thy

\(^{36}\) Temperature in *Othello* brings together several elements that show how touch patterns human language. As Lakoff and Johnson propose in their overview of “the sensorimotor structuring of subjective experience,” the sensory feeling of touch (in heat and cold) informs how a living body understands and cognitively categorises its environment in metaphors such as “affection is warmth” (*Philosophy* 47, 50). In *Othello*, heat suggests vitality, sexual intimacy, and urgency, whereas cold invokes death, chastity, and delay. To exemplify just the last of these: Cassio approaches Othello with the news, “It is a business of some heat” (1.2.40), “You have been hotly called for” (1.2.44), and Iago conversely spurs his plan forward by saying, “Ay, that’s the way./ Dull not the device by coldness and delay” (2.3.377-78).
chastity” (5.2.282-83). Lying before him, “pale” as her “smock” and lifeless, Desdemona is now more “cold” and chaste than he can bear (5.2.280). Like the statue of Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, Othello petrifies Desdemona by overlapping the touch sensations of temperature and texture, remarking that her skin is “whiter” than “snow” and “smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.4-5). As he puts out the light in the chamber, he not only darkens the room but cools it, wondering if he could ever find “that Promethean heat/That can thy light relume” (5.2.12-13). The allusion to Promethian fire here invokes both sexual trespass and physical temperature, in that the spark stolen from the Gods was used to animate a clay statue Prometheus loved (Pechter 104 n.12). The doubling of “cold, cold” recalls the earlier “hot, hot” of his jealous accusation through touch as his realisations come full circle.

Othello’s emphasis on the paleness of her skin alongside the feeling of its smooth coolness raises provocative questions about the temperature of different skin colours. When two people embrace or kiss each other, does their skin feel “white” or “black”? Would a blind man be able to palpate the difference? Or does touch erase race? It is easy to assume that skin-to-skin contact exchanged between black and white bodies offers the same cutaneous rewards as those between two white bodies (for instance, Cassio and Desdemona). Iago’s suggestion of substituting Cassio’s touches for those of Othello invites the audience to imagine the difference between the feel of their skins in the darkness of night; what if anything renders them distinguishable to Desdemona, if not

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37 In her study of cognitive linguistics and the experiential dynamics of metaphor, Elizabeth Hart uses the example of the “Promethean heat” to demonstrate how literary metaphors borrow from sensorimotor metaphors (such as life as warmth, or soul as an inner “spark”) to achieve surprising effects: “While there is everything usual in thinking about ‘life’ in terms of ‘fire,’ we are struck by a kind of fresh energy when Othello concretizes his wife’s metaphoric ‘fire’ through his address to the first ‘light’ of line 7 above, a candle’s flame. This reversal of metaphoric direction, from abstract to concrete, is explicitly dramatic: according to the play’s stage directions, Othello actually holds a candle” (7).
sight? Touch seems to offer a liberating potential away from racialist distinctions, elevating its normal status as a base sense by achieving a transcendence over the hegemony of vision that the play outwardly celebrates. But this reading collapses if we consider that the early modern understanding of racial difference had more to do with skin’s temperature than its pigmentation. As Floyd-Wilson explains in her work on geohumoralism, “physiological differences, including those classified in modern terms as ‘racial’ characteristics, primarily denoted a body’s proportion of liquidity and heat” (“Temperature” 183-84). Black skin was a by-product of a hot climate where darkness radiated from the core as temperature, rendering race more than superficial. Renaissance medicine asserted that men’s bodies were warmer than women’s, and the same logic held that black bodies felt hotter to the touch than frigid, northern whites. Of course, “the theory was not scientific but speculative, for there existed not a thermometer, not even a thermascope, for verification of the principle” (Boyle 136). In a humoral ideology of “race,” then, the skin (through the touch of temperature) serves again as an interface for the interior person and mind.

Responding to Emilia’s question, “Is he not jealous?” (3.4.29), Desdemona uses these climate-based ideas of race to reassure her: “Who, he? I think the sun where he

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38 The director Oliver Parker, in his 1995 Castle Rock entertainment film Othello, explicitly stages this comparison. He presents a scene of Othello and Desdemona making love that centres on their clasped hands and sharply contrastive fingers, and then this image distorts as Othello envisions Cassio in his stead in the same sexual posture, replacing the black skin with white.

39 There were two opposite views about the thermal relationship between interior and exterior complexions. One group, based on the teachings of Hippocrates, held that a hot climate produced hot humours, whereas the other school, including Aristotle, Bodin, and Magnus, argued “for a counteractive relationship between internal and external temperatures, that is, cold air makes for hot blood” (Floyd-Wilson, Ethnicity 25). In both systems temperature was central to ethnology, and it was in the seventeenth century that these classical ideas were dramatically revised towards vision and racialist conceptions of black skin that, in Floyd-Wilson’s words, “reinvented blackness” (Ethnicity 78). My discussion of skin temperature is necessarily indebted to her influential work on geohumoralism, though I should be careful to clarify that her approach to race is still contested. In my analysis of skin in Othello, I attempt to syncretise the sunburn theories of Kim Hall and Ania Loomba with the climate-based theories Floyd-Wilson advances.
was born/ Drew all such humours from him” (3.4.30-31). This moment, which directly precedes Othello’s palm reading of Desdemona’s temperature, cues our attention to thermal complexion. As Iago reminds us, Desdemona chose “not to affect many proposed matches/ Of her own clime, complexion, and degree” (3.3.234-35); instead she favoured Othello’s black “complexion,” the legible colour of the humours from another “clime.” Desdemona’s assertion about sun’s shaping role in Othello’s temperament speaks to geohumoralism since in this model, “the sun’s heat burns out the body’s heat and moisture, leaving only a black earthy element that darkens the outer flesh” (Floyd-Wilson, *Ethnicity* 30). Africans were therefore associated with melancholy, but this is not the humour that Shakespeare predominately links with Othello. On the contrary, Othello defines himself in terms of the “air” and “fire” of sanguine blood and choleric yellow bile: the hottest humours. Othello is as “rash as fire” (5.2.143), he turns his “soul” to “exsufflicate and blowed surmises” once “jealous” (3.3.185-86), he “blow[s]” his love to “heaven” (3.3.450), and calls for devils to whip him with wind and flames: “Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,/ Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!” (5.2.286-87). Rather than characterising Othello as melancholy black, dried out of “jealous” humours by the sun’s scorching heat, the play counters Desdemona’s approach with another more racialist view of a sanguine man sunburnt into darkness as punishment. Hall traces this discourse of sunburn in *Things of Darkness*, noting that the Renaissance proverb “To wash an Ethiop/ blackamoor is to labor in vain” is perhaps the “dominant troping of blackness in the period” (66). The most famous early modern instantiation of this desire to “whitewash” is Ben Jonson’s “Masque of Blackness”
(1605), where the sun’s temperature is reinforced as the origin of Niger’s daughters’ black “complexion” (1330):

As of one Phaëton, that fired the world,
And that before his heedless flames were hurled
About the globe, the Ethiops were as fair
As other dames, now black with black despair. (1329-30, lines 61-64)

The burning sun, in Jonson’s masque, is read as the “cause” of “their scorched cheeks” because of the “intemperate fire” of sexual “desire” they incite (1330, lines 74-77). It is only by being cleansed in water and dried by the more “temperate” English sun, embodied by the radiant James I, that these daughters can regain white skin – explicitly politicising racial difference in terms not only of colour, but heat.

The sunburn theory assumes that all skin is white by default, where those who are black are inferior due to their alteration. As Richard Hakluyt writes, those “which we now call Moores, Moorens, or Negroes […] are so scorched and vexed with the heat of the sunne, that in many places they curse it when it riseth” (331). Hakluyt’s reference to the Moors cursing the sun encodes a second explanation for blackness that gained popularity through the seventeenth century: the “curse” of Ham. According to the biblical account of Genesis, Ham was punished by his father Noah for “sexual excess” with the visible mark of his sins: blackness to be passed down through generations (Loomba, “Sexuality” 166).\(^{40}\) Curiously, the word “ham” actually means “skin” as it is derived from the Old English hama, Middle High German hame or ham, and Danish ham

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\(^{40}\) The curse of Ham, from Genesis 9:20-27, was frequently cited as the cause of blackness and used to justify slavery and racism. There are several different interpretations of what exactly Ham did to merit this punishment from Noah. One popular explanation is that Ham went against his father’s prohibition of sex on the Ark and copulated with his wife all the same, another is that he viewed his father naked, and there are even more elaborate stories about him incestuously sleeping with his mother or assaulting Noah. A believed source for Shakespeare’s Othello is the Geographical Historie of Africa written by John Leo, known as Leo Africanus, and translated by John Pory into English for publication in 1600. While this text provides more positive accounts of black people, it nevertheless links the origin of black skin to the lineage of “the sonne of Cham, the sonne of Noe” (298).
for “A covering, esp. a natural covering, integument; skin, membrane” (OED “hame” n. 1). John Bulwer, in *Anthropometamorphosis* (1650), and Sir Thomas Browne, in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), both group together the sun’s heat and Ham’s curse as two possible causes for the “gloss and tincture of blackness” in “mankinde” (Browne 323). For Othello, like Cleopatra “with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black” (1.5.28), “sunburn” is not only a signifier of racial difference but a “mark of sensuality” (Hall 97). In this way, I suggest, Shakespeare modulates Othello’s black complexion through two different belief systems, associating him with both the thermal humoralism Desdemona advances and, more consistently, with the emergent racialism of sunburn, staining, and visual theories of blackness.

Combining a racial slur against Othello’s hypersensual and distinctly African “thick-lips” with his own envy for the “full fortune” of winning Desdemona, Roderigo’s comment – “What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe/ If he can carry’t thus!” (1.1.66-67) – is the first of many to betray anxiety about Othello’s contaminating touch. Roderigo reduces Othello from a man to a composite of touching parts: kissing “lips” and “carry[ing]” arms. In so doing, he seizure upon a racial characteristic to make his metaphor embody a threatening lasciviousness. Moreover, he embeds a second sensorimotor metaphor of carrying forward success in a cognitive trace. Most of the subsequent references to Othello’s skin extend these fears of sensual heat and miscegenation in terms of sooty blackness. It is this fear of spreading blackness that fuels Iago’s notorious cry: “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.88-89). The later motif of Othello as a “Barbary horse” covering the human Desdemona, or as an “ass” (2.1.308) with its accompanying phallic overtones,
likewise frames Othello’s blackness as bestially soiled or dirty, and communicable through touch. When Brabanzio dehumanises Othello, addressing him as “such a thing as thou,” he is most astonished that she should have “run from her guardage” to his “sooty bosom” (1.2.71-72). The “soot” here evidently signals the darkness of ash or coal, but it also invokes the myth of skin-scourching heat. Soot returns again when Othello admits that passion has “collied,” or blackened with coal, his “judgement” (2.3.199).

So too the sexual stain Othello imagines upon Desdemona is described as blackness seared into the white paper of her skin: “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,/ Made to write ‘whore’ upon?” (4.2.73-74). It stains his honour in just the same way his face was blackened: “My name, that was as fresh/ As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black/ As my own face” (3.3.391-93). Evoking the heat of blushing in a touch sensation as well as the grimy darkness of “forges,” Othello swears: “I should make very forges of my cheeks,/ That would to cinders burn up modesty,/ Did I but speak thy deeds” (4.2.76-78). Even when the taint of sexual contact operates in reverse, moving from Desdemona to Othello, he construes it as a source of “cinders” and blackness. It is especially fitting that Shakespeare should employ a language of soot to define Othello’s skin because this role was originally performed in blackface – that is, by a white actor in black make-up composed of grease and the ash from coal or burnt corks (Vaughan 9). Under such conditions, touches between characters onstage could literally stain each other, as evidenced in the “dirty still” from Laurence Olivier’s 1964 Othello where his black make-up “smudged Maggie Smith’s white cheek” (Hodgdon 23). The touches shared between races in Othello, as the language of the play
continually reminds us, have as much to do with the feel of skin (in its temperature, texture, and pressure) as its colour.

**Pressure: Impressing the Audience**

From the opening lines of *Othello*, punning on touch embodies the weight of the mind at work. The play obsessively returns to the weightiness of ideas, emotions, or cognitive burdens as a felt pressure, where for example Desdemona aims to “touch” Othello’s love with a request “full of […] difficult weight” (3.3.82-83), or where she recognises that she must “support” a “heavy interim” in his “absence” (1.3.258-59), feeling her husband’s departure as “a bodily weight on her” (Pechter 22n.256). The sensation of touch (apart from pain and temperature) is essentially a measure of force. The soft impress of light touches, such as a caress, Othello’s kisses, or his gentle drawing back of the “curtain” around Desdemona’s bed (5.2.1, 16), are perceived by the Meissner’s corpuscles. These discs are associated with sensory dendrites that lie close to the skin’s surface, able to be bent with little force. Intense pressure such as the smothering murder of Desdemona (5.2.93), however, is felt as weight by the Pacinian corpuscles deep within the skin. The explicit contrast of light and heavy pressure in the final act embodies Othello’s vacillating passions, tender love and forceful jealousy, and further it suggests how metaphors of weight in *Othello* come to bear jealous affect that crosses into the audience’s felt sensations of sympathy.

Perhaps the best example of deep pressure as impression, or more specifically, oppression, appears in the opening scene. When Roderigo shouts up to Brabanzio that Desdemona has been carried off in Othello’s “gross clasps,” he assures his listener that he would recant his “wrongs” if “this be known to you” (1.1.129-30). The “know” of
Roderigo’s “if it be known to you” puns on the connotations of knowing as cerebral awareness and to have “known” her in the Hebraic sense of sexual intercourse. Transferring this jealous thought to her father, Brabanzio’s mind perceives its weight: “Belief of it oppresses me already” (1.1.139). While Brabanzio’s expression equates mental difficulty with physical burdens as a familiar trope, one so common that it hardly registers as a metaphor at all, it is worth reconsidering because his phrasing grows out of a shared embodied experience. Given that linguistic metaphors, such as lexical pairings, similes, or puns, are built upon smaller units of conceptual metaphor (those neural linkages that serve in spatial orientation and somatic mapping) language is “fundamentally” grounded in the body of touch (Hart 5). The wording chosen is precise; Shakespeare’s reference to Brabanzio’s mental suffering invokes a tactile sensation of pressure that causes his condition to register more forcefully with the spectator.

As Frey attests in his work on dramatic response, the metaphors that stimulate bodily experience, as “kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensitivity,” yield a deeper “feeling” of empathy or physical identification with the characters (32). The touch metaphor of oppression generates both abstract cognitive and concrete physical effects that create – to employ Brathwaite’s phrase once again – “fellow-feeling.” To clarify, in neural theories of primary metaphor, the subjective judgement of difficulty is linked to the sensory domain of cutaneous pressure and muscular exertion. The experience in forming memories of “the discomfort or disabling effect of lifting or carrying heavy objects” is equated with the internal sensation of struggling under a powerful emotion or new mass of ideas (Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy 50). In cognitive linguistics the target (muscular difficulty) enacts the source (mental burdens). Or, in more literary language,
the skin under pressure is the implied tenor of “oppression” where the vehicle of that force is the “brain.” Brabanzio’s mental oppression resurfaces in the court scene, and becomes a physical measure of parental control, where Desdemona’s betrayal has taught him to “hang clogs,” or prisoners’ weights, on others (1.3.197). Jealous to have had his daughter, his “jewel,” stolen away by another man, Brabanzio conveys his affective feeling in embodied terms of perceptible weight (1.3.194). This feeling the impress of thought relates to bodily sensation, for, as Jacques Derrida writes in On Touching, the “corpus, inasmuch as it weighs” also, “in a certain way, thinks” (71).

It seems particularly appropriate to evaluate the weightiness of Othello’s dramatic impression in terms of touch for this reason. Theatre is aligned with a physical capacity to “move,” “grip,” or “touch” an audience. As Thomas Heywood writes in An Apology for Actors (1612), “well-spirited action […] hath power to new mold the hearts of the spectators and fashion them” (B4). To be sure, Elizabethan and Jacobean writers believed that drama had the formidable ability to sculpt the playgoer emotionally, intellectually, or even morally. This affecting “touch” was a point of consensus among both contemporary advocates of the theatre and its most outraged detractors. Plays were believed to exert a material influence that either “consciously or subliminally” remodelled “patterns of cognition in its audience” (Montrose 51). Heywood’s verb “mold” necessarily implies tactility. John Northbrooke, in his antitheatrical treatise on Vaine Playes or Enterluds (1577), similarly sees the theatre as a place where people are “fleshye ledde” (67) and

41 Samuel Johnson famously found Othello so unsettling that its performance was simply “unbearable.” The weighty impression of the “tragic loading of this bed” is a shared by many (5.2.373). The final act in particular exerts its “sensational effect” as a physical discomfort, Michael Neill argues, because the killing occurs in her bed: a site of assumed safety and domestic intimacy. Sexual touching and violence collapse together within this framed space to “grip” the “imagination” more forcibly and generate horrible “feelings” (Neill, “Unproper” 384).
physically impressed: “All such spectacles and shewes [...] enter our heartes and breasts” to “touche vs, and conuerte vs thereby both from God and good workes” (62). Importantly, this pressure can be understood both as a visceral response – where the play might have “hurt” the curious viewer or wrung out tears (Northbrooke 68) – and as an emotional movement that stimulates judgement of plot and character. In the seventeenth century the word emotion meant stirring in a physical sense; it only later acquired the connotation of mental disturbance (OED 1, 4 a). Jean-Luc Nancy notes that “what touches, what we’re touched by, is on the order of emotion”; it sets “in movement, in motion, shaken, affected, breached” (135). While passionate “motion” is the term Shakespeare uses to convey the psychosomatic feelings of interior pressure, only slightly later authors employed the word “commotion.” In Paradise Lost, Milton portrays Adam’s reaction to Eve as “Transported touch: here passion first I felt,/ Commotion strange” (8.525-26). This description of “internal churning,” as Schoenfeldt observes, is a cogent predecessor of “our own ‘emotion’” which is linked to visceral touch (“Commotion” 43, 45). The early modern term “commotion” is especially applicable to theatrical experience because it introduces the “cum” (with); commotion is being set in motion “by” or “with” someone else. This form of touching depends upon a web of relationships among people within a shared space, since, as Nancy explains, bodies do not simply possess “weight” but must “weigh on” one another “and against one another” to share force and create movement (93).

In the earliest firsthand account of Othello in performance (1610), Henry Jackson repeats the term “moved” twice to describe the fitness of this tragedy, admitting: “they moved us to tears” (qtd. in Yachnin 205). From the perspective of an early modern
theatrical subject, a successful production of *Othello* generated a “moving” response in the somatic body. The palpable arousal of pity within theatrical identification causes a shared swelling feeling, one whereby “witnesses” experience a “distending force effecting an enlargement from within” (Weimann and Bruster 22). This tumescence aligns interoception, or the perception of touch in the inner organs, with a more vague affective fullness often thought to be released by crying. Wright considers this link between theatrical touch and tears when he defines passion as “a sensual motion” or type of physical force (94). Passion moves the animal spirits within the body that in turn press themselves upon the heart, blood, and brain.\(^42\) An intrinsic part of the body, the “force” of “strong passions” can be used to persuade, to “marvellously allure,” or to draw the assembly into sympathy – with “tears dropping down their cheeks” – by way of their sensitive souls (90). He offers advice about how best to achieve this affecting style of oratory, suggesting: “if we intend to imprint a passion in another it is requisite first it be stamped in our hearts: for through our voices, eyes, and gestures the world will pierce and thoroughly perceive how we are affected” (212). The tactile verbs “imprint,” “stamp,” and “pierce” reveal a sensory bias and materiality in this tacit communication.\(^43\) Most interestingly, the passion must be stamped into the actor in order to pierce the hearts of the observers, forcing a mirroring between the participants in the materialisation of the experience. Crooke equally insists that social events like theatre create a deep “impression” into our “Sense” that “imprint[s]” palpably upon the “mind” (698).

\(^{42}\) On Wright’s passions and their role in understanding tragic emotion, specifically in relation to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, see Rowe “Minds in Company: Shakespearean Tragic Emotion.”

\(^{43}\) This stamping recalls the etymological root of “character” in that it signifies both a “distinctive mark impressed” or “engraved” (OED 1.a) and “the personality or ‘part’ assumed by an actor on the stage” (OED 17.a). Wendy Wall examines the language of pressing both in relation to early modern publication practices and the gendered body in *The Imprint of Gender*. See her first two chapters for more on the historical torture of pressing (or laying on of heavy stones) and its metaphoric connection to printing.
Passionate response, these authors would seem to say, touches us because it is an internal pressure we feel as weight.

After attending a performance of *Othello*, we might feel a whole series of complex emotions ranging from the soaring elation of the grand verse to the tugging sadness of Desdemona’s willow song. Associated with each of these emotional experiences in brain-body activity are touch related impressions, occurring both on the deep interoceptive level and on the surface exteroceptive level of the skin. Neil Genzlinger remarked in a recent *New York Times* review of *Othello* that the final scene never fails to “bring out a few goosebumps.” This concatenated relationship between visceral arousal, emotional response, and cognitive evaluation in *Othello* relies on touch because, in many ways, “our feeling of bodily changes as they occur is the emotion” (William James 191).44 The degree of touching we witness onstage stimulates our arousal state, which in turn produces a “feedback system” of inner and outer bodily perception that can “affect attention deployment” or even change mental “judgment thresholds” (Colombetti and Thompson 52). Seeing the characters touch, and feeling touched by them as we watch, changes the way we think about them as characters.

Stephen Gosson, the playwright turned antitheatricalist, provides a firsthand account of how this touching between characters in the theatre becomes fellow-feeling shared by the audience. Recalling the onstage seduction of Ariadne, he reports:

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44 Scientists such as Cannon and Tomkins reverse the direction of James’s theory, considering how the brain’s emotional processing instead triggers visceral responses. In other words, “do we experience an emotion because we perceive our bodies in a particular way, or are there specific emotional neural patterns which respond to environmental events and then release bodily and visceral expressions?” (Mandler 49). Does our skin blush and feel hot to the touch because we are embarrassed, or do we feel touched with embarrassment because our skin is hot and flushed? Viewed in either light, cognitive science concludes that the sensorial “feelings” rooted in the body are directly linked to the manifestation of emotion on a neural level.
When [Bacchus] embraced her, she with an amorous kind of feare and strangenes, as though she woulde thrust him away with the litle finger, and pull him again with both her handes, somewhat timorously, and doubtfully entertained him. At this the beholders beganne to shoute, when Bacchus roose vp, tenderly lifting Ariadne from her seate, no small store of curtesie passing betwene them, the beholders roose vp, euery man stooode on tippe toe, and seemed to houer ouer the payre, when they sweare, the company sweare, when they departed to bedde; the company presently was set on fire, they that were married posted home to theire wiues. (Playes Confuted 114-15)

Gosson begins by cataloguing the erotic embraces exchanged between the actors, but the description soon shifts to the exchange between the actors and their “beholders” instead. The coy lover pushes away her suitor with one finger, but pulls him closer with both hands, repeating the tantalising action of theatrical representation itself as it draws the audience ever closer while maintaining a degree of distance. The physical touching stirs up a passionate reaction as felt response: a “fire” inside the beholders that encourages them to post home to their wives, presumably to act out what they have witnessed. What makes this passage so intriguing, however, is the exactness with which the bodies offstage mirror the actions and postures of the bodies onstage. When Bacchus rises, the assembly rises; when he lifts up Ariadne, the assembly stands on tip toe; when they sweare, the company sweares; and when they depart to bed, the company heads home to do the like. This example, as Gosson himself glossed it, proves “what force there is in the gestures of players” (Playes Confuted 114, emphasis mine).

Granted, the theatre’s ability to affect its audience was defined by early moderns in terms of tactile force and physical pressure, but how, to borrow Smith’s phrasing, “can the kinesthesia of this touching moment be communicated to someone outside the fiction?” – or how can “my sense of touch” allow “me to project what I can feel with my body here onto his body there, and reversing direction, to take what I see happening to
his body there and feel it in my body here?” (*Phenomenal* 134, 151). To broach these questions about theatrical identification, particularly identification through touch and fellow-feeling, inevitably widens a consideration of emotion from an individual body into a study of commotion among multiple bodies that weigh on one another. One of the most vital components of theatrical experience, as Crooke notes on “playes acted upon a Stage,” is the effect of “society” in “acting” (698). A select population of theatregoers could afford to pay for seats stage-side or in the Lord’s rooms where they might be close enough to come into physical contact with the actors, but, by and large, those assembled to watch *Othello* would remain at a distance from the performer – no more than fifty feet away, but no nearer than the margins. Crowding in the theatres encouraged social touching among audience members: “at playes in London, you shall see such heauing, and shouing, such ytching and shouldring, too sitte by women […] such tickling, such toying […] that it is a right Comedie, to marke their behauiour” (*Gosson, Abuse* 17). Philip Stubbes similarly depicts playgoing as a touch-based experience: “for what clipping, what culling, what kissing and bussing, what smouching & slabbering on another? what filthie groping and vnclean handling is not practis euery where?” (33). Leaving aside the jostling in the Globe theatre, touch and the intersubjective interaction of people in close proximity may have had an additional influence on playgoers then as now. In face-to-face exchanges between people in society, studies have shown that one subject’s sensorimotor coupling and emotional bodily

45 Smith investigates what he calls “touching moments” by using virtual reality studies to explain the phenomenon of “proprioceptive drift.” He notes that case subjects “react viscerally in their physical body when an object (in the experiment, a hammer) seemed to threaten their virtual body” or the body of another “dummy,” aligning their perceptions of touch with the touch of an exterior other (*Phenomenal* 147-49).

46 Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson urge critics to take environmental factors into consideration when discussing early modern passions. Their introduction claims that there is something faulty in the “current privileging of emotions as inward rather than social phenomena,” proposing an alternative “system of emotional cataloging, wherein group identity determines affect display” (13).
signals can be replicated as force in another subject’s sensorial-brain to alter their felt response. By seeing and physically witnessing an event as felt by other “players in the web of processes subserving emotions,” we respond by shifting our own physical state and reactions to that event (Colombetti and Thompson 62).

It is not anachronistic to envisage the relations among people within the theatre space as “players” in a web or “social network,” because early modern theatregoers conceived of themselves as connected by invisible threads.47 “Sit in a full theatre,” Sir Thomas Overbury writes in 1616, “and you will thinke you see so many lines drawen from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the Actor is the Center” (M2). The actor may reside at the heart of the circular web of touch, but his feelings radiate outward through the “lines” that extend to every member. Thomas Dekker’s prologue likewise promises to hold his audience’s attention by tying them to his body “with golden chains” (121). And Northbrooke calls his reader to consider how “we kepe ioly cheare one with an other in banquetting, surfeting and dronkenness [...] with Mummeries and Maskes” and exhorts them to give up these practices by referring to the fragility of our life within this shared “weauers web” (To the Reader, aii). The physical interaction of bodies within the theatre venue materialises a web of touch, not only through displaced contact, but further the social “net” of relations reduces the affective space between man and man into the sense of another’s misery. Like the spider iconography of skin as a web that mediates touch throughout the body, or Descartes’s threads of pain, the theatre becomes another fibrous network that ties playgoers together through the felt force of sympathy.

47 Today’s vocabulary of the “Internet” and the “world wide web” reinforces the associations between touch’s history of arachnoid depiction and the interpersonal intelligence available through prosthetic self-extension. To accept the idea that we can remain emotionally and physically available to each other over vast distances through a virtual medium – as the very phrase “staying in touch” implies – is to realise the shared cognitive underpinning of modern and early modern web analogies of social connection.
In recent years, neurologists (Damasio 1994; Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004; Gallese, Keysers, and Rizzolatti 2004; Gallese 2006) have identified the pathways contributing to this felt empathy. The brain system of “mirror neurons” mediates between “the personal experiential knowledge we hold of our lived body, and the implicit certainties we simultaneously hold about others” (Gallese 53). This means that mirror neurons activate and fire when the individuals watching another person complete an action (such as Othello stabbing himself) undergo an “as if” function and duplicate the feeling of the action as if they completed it themselves. This identification in embodied experience intensifies emotional response in a feedback-loop, and moreover increases the impact of visceral corollaries – giving one “goosebumps” or the “shivers.” Recalling Jackson’s observations about the 1610 staging of Othello at Oxford, he was all the more likely to have been moved to tears because he was part of a collective audience that cried. When Othello smothers Desdemona with the pillow, the audience feels the pressure of his jealousy as well as physical discomfort. The drama takes hold of the embodied mind and “makes us feel” along through the action an “insupportable” burden – “O heavy hour!” (5.2.107) – touching us to the quick.

Ultimately, by tracing the interpenetration of physical touching and cognitive reasoning throughout Othello into a combined web of “fellow-feeling,” we can better understand the play’s final dramatic affect: how it has moved our minds, impressed itself upon our bodies, and touched us with its weight. In this sense, Lodovico’s call to gravitas at the play’s end achieves a new significance: “this heavy act with heavy heart relate” (5.2.381).
CHAPTER TWO

A Taste for the Exotic: Incorporation, Colonisation, and the Double Tongue in

Antony and Cleopatra

Pompey’s apostrophe to “Salt Cleopatra” invokes her assistance as an enchantress of taste:

Salt Cleopatra, soften thy waned lip.
Let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both,
Tie up the libertine, in a field of feasts,
Keep his brain fuming: Epicurean cooks
Sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite,
That sleep and feeding may prorogue his honour
Even till a Lethe’d dullness –. (2.1.21-27)

Pompey asks Cleopatra to distract Antony’s fuming “brain” by manipulating his tongue. Indeed, the passage conspicuously circles the mouth as the imperative to “soften” anticipates the dissolution of food intimated in “feasts” and “feeding,” moving us in turn from Cleopatra’s “lip” to the sublingual ligament or “tie.” In Pompey’s imagination, it is the lusciousness of her leisure that distracts Antony from military activity just as the “sharpen[ing]” of his “appetite” counters the “dullness” of his “honour.” This moment encapsulates the play’s tendency to fault Antony for a particular kind of uxorious behaviour: for not only loving Cleopatra too much, but for craving her delectations. His apostrophe pairs terms that complete each other by returning to the whetted tongue. This may seem surprising. Typically, critics have treated Cleopatra’s appeal as dominantly sexual, and, if sensual, then in terms of feminine superfluity rather than rooted in any one sense. As Harris remarks, “Cleopatra has been cast within literary criticism as the Ur-

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48 When critics do address the food imagery that labels Cleopatra an “Egyptian dish” (2.6.126) they favour sexualised readings that centre on the Elizabethan pun of the banquet as an “amorous encounter” (Meads 90). Maurice Charney (102-03), Intiaz Habib (172), and Janet Adelman (Liar 74) all imply that eating represents the merger of bodies in coition.
Woman, the archetypally female origin of male heterosexual eros” (“Narcissus” 409). This is because literary studies of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* often succumb to the fascination Pompey attributes to this “salt” queen; they trace the competing claims of Egypt and Rome on Antony either to praise or vilify Cleopatra as the seductress who overpowers his sense of proper limits. But this extraordinary passage of gustatory attraction has rarely been considered in relation to its own express emphasis on taste. What Shakespeare establishes here, I want to show, is a perceptible rivalry between two means of knowing the world through the instrumentality of two contrary tongues: the sensual tongue of rhetorical excess and oral pleasure, aligned with Cleopatra, and the discriminatory tongue of rational taste, here epitomised by the corrupted Antony. Taste is more than a metaphor for the sexual exoticism of Cleopatra; it is also the means through which Antony is absorbed by her, and it further enacts the process of Egypt’s colonial ingestion that pervades the play.

By giving Cleopatra the curious epithet “salt,” Pompey draws together a complex set of seventeenth-century associations. Pompey’s adjective diverges from the literary tradition surrounding Cleopatra that associated her with the sweet spice cinnamon. Shakespeare’s main source for his drama, Plutarch’s first-century text *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (1579), reports that when Cleopatra retreated to her monument, she fled with “gold, siluer, emerods, pearles, ebbanie, iuorie, and sinnamon” (1005). Juxtaposed against these materials of obvious value, the spice seems all the richer at the end of the list. Cassia, cinnamon’s root plant, was synonymous with Egypt and the “floodwaters of the Nile,” and Herodotus, Pliny, and the anonymous author *Periplus of the Erythraen Sea* all believed, erroneously, that cinnamon originated in Africa.
(Schivelbusch 6). In actuality, cinnamon arrived in Africa from Sri Lanka and China but was imported into the Roman Empire – taking the same path into England in the seventeenth century – from the central “Egyptian port-city of Alexandria” (Keay 14).49 Salt, by contrast, was one of the tongue’s four standard flavours and a customary seasoning.50 That Pompey aligns Cleopatra with saltiness is telling because, for Elizabethan and Jacobean Englishmen, salt was at once prized and pedestrian. Pompey’s association of Cleopatra with salt carries an insult; it marks her as common as well as a “whore” (4.13.13). The tag suggests the queen’s lecherousness where Cleopatra has the “salty” aroma of a “bitch in heat” (Wilders 126 n.21), and, as a local good rather than an international commodity (like cinnamon, nutmeg, or saffron), the salt epithet domesticates Cleopatra, subsuming her into the same cultural imaginary through reference to a shared gustatory frame. Nevertheless, salt also marks Cleopatra with powers of preservation and even mummification, investing her with an Egypt-specific aura of immortality. Appealing to salt’s multiple meanings, Pompey’s apostrophe highlights the danger of her attractiveness by enticing the spectator’s taste for the quotidian as well as the exotic.

Pompey’s reference to “salt” also shifts the emphasis away from food in general toward taste specifically as an experience of pleasure. Spices and minerals like salt provide a concentrated intensity of flavour without any energy benefit or accompanying

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49 The spice trade would likely have been present in Elizabethans’ minds when Shakespeare wrote Antony and Cleopatra given that England had chartered the East India Trading Company only seven years earlier in a move to wrest control away from Dutch and Portuguese merchants. Spice, as Shakespeare was well aware, bound the pleasure of taste to imperial power.

50 Sea-salt prevailed over that mined from salt-flats until the twelfth century in Europe, but in Shakespeare’s England salt was produced locally from underground brine wells known as “wyches” that gave rise to the town names Norwich, Middlewich, Nantwich, and Leftwich. For the English, salt was a “basic foodstuff” (Fitzpatrick 41) but also a precious enough commodity to warrant ornate cellars, grand platters, and “pedestals” (Caton and Thirsk 95). The biblical expression the “salt of life” and the Latin root of health sal-ubritas remind us of its vital significance.
fullness. This quality brings oral pleasure into our consideration, and therefore it makes all the more sense to re-evaluate eating as attendant upon the tongue rather than the belly. *Antony and Cleopatra’s* allusions to sweetness and “delicious[ness]” necessitate an important distinction between the luxury of taste and the utility of satiation (1.5.27). Food is consumed for a variety of reasons apart from pure hunger and, as Schoenfeldt insightfully argues in *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, selective eating offered seventeenth-century individuals a means to achieve “self-regulation” through diet (39). Like Schoenfeldt, I read food as pivotal to inwardness and self-formation, and I extend his concern with digestion’s dissolution of self and other into *Antony and Cleopatra’s* colonial context. Yet while he underscores the belly’s centrality in a “system demanding perpetual, anxious osmosis with the outside world” (26), I emphasise in contradistinction the paramount role of the tongue as the gateway to that system. Where early modern anatomists name the tongue the competent “judge” of what we put into the passive pot of “our bellies” (Crooke 621), modern biology likewise sees the vestibular tongue as essential to feeding. Incorporation involves a series of interconnected phases: *appetite* (where the thought of food combines with sensory stimuli to prompt the release of saliva), *ingestion* (where food is taken into the mouth and the tongue begins the breakdown of starches before swallowing), *digestion* (when the bolus moves into the stomach for churning), and *absorption* (where the small intestine integrates nutrients).51 In short, the tongue has authority over the stomach.

By reconsidering the food imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra* to show the importance of taste to material incorporation, I argue that the play encourages both

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51 See Elaine Marieb *Human Anatomy and Physiology* on the role of the tongue in the digestive system, esp. 855-66.
physical and political identification through the tongue. This approach addresses a gap in the criticism of *Antony and Cleopatra*, because while Habib, Loomba, and Hall read eating as erotically charged in this play, Charney traces appetitive indulgence as an Egyptian value, and Peter Parolin determines that serving food has a political function, the role of taste in the construction of these meanings has yet to receive the attention it deserves. To view the symbolism of food in isolation from taste is to ignore the play’s fascination with the tongue and, further, to misread the origin of pleasure in political and theatrical ingestion. This chapter theorises the tongue in order to probe how *Antony and Cleopatra*’s interest in taste changes the reception of the play. Taste is an organising feature of this drama, first, in that Shakespeare associates Antony with the tongue of taste (Gustus) and Cleopatra with the tongue of speech (Lingua). The tense pairing of these rival tongues energises the romance of the main characters, while at the same time inverting their gendered hierarchy to reinforce the allure of poetry. Second, the thematic dietary opposition of Stoics and Epicures grounds the familiar dichotomy of Rome versus Egypt in terms that contrast reason with sensation. This philosophical discord materialises the divided claims of stomach and tongue. And third, Shakespeare uses rhetorical strategies of avoidance such as gaps, paradox, and tautology that, as I will show, stimulate a bodily longing to taste. Where the consumption of the theatre’s words feeds rather than fulfills that appetite, the Jacobean perceivers’ taste for new goods and colonial expansion is aligned with the Roman incorporation of Egypt. Ultimately, *Antony and Cleopatra* challenges the imperial enterprise of early modern England through the tongues of its audience.
The Early Modern Tongue

The tongue is conspicuously singular in a symmetrical body of two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and two hands. As Bulwer observes, “the tongue of man” is not forked “as in some creatures, but simple and one only” (*Anthropometamorphosis* 233). Yet numerous anatomical images emphasise the visual cleft of the fibre running down its centre, rendering the tongue “a *Double Member*” (Crooke 628). At once cleaved (separate) and cleaving (joined in one flesh) the early modern tongue enacts physical doubleness. The tongue provides a ligature between talking and tasting, or what Crooke called “the Sense of Tasting & of the Speech” (629). Seated in “the very ingresse of the mouth,” the tongue is ideally situated to monitor nourishment through taste, ensuring that “nothing may be admitted into the mouth which does not first make his quality manifest by the concoction of the Tongue” (621); and placed at the base of the skull, it is equally the “messenger of the Braine” that reaches through the mouth in order to articulate thoughts (629). The tongue mediates the boundaries of the body both as an importer of food and an “exporter” of language (Mazzio, “Sins” 56).

Whereas anatomy visually split the tongue into a double form of taste and speech, early modern allegories of the senses parsed the tongue’s roles instead through gender. Poets regularly anthropomorphised the tongue as both the king of tastes, Gustus, and as his loquacious queen, Lingua. There is an inclination to duplicate this organ, generating two tongues in one body as opposed to, say, the singular characters of sight or hearing. Fletcher weds the tongue’s contentious powers in *The Purple Island* (1633): “With Gustus Lingua dwells, his pratling wife” (5.56.1). Fletcher’s account confines the feminine tongue Lingua to the mouth with the teeth as “guarders” (5.59.1). Curbed by
taste as her husband and ruler, she is both an attractive figure of “enchanting art” (5.59.5) and a monster to be “held from ranging” with an “iron bit” (5.58.4). This subversive woman reappears in Tomkis’s university comedy Lingua produced in the same year as Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra. A wily and deceptive character, Lingua hatches schemes to distract her opponents and win the attention of Common Sense. Despite considerable success, she is ultimately punished for her ambition in “the close prison” of Gustus’s “house” (5.19.17). The speaking tongue is kept under the custody of taste “without whose licence shee shall by no meanes wagge abroad” (5.19.18-19). In pitting Gustus directly against Lingua’s oratory, Tomkis makes the relationship between taste and speech one of gendered control. Where the feminine tongue runs the risk of garrulity and associated sexual looseness, she must be restrained; and where the masculine taste polices the body’s boundaries by accepting only suitable nutrition, he must be vigilant.

The tongue channels the reciprocal concerns that Gustus might admit too much food into the body to poison the whole, and that Lingua might likewise admit too much in words to damn the speaker. Fletcher and Tomkis’s allegories are at such pains to repress Lingua – fastening her behind guards, bits, and bridle – that we might assume these authors esteemed the voluble woman the greater threat. Just the opposite: it is expressly the freedom Gustus retains which so unsettled early modern readers. Free to decide what is brought into the body in moments of eating, and overseeing Lingua’s actions as his ward, taste is doubly accountable. In Tomkis’s drama Gustus recognises his position as the guardian of health; he assures Common Sense that his judicious “tryall” of “meates” provides a “good supplie of strength-renewing foode” while shutting out “all that may anoy” the “health of the Microcosme” (4.5.30-33, 39). His promise
nevertheless contains a threat. For as taste acknowledges, this scrutiny runs contrary to
his personal interest because he must sample foods that are “neeedefull” rather than
“delectable,” suffering “griuous paine” by swallowing “sowre purgations” (4.5.34, 49).
The worrisome possibility that Gustus could opt to feed his pleasure becomes explicit
when he warns: “Should I neglect this musing diligence/ The body of the Realme would
ruinate” (4.5.35-36). Since perfect health or “eukrasia” depended upon the humours of
blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile derived from digestion, Galenic medicine
insisted that the appropriate selection of fare was integral to balance. Andrew Boorde’s
*Dyetary of Health* (1547), Thomas Elyot’s *Castell of Health* (1595), and Nicholas
Culpeper’s *Galen’s Art of Physick* (1652) all prescribe foods as a means to regulate
temperament. Rhubarb purged yellow bile to relieve choleric temper, wine increased
blood in the melancholy, and coriander released wind from phlegmatics. That is, what
one ate or drank modified identity. One consequence of this belief system is that the ill
are always to blame for their diseases. As William Bullein explains, overindulging in rich
fare destroys the glutton from the inside out with “sausy faces, dropsies, vertigo, palsies,
obstructions, blindness, flixes, apoplexies, caters, and rheumes” (*Gouernment* 2). It is the
tongue’s responsibility to assess the alimentary matter to be welcomed or barred from
entry; in fact the word “taste” meant to try or test before it developed the specific sense
to “perceive or experience flavour” (OED 2, 2.4). Taste is the body’s first defence
against poisons, impurities, and spoiled foods.

Taste was, for this reason, one of the most powerful and most distrusted senses.
As Brathwaite reminds us in his essay “Of Tasting” (1620), the tongue is to blame for
our postlapsarian condition and he admits that he still eyes “apples” with “suspic[ion]”
Brathwaite’s lingering misgivings about apples from Genesis make the biblical transgression strikingly literal: we fell because we tasted the wrong fruit. Brathwaite exhorts his reader to let their “taste be directed by reason, and not by sense,” since it is far better to live “temperate” and “taste all things as indifferent” than “to feed lusciously, fare daintly, [and] tast all things with full satiety” at the expense of body and soul (49, 52-53). The injunction to taste all things with indifference suggests an outright rejection of the palate. Certainly, his avowal that “I will not taste every thing I like, lest late repentance force me to distaste that which I liked,” evidences a willingness to suppress the “delight” of this sense (51). But the circular construction of his statement contradicts itself. How can he distaste what his taste liked? This rupture between rational taste (aligned with discriminate safeguarding of the body) and sensual taste (aligned with delight, deceit, and excess) gets to the heart of early modern doubts about the tongue.

To put it simply, the problem of taste is pleasure. Anatomists, poets, and preachers alike assert that the tongue was fashioned by God to screen repulsive contaminants and to enjoy healthful flavours: the tongue’s “substance is soft, loose, rare and like a Sponge that it might bee the sooner moistened with the humour which carrieth the Sapor in it, and so fitter to discerne of the diuersity of Tastes” (Crooke 628). Yet experience proved that the tongue could easily be convinced to take in spoiled meats under a spicy sauce, or tempted into excess if given a bribe to sweeten the deal. Pleasure made the judgment of the tongue unreliable and opened the body to

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52 Without the benefit of pasteurisation or refrigeration, food in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was quick to spoil. One means of recuperating meats past prime was to hide unsavoury odours under a sauce flavoured with pungent spices. Some consumers saw this practice as equivalent to poisoning, but from the cook’s perspective it was simple frugality. A distrust of the tongue lingers in many world religions that forbid foods or maintain suspicion about spices. Judaism still bans the consumption of pork and shellfish, which have been linked to several hygienic hypotheses (Simoons 65), and Mahayana Buddhism prohibits five spices – garlic, shallot, mountain leek, coriander, and onion – due to their stimulation of base desires.
vulnerability through taste. The increasingly common importation of sugar heightened this concern, for while it was enthusiastically added to breads, fish, and even meats in early modern cookbooks (such as Gervase Markham’s sugary “chicken sauce” [90] in *The English Housewife* of 1615), it was fingered as one cause of gluttony as a nationwide affliction. A sucker for sweetness, Gustus is the traitorous steward who sells out “his master’s rest, health, heart, life and soul” for a rent paid in “sugar” in Fletcher’s *Purple Island* (1.27.5). This tongue accepts “bribes of sauce” to smuggle in bad fodder that attacks the body from within, and the consequences are dire: “Thus plenty, fulnesse, sicknesse, ring their knell/ Death weds and beds them; first in grave, and then in hell” (1.27.6-7). Nutritionally void foods here endanger early modern consumers through their tongues – moving them rapidly from pleasure, to sickness, to death. Stubbes likewise censures English “daintie faire” in his *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), sneering at the “varietie of dishes,” “curious sauces,” and “delicat spices” that prompt “excesse, ryot, and superflutitie” (152). Addressing “the Tong & Palate,” Davies claims that “more bodies are consum’d and kild with [Cookerie]./ Then with the sword, famine, or pestilence” (44-45). The body’s consumer has antithetically become that which “consumes” the Englishmen who eat themselves into the grave.

Tomkis illustrates the dangers of tongue both as female persuasion and cookery. While Gustus prides himself on his diligent “tryall” of nourishment, the action of the play proves that he is all too easily deluded by a spoonful of sugar (4.5.33). Upset by the ruling court’s decision against her, Lingua determines to poison the five senses with tainted wine. “Craftily” adding to her “cup” a honeyed toxin, Lingua is certain that as “‘tis sweet, theile swallow it” (5.3). Yet Lingua manipulates taste with wordcraft as well.
She gives him “[d]elightfull speeches, sweet perswasions,” and seasons “sauorie periods” to “delude Gustus taste” (1.1.). Not only would a meal appeal to the palate, but a choice phrase was equally to be savoured upon the tongue and often these two varieties of oral pleasure were read as mutually reinforcing. The tongue as language evades Gustus’s guard because Gustus is both tempted by delicious food and seduced by “sugred words” (1.1). Even Brathwaite’s suspicions about the taste of apples are associated with Satan’s speech, since Eve was “induced to taste that shee ought not” by palatable flattery (45). Contrasting an appetite for knowledge in sin against the true “sweetness” of God, he encourages his reader to “taste and see how sweet the Lord is” in “his promises” (54). To the extent that the powers of oratory are repeatedly coupled with gustatory relish, words and food become coterminous providers of pleasure in oral consumption.

**Gustus and Lingua**

Romantically linked, and yet politically divided, the two titular characters of *Antony and Cleopatra* embody the doubleness of the tongue. Stepping forward to kiss Cleopatra, and to hush her “shrill-tongued” “scold[ing]” (1.1.34), Antony assures her that “the nobleness of life” depends upon their companionship; they are “such a mutual pair,/ And such a twain” (1.1.38-40). The words he chooses to define his relationship with Cleopatra stress both their closely-bonded form and their insistent separation. Like Lingua, the “strange woman” guarded inside Gustus’s mouth as a resident alien, Cleopatra charms Antony’s tongue with her outsider’s speech (Fletcher 5.59.1). Moreover, just as the early modern tongues of taste and speech cleave together and apart, so too are Antony and Cleopatra twinned and “twain.” Unlike the paired eyes, ears, and nostrils associated with the other senses, these two figures are one “peerless” tongue –
singular among the ranks of lovers (1.1.42). United as a composite whole, even physical
distance cannot divorce Antony from Cleopatra, for, as Antony consoles her: “thou
residing here goes yet with me,/ And I hence fleeting, here remain with thee” (1.3.104-
05). Their actions are co-dependent: Cleopatra will “seem the fool [she] is not” when
“A Antony/ Will be himself” (1.1.43-44), and Antony insists that he will not move unless
“stirred by Cleopatra” (1.1.45). The particular verb “stirred” is especially appropriate
because period convention held that Lingua stirred up words (verbum) through her
tongue’s whipping motions in the air (verberato) and thereby she “thrives” on “pushing”
Gustus “around” (Mazzio, “Sins” 65).

Cleopatra is the most verbose of all Shakespeare’s female characters: her 204
lines of virtuoso coercion and “sweet” conversation align her with the Lingua tradition
(1.3.32). That Cleopatra’s first line in the play is a request for flattering words – “If it be
love indeed, tell me how much” (1.1.14) – suggests through its invitation to elaborate
how she feeds on language and draws energy from the auditors she commands. Urging
Antony to hear the messengers, and taunting him with his implied allegiance to her over
Fulvia or “scare-bearded Caesar” (1.1.22), Cleopatra uses repetition, mock humility, and
an exaggerated slip of the tongue – “Where’s Fulvia’s process? – Caesar’s, I would say –
both?” (1.1.30) – to add piquancy to her speech. She manipulates Antony’s tastes by
testing the limits of his patience for her prattling against him, mixing tart jibes with
sugary compliments in the varied style Plutarch names the flatterer’s “sauce.”53 Where
early modern allegories defined Lingua’s spoken poetry as an “enchanting art” (Fletcher

53 Plutarch describes Antony as a man “easely abused” by flatterers who mingle “their flatterie, under this
familiar and plaine manner of speach vnto him, as a fine deuise to make difference of meates with sharpe
and tart sauce” (981). The simile that compares the alternation of sharp speech and sweet praise with the
use of different sauces to cover meats references the tongue’s shared role in taste and articulation.
Antony recognises Cleopatra’s debilitating influence: “I must from this enchanting queen break off” (1.2.121). Even as Antony entreats his “most sweet queen” (1.3.32) to listen, she interrupts him, drowning his interjections with a flood of words. Cleopatra runs verbal circles around him. She even talks over Antony’s dying behest, answering his imperative to “Give me some wine, and let me speak a little” with the opposite assertion “No, let me speak” (4.16.44-45). An Egyptian Lingua, Cleopatra favours rhetorical effusiveness and relishes “the time for words” (1.3.34). Of course, Shakespeare would likely identify with Cleopatra’s indulgence since his own craft depends upon the flourishes of writing, but the play exaggerates her pleasures in overdoing it so as to throw into relief reason’s susceptibility to the verbal tongue as well as taste. Centring her oral pursuits on the pleasures of articulation, and disregarding the dangers of excess – sending letters “twenty” posts “thick” (1.5.62) – she delights in poetry for the sake of luscious sense.

It is Gustus’s responsibility to re-establish the reason in his sense. As Davies’s, Fletcher’s, and Tomkis’s depictions of the tongue make explicit, taste is bound up with masculine discrimination. But rather than upholding Gustus’s control over his unruly counterpart, Shakespeare disrupts the traditional hierarchy, portraying Antony’s reason as compromised by the pleasures of Cleopatra’s speech. Shakespeare’s Antony is a misguided Gustus. From the opening line, Philo observes how Antony’s “dotage” on Cleopatra surpasses restraint: he “o’erflows the measure” (1.1.1-2). Philo’s verb “o’erflow” returns to the oft-noted contrast between Rome’s Lenten measure and Egypt’s Cleopatra was praised for the “sweetness of her tongue” (Plutarch 981) and so too was Shakespeare. Francis Meres draws on the ancient trope of honeyed speech to rhapsodise over the “sugared Sonnets,” claiming that the “sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare.” Meres’s phrasing expresses delight at both the taste and “feel” of these lines “in the mouth” as Smith explains in “Shakespeare’s Sonnets: A Reception History” (7).
limitless sensuality, but it is importantly the Roman who here embodies excess. By reading moments of overflow through the allegory of the rival tongues that reinforces the interconnectivity of these two halves, I hope to suggest how both cultures exceed their bounds in colonial interchange. The binaries of Rome/Egypt, reason/sensation, and Stoicism/Epicureanism that scholars conventionally recognise can thus further be understood in reference to the parallel binary of taste and speech. To be sure, Egypt’s victuals twist Antony’s tongue towards sensation, but the verbal equally – if not more so – shifts Gustus away from vigilant action. It is the combination of Cleopatra’s salty words and “cloyless sauce” that seduces Antony’s guiding reason of taste (2.1.25). He becomes an Epicure, in part, through his indulgence in language. For Antony, Cleopatra’s foreign language is not only more poetic but more appetising in its exclamatory mode and jollity. Once this Gustus has been introduced to the pleasures of Egypt’s speech, he has little tolerance for Rome’s words. Refusing to listen to the messengers, Antony importunes: “Let’s not confound the time with conference harsh./ There’s not a minute of our lives should stretch/ Without some pleasure now” (1.1.47-49). The cadence on “now” accentuates the transition his taste has undergone: he neglects “harsh” and austere Roman duty to pursue the pleasures of Cleopatra’s court. AntONY’s tongue lingers on sensual “soft[ness],” “the love of Love,” and “desire” (1.1.46, 48, 57), and his particular insistence on continuous sensation – where every minute must be filled with pleasure – demonstrates his conversion to Cleopatra’s Epicureanism.

Cleopatra teases Antony’s tongue, going so far as to school him in how best to articulate his rage: “say the tears/ Belong to Egypt. Good now, play one scene/ Of

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55 I use the word “austere” to refer to Rome in a very specific sense. The etymology of “austere,” from the Greek οὐστηρός “to make the tongue dry and rough,” unites gustatory astringency with moral “self-discipline” (OED 1, 4).
excellent dissembling” (1.3.77-79). The metatheatrical valence is clear, but its special significance lies in her encouragement of particular phrasing. She coaches him to “say” it her way; and when he does respond, “You’ll heat my blood. No more!” (1.3.80), she refines his words again, “You can do better yet,” even finishing his martial oath, “Now by my sword –,” with “target” (1.3.81-83). When Antony subjects himself to Cleopatra’s “sport,” he plays with the normative gender hierarchy of the Lingua tradition by allowing her to reign (1.1.48). Antony knows that he is harming the body, hatching “ills” through his tongue’s “idleness” (1.2.122-23); he just lacks the resolve to break free of Cleopatra’s verbal spell: “These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,/ Or lose myself in dotage” (1.2.108-09). He bristles at her goading and threatens to leave, but she again turns his tongue back to her with a sweet compliment – “Courteous lord” – and the appeal of “one word” (1.3.87). There is no real contest for Antony’s affections given that Octavia epitomises Rome’s “holy, cold, and still conversation” (2.6.122). She is, as Cleopatra rejoices, “dull of tongue” (3.3.16) in comparison to his “Egyptian dish” (2.6.126). Upon his return to the larger body of Rome, Antony sheepishly admits that Lingua had gotten the better of Gustus’s reason. In the face of Caesar’s charge that he forgot his duty, Antony blames his lingual poisoner: “Neglected, rather,/ And then when poisoned hours had bound me up/ From mine own knowledge” (2.2.94-96). After the same style as Tomkis’s Lingua, Shakespeare’s Cleopatra misleads Antony-as-Taste so as to cloud his discretion. Just as Pompey had hoped in his apostrophe, she “keep[s] his brain fuming” with her tempting words and “Epicurean cooks” (2.1.24).

When Brathwaite condemns the pleasures of the tongue in his essay “Of Tasting” (1620), he invokes “Cleopatra” as an exemplar of sensual excess (49). He admonishes his
readers for their susceptibility to empty oral pleasures, and – in words that could be directed at Antony – warns them to avoid overindulging as “Epicures” or “Cleopatras” (47, 49). Brathwaite, like many other English authors, is somewhat “careless” in his reference to Epicurean tradition (Barbour 172). He uses the term “Epicure” merely as a label for the gourmand rather than as an appeal to the sophisticated classical philosophy beginning to be rehabilitated at court. To Brathwaite, Epicures and Cleopatras are synonyms: both are devoted to the present satisfaction of the tongue at any internal cost. The negative moral tinge of such “luscious feeding” is manifest in his repugnance at “Aegypt” as a “world so dissolute” filled with “slesh-pots” and “libertine[s]” (53, 55). Whereas taste should be checked by manly prudence, he laments that there are now “more Cleopatras than Cornelias” since “many have exceeded in the vse of this Sence, but few restrained their desires with moderation” (49). Brathwaite juxtaposes Cleopatra as the ultimate glutton, or Epicure, against Cornelia as a temperate consumer, or Stoic. He compounds the insult against proud Englishmen, since calling them “Cleopatras” emasculates and alienates them through identification with this tongue of Egypt.

What Brathwaite’s flippancy reveals is a common cluster of associations around Epicureanism and Egypt. For Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Epicures were degenerate hedonists: ungodly self-indulgers who relished pleasures of the flesh and the table above all else. This popular sense of the Epicure prevails in Pompey’s reference to “Epicurean cooks” (2.1.24); indeed, Shakespeare’s use of the term defined the history of the word in English given that the Oxford English Dictionary cites this quote as the origin of the meaning to suit an individual of “refined tastes” or “devoted to the pursuit of pleasure; hence luxurious, sensual, gluttonous” (2.a.b). Yet if we remember the classical roots of
Epicureanism, then it becomes immediately clear that this view confuses Epicurus’s ideal of pleasure with simple hedonism.\textsuperscript{56} A true Epicure sought kinetic pleasure (sensation) and static pleasure (the avoidance of pain) by first realising his personal appetites, and then by paring down his needs to a basic level in order to have them consistently met. Classical Epicurean satisfaction therefore depends upon the reduction of bodily desires rather than their exaggeration. While Shakespeare connects Epicureanism with Cleopatra as Egypt’s sensual tongue in order to imply gluttony, the association also, I believe, does more to link her to Epicurus’s idea that sensation is the purest means of discovery. Shakespeare intensifies the contrast between Egypt and Rome by mapping each culture’s larger attitudes towards the body, pleasure, and sensory epistemology onto these divergent philosophies of diet.

In Epicurean philosophy the senses are of central importance. Epicurus believed that the body, through the senses, supplied truth to the mind via observation. From this perspective, truth can be grasped only through empirical trial with a combination of sensation (\textit{aesthèsis}), pre-formed ideas (\textit{prolepsis}), and feelings (\textit{pathê}). Epicures claim that whereas the judgements of the brain may err, the senses themselves are to be trusted. Classical Stoicism, on the other hand, valorised reason.\textsuperscript{57} Stoics maintain that the senses are perpetually bombarded by stimuli that leave behind impressions, but that it is the

\textsuperscript{56} Epicureanism taught the art of living designed to ensure individual happiness. Its three tenets were: first, that the chief good in life is pleasure which aligns directly with virtue, second, that atoms define the function of the universe so as to control causality independently of the gods, and third, that the bodily senses are the primary criterion of knowledge. This ideal of pleasure, however, was no prodigal pursuit: “by pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul […] It is not by an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not by sexual lust, nor the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life” (Epicurus 10). For more information about Epicureanism, see Cyril Bailey, Carlo Diano, Robert Hicks, and Whitney J. Oates.

\textsuperscript{57} Stoicism, founded by Zeno in 300 B.C., centred on reason and the suppression of emotion. Its masculine insistence on universal brotherhood, militaristic ethos of acting to change “a world of strife and uncertainty,” and focus on maintaining a patient indifference to pleasure and suffering became entrenched in later Roman self-definition under Panaetius, Poseidonius, and Cicero (Saunders 2).
mind that actively distinguishes truth from fallacy. Total understanding (katalepsis) results from reasoning an impression through belief (doxa) to conviction (episteme) in discussion. It is particularly apt that Shakespeare presents Cleopatra as the Lingua of Egypt who commands Epicurean cooks, whereas Antony – the Gustus of Rome – symbolises the Stoic’s flawed ethic of rational discrimination. If Lingua incites Gustus to feel pleasure, then the Romans urge him instead to resist and think through the careful filtering of food. They laud self-control as a means to overcome the destructive physical impulses and emotions Pompey summons in his apostrophe to Cleopatra. We can see how the rivalry between the tongues of taste and speech aligns with the philosophical divide in Stoic and Epicurean thought to imbricate fully the play’s larger contests: the tension between sensation and reason, passive perception and active duty, and personal romance and military conquest.

If the Egyptians are called Epicures in Antony and Cleopatra, then surely the Romans are their Stoic counterparts. While there are frequent scenes of feasting in Egypt, Rome is a place of rigorous restraint, even famine. In Egypt, Antony is an “amorous surfeiter” (2.1.32) who “feast[s]” with African kings (2.2.80) and always “sits at dinner” (2.1.12). In Egypt, Enobarbus boasts to have “used” his “throat” (2.6.134) and eaten “eight wild boars roasted whole at breakfast” (2.2.186), eagerly anticipating the “four” more “feasts” “toward” (2.6.74). In Egypt, the soldiers are rewarded by Antony with “Some wine/ Within there, and our viands!” (3.11.73-74), full “bowls” that “mock the midnight bell” (3.13.186-87), and “bounteous” meals (4.2.10). The Romans frown upon such festivities. Menas says that he is “sorry” to see the night has “turned to a drinking” (2.6.105), and Caesar too would “rather fast from all, four days,/ Than drink so much in
one” (2.7.98-99). Even when he feeds his army, it is pointedly different from Antony’s magnanimity. Caesar’s is a coolly calculated expenditure: “And feast the army. We have store to do’t./ And they have earned the waste” (4.1.15-16).

Caesar reviles Egyptian dietary customs and food in general. He scoffs at the news that Antony “fishes, drinks, and wastes/ The lamps of night in revel” (1.4.4-5) as evidence of his diminished Roman power. In Caesar’s eyes, these “orgies of consumption” make Antony a ridiculous drunkard, glutton, and man of lightness (Parolin 215). Caesar judges the other Romans, even as Stoics, to be “too indulgent” in their forgiveness (1.4.16). He opines:

Let’s grant it is not
Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolemy,
To give a kingdom for a mirth, to sit
And keep the turn of tippling with a slave,
To reel the streets at noon, and stand the buffet
With knaves that smells of sweat. […]
Full surfeits and the dryness of his bones
Call on him for’t. (1.4.16-21, 27-28)

Contemptuously using the verb “tippling” rather than drinking and “tumbling” to insinuate wanton sex, Caesar describes Antony as a grotesque man of the lower body and the lower classes in company with “slaves” and “knaves.” His tirade links Antony to sensuality through this evocation of the smell of sweat, the taste of liquor, and the touch of carnal embraces. His last sentence affirms that this “voluptuous” consumption generates illness (1.4.26). Antony’s dining bloats him with dry air, modifying his inner body so that “stomach disorders and syphilis call him to account” (Jones qtd. in Wilders, 115 n.27). The surfeit becomes its own punishment according to Galenic medicine, and Caesar’s “distinctly Roman economy of the self” converts plenty into “waste,” as
Adelman argues (Suffocating 178). Caesar exaggerates the Stoic ideal of self-restraint by making all food a threat to the physical and moral interior.

To Caesar, Antony is most heroic when starving. Reminiscing about Modena, Caesar romanticises an earlier Antony who survived on the barest sustenance:

[...] Thou didst drink  
The stale of horses, and the gilded puddle  
Which beasts would cough at. Thy palate then did deign  
The roughest berry on the rudest hedge.  
Yea, like the stag when snow the pasture sheets,  
The barks of trees thou browsed. On the Alps  
It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,  
Which some did die to look on; And all this –  
It wounds thine honour that I speak it now –  
Was borne so like a soldier that thy cheek  
So much as lanked not. (1.4.61-71)

If we are to take Caesar at his word, Antony not only thrives under deprivation but relishes things that taste bad. He maintains more than Stoic self-command: his cheeks remain full despite the meagre nourishment of stagnant puddles, bark, and berries.\(^{58}\)

Linked to Rome’s rugged forbears Romulus and Remus, Antony is likewise nurtured with the “roughest berry on the rudest hedge” (Heather James 128). By charting Antony’s degradation from Roman soldier to Egyptian lover in nutritional terms, Caesar uses the past to reprimand Antony for his current tastes. Whereas the pleasurable feasts in Egypt dry his bones and corrupt his reason, this primitive diet ensures his vital Romanness. Caesar strategically “wounds” his military competitor’s honour by speaking

\(^{58}\) No critic, as far as I am aware, has yet noticed the striking similarity between this Modena episode and Gosson’s denunciation of taste in The Schoole of Abuse (1579). Gosson attacks overindulgent Englishmen by referring to the “olde discipline” where our ancestors “fedde vppon rootes and barkes of trees, they would stande vp to the chinne many dayes in marishes without victualles: and they had a kinde of sustenaunce in time of neede, of which if they hadde taken but the quantitie of a beane, or the weight of a pease, they did neyther gape after meate, nor long for the cuppe, a great while after” (16). That these men can withstand days of hunger after eating only one pea is a hyperbolic example of Stoic self-sufficiency. I believe Shakespeare combines Plutarch’s story of famine from the Noble Lives with Gosson’s disparagement of modern tastes in order to foreground the “strangeness” of Antony’s palate.
this tribute “now” in order to demonstrate the discrepancy. Caesar’s command to “Leave thy lascivious wassails” pivots into nostalgia for an Antony whose “palate then did deign” unappealing foods (1.4.56). The Modena speech shows the heroic palate at the furthest possible remove from Epicurean refinements and Caesar thereby flatters himself. The positive features of Antony’s alimentary resilience (his adaptability and renunciation of basic needs) are exactly what Caesar sees in himself as a model consumer. By idolising Antony’s former self-denial, he reinforces the Roman value of abstemiousness and his own Stoic resolve.

Nevertheless, the diet of “strange flesh” Caesar attributes to Antony stands out (1.4.67). Where the passage seems to hold Antony in awe, it actually verges on disgust, framing him as a radical outsider of both dietary philosophies. Caesar not only dehumanises Antony by converting him into the stag, but defamiliarises him as a creature beyond the pale since even “beasts” refuse the nourishment Antony accepts. By picturing a man that surpasses the “savages” in willingness to “suffer,” who drinks the “stale” of urine or blood, and who palates the fare “which some did die to look on,” Caesar presents Antony as a misguided Gustus with curiously perverted tastes (1.4.61, 62, 68). If Caesar’s sole purpose were to juxtapose his opponent’s profligacy against past honour in dietary terms, then he could simply repeat the consumption myth as it appears in his sources. Shakespeare’s Modena narrative differs from Plutarch’s The Noble Lives in one important respect: whereas Plutarch’s Antony endures famine among a group of men, this Antony practices solitary consumption. Indeed, all Shakespeare’s changes in wording estrange Antony’s palate. To Plutarch, “euery man that feleth want or aduersite” can identify with this great captain (977). He is a “wonderfull example to the souldiers”
who collectively follow his lead: “it is reported that euen as they passed the Alpes, they did eate the barcks of trees, and such beasts, as neuer man tasted of their flesh before” (978, emphasis mine). Plutarch’s innocuous wild fruits and game are metamorphosed in Caesar’s speech into “gilded” puddles, “rough” berries, and the taboo “strange flesh” that horrifies the onlooker. Arthur Little gets the difference in scale here exactly right, remarking that Caesar converts Plutarch’s landscape into “a nearly fantastical horrific one: the exigent and collective carnivorism in Plutarch’s text becomes Antony’s singular cannibalistic indulgence” (138).

The spectre of cannibalism in the Modena speech is a Shakespearean invention. The uncomfortable proximity of eating to death in the line, “It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,/ Which some did die to look on” (1.4.67-68), suggests that the unnamed flesh may well be from other humans. This sensational rhetoric of anthropophagy was familiar from contemporary accounts of famine, such as Spenser’s well-known reports on Ireland that told of desperate men cannibalising fallen soldiers. As Maggie Kilgour and Scott Manning Stevens have shown, these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century stories about cannibals were most often repeated by the colonisers who sought to oppress and ingest foreign nations, “enacting a cannibalism of their own on a metaphoric level” (Stevens 135). That Caesar rehearses this tale as Rome’s forces mobilise to subsume Egypt bears the additional weight of this ideological link between gustatory and colonial incorporation. It is important to note in this respect that Shakespeare adds the “strangeness” to flesh. The meat in Plutarch’s report comes from beasts hitherto untasted; in a sense then it was “strange” to them (although he does not use this word) in that it was unknown or alien. We are now accustomed to “strange” as an adjective for
anything bizarre, perplexing, or exceptional, but this secondary sense diverges somewhat from its older meaning. “Strange” first referred to people, languages, or customs outside a set frame of reference: “strangers,” simply, are not one’s own. The word “strange” reappears in this manner across Antony and Cleopatra, as when Lepidus asks about the “strange serpent” of the Nile (2.7.24). This sense of the stranger inhering in “strange flesh” problematises the idea that cannibalism depends upon sameness. Cannibalism is insupportable precisely because it is a consumption of like by like: of man by man. Ingestion also absolutely erases boundaries such that the strange, once taken inside, becomes the same. Antony’s consumption, if read with this awareness, both enacts an objectionable difference and reassuringly appropriates the foreign: non-Roman. Shakespeare’s naming of Antony’s “strange” tastes enfolds the complexity of Rome’s colonial incorporation of Egypt into this moment of exotic feeding.

The ingestion of Egypt’s flesh was not, however, all that strange to early modern Londoners. Some ten years before Shakespeare wrote Antony and Cleopatra, the merchant John Sanderson recorded the import of 600 pounds of mummy and one whole body to be sold in England (Dannenfeldt 20). At the turn of the seventeenth century, the English were literally incorporating the bodies of colonised African provinces. Powdered mummia was a highly desirable commodity because the bituminous materials used to embalm Egyptian corpses were believed to heal every ailment from abscesses to vertigo if swallowed. As Browne states in Hydriotaphia, “Mummie is become Merchandise, Mizzraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsoms” (78-79). The commodification of Egypt’s people as a meal “consumeth” with “avarice” (Browne 78) offers a concrete example of the way colonial assimilation of one nation into the body of another in empire
can be recognised as an internalisation of the stranger, or the tasting of “strange flesh.” Those Englishmen who did eat *mummia* endeavoured to make the odious “corps” meat, or “bad food,” as palatable as possible by mixing it with spices like marjoram, thyme, cumin, saffron, or cinnamon (Fuller 101). Where Cleopatra’s connection to salt, as I mentioned earlier, was bound to concepts of preservation, Egypt’s royal bodies were the perfect candidates for consumption in the quest for immortality since they evaded decay through elaborate spicing (Baumann 84). Given that demand exceeded supply in the “corpse-pharmacology” of Jacobean England (Noble 136), executed criminals at home started to be prepared in the Egyptian style, giving grim weight to Falstaff’s quip about his corpulence as a “mountain of mummy!” (*MWW* 3.5.17). For true *mummia* enthusiasts these substitutions would not do; they posited that eternal life could only be achieved through the cannibalism of foreign bodies, either the strange Pharaohs of Egypt or the “Carcase” of a “red Man” (Croll 155). The overlap between ingestion and immortality in this trade may explain Caesar’s cryptic phrase about Cleopatra in his pageant: “for her life in Rome/ Would be eternal in our triumph” (5.1.65-66). A possible allusion to *mummia*, Caesar infers that the incorporation of Cleopatra’s body (itself “eternal”) into his staged triumph would ensure the life of Rome, if not physically, then in the ongoing theatre of his colonial conquest.

And indeed, the Romans become the voracious political consumers of Egypt. This may seem ironic given that the Romans outwardly promote restraint, but their fascination with eating in Egypt forces an acknowledgement of an alternative culture with Epicurean ideas of sensory engagement and pleasure in taste. Notably, it is the Romans that we most often hear talking about Egypt’s feasts. Each of the references
made to Epicurus is voiced by a Roman (2.1.24; 2.7.51), and all of the feast scenes conspicuously focus on Roman consumption in Egypt. Pompey reports that Julius Caesar “grew fat with feasting there” (2.6.66), Antony and Enobarbus indulge heartily in Egyptian wine, and the Roman triumvirs simulate the riotous gratification they associate with Epicureanism by mimicking an “Alexandrian feast” on Pompey’s galley (2.7.91).

Roman tongues (namely those of Caesar, Enobarbus, Lepidus, Pompey, and their followers) repeatedly describe Egypt as a meal to be consumed and savoured. This tendency is most apparent where they conceive of Cleopatra not as a ruler, but a dish to be eaten. In figuring “Salt Cleopatra” (2.1.21) as a tasty tidbit, and by associating her body with the land of Egypt in metonyms – where she is a “field of feasts” (2.1.22), the “serpent of old Nile” (1.5.25), or named “Egypt” (4.16.43) and (5.2.111) – the Romans envisage Antony’s consumption of Cleopatra as a feasting on her flesh.

As the Roman presence increases in Egypt, Cleopatra comes to recognise their colonial threat in gustatory terms. She imagines being swallowed by the Roman tongue: “enclouded” by “their thick breaths,/ Rank of gross diet” and “forced to drink their vapour” (5.2.207-09). Cleopatra makes her “distaste” for Rome strikingly clear through “food imagery” (Traci 88). She loathes their “gross” diet, and is repulsed by their aims of incorporating her nation into their state performances. Central to this concern is the means by which the Romans might misrepresent Egypt’s sensual dining as crazed “Alexandrian revels” where “Antony/ Shall be brought drunken forth” (5.2.214-15). Her fears are well-founded because while the Romans literally consume her country, they begin to absorb Egyptian food customs. In the mock Epicurean banquet staged by Romans for Romans, all the military figures partake of Pompey’s feast. Caesar’s soldiers
consume with the ecstatic excess they associate with Egypt. Wine drowns the scene:
“some wine” (2.7.29), “wine for Lepidus!” (2.7.39), “fill till the cup be hid” (2.7.85). The Romans gorge themselves to “ripen” towards the reels of an “Alexandrian feast” (2.7.91-92). In so doing, they shed their Stoic attitudes towards eating to instead embrace “Egyptian bacchanals” (2.7.100). John Michael Archer remarks that while the men “drink deeply with differing effects” they all ascribe their “celebration of Bacchus […] to Egypt” (51). The Romans manipulate food and drink as tools of self-definition, actively reworking the decadence of Cleopatra’s court into a ritual of colonial assimilation.

The Romans celebrate the “bravura of conspicuous consumption” (Meads 2) in what they feel is the Egyptian fashion – with revels, song, and dance – in order to test how the strange nation will exist once incorporated into themselves. The increasing fluidity of interchange across the Roman and Egyptian cultures hinges upon their participation in alternate food rituals that place them, in turn, at risk of absorption. Antony, the play’s central figure of dissolution, appreciates the threat such interpenetration presents, warning Lepidus to “keep off” these “quicksands” lest he “sink” (2.7.58-59). The image of the solid land liquefying beneath his feet suggests the two-way permeability of the divide between Roman and Egyptian identity. Here Rome attempts to incorporate Egyptian “levity” through their administration of “the conquering wine” (2.7.118, 104). While the “conquering” adjective refers to the wine’s ability to dominate the intellect, it also hints at the Roman’s motives of conquest behind the feast, and further, at the potential for the Egyptian feast to conquer them. When the Roman convivial gathering becomes an Alexandrian revel, the dietary codes that separate the two countries intertwine.
The Taste of Words

The tongue plays a prominent role in generating gustatory pleasure for Lepidus because it both savours the other’s wine and tastes their words at the banquet aboard Pompey’s ship. Here the Romans use their tongues to utter foreign terms: “pyramid” (2.7.18), “Nile” (2.7.17), and “strange serpents” (2.7.24). The articulation of Egypt’s words on Roman tongues is an act of appropriation because by ingesting these words in a Roman context the matter becomes symbolically “ours”; Lepidus takes it “in” (2.7.31) alongside the feast and will “ne’er” again be “out” (2.7.30). While the Romans enjoy a “course of sweetmeats, fruit, and wine” (Neill 211 n.02), Lepidus gluts himself on words. Bracketed by calls for more wine, Antony’s equivocating replies on the crocodile juxtapose the empty matter of speech against the mouth full of “th’ drink” (2.7.8). Caesar challenges Antony in just this manner, wondering with disbelief how such a “description” could “satisfy” Lepidus (2.7.49). To this charge, Antony insists that his words will sate Lepidus as a hearer, “with the health that Pompey gives him; else he/ is a very Epicure” (2.7.50-51). Most editors gloss Epicure again as a “glutton” (Neill 214 n.52) because this reinforces the association between eating words and drinking wine established in Antony’s phrase, and further it insinuates Lepidus’s gullibility as a man who will – literally and figuratively – swallow anything. If Antony calls Lepidus an “Epicure” or a man “devoted to sensual pleasure and hence not easily satisfied” (Wilders 165 n.53), then it is significantly the sensual pleasure of words that is deemed to gratify him. Caesar asks whether the matter of Antony’s speech, not the drunken measures, will be enough to please Lepidus’s tongue.
It makes physical sense that words should incite taste, given that “the tongue” which “is employed in the pronunciation and articulation of the syllables” is the same “tongue” that “acts in the necessary turnings of the masticated food” (Leonardo Da Vinci qtd. in Mazzio, “Sins” 74). The belief that the mouthing of speech replicates the pleasures of tasting in mouthing food is a conventional early modern idea. Jonson observed of the letter “L” that “Lingua, palatoque dulcesit” or “L sweetens on the tongue and the palate” in The English Grammar (Waite 41). For early modern writers, the deliciousness of poetry had everything to do with the tongue. The tongue’s role in tasting words is most readily glimpsed when the subject is consumption. For Caesar, Antony’s excessive feasting in Egypt is so distasteful that he must restrain its influence inside his own mouth. When Caesar rebukes his compeer, saying “Let’s grant it is not/ Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolemy” (1.4.16-17), he clips his teeth on the consonant [t] at each line end, emphasising: “not,” “sit,” and “sweat.” Pronounced in this fashion, Caesar’s words evidence his scorn for Antony’s tastes in the physical movement of his tongue. He linguistically refuses to taste by curbing his palate to favour nasals and dentals. On the contrary, Pompey takes apparent delight in imagining the spiciness of “Salt Cleopatra.” Bilabial plosives, in particular [p]s, abound in his apostrophe to this “Epicurean” queen (2.1.21-27). At the moment of pronouncing the words “sharpen,” “appetite,” “sleep,” and “prorogue,” Pompey’s tongue materialises the piquancy of her “cloyalss” sauce in the explosive letter-cases held on his lips. This mouth-feel is most striking when Enobarbus brags of the abundant meals in Egypt. The alliterative [m]s in Enobarbus’s “much more monstrous matter of feast” move the mouth as coarticulated consonants between wide [u], [o], [ou] vowel sounds (2.2.189, emphasis mine). Articulated in series they force a
successive rounding and flattening in the lips, as well as the gliding of the back tongue up and down in waves that reverberate into the nasal cavity, yielding the full-mouthed hum “m/m/m/m,” which is also the instinctive expression of gustatory delight.

Slips of the tongue also substantiate the intersection between words spoken and eaten. In a drunken slur, Lepidus mispronounces “pyramids” as “pyramises” (2.7.34), extending the sibilance of the alveolar affricate [d] in “Ptolemies’ pyrami[d]s” into an open alveolar fricative [s] in “pyrami[ses].” There is of course a physical cause for this lisp, and it is one that connects the tongue’s excessive consumption to its troubles of communication. While we think of slurring as a neurological side-effect of liquor, early modern physicians understood the relationship between the tongue’s two roles of taste and speech in more bodily terms. As Boorde explains, when the tongue overindulges its own pleasure, the stomach retaliates by tying up the tongue’s ability to enunciate: “the tongue is depryved of his office to speke” when the “stomacke is farced or stuft, or repleted with to moche drynke and meate” (C2V). For Lepidus, the physical movement of the tongue changes, opening from affricate to fricative, and the matter formed by the tongue as words shifts in consequence. Unsurprisingly, it is Caesar who first acknowledges that the wine has altered his speech: “Strong Enobarb/ Is weaker than the wine, and mine own tongue/ Splits what it speaks” (2.7.119-21). His tongue is “split” in that his drinking severs the tongue of gustation from his powers of articulation. What is all the more powerful in Lepidus’s slur, however, is that his slip of the tongue demonstrates an uneasiness with Egyptian words; they stick in his throat as he swallows their customs, and the hiss of sibilance mimics the “strange serpents” they discuss (2.7.24). The exchanges of food, culture, and ingested words heighten Lepidus’s lingual
confusion. The Romans are fascinated by tales of Egypt because speaking these words provides a means of tasting, and testing out, foreign bodies in their mouths.

In the political counsel between Antony and Caesar, Lepidus implores both triumvirs to: “Touch you the sourest points with sweetest terms” (2.2.24). His instruction to “touch” the points of conversation returns to the original root of taste, “tast,” as conveying the sense of touch in mouthing an object with the tongue (OED I.1). This verb suggests the palpability of words, and implies the tongue’s role in sculpting them. Yet, all the more importantly, Lepidus’s gustatory terms “sweet” and “sour” indicate that he wants the words expressed by Antony and Caesar to be not only tactful, but palatable. The repeated assurances from the participants that “’Tis spoken well” (2.2.25) and “’Tis noble spoken” (2.2.103) combine an appreciation of wording with Lepidus’s idea of flavouring the content. It is in this same vein that Caesar objects to Enobarbus’s caustic phrasing: “I do not much dislike the matter, but/ The manner of his speech” (2.2.116-17).

In much the same way that the tongue was thought to taste and feel words, Antony affirms that the tongue also binds words as matter. He pronounces his love to Cleopatra in a “performative act” (Austin 6) by swearing: “in which I bind/ On pain of punishment the world to weet” (1.1.40-41). He attaches his body to the assertion in a formula used in official oral statutes. To stress binding as related to the tongue is fitting considering that “Varro thinks that the tongue, lingua, was named from binding food, ligare; others because it binds words” (Seville qtd. in Mazzio, “Sins” 56). Caesar’s charge against Antony’s “tongue” for breaking “the article of [his] oath” continues this pattern in a rapid turn from taste (the feasting of three kings) to speech (the tongue of oral contracts) (2.2.86-87). Antony similarly denounces Caesar’s biting praise: “spoke
scantly of me; When perforce he could not/ But pay me terms of honour, cold and sickly/ He vented them” (3.4.5-8). Antony faults Caesar for speaking “from his teeth,” just as Caesar disparaged Antony for his wasteful feasts (3.4.10). Caesar’s words leave a bad taste in Antony’s mouth, and, as Octavia notes, he cannot “stomach” them (3.4.12). Speaking with his teeth rather than the tongue, Caesar offers up a cold dish of meagre proportions. This intersection of political and personal “binding” is clearest in the representation of the tongue as a national instrument, when Antony demands that the messenger “Mince not the general tongue” (1.2.98). Prepared to swallow difficult news if that is the matter to be had, Antony does not want the gustatory tongue to be “minced” from the verbal tongue with less than truthful delivery. If the general tongue has censured him, then Antony is willing to be scoured with the full “power” of Rome’s “utter[ance]” (1.2.102).

Of course, Antony is subject to the “general tongue” because he takes in these words through his ears.59 The material impact of the words spoken by the messenger ploughs into Antony through his hearing/ “earing,” uprooting the “weeds” (1.2.104, 102). Cleopatra echoes this agricultural-gustatory pun where she commands her messenger to “ram thou thy fruitful tidings in my ears” (2.5.23). Cleopatra’s injunction makes the association between aural and oral consumption all the more explicit since her words not only imply bawdy sexual ramming, but further that his words provide her with “fruit.” She asks the speaker to “pour out” the “matter” of words to her “ear” so that she may drink them in (2.5.53). The incorporation of words into the mind through the orifice of the ear is analogous to the ingestion of food through the cavity of the mouth. Taking this

59 The oral/aural dynamic of consuming stories reappears in Pericles where Mariana, like Cleopatra, “starves the ears she feeds, and makes them hungry/ The more she gives them speech” (21.101-02).
conceptual similarity as the point, Cleopatra’s line demonstrates how the duality of the early modern tongue made it intuitive to conceive of attending to words as eating them.

**Tasting Theatre**

Shakespeare’s contemporaries used oral metaphors to define theatre-going as a gustatory experience. In fact, all the most notorious English antitheatricalists condemn the theatre as feeding an excessive appetite. Gosson, Northbrooke, Stubbes, and Prynne call up food metaphors “automatically as an obvious way of thinking about their subject, and thus they represent something particularly inherent to the writers’ assumptions about theatre” (Lopez 27). In his *Short Treatise of Stage Playes*, Alexander Leighton avows that decadent spectators split their time between “bellie cheare and Playes,” where one pleasure leads directly into the other: “sitting downe to eate and drinke, and rising up to play” (9). The wave-like movement from sitting down to rising up connects gustatory extravagance to amusing play in general and play-going in particular. The conjunction “and” works with the progressive tense gerunds to run the two actions together in one uninterrupted instant. To participate in the theatre is thus not only like eating at a banquet; the theatre continues the feast. While the underlying assumption here is familiar – namely that a playgoer’s overindulgence in drama is equivalent to a gourmand’s overeating of food – it is easy to miss the subtlety of these metaphors. We must register that the plays themselves were believed to produce delicious oral pleasure. Gosson alleges that he “may well liken [...] Poets to Cookes,” since “the pleasure of the one winnes the body from labor & conquereth sense; the allurement of the other drawes the mind from vertue” (*Abuse* 4). Whether or not the syntax follows a former-latter arrangement or is chiasmatic as Jeremy Lopez asserts (29), Gosson’s sentence
interweaves the savouring of poetic words and the allurements of cookery to meld both mind and body to taste.

Theatre is more than bad food opposed to God’s word as the “food of life” (Stubbes 202); it is a food with particular appeal for the Epicure’s tongue. It seems uniquely apposite to Antony and Cleopatra that multiple antitheatricalists relate theatrical consumption to Epicurean tastes. In Gosson’s words, such “wanton spectacles” will “hurte them more, then if at the Epicures table, they had nigh burst their guts with ouer feeding” (Abuse 12), and likewise for Prynne those playgoers who are “abstemious at all other times, prove Epicures and drunkards” at the revels (746). The theatre’s sumptuous poetry coerces the audience into feeding their mouths to sate a simulated longing to taste. Prynne denounces plays in a way that smacks of this pleasure: “All the eloquence and sweetnesse therefore that is in Stage-playes, is but like the drops of honey out of a poysoned limbecke, which please the pallate onely, but destroy the man that tastes them” (792). Prynne’s assessment recalls the early modern fear of cookery because the theatregoer is at risk of taking in damaging material under the cover of sweetness. From this perspective an appetite for plays is an endless longing to taste: where it nourishes it only makes desire stronger. These treatises employ the same Narcissian inopem me copia fecit trope that characterises Cleopatra (Harris, “Narcissus” 411). Given that these authors unambiguously condemn the theatre, their taste metaphors testify all the more forcefully to sweet audience pleasure.

However, while words may be like honey, they offer no means to fill the belly. The words in the play that produce an appetite through description are similar to the spices that circulated between Rome and Egypt since both whet the tongue and deny
gastric satiety; both feed hunger and refuse to satisfy it. The substantial insubstantiality of words is perfectly in keeping with the play’s representation of hunger as a process driven by hollowness and paradox. When Enobarbus describes Cleopatra as a meal of “infinite variety,” attesting that “other women cloy/ The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry/ Where most she satisfies” (2.2.242-44), he identifies her as a food that is cyclically self-consuming and thus able to perpetuate the hunger she provokes.

Enobarbus’s rhetoric shares this attribute in its paradoxical self-cancellation. His descriptions of the queen invoke a craving in the audience to taste more and more words. This longing for words parallels a desire for food, but it diverges from hunger as a purely imaginative appetite. This distinction is of crucial importance for Antony and Cleopatra because, I argue, the play fashions itself into an oral artefact to be consumed by its audience through the sense of taste. Figs, fruits, fish, boar, and wine abound in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, and the play should inspire a longing to taste purely from a biological standpoint given that food is so often present or discussed.

Yet this play practices a deeper rhetorical strategy of avoidance: it employs gaps, paradoxes, and tautologies to mimic a felt emptiness that produces hunger. To experience speech through embodied perception, and the double tongue, illuminates the mechanism through which rhetoric pulls at the sensory body. Gaps, tautologies, and paradoxes

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60 I acknowledge the necessarily speculative nature of my hypothesis that this play stimulated a longing to taste in its Jacobean audience, especially given that there are no surviving first-hand accounts of Antony and Cleopatra save Samuel Daniel’s muddled reference. However, modern reception stories substantiate my claim about the play’s connection to imaginative hunger. Emily Dickinson writes that after reading Antony and Cleopatra she would feel so insatiable from “drink[ing] this wine” that she would “devour the luscious passages,” voraciously “tear[ing] out the leaves” in her eager ness (76).

61 There are more than seventy references to food in Antony and Cleopatra, including: “berries,” “boar,” “dinner,” “drinking,” “feasts,” “feeding,” “figs,” “fish,” “grapes,” “meal,” “olives,” “oyster,” “salt,” “sauce,” “supper,” “sweets,” “viands,” and “wine.” This surfeit of food may have triggered salivation in the audience. For a compelling account of such “Pavlovian reaction[s]” (Folkerth 12) in response to onstage meal description in other plays, see The Sound of Shakespeare.
materialise a textual hollow in a desire to taste, and they feed that longing twice over with the “Gustable qualities” of words (Crooke 632).

Paradox, as Henry Peacham defines it, is a “forme of speech by which the Orator affirmeth some thing to be true, by saying he would not have beeled it” (qtd. in Adelman, Liar 113). Paradox insists on the contradiction of simultaneous presence and absence. Paradox is the chief idiom of Antony and Cleopatra: Cleopatra sustains herself with “delicious poison” (1.5.27), she makes “defect perfection” (2.2.238), and when “breathless” still “pour[s] breath forth” (2.2.239). Her very nature is antithetical: the “vilest things/ Become themselves in her” (2.2.244-45). Cleopatra laughs Antony in and out of patience (2.5.19), she counters his sadness with dancing and mirth with sickness (1.3.3-5), and her cheeks are warmed and cooled by the same fans, that “what they undid did” (2.2.212). The play obsessively revisits this idea of doing as an undoing. In Antony and Cleopatra everything that is made to be described, spoken, or given matter by the tongue is simultaneously unmade, unspoken, and hollowed out in order to encourage an appetite. These fans that do and undo recall Philo’s speech where Antony’s heart was “bellows and the fan” to inflame and cool “a gipsy’s lust” (1.1.9-10), and they reappear in his divided properties “of hot and cold” (1.5.51). In each of these paradoxes something has “become/ The opposite of itself” (1.2.118-19) and, as Neill explains in his introduction, this can only be “self-cancelling, since it is an axiom of logic that thing cannot be both itself and another thing” (102). The paradox fills out a metrical line and then vanishes, leaving behind an openness where hunger is felt and words are tasted.

Adelman argues that paradox governs the structure of Antony and Cleopatra in that its logical discrepancies force the audience to choose one means of witnessing the
play over another (*Liar* 113). Where it is certainly true that these gaps present an interpretative riddle, I wish to focus on how paradox invites an awareness of physical vacancy. Instead of giving the hearer words that “satisfy” the criteria of description (in the sense Caesar assumes), the words of paradox are tantalisingly hollow. Paradoxes frame a textual vacuum at their centre. Caesar believes desire is generated expressly by such absence:

> It has been taught us from the primal state  
> That he which is was wished until he were,  
> And the ebbed man, ne’er loved till ne’er worth love,  
> Comes deared by being lacked. (1.4.41-44)

Caesar clarifies why Pompey rouses the most support when he has the least power, and his own paradoxical formulations – “was wished until he were” and “ne’er loved till ne’er worth love” – make longing dependent upon lack. His paradoxes regulate and repeat our hunger in their own self-devouring contradiction. Caesar identifies the dearness of absence as being taught by a “primal state”: one felt in “this common body” (1.4.41, 44). His terms invoke physicality through the body politic, but they also resonate with paradox’s ability to elicit a primitive yearning through emptiness. In this same way, the paradoxes act as the rhetorical form of incorporation-as-colonialism. The paradoxes of the play open a space into which more words must be poured even as they nourish our appetite in a longing to taste.

Nowhere is the power of descriptive gaps more keenly felt than in Enobarbus’s barge speech. The context here is vital to the full experience as response insofar as it arises amidst a discussion of food and acts as a substitute for food. Enobarbus’s speech follows the meeting of the three triumvirs, where Caesar appears politically poised to incorporate Egypt into the empire of Rome. Agrippa and Maecenas are insatiably curious
about Egypt and, fittingly, goad Enobarbus with questions about Epicurean dining. They begin the exchange: “We have cause to be glad that matters are so well digested” (2.2.182-83). Their pun on the word “digested” blends political and physical integration. Enobarbus brags about nights filled with wine, breakfasts with “eight wild boars roasted whole,” and “much more” (2.2.186, 189). In a seeming non sequitur, Maecenas rejoins: “She’s a most triumphant lady, if report be square to her” (2.2.191-92). The move, between the consumption of Egyptian food by Enobarbus and the consumption of Cleopatra by the Romans, is a false switch because the two ideas combine as a single subject. These auditors are pointedly “hungry to hear about” Cleopatra’s at Cydnus (Tassi 296), and Enobarbus promises a descriptive feast. Nevertheless, while he pledges to reveal her – “I will tell you” (2.2.197) – he actually conceals her beneath ambiguous detail. In a very important way Cleopatra is not there. As Harris remarks, “for all of Cleopatra’s undeniable corporeality, her body has an odd habit of disappearing altogether at precisely those moments when it seems most overwhelmingly present” (“Narcissus” 417). She sits at the centre of an ekphrastic portrait without being seen, making a gap we feel.

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62 Enobarbus’s barge speech so closely resembles Plutarch’s account of Cleopatra on the river Cydnus that some critics have felt Shakespeare simply versified North’s prose. The exactitude of the parallel makes the discrepancies register all the more forcefully. Shakespeare preserves the details of the original: “the poode whereof was of gold, the sailes of purple, and the owers of siluer, which kept stroke in rowing after the sounde of the musick of flutes, how boyes, citherns, violls, and such other instruments” (981). Yet he deflects attention away from the body of Cleopatra herself, characterised in Plutarch as resembling Venus (not over-picturing her): “now for the person of her selfe: she was layed vnder a pauilli on of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddesse Venus, commonly drawen in picture: and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretie faire boyes appareled as painters doe set forth god Cupide, with little fannes in their hands, with the which they fanned wind vpon her” (981). Shakespeare’s account diverges from his source in three important ways that support my argument about imaginative hunger: first, in that he elides information about Cleopatra’s “charmes,” “beawtie, and grace” to render her a gap (981), second, in that he adds all the paradoxes to the speech, and third, in that he reframes Cleopatra rather than “the supper” as the thing so grand and “sumptuous” that “no tongue can expresse it” (982).
Paradoxically replete and empty, the barge speech augments the listener’s desire for Cleopatra by picturing her as “a gap in nature” (2.2.225). The description caves in around her because, while it presents a pleasing if vague impression of sensory richness, there is a striking lack of information about the queen herself:

[...] For her own person,
It beggared all description. She did lie
In her pavilion – cloth of gold, of tissue –
O’er-picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-coloured fans whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did. (2.2.204-12)

The speech contains colour (silver oars, golden cloths, and purple sails), sound (the tune of flutes, the swish of water, and the whistling wind), and texture (silken tackle and flower-soft hands). But what is really said about Cleopatra? Only that she beggars all description. Cleopatra undoes what she does, emptying out the matter of the tongue that speaks about her. Enobarbus qualifies her in terms of “o’er-picturing” Venus and outworking nature, though she is, if anything, under-pictured in his account. This presence as absence is coupled to the paradoxes of a barge that burns on water and fans that heat what they cool. Enobarbus exaggerates this void through imprecision or equivocation. The fans are of unimaginable “divers-colours,” the scent of her perfume is defined solely by its perplexing invisibility, and the dimpled boys that stand “on each side” only bracket her disembodied cheeks. If Cleopatra is the meal that cannot “stale,” then Enobarbus’s rhetoric “makes hungry” where he “most satisfies” (2.2.241, 243-44). Curiosity about Egypt in an imaginary political tasting duplicates the actual physical hunger in the audience propagated by the surrounding discussion of food.
Antony and Cleopatra bodies forth the desire to consume words as gustative objects so insistently that scholars cannot help but engage the same terms to describe Enobarbus’s captivation of his Roman audience. Offering the Romans a virtual banquet of detail, he objectifies the foreign queen as “commodifiable material” (Charnes 119). Agrippa pronounces her a wonder, the “Rare Egyptian!” (2.2.225), sounding his evaluation of her worth as a delicacy in a market of exotic goods. Habib stresses this aspect, noting how the Roman triumvirs map the political-civic space of their imperial domain onto Cleopatra’s body in constructions their subordinates parallel by “feasting on the foreign in both the female and the alien” as “property” (171). The Romans integrate Cleopatra by ingesting stories about her, using words to feed their appetites. Heather James observes that “these men have listened to gossip and the reports of their political informers, but when Enobarbus holds forth […] they greedily devour his rhetoric for pleasure” (142). These Romans devour his words as equivalent to food and by extension the English audience is invited to share this oral pleasure. This is possible because the “main element of feast” in the theatre, as in Enobarbus’s speech, is verbal: “a feast of information, of gossip, tale, rumour, or report” (Code 112). These critics typify the tendency motivated by the play’s own language to emphasise the Roman’s oral, rather than acoustic, consumption of Egypt through its stories.

At the “Epicures table” of the playhouse, the audience’s tongues savour poetry as a means to oral pleasure (Gosson, Abuse 12). This idea of spoken words as able to “satisfy” the “Epicure” returns us to the scene with which we began: Lepidus’s drunken revels. Placed alongside the dramatic strategies of avoidance (evidenced in paradox and the descriptive gaps of Enobarbus’s speech), it now becomes possible to read this comic
episode as stimulating an appetite through tautology. Because tautology defines a thing only as itself, it frustrates description in a similar manner to paradox. Whereas paradox self-devours by stating a fact and then claiming the opposite, tautology simply insists that something is what it is. Both rhetorical devices circle the subject and refuse to advance the characterisation, thereby rendering the present object a voided absence. When Lepidus interviews Antony about Egypt, he focuses on the “strange serpents” (2.7.24) with particular interest, asking: “What manner o’ thing is your crocodile?” (2.7.40). Antony defines the creature by mimicking taxonomy; he seems to give the height, breadth, movement, and diet of the animal but does so without any reference for comparison. His description of the crocodile teasingly traces a blank space:

It is shaped, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is, and moves with it own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates. (2.7.41-44)

The ostensible logic of these statements subverts the philosophical practice of clarification through successive claims since these assertions only illustrate the open-endedness of language. From drunken Lepidus’s standpoint, Antony has given him information about the “strange” beast, though in actual fact he has told him nothing at all except that “the tears of it are wet” (2.7.48). As Harris rightly discerns: “Antony’s litany of tautologies create a ‘gap in nature’ where the crocodile should be and Lepidus’s ‘’Tis a strange serpent’ suggests that he fills the space with his mind’s eye” (“Narcissus” 416). Of course, Lepidus’s response “’Tis a strange serpent” is another tautology, for it only restates his prompt for the entire definition: “You’ve strange serpents there?” (2.7.24). Where Harris interprets this tautology as working along the same lines as Cleopatra’s gap in nature in terms of visual projection, it makes more physical sense to register our
perception of gaps in this banquet scene in terms of taste. For what Antony seeks to fill with these words is the Epicure’s mouth, and Lepidus heartily consumes the tale of the crocodile alongside wine to fill his “vacancy” (1.4.26).

**Imaginative Hunger and Imperial History**

Antony believes that an imaginative longing to taste can be satisfied by words. Faced with impending death, he appeals to Cleopatra in a metatheatrical flourish:

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[...] please your thoughts
In feeding them with those my former fortunes,
Wherein I lived the greatest prince o’th’ world,
The noblest; and do now not basely die,
Not cowardly put off my helmet to
My countryman; a Roman by a Roman
Valiantly vanquished. (4.16.54-60)
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Delivering his own eulogy and referring to himself in the past tense as already absent, Antony rewrites his botched suicide as a valiant death performed for the sake of honour. This is clearly a performance, and the repeated negations of “do now *not* basely die” and “*not* cowardly” betray the anxious tension between the true events and their narration. Antony is all too aware of the theatrical currency his name holds for Rome, and his refutation of cowardice strives to correct the alternate staging he imagines at Caesar’s triumph, yielding “To penetrative shame, whilst the wheeled seat/ Of fortunate Caesar, drawn before him, branded/ His baseness that ensued” (4.15.75-77). Antony first creates, then attempts to fill, a void by imagining his death. He may seek to dispel Cleopatra’s grief with his words, but his express aim is to “please” her “thoughts” by “feeding them.” This “feeding” suggests Antony’s intent to satisfy Cleopatra’s appetite for what is missing through the oral pleasure of articulated words, and also his desire to nourish her thoughts by augmenting them into further presence. Antony addresses his final speech to
Cleopatra, but the marked self-consciousness of his display also engages the offstage audience. Antony invites the early modern theatregoers to please their palates by “feeding” their thoughts with his story.

That Caesar chooses to stage both Antony’s reincorporation into the Roman empire as the “arm of my own body” (5.1.45) and Cleopatra’s assimilation into his triumph to savour her “sweet dependency” (5.2.26) speaks to the relationship between theatrical performance and the pleasures of taste. Crucially, it is not only the Romans that “catch at” Cleopatra like “saucy lictors” but the Jacobean audience as well (5.2.210-11). Under the normal conventions of a Roman triumph, prisoners would be led behind the conqueror’s chariot as objects for public view and scorn. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, however, makes the frightening possibility of display sound more appropriate to the English stage she stands on than any in ancient Rome:

[...] Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
Ballad us out o’ tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I’th’ posture of a whore. (5.2.210-17)

The speech ruptures theatrical illusion. It forces the Jacobean auditor to hear Cleopatra as a boy-actor “squeaking” the lines, it challenges the viewer to recognise the scene as staged by “quick comedians” and, most of all, it demands that the theatregoer remember his place as here, at this very moment, at a play. What this passage produces is more than an alienation effect; these lines overlap performance in the present with Caesar’s triumph of the past. Cleopatra’s revulsion at the “mechanic slaves/ With greasy aprons, rules, and
hammers” that surround her and “encloud” her with “rank” breath equally applies to the Roman and English groundlings (5.2.205-08).

This theatrical identification happens specifically through taste in Cleopatra’s reference to “saucy lictors” (5.2.214). Cleopatra’s metatheatrical speech embeds numerous taste terms: sauce, lick, grease, diet, drink, revels, and drunkenness. Of course, “saucy” in this passage is used in its primary meaning of impertinence, and the term “lictors” is a title from Roman antiquity for the officers that execute sentences on offenders (OED 1.a). Yet, in combination, the sound of “saucy lictors” cannot help but summon ideas of taste and food. The pun returns us to the play’s wider focus on sauces, and “lictors” phonetic likeness to “lickers” invokes salivation, lingual manipulation, and the tongue. The etymology of the Roman term “lictor” even shares the same root: “ligare” or “to bind” which gave rise to Lingua. The collapse that this demands between vehicle and tenor allows the English theatregoer to identify forcefully with the subject position of Rome (where this Rome is their England). While Cleopatra’s “saucy lictors” speech is the most pronounced example of the theatrical crossover between contemporary playhouses and Roman triumphs, the play repeatedly models Roman audiences feeding upon Egyptian entertainments. From the first line, “Nay, but” (1.1.1), Shakespeare challenges audience response through the in medias res disagreement. Philo’s instructions to “behold and see” place Antony and Cleopatra within a frame of Roman commentary where the observers Philo and Demetrius mirror the English attendees (1.1.13). Framed in this way, the play, like Cleopatra, is a “wonderful piece of work” that merits our sampling (1.2.145). Where Enobarbus’s speech nourishes an appetite for words, it also pairs Roman and English audiences as consumers of the same
stories about Egypt. The seventeenth-century English playgoer would have shared Lepidus’s curiosity about the crocodile (2.7.40), been just as perplexed as the Romans by Seleucus’s admission (5.2.144), and have wondered at Cleopatra in her suicide, looking “like sleep,/ As she would catch another Antony/ In her strong toil of grace” (5.2.340-42), especially since this stage-Cleopatra is playing dead and so should resemble sleep more than death. These moments of onstage audition reinforce the tie between English playgoers and Roman colonial consumers felt as the longing to taste.

The readiness of seventeenth-century audiences to identify with the Romans in Shakespeare’s plays results from the popular conception of Rome in English society. Londoners believed themselves to be Rome’s direct descendants, living in “Troynovant,” since “the ancient kingdom of Britain” had, “according to popular legend, been founded by Brute, son of Aeneas” (Marcus 121). The foundational myth of Virgil’s Aeneid gave English monarchs a means to validate their rule through supposed Roman ancestry. When Antony boasts that “Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,/ And all the haunt be ours,” his reference is a pointedly ironic revision of Virgil’s narrative (4.15.53-54). Antony rejects Virgil’s story wherein Aeneas overcomes his attachment to a foreign queen (Dido) in order to establish a second Troy from which a third (England) emerges; he instead imagines a reunion between the lovers that ranks Egyptian passion over Roman politics. This change is meaningful because when Shakespeare wrote Antony and Cleopatra, numerous texts from Roman antiquity (most notably Virgil and Plutarch) were being newly translated and read as paradigms for English government, civility, and empire. Poised on the brink of expansion into the new world, and yet guarded about its borders as an insular nation, England turned to Rome as a means of self-construction;
numerous critics attest to this *translatio imperii* (Code 116; Habib 161; Hall 217; Heather James 1; Little 23). The ideological presence of Rome within early modern London underpins the shared subject position *Antony and Cleopatra* fosters as an implicit comment on Shakespeare’s own England.

If Shakespeare depicts Egypt on the eve of its colonisation as swallowed into the body of Rome, “a morsel for a monarch” (1.5.31), then analogously King James I styled himself as that monarch who incorporates countries under the aegis of empire. King James I is often read as a second Augustus Caesar in *Antony and Cleopatra*’s coded presentation of seventeenth-century England (Habib 161; Nyquist 96; Whitney 85).

Where his desire to fuse England and Scotland evidences colonial integration on a domestic level, King James I made a point to portray himself in command of an expanding, international world. Like Caesar, James was famous for the lavish court masques and civic triumphs that publicly displayed the wealth drawn into England from Africa and the new world. King James’s Scottish wedding festivities included four Africans dancing naked in the snow – one of whom died from exposure – and a spectacular show of more than forty men wearing gold chains over blackened faces (Hall 128). Queen Anne herself was said to have commissioned Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness* (1605) and she even took the part of Cleopatra as a conquered foreigner in the *Masque of Queens* (1609) at the Stuart court (McDonald 305). We can only imagine the horror of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra at being so fully appropriated into this state pageant. Extending Elizabeth’s aims, James began the imperial project of unification in Great Britain, chartered the East India, Virginia, and Guinea trading companies, and licensed the growing import of merchandise – silks, cloths, plants, spices, and traveler’s curiosities.
Strangers’ goods, such as “An African charm made of teeth,” “Beautiful Indian plumes,” and “A felt cloak from Arabia” (Loomba, Race 14), circulated alongside strangers themselves as the number of Jewish, African, and Turkish immigrants tripled in London.

Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra explores a European engagement with an exotic, African other in Egypt, and there are trenchant reminders in the dialogue of Antony’s position as a coloniser. In the very first scene, Antony responds to Cleopatra’s banter about reckoning the worth of his love in terms that recall the claims of colonial expansion: “Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth” (1.1.17). While his line alludes to the bible, Revelation 21:1 “I saw a new heaven, and a new earth” (Wilders 92 n17), the suggestion of searching for new lands to be developed would have resonated with an early modern listener as part of the pro-colonisation propaganda familiar from Hakluyt’s Principal Nauigations (1599). That Antony’s next statement about the “earth” follows on “feed[ing]” both beast and “man” is significant because it emphasises the interdependence of feeding and colonial action, linking the ingestion of new territory to agriculture and crops to be tasted (1.1.38). Cleopatra makes these colonial undertones explicit when she badgers Antony to hear Caesar’s imperial orders: “‘Do this, or this,/
Take in that kingdom and enfranchise that” (1.1.23-25). The language in which Cleopatra expresses Antony’s duties, as a man commanded to “take in” rather than “take over” or “take possession of” another nation, implies the incorporative nature of such conquests.

But how can one “take in” the other without diluting an essential self? Where, on the one hand, individual early modern consumers upheld a Galenic view that necessitated dietary caution to maintain internal balance, on the other, England as a whole faced the threatening side-effect of political deregulation attendant upon absorbing strangers into
its imperial body. The play intertwines an excessive consumption of strange foods and
words with metaphors of dissolution, such that boundaries of individual bodies, and of
Rome, are continually tested and renegotiated. The idea that eating too much food
destroys personal integrity, and by association that too much feasting on Egypt dissolves
Roman identity, is exemplified by Antony. He overflows his bounds to the extent of
radical softening: this “triple pillar of the world” has melted into a mere “strumpet’s
fool” (1.1.12-13). In Enobarbus’s boast of the eight wild boars for breakfast, Shakespeare
modifies Plutarch’s account in order to highlight Antony’s gastronomic extravagance.
While Plutarch explains that Antony and Cleopatra had feasts prepared all day because
they were unsure of the hour at which they would dine, demonstrating a needless waste
of food (or Laute), Shakespeare recasts the meal to make it appear that Antony eats in
Egypt both too much (Nimis) and too eagerly (Ardente) for the sake of his tongue’s
pleasure. Antony’s identity becomes malleable or even liquefied in consequence. In the
words of the Church of England, gluttony “wasteth the substançe” so that “the membres
of the body are dissolued” (Oo6v, qtd. in Fitzpatrick 16). He feels this change,
expressing that he has become as “indistinct/ As water is in water” (4.15.10-11). Like the
Nile which regularly overflows its banks, Antony merges with the Egypt he incorporates
as his Roman self is subsumed. Against Enobarbus’s counsel, Antony gives up his “firm
security” in order to fight at sea (3.7.48), and turns into a man “so leaky” that his best
soldier abandons him to sink (3.13.63). He dissipates, “too short of that great property/
Which still should go with Antony” (1.1.60-61), “distains,” as he is unable to “hold this
visible shape” (4.15.10, 13) and, most poignantly, “discandys,” as his followers desert
(punning on dessert) him for Caesar. The men he once considered political allies, whom
he feasted with in celebration, have now changed their tastes: “The hearts/ That spanied me at heels […] do discandy, melt their sweets/ On blossoming Caesar” (4.13.20-23).

The word discandy suggests the confectionary appeal of sweetness as a common header in seventeenth-century cookbooks, while it is also a transitive verb meaning to thaw. Discandying tropes Antony’s taste specific political disintegration.

Antony’s dissolution is symptomatic of Rome’s larger oral and political transgressions. Since the goal of the Roman Empire in Antony and Cleopatra is to incorporate Egypt as a subsidiary, it likewise fears for the preservation of its essential “self” as a consumer. Caesar wants to enlarge the domain of Rome, but he fears the dissolution of Romanness. When Lepidus is in danger of sinking into the “quicksands” of his Egyptian curiosity (2.7.58), Caesar shudders at the possibility of what this Epicureanism might do to the Roman spirit: “The wild disguise hath almost/ Anticked us” (2.7.121-22). Caesar is, at best, an unwilling participant in this feast, but he is willing to glut himself on Egypt as a colonial food. Like paradox, gaps, and tautologies that encourage an insatiable appetite for more, colonialism depends upon gluttony: the ever-increasing consumption of the strange until it all becomes the same. While Antony dissolves into Egypt, Caesar becomes “the fullest man” (3.13.87) and “full-fortuned” (4.16.25) as he engulfs Egypt as a province. Caesar marshals all the rhetoric he can to avoid a rebellion within his Roman self, struggling to enter into the Egypt he absorbs while remaining above and separate from it. He justifies his actions very carefully along the lines of Elizabethan condemnations of gluttony: “O Antony,/ I have followed thee to this. But we do lance/ Diseases in our bodies” (5.1.35-37). Caesar implies that he has emulated Antony’s feasting through his consumption of Egypt, “following” his rival’s
steps in the colonial project, but he also makes clear that the consequence of such an action is the cause of “diseases in our own bodies.” His “lance” suggests a medical cure. To Caesar, Antony is the bad blood to be purged out of Rome’s body as a ruined “mate in empire” (5.1.43). For the English, taking in the foreign was just as “highly contested and fraught with anxieties over the ramifications of crossing borders” as it was for Shakespeare’s Romans who worried “over the resiliency of internal boundaries” (Hall 124).

The figuration of colonialism as tasting in *Antony and Cleopatra* somatises politics upon the double tongue in ways that parallel England’s efforts abroad. An early modern audience member attending this play would have had his palate activated, both as a longing to taste *physically* (through the pervasive imagery of food and the onstage stimulus of banquets) and *imaginatively* (through the rhetorical strategies of avoidance), generating a cumulative response that alters an interpretation of the play through the sensory body. Taste incites a desire to feast upon the strange in Egypt – its people, its words, and its lands – alongside the Roman colonisers, for pleasure rather than satiety. And when the play depicts the dangers of gluttony as a loss of self, taste also reminds the spectator of the volatile position of England at this point of cultural flux. Those critics who analyse *Antony and Cleopatra* as an object lesson for England tend to argue that the play produces either propaganda for, or a warning against, James’s imperial ambitions. For example, Habib implies through hyphenation that Shakespeare’s play supports Jacobean expansion, vindicating “noble Rome-England” (157), while Hall oppositely reads the play as portraying the “difficulties of maintaining cultural integrity” (160), and Loomba insists that *Antony and Cleopatra* “has always been a cautionary tale, a story
that warned aspiring imperialists of the dangers of East” (Race 127). The very divergence of these reactions to the colonial evinces that Shakespeare is doing something far more subtle than pure celebration or condemnation. It is at once both and neither. The play refuses to favour either world conception of a sensual Epicurean Egypt or a rational Stoic Rome, but rather interrogates both ends of the political spectrum through the rival tongues. In sum, the play’s oral metaphors render English imperialism cogent to the audience as felt response, and this response moves the audience to test England’s project within the territory of their bodies. If the most delicious meals were praised for their mixture of sweet and tart sauce in the early modern dietaries, then Shakespeare realises exactly how to question England’s colonialism in a theatrical “dish” fit “for the gods” (5.2.269).
CHAPTER THREE

“The Smell of Blood”: The Olfactory Atmosphere of *Macbeth*

Materialising upon the heath at the beginning of *Macbeth*, the three weird sisters chant: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair,/ Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.10-11). The witches’ stress on the “filth” in the air is apt since their arrival coincides with the stage direction “Thunder and lightning,” which almost certainly called for squibs, the low-grade fireworks made from fermented hog’s manure, egg oils, and saltpetre.\(^{63}\) Unlike the typical Scottish fog that impairs vision, this cloud affronts the nose.\(^{64}\) “Foul” is first and foremost a sensory adjective and, in the seventeenth century, the word was more redolent of malodour than moral judgement (*OED* 1.1.a). The witches’ lines invoke this stench even as they equate the ethical labels “fair” and “foul,” combining both meanings in a way that creates a new and troubling middle ground. The extrametrical foot at the end of this couplet further elides “filth” and “air” into a contracted expression of disgust (“f’air”) that puns on the olfactory environment, and their chiasmus similarly emphasises the paradoxical merger: “foul is fair.” It is no coincidence that this linguistic and ontological confusion of categories relates to smell. Smelling blurs the line between inside and outside, intertwines past memories with present odours, and crosses the threshold of dreaming and waking, or real and imaginary. As I will suggest, smell’s ability to diffuse across borders is precisely what most fascinates Shakespeare about this sense in *Macbeth*.

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\(^{63}\) As Harris has shown, the “controlled detonation of fireworks” in *Macbeth* started the play not only with a flash and a bang, but also with a “stink” (*Untimely* 120).

\(^{64}\) Smell dominates our impressions of this scene even when it is presented in the scentless medium of film. The 2005 BBC adaptation of *Macbeth* from *Shakespeare Retold*, for example, begins by panning over a rotting garbage dump as seagulls circle overhead. The camera’s movements evoke the stench in the air by following the wind as it rustles through kitchen waste, fish bones, and wet paper.
From its first lines *Macbeth* seems to establish a set of binaries: “fair” and “foul,” “clean” and “filthy,” good and evil. But in actuality – as the witches’ insistent “is” soon proves (1.1.10) – nothing is simply one or the other. Rather, each character contains both elements and resists either category, transgressing borders in order to become a third possibility. For example, when the witches call each other to “Hover through the fog,” they enter into the “filthy air” as the foul smell that transmits the germ of an invisible evil (1.1.11); and, in so doing, they bridge the categories of supernatural and natural, controlling the play’s environment with their supra-natural odour. As I will show in my study of gendered smells, the qualities that differentiate men from women are not reduced but rather augmented by Lady Macbeth’s call to the spirits to “unsex” her (1.5.40). Olfaction in *Macbeth* operates like a Venn diagram that crosses between two contrary poles to expose an overlapping space. By diffusing across boundaries, smell invites the perceiver into an ambiguous world: a space of the uncanny, the unnatural, and the in-between.

These mysterious qualities of smell, as I will come to argue, significantly contribute to an understanding of *Macbeth*’s dramatic atmosphere. When the squibs’ stench lingers for the opening scenes, the smell would have registered with the audience as more than unpleasant. It evoked a powerful “remembrance” of the evils of plague, of possession, or of the unsettling odour of women. By tracing the influence of the

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65 I borrow the term “remembrance” from Shakespeare’s fifth sonnet (779). When Shakespeare describes the bottled perfume of the summer’s roses as a “distillation left/ A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass” (5.9-10) he draws upon the convention that smells immure the past. Smell is the closest sense to memory because the cortical nucleus of the amygdala processes both past experiences and olfactory stimuli. Odours trigger recollection, as when Marcel Proust wistfully reflects on his childhood after smelling Madeleines, and strong memories can also evoke phantom odours, as when George Orwell remarks: “It is not easy for me to think of my school-days without seeming to breathe in a whiff of something cold and evil-smelling” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 82). See Classen, Howes, and Synnott esp. 2-7 and 80-88; Dugan *Perfume*; and Harris *Untimely*. 

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witches as an evil embodied by this “foul” air, I re-evaluate Macbeth’s culpability as an active agent or infected victim, and by examining the intersections among odour, gender, religion, and the medical discourses that link them, this chapter enlarges our understanding of the marginal bodies at work in the “Scottish play.” My aim is to test the way smell functions in Macbeth as a connotative symbol for its characters and to argue, in tandem, that the smells of Macbeth create a productive confusion of categories for its audience. Smell not only fleshes out the otherworldly atmosphere of the play by dispersing across spaces, the odours onstage also literally embody the invasive threat that the atmosphere of the play performs, ultimately heightening the emotional impact for the playgoers by making the play real in their own bodies.

The emphasis on the nasal experience of Macbeth’s early modern playgoers places my study in conversation with Dugan, Harris, and Danielle Nagler, all of whom similarly ask what it means to approach Shakespeare’s plays through scent. While smell is one of the most essential senses for survival, and while it plays key roles in social distinction, emotional arousal, and memory formation, until the last decade few critics had devoted their attention to this sense. Sociologists such as Gale Largey, J. Douglas Porteous, David Rodney Watson, and Antony Synnott have long lamented the undervaluation of smell, and their studies have shown that, given the choice, most people would sacrifice smell in order to preserve their other senses (Synnott 183-84). Yet over the last ten years smell has gained critical interest. The neuroscientists Richard Axel and Linda Buck won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for their discovery of the odorant receptor mechanism in 2004, commercial enterprises are now funding research to determine how environmental odours affect purchasing decisions, and anthropologists have started to
investigate the cultural determination of odour preferences (as in Jim Drobnick’s anthology of scent *The Smell Culture Reader*).

Only a handful of critics have broached the subject of smell in Shakespeare’s works. This lack of attention is, no doubt, based on “the assumption that olfaction lacks both a history and an archive” (Dugan, “Scent” 229). Creating an archive of smell and perfume – for a sense that has hitherto been understood to be ephemeral – is the main goal of Dugan’s research. Richard Altick calls attention to Shakespeare’s smell imagery, but his essay treats the odours of mortality in *Hamlet* as a trope, not an element of performance. The only two critics to engage with smell in *Macbeth* to date are Nagler (who claims in her impressive survey of period sources on smell that Lady Macbeth perfumes the castle to delude Duncan [52]) and Harris (who argues that Shakespeare’s “stinking squibs allowed a supposedly superseded religious past to intervene in and pluralize” the Protestant moment [*Untimely 121*]). Harris’s book *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* has been formative to my thinking about the role of squibs in theatrical presentation, and it was his consideration of the “untimeliness” of odour in overlaying past and present that spurred me to investigate how smell, in particular, “smudges” this play’s “boundaries” (123). While Harris deals predominately with time, however, my integration of the discourses of miasma, plague, and gender extends his insights into a new analysis of the palimpsestic nature of smell in performance.
The smell of gunpowder is essential to *Macbeth*, as Harris attests, but so too is the smell of blood. In 1.2, the bloodied Captain pays tribute to Macbeth, whose sword still “smoked with bloody execution” (1.2.18) and who “redoubled strokes upon the foe/ […] to bathe in reeking wounds” (1.2.38-39). Macbeth’s bloodlust may distract us from the soldier’s unusual characterisation of the wounds’ scent (or “reek”) as smoke. But his words recall the early modern medical theories that reinforced the necessity of air as a medium. To be perceived, the blood must mingle with the air to become, first, a vapour that wafts into the perceiver’s nose, and second, a spirituous form as the scent integrates with the brain. The ambiguity of the word “smell,” both a noun and a transitive/intransitive verb, points to the multi-directionality of this physical transaction: “smell” can imply either an object (“the blood smells”) or subject (“I smell blood”) position. Olfaction inherently troubles the border between self and environment.

Given the pioneering work of Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson on embodiment and environment in the early modern period, it is impossible to ignore the pervasive interaction between “the porous and volatile humoral body, with its faulty borders and penetrable stuff” and the surrounding elements in the wider macrocosm (Paster, *Humoring* 23). While Paster, John Sutton, and Timothy J. Reiss have helpfully interrogated this porousness, or “passibility,” as a defining feature of early modern personhood (Reiss 2), and while Floyd-Wilson has even focused on air in *Macbeth* as tied to the Highland environment (“Epicures” 135), the importance of smell to the

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66 The smell of blood is real effect because the stage directions specify that the Captain is to enter “bleeding,” and Duncan responds, startled, “What bloody man is that?” (1.2.1). In Shakespeare’s theatre, “spectacular blood effects were created by painting, smearing, or sprinkling and by concealed bladders, sponges, and animal entrails” (Kirschbaum 517). The odour experience was thus as strong as the visual one. While we avoid this verisimilitude in modern staging, the sensory impact of blood is still keen: “The blood that smears the entire surface of *Macbeth* is physical; we see, feel, and smell it” (Van Doren 185).
assimilation of air has generally been overlooked. It is my intention to unite the
discourses of sensory studies on smell from the perspective of historical phenomenology
(Dugan, Harris, Nagler) with these critical environmental concerns. Arranged to forge
links between these methodologies, the first three sections of my chapter will reveal the
way smell negotiates between self and environment, the next segment traces smell’s
relation to coding self and other, and the concluding section brings these concerns home
to the stage. In so doing, I investigate the crucial role of smell in the construction,
preservation, or disruption of bodily integrity for the early modern playgoer. I question
why it was that certain odours were believed to corrupt while others could cure, who it
was that bore the stench of evil, witchcraft, or womanliness, and – most of all – how the
diffusion of smell blurs the boundaries between “foul” and “fair.”

Miasma

In his essay “Of Smelling” (1620), Brathwaite observes that “this peculiar Sense,
is an occasion of more danger to the body than benefit, in that it receiuves crude and
vnoholesome vapours, foggie and corrupt exhalations, being subiect to any infection” (58).
For Macbeth’s audience, standing amidst just such a “fog” as the witches come into
being, the contemporary fear that bad smells harbour danger is eerily realised (1.1.11).
As Brathwaite implies, the nose jeopardises the body simply by breathing because it
makes the interior “subject to” incursion from environmental agents such as miasma: the
“noxious cloud created by putrid vapours and particles” emanating from decaying bodies,
rotting vegetation, or swamp water (Robins 10). First proposed by Hippocrates and Pliny
and later endorsed by early moderns like Bacon and Crooke, miasma theory was a
popular explanation for infection that held sway until the nineteenth century (note the
continued association of disease to bad air or *malaria*). In Shakespeare’s London, several Whitefriars monks reputedly died from the effluvia of Fleet River, and Simon Kellwaye maintained that “stinking doonghills, filthie and standing pooles of water and unsavery smelles” were to blame for the 1592 plague (Nagler 44). The weird sisters emerge from this background, and recede again “into the air” (1.3.79). “For as much as Spirits be withoute bodies,” Levinus Lemnius warns in *The Touchstone of Complexions* (1576), “they slyly and secretly glyde into the body of man, euene muche like as fulsome stenche, or as a noysome and ill ayre” (22).

By overlapping the witches with stinking squibs, and by insisting on the continuity between these figures and the air, Shakespeare ruptures any comforting notions of containment. The spectators may shut their eyes, close their mouths, or cover their ears, but they can hold their breath only so long before they must “receive” the “corrupt exhalations” of the witches (Brathwaite 58). Smell entwines bodies through diffusion, and so threatens individual personhood by necessitating an interaction between “*interiors*,” rather than with surfaces” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 4). Whereas sight and hearing operate at distances, and touch entails physical proximity, smell (like taste) requires a chemical interpenetration of self and environment. Indeed, in the first act of *Macbeth*, the persistent connection between air and evil suggests not only that these women are “bubbles” in the “air” (1.3.77, 79), but further that they manipulate the meteorological environment in order to saturate the bodies of men with their smell. When the smeller inhales the scent of the witches, the boundary between the air “in here” and

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67 On the definition of miasma, see John M. Last in *The Encyclopedia of Public Health*. For more about its origins, consult *Air, Miasmes, et Contagion* edited by Dominique Guéniot or chapters one and two of Joseph Robins’s *The Miasma*.
“out there” dissolves even as an equivocal in-between space emerges. True, the witches may be supernatural and the ecosystem natural, but when the two are brought together through odour – namely, the “pungent” and “peculiar s[cent]” of witchcraft whose “nestiness” “flows” outward from the “full Possession of her soul” (Bell 16) – then a miasma is born.

In his treatise on “the plague,” published only three years before Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Dekker links smell to the inception of “thick and contagious clowdes” (Note: 1603). Dekker writes that before the plague, London’s “excellent aires” smelled of “sweete Odours that breathed from flowers” (Note: Vpon the 23), but that scent soon changes as a feminised “storme” rides in:

> Westward descended a hidiouss tempest, that […] (taking the Destinies part, who indeed set abroach this mischiefe) scowled on the earth, and filling her hie forehead full of blacke wrinkles, tumbling long vp and down (like a great bellyed wife) her sighes being whirlwinds, and her grones thunder, at length she fell in labour, […] and was delivered of […] *Sicknesse*. (Note: The Queenes Sicknes)

The evil “breath” exhaled by this new-born pestilence made its way into London’s “shamble-smelling roomes” as “nasty” air (Note: General terror). That the plague is communicated by the storm’s smell is readily apparent in Dekker’s olfactory portrait of the quarantine house that fills every “nosthril” with the “noysome stench” of “rotten coffins” (Note: The Plague). Shakespeare’s witches rattle the elements after the same style as Dekker’s Destinies. They use smell to act upon their male subjects – such as

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68 The witches’ ability to influence the actions of men through the olfactory atmosphere can be seen in the Captain’s description of Macbeth and Banquo: “As cannons overcharged with double cracks,/ So they doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe” (1.2.37-38). The echo of the weird sisters’ “double double” speak suggests that their *essence* (both the “being of a thing” and a fragrance or “scent” *OED* 7, 10) taints the Captain’s expression through the shared miasma.

69 Dekker’s pamphlet *The Wonderful Yeare. 1603 Where is Shewed the Picture of London, Lyng Sicke of the Plague […]* is unpaginated, and therefore I situate quotations by citing the nearest margin note. While I do not claim that Dekker’s pamphlet was a source for *Macbeth*, the twinned imagery in these texts is historically illuminating because it speaks to a common mythology of foul air.
Macbeth or the sea-captain whom they make “peak” and “pine” and sexually drain as “dry as hay” (1.3.22, 17) – to engender a poisonous miasma.

_Macbeth_ makes it patently clear that the sisters have the power to wreak havoc in the natural world: they exchange winds, “toss” ships (1.3.24), “topple” castles, bow trees, shake foundations, and “blow” down churches (4.1.70-75). Marjorie Garber has demonstrated the control exerted by _Macbeth’s_ witches, and Floyd-Wilson has compellingly argued that the weird sisters are “predominately elemental” (“Epicures” 136). But while these critics connect the witches to the weather, and while Floyd-Wilson links their ecology to Macbeth’s permeable interior, what is absent from their readings is any mention of how the witches’ action resembles a smell-based illness – a connection that _Macbeth’s_ language persistently establishes. The early modern doctor Bullein suggested that “strong windes” were to blame for the _Fever Pestilence_ (1564) because they spread “stinctke[s],” carrying “pestilent fume or vapours from stinkyng places, to the cleane partes, […] and] coming sodainly by the impression of aire, creping to the harte, corrupting the spirites” (27). As Floyd-Wilson argues, the witches direct the winds to “stir” the body’s spirits (“Epicures” 143), but it is – I propose – the malodourous nature of those winds that specifically impresses upon the playgoer his own exposure to evil. This perspective allows us to explore how _Macbeth_ heightens playgoer anxiety by capitalising on the unrestricted properties of smell. Just as smell is amorphous, so too are the witches as borderless as the air they suffuse. They “look not like th’inhabitants o’th’ earth/ And yet are on’t” (1.3.39-40), they “seem corporeal” but “melt” as “breath into the

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70 King James I believed that an East Lothian coven had summoned a gale to sink Anne’s ship, and he affirms in his _Daemonologie_ (1597) that witches “can raise storms” either “upon sea or land” (395). On the connection between Macbeth’s witches and the confessions found in the _Newes From Scotland_ (1591), see Edward H. Thompson, “Macbeth, King James I, and the Witches.”
wind” (1.3.79-80), they render “themselves air” and “vanish” (1.5.4-5), they “ride in the air” (3.5.59) and travel in “foggy cloud[s]” (3.5.37). And yet, as 3.5 reveals, the witches are able to fuse with the air only through a smell based ritual: one that enables spiritual transactions through distilling, perfumery, and anointing.

The weird sisters engage in perfumery when Hecate “distill[s]” her “dismal” scent out of “th’air” through “magic sleights” and into a “vap’rous drop” that “shall draw [Macbeth] on to his confusion” (3.5.20-29). It is by refining their airy essences and combining them with the moon’s pendant dew that Hecate summons the “artificial sprites” who serve as the apparitions intended to give Macbeth a false sense of “security” (3.5.27, 32). Perfumery was often associated with the occult, and John Bell’s Scottish treatise on Witch-craft (1697) specifically records the belief that “Witches” “anoint[ed]” themselves with certain ointment” to be “carried in Spirit through the Air” (5). Once Hecate completes her ritual of scenting and ascension, repeating “I will but ’noint, and then I mount” (3.5.47), three new spirits appear to comment on their “delight” (3.5.53) and “dainty pleasure” (3.5.58) from riding in her cloud of smell: “Since the air’s so sweet and good” (3.5.51). Even before they take shape, the infusion of scent into the air implies the arrival of an invisible company. That the “sprites” they conjure through aromatic distillation are named “artificial” is telling because the artifice of presenting a counterfeit essence to the nose is the primary aim of perfumery.

71 The scenes containing Hecate (3.5 and 4.1) have garnered much critical attention because these songs are also found in Middleton’s The Witch. It is highly probable that Shakespeare collaborated with Middleton, but Shakespeare was the final arbitrator on what material he included (Brooke 55). My present aim is not to enter into the authorship debate. Rather, I analyse these witchcraft scenes for their amplification of smell in Macbeth because, like Peter Stallybrass, I believe that “whether Shakespeare wrote them or not, they are perfectly in keeping with the structure of the play” (113).
In early modern British culture, smell was thought to express one’s inner nature: those pure of heart smelled sweetly, whereas evil men reeked of sin. Sin was believed to pollute the flesh physically, and if an “odious stinch” meant evil, then “sauery smells” denoted “devine grace” (Breton 11-12). Christian doctrine predicates that the Holy Spirit carries an ambrosial scent when incarnated, and that angels emit an incomparably sweet odour (as John Milton imagined by having Raphael shake his perfumed “plumes” of “heavenly fragrance” \textit{PL} 5.286-87). In the Bible, Saint Paul claims that God’s agents are imbued with this essence: “wee are” the “sweet sauour of Christ” (Corinthians 2:15). Some priests garlanded themselves in roses or perfumed their vestments to inculcate a sense of holiness. Hagiography valorised the odour of sanctity as a literal phenomenon: canonising Simeon Stylites, who died from a fever of paradisal fragrance; the nun Benedicta of Notre-Dame-du-Laus, whose ecstasies made everything she touched smell sweet; and Isidore, whose exhumed body released a “ravishing odour” instead of the normal putridity of decomposition (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 53). Despite the Catholic origin of these olfactory encodings of good and evil, these beliefs endured through the Protestant Reformation. For example, Harris finds the Catholic odour of sanctity reworked in George Herbert’s Protestant poetry where smell continues to be “only ambivalently metaphorical” (“Smell” 479). The early modern belief in smell as the moderator between the body and the soul is equally apparent in religious conceptions of this sense and in the Aristotelian hierarchy that ranked smell as the intermediary between intellectual (sight, hearing) and bodily (taste, touch) senses. Ideally, smells were supposed to make morality perceptible.
Unless, that is, the scent was like that of the “vap’rous drop” distilled by Hecate (3.5.24). The trouble with perfume lies in its ability to muddle the proper equation between interior and exterior essences. In my chapter on *Antony and Cleopatra*, I noted a distrust of cookery that hid spoiled meats under spicy sauces, and here too the same misgivings arise against perfume for misleading perception by using artificial odours. Montaigne writes in his essay on “Odors” that “well-smelling, strange savours, may rightly be held suspicious in such that use them; and a man may lawfully think, that who useth them, doth-it to cover some natural defect” (171). Given that bad smells were harbingers of death, and that perfumes provoked scepticism about pleasant aromas in a period when “everything from letters to lapdogs was scented” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 71), it is no wonder that many early modern authors repeated Martial’s aphorism that “they smell best, that do of nothing smell.”

Now, I do not mean to imply that the staging of *Macbeth’s* 3.5 used perfume. While the olfactory technology was certainly available – medieval royal processions featured rose water and spice fumigations as part of their performance of state wealth, Elizabethan masques employed apothecaries to flood the air with “musk, ginger, and clove comfits” or scented “hail” (Dugan, “Scent” 233), and Bacon’s essay on “Triumphs” records new “odours suddenly coming forth without any drops falling” – the meeting of the witches in *Macbeth* does not seem a fitting occasion for this type of professional perfumery.

First, it would have been lavishly expensive to stage the scene in this manner at the Globe, and second, the spirits’ references to the air as “sweet” or “dainty” are

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72 To smell literally of “nothing” would be very disquieting. Patrick Süskind probes the social valences of smell and scentlessness in his portrayal of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille: the psychopath protagonist of the novel *Perfume* (1988) who possesses no natural body odour but whose odourphilia motivates him to seek out and murder pre-pubescent girls in the quest for the perfect fragrance.
automatically suspect given the source (3.5.51, 58). It is more likely that the scene began with the rattling of sheet metal and another squib, given the direction “thunder” (3.5.1). In this case, the discrepancy between the language of perfumery, “vessels,” and “distill[ation]” in Hecate’s anointing of the sky, and the actual stench in the theatre would have produced an olfactory dramatic irony (3.5.18, 26). By contrast to other dramas that align the discussion of sweet perfumes with onstage perfumery – such as the Digby *Mary Magdalene* (c.1520) that used scented balm as a prop or Jonson’s *Chloridia* (1631) where “Rain” sprinkled drops of “sweet water,” using perfume “in the context of performance qua performance” (Nagler 48) – Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* refuses this conjunction. In *Macbeth*’s staging, the witches’ language of “filthy air” is accompanied by smoke and squibs (1.1.11), but so too is Hecate’s language of “dainty” distillation (3.5.58). This divide between the smells described and perceived hints at the untruthfulness of perfume onstage and off by inviting the audience to “smell out” the foulness of the witches beneath their words. The only true odour, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* seems to imply by its very performance features, is the smell that sticks on evil deeds.

Shakespeare is especially interested in the tenacity of smell. Unlike the other senses – which remain perceptible only so long as their material stimuli are present – smell can linger without its object. Shakespeare seizes on this unique aspect of odour and uses it to express the symbolic persistence of immoral actions. For instance, King Claudius admits in *Hamlet* that his prayers are ineffective because his “offence” is so “rank […] it smells to heaven,” his present tense indicating that the smell of murder reeks months after the fact (3.3.36). King Lear too rejects the apothecary’s “civet” in favour of the more honest, if offensive, “smell of mortality,” although he instinctively tries to wipe
his palm clean of this invisible pollutant before giving his hand to Gloucester (4.5.127, 129). Nowhere is the endurance of scent a clearer manifestation of guilt than in Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking episode. Painfully aware of smell’s ability to “sticke” on the body “many houre[s],” days, or even weeks “after” a physical encounter (Montaigne 171), Lady Macbeth frantically mimes washing her hands: “Out, damned spot; out, I say” (5.1.33). The horror of blood fills her nostrils: “Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (5.1.48-49). Fittingly for a sense that cannot be contained, the metaphorical smell of guilt diffuses across the threshold of physical perception. Because scents carry forward prior experiences and cross from one space into the next, smell negotiates between time and place. Lady Macbeth’s somnambulism at the end of the play returns her to its fateful beginning through an olfactory memory since the lingering smell of blood on her hands prompts a psychological repetition of the murder in her waking dreams: “who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him” (5.1.37-38). Overlapping two moments to distort the boundaries of the present, and travelling between two places to form a composite third, smell “manifests the place” she “come[s] from” (Montaigne 171). The odours that hover around people’s bodies give clues as to where they were last or what activities they pursued, but beyond this scents also materialise a presence in absence, and her ominous statement “Hell is murky” signals the witches’ reprisal here as miasma (5.1.34). It is the smell of blood that overpowers Lady Macbeth, creating a “hell which she scrubs at but cannot erase” (Nagler 52).

73 This ability of smell to signal the invisible proximity of someone is exactly what John Donne turns to comic advantage in his “Elegy 4.” Donne pokes fun at the courtier whose perfume gives away his presence: “Only, thou bitter sweet, whom I had laid/ Next me, me traitorously hast betrayed./ And unsuspected hast invisibly/ At once fled unto him, and stayed with me” (98, lines 54-57).
Macbeth registers the blood on his hands, by contrast, through touch and vision. Refusing to bring the daggers back to Duncan’s body, Macbeth bewails the “sorry sight” (2.2.18). Lady Macbeth urges him to regain composure, instructing: “Go get some water./ And wash this filthy witness from your hand” (2.2.44-45). To Macbeth’s senses, however, the “filth” of blood is seen more than smelt, and its viscous residue crosses synaesthetically into colour:

> What hands are here! Ha, they pluck out mine eyes.  
> Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood  
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
> Making the green one red. (2.2.57-61)

Macbeth imagines his bloody deed to be so contaminating that it stains all innocence “red,” turning the “multitudinous seas incarnadine.”\(^{\text{74}}\) He suspects that the guards may have “seen” him with “these hangman’s hands” (2.2.25), and his Latinate hyperbole about the blood’s impossible spread reveals his concern over the murder’s wider recognition. While the trace of his crime unnerves him, his fear lasts only so long as the blood is publicly visible – “a little water clears” him of the “deed” (2.2.65) – whereas Lady Macbeth continues to be haunted by the private smell of her crimes.

Shakespeare unquestionably makes blood central to the play’s exteriorisation of guilt, but his juxtaposition of the two protagonists’ perceptions also genders their senses. It is no accident that Macbeth is predominately troubled by the sight of blood whereas his wife is more closely aligned with its smell; smell was in many ways feminised in the early modern period (see “Possessing Odours” and “Gendering Smell”), and a strong

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\(^{\text{74}}\) Macbeth’s fears about his red hands polluting the ocean, and Lady Macbeth’s desperate calls “Out, damned spot” (5.1.33), recall “contemporary theories about plague’s etiology” which, as Cheryl Lynn Ross explains, “imagined the disease’s infection as a stain, one drop of which discolored all, one breath of which poisoned the whole body” (444).
capacity for odour detection was believed to be closer to bestial, and hence female, perception. However, Shakespeare’s gendering of the smell of blood does not lessen the intensity of Lady Macbeth’s sensation, nor does it debase her. On the contrary, Shakespeare arguably endorses her perceptual model over Macbeth’s by according the sleepwalking scene more lines than his reflections on the hand and a greater dramatic emphasis due to its climatic placement at her final appearance. Macbeth hardens his conscience once his hands are returned to whiteness, becoming increasingly insensible – “I have almost forgot the taste of fears” (5.5.9) – but Lady Macbeth internalises the crime as scent and she can never again smell “of nothing.” She is so terrified by the blood’s lasting essence, even in her sleep, that she eventually “shut[s]” her senses altogether in suicide (5.1.24). It is the subtle and invisible nature of scent that makes it such a poignant embodiment of mental torment in Macbeth.

Where the two scenes mark a tension – literally – between smell, on the one hand, and sight and touch, on the other, this gendered distinction further allows Shakespeare to map out two rival understandings of disease: contagion and infection. “Contagion,” Thomas Lodge writes, “is an evil qualitie in a bodie, communicated” by “touch” (qtd. in Healy 22). Blood on the hands serves as an example of this transmission, where one individual touches the body of another to catch their malady. This contact necessary for the dissemination of “evil qualities” underpins Macbeth’s hyperbole of the “incarnadine seas” that accept, and spread, the contagion of his “red” hands through direct immersion. In contradistinction, Lady Macbeth inhales the scent of blood and Macbeth first breathes the corrupting fog of the witches in ways that reinforce miasmal theories of infection. This division between touch-mediated contagion and smell-borne infection also encodes
the opposition of Galenic and Paracelsian medical paradigms. Whereas Galen held that health was governed by the *internal* balance of the humours, treating self-originating distemper through the prescription of “opposites,” Paracelsus maintained that disease was attributable to *external* agents or foreign astra that grew inside an invaded host, applying “like” chemicals to expel them from the body. Infectious epidemics like the plague were all the more feared because they appeared to travel beyond their hosts, hovering as rogue “semina” or “seed-like entities” in the air that could “infect bodies” at a distance (Healy 24). Debates raged over whether the bubonic plague (named for the characteristic swollen “buboes” around the lymph nodes and groin) was communicated by touching the sores or by the noisome air released when the boils burst. These contrary models of contagion and infection were often opposed in the medical literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but Shakespeare’s counterpoising of these two principles in the divergent hand scenes actually defines a shared ground through smell.

This crossover between infection as smell-borne disease and contagion as spreading touch can be clarified by turning to his sonnet 111 on the “dyer’s hand” (792). In this sonnet, the speaker laments that his “harmful deeds” have marked him with an indelible stain:

> Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,  
> And almost thence my nature is subdued  
> To what it works in, like the dyer’s hand.  
> Pity me then, and wish I were renewed,  
> Whilst like a willing patient I will drink  
> Potions of eisel ’gainst my strong infection;  
> No bitterness that I will bitter think,  
> Nor double penance to correct correction. (111.5-12)

75 For more on the contrast between Galenic and Paracelsian medicine see Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine*, and for more on the reconceptualisation of “disease as an ontological entity” akin to microbiological infection “rather than a state of humoral disarray,” see Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic* (24).
Using the hand that has taken on the coloured waters of its trade as a simile for his plight, he inverts Macbeth’s hyperbole wherein his hands turn the waters red. Both men are bothered by the sight of the stain on their hands and choose contact metaphors of touch to substantiate its contagious quality in a public forum. Punning on the shared root “manus,” the sonnet’s speaker links his manual brand to the “public manners” that censure him (111.4). But the transition to the medical language of “patient[s],” “potions,” “infection,” and “cure” (111.9-11, 14) brings us back to the role of smell in disease. Promising to drink “eisel,” or vinegar, the most commonly prescribed scent as a preservative against plague, the speaker merges the “bitter” smell of his deeds with the bitterness of taste in the potion. Crucially, the etymological stem of infection is inficere, meaning to “dip in,” “colour,” or “stain” (for instance, to dye wool), but it also connotes a deeper “taint”; to infect is to “spoil” a “person or thing” by imbuing it with new qualities (OED 1.1, 3a). The smell of blood on Lady Macbeth’s hands is thus a perfect example of infection as Shakespeare uses it because the stubborn odour of blood not only colours her hand but corrupts through its noxious influence in the air.

**Possessing Odours: Infected Minds**

The word “infected” appears twice in Macbeth. In the first instance, it is linked to the air-riding witches, and, in the second, to the distemper of Lady Macbeth’s mind; “infected” is the synapse between cause and effect. After the weird sisters reveal Banquo’s numerous offspring, Macbeth growls: “Infected be the air whereon they ride/ And damned all those that trust them” (4.1.154-55). Critics normally interpret this line as cursing the witches, but he actually condemns himself for inhaling their miasma.

Macbeth’s language recalls Thomas Paynell’s *A Moche Profitale Treatise Against the*
Pestilence (1534): “For from suche infected bodies commethe infectious and venemous fumes and vapours, the whiche do infecte and corrupte the air” (A3r). Analogous to the reeking fumes released from corpses, the witches foster a plague of evil by traveling in the air. Macbeth’s slippery “infected be” suggests that the sisters are the agents of transmission because the witches not only infect the air itself but further invade the bodies of “those that trust them” through smell. The word “infected” next appears just three scenes later when the Scottish Doctor gives his diagnosis:

Foul whisp’rings are abroad. Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.
More needs she the divine than the physician. (5.1.68-71)

Certainly the lines, “Foul whisp’rings are abroad. Unnatural deeds/ Do breed unnatural troubles,” suggest sound and the poisonous workings of rumour. Yet that the Doctor begins his diagnosis with “foul” returns to the sensory register of smell. The whispered wind is “discharged” with the sisters’ scent as “noxious matter” (OED foul 4.a), and it is this air that Lady Macbeth calls forth to “breed” an “unnatural” infection in her body in her invocation of “spirits.” Shrugging at the limits of his remedies, the Doctor sees a priest as more suitable in exorcising her affliction. But surprisingly he does not recommend one, advising instead that “the patient/ Must minister to himself” (5.3.47).

His language mixes miasmal theories of plague transmission with occult ideas of demonic possession. Where Lemnius claimed that evil spirits “joyn with the tempests” as stench to secretly thrust “themselves into the mind […] to vex and tear and torment it” (192, Secret), the Scottish Doctor here likewise points to the “foul” air as the ultimate source of Lady Macbeth’s brain-sickness.
The physical relationship between the nose and the brain receives considerable attention in anatomies of smell. Medical authorities since classical antiquity have debated whether it is the *nose* or the *brain* itself that is the “real olfactory organ” (Vesalius 181). Plato suggested that the perception of odours depends upon the cooperation of both these structures, noting that “the veins about the nose are too narrow to admit earth and water, and too wide to detain fire and air, and for this reason […] smells are perceptible only in the intermediate state” of vapour that “soothes” or “irritates” the whole mental “cavity” (464-65). By contrast, Aristotle believed that the receptors for smell were located uniquely inside the nose, and his comparisons between the sensations of taste on the tongue and smell in the sinus in *de Anima* and *de Sensu* imply that he viewed olfaction as a contact mediated sense at least in part. Theophrastus, Aristotle’s pupil, wrote the first specialised treatise on smell, *Concerning Odours*, and he merged these views by arguing that smell operates both over distances in the traveling scents absorbed by the brain and in contact for the nose in the consumption of foods. Democritus and Epicurus used their models of atomism to offer a material justification for smell effects: “pleasant smells were caused by smooth, round particles, whereas harsh or unpleasant smells were due to hooked atoms, which tore open passages from the areas stimulated” (Finger 176). It was Galen’s discovery in *The Organ of Smell*, however, that was the most astounding claim for centuries to come.

Based on his vivisections of animals, Galen concluded that “the olfactory sensor” is “inside the skull”; “it resides in the anterior ventricles of the brain” (Galen 8.469). The nose, in this understanding, is merely a channel. Certainly the nose helps to inhale odours inward and upward, cool inspired air, and drain phlegm, but Galen’s writings indicate
that the brain itself breathes under pneumatic theory. After witnessing cerebral pulsation in head injuries, Galen deduced that the brain expands and contracts in order to circulate fresh odorants across the olfactory processes and to expel stale air (Finger 176). The locus of odour sensation was therefore within the brain and, more specifically, in the two projections of the forebrain that cross the ethmoid bone in an open mingling of air that continuously flows between the sinus and neural ventricles. Smell thus worked in a very different way from all the other senses because, as Richard Palmer notes, in “smell alone the brain was the primary organ of perception” (62). These twinned projections came to be known as the olfactory processes, and Galen’s theories dominated the Western understanding of smell until the late seventeenth century.

In an almost exact paraphrase of Galen, Crooke writes in 1615:

> Although the Nose be the way & path of smels, yet is not the instrument of smelling, neither yet his hindmost coate; but farther within the skull there are certain processes or productions esteemed for the very organs of this sence, [...] called Processus mammillares. (483-84)

The curious label “processus mammillares” calls attention to itself in this description, begging the question: how is it that for the early moderns the olfactory sensor became synonymous with a lactating breast? Nearly two hundred pages later, Crooke clarifies that these twinned bodies are named the “Mammillarie processes” because “they are somewhat like the nipples of a Dugge, called Mammillares” (619). Crooke is hardly the first, or the last, anatomist to employ this name. Avicenna noticed the resemblance between the olfactory protuberance and the “nipple” of a “female breast” in his 1025 Canon of Medicine (Finger 177), but his observation remained only an comparison (albeit an oft repeated one) until the sixteenth century when process mamillares emerged as a scientific term (Palmer 62). By retitling the olfactory processes “mammillary,”
Ambroise Paré, Andreas Vesalius, and Crooke made the transition from simile to metaphor. They collapsed the distinction to suggest a direct equivalence between the nasal projections and women’s breasts.\footnote{Early modern anatomy looked for duplications in its naming of parts. Identifying neural structures on a basis of resemblance, surgeons found miniature breasts in the olfactory projections and likewise “Buttockes” in “the Braine, and vnder them the Testicles” (Crooke 431). These doubled names are often curiously sexual as they displace male and female genitals onto the brain.} One decisive consequence of this renaming was to feminise smell both in medicine and the wider culture. This sense, more explicitly than any other, became associated with a woman’s body through the idiosyncrasy of its anatomical designation.

Milk, breasts, and breastfeeding feature prominently in the imagery of Macbeth. Lady Macbeth fears that her husband is “too full o’th milk of human kindness” (1.5.16), implores the night’s spirits to “come to my woman’s breasts,/ And take my milk for gall” (1.5.46-47), and infamously swears that

\begin{verbatim}
I have given suck, and know
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this. (1.7.54-59)
\end{verbatim}

Even Malcolm imagines pouring “the sweet milk of concord into hell” as the worst possible crime to demonstrate his supposed unfitness to rule (4.3.99). Indeed, there are more references to “milk,” “breasts,” and “nipples” in Macbeth than in any other Shakespearean drama and these passages have sparked tremendous critical interest. While scholars have contemplated their relevance in terms of literal motherhood “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” (Lionel Charles Knights; A.C. Bradley; Michael Bristol), psychoanalysis of the maternal (Adelman; Stephanie Chamberlain), or an appropriation of male power (D. W. Harding), no editorial gloss has yet acknowledged
the connection between the female mammilla and the mammillary processes of smell. The principal function of this image cluster is to embody the corrupted family in *Macbeth*. Shakespeare was no doubt thinking more about using the language of nursing to highlight Lady Macbeth’s cruelty or the contrast between Banquo’s line of succession and Macbeth’s “barren sceptre” than the nose as a sensory organ (3.1.63). Nevertheless, the repetition of these images, their precision of named parts, and their overlap with miasmas and squibs suggest that Shakespeare may have been punning on the ubiquitous linkage between women’s breasts and mammillary processes to achieve a secondary resonance. This wordplay connects the themes of smell and gender through the body in an allusion familiar to his audience. Other plays of the period worked smell’s anatomy into jokes that exaggerated the sexual and feminised nature of this sense, as when Olfactus declares: “I lay my head betweene two spungeous pillowes,/ Like faire Adonis twixt the paps of Venus” (Tomkis 4.4.34-35). By effectively resituating a miniature woman inside the nose through the synecdoche of the “pap,” Shakespeare, like the anatomists, hints at the subversive feminine potential of smell latent in all bodies – including men’s.

This feminisation of smell helps to explain why Lady Macbeth’s perception of blood on the hands is registered in terms of scent, whereas her husband’s perception is predominately influenced by vision. Nevertheless, the medical understanding of this sense insists that men and women alike depend on the “mammillary” to process odours. To smell, then, is to inhale real substances into the brain with all their troubling implications. While food odours may nourish the body, as was the case for Pliny’s Astomes, and while fumigations are more effective than pills given their rapid admission
to the ventricles, bad smells can be manipulated to play upon the mind, unsettle the spirits, or even cause death. Crooke acknowledges the threat of “nasty and abominable smelles,” since they “doe make men oftentimes swound, yea and such exhalations arising from dead Carkasses or muddy fens doe infect the ayre,” but he also turns to stranger speculations about the smell of ointments making cats insane and the “odours” from flowers in the “Low Countries” that drive travellers into “light madnesses” (706).

Botanists claimed that African marigolds carried an olfactory venom that could kill the unwary smeller, and James I publicly denounced the “stinking suffumigation” of tobacco as “hurtfull to the health of the whole body” (B3) – a conclusion not too far removed from the current anxiety about second-hand smoke. The inhalation of bad “ayre” is even “more hurtfull than faulty meats, […] for it presently infects the heart and vitall spirits” (Lemnius, Secret 188). In other words, the quality of the “ayre” synthesised inside the body is directly dependent upon the quality of odour inhaled from the environment.

The mysterious “spirits” Lemnius refers to in his warning are the early modern equivalent of today’s neurotransmitters. As Sutton explains, vital spirits were converted into so-called animal spirits: the “volatile messengers” that coursed along the nerves to distribute neural commands throughout the body (Memory 181). Made of distilled blood and inspired air, these “fluid beasts roamed our nervous system” and “rummaged the pores of the brain” (Sutton, “Mind”). Since the air necessary for their spirituous form was respired in through the nose, it follows that smells have the power to alter the composition of the brain’s messengers, and consequently, the messages delivered.

Environmental odours provide “sensory input” that “change[s] the character of the physic

77 In book seven of his Natural History, Pliny describes a tribe called the “Astomes” who have no mouths but live “only by the aire, and smelling to sweet odours, which they draw in at their nostrhils: And yet if the sent be anything strong and stinking, they are soone therwith overcome, and dy” (qtd. in Nagler 42).
pneuma” (Freemon 267). While early modern medicine imagined numerous parts of the body (liver, heart, brain, and nose) as factories for these spirits in different stages, Crooke usefully distinguished the “Vital spirits” prepared in the heart from the “Animal spirits” perfected in the brain, noting in particular the confluence of smell with the latter process: “This callous body decending a little downward appeareth to be excavated or hollowd into two large ventricles […] wherein the Animal spirits receiue their preparation; and out of these Ventricles do yssue two swelling Pappes which are commonly called the Organes of smelling” (431). Using a semicolon to mimic the cribriform plate that separates the neural and nasal cavities, Crooke’s punctuation implies that the ventricles of smell perception and spirit production are one and the same. Anatomising the olfactory organs in tandem with neural messengers, this quote reflects the period tendency to link smell with the material of the mind even as it likewise troubles borders – blending two categories (inspired air and vital spirits) into a third term (animal spirits).

If smell therefore creates the conditions that allow for healthy or dangerous spirits to form within the brain, then it is all the more frightening to recognise that smell is to a large degree involuntary. The effect of scent in dreams was controversial, but many insisted that we continue to smell our surroundings unwittingly while we sleep (Crooke 656). A man placed “into a chamber fulfilled with some strong odour” cannot help but smell it when he “draw[s] in his breath” whether he is active or slumbering (Crooke 618). It seems fitting that sleep and dreaming should preoccupy Macbeth, given the nocturnal atmosphere of “night’s great business” (1.5.67), but the characters’ references to dreams more subtly suggest the persistence of odours within the brain. Banquo confides to Macbeth, “I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters” (2.1.19). Their presence tarries
as their smell does, reinforcing the degree to which the sisters are not only perceived but absorbed, even by his subconscious. The longstanding belief that certain odours could generate nightmares once internalised provides a rationale for Lady Macbeth’s alchemical imagery in securing the guards’ “swinish sleep”: the digested wine releases “fume[s]” to make “the receipt of reason/ A limbeck only” (1.7.66-67). And during the assassination, when Macbeth hears a voice cry “sleep no more” (2.2.33), the smell of blood effectively curses the couple with insomnia and such “brain-sickly” thoughts (2.2.44) that they suffer an “affliction” of “terrible dreams/ That shake us nightly” (3.2.20-21). The Macbeths’ “strange infirmity” (3.4.85) manifests itself as a physical as well as psychological smell-disease, evidencing the tacit continuity between the two assumed by pre-Cartesian psychophysiology.

After Macbeth and Banquo inhale the matter of the witches that “melted as breath into the wind” (1.3.80), Banquo puzzles over the meeting: “Were such things here as we do speak about,/ Or have we eaten of the insane root” (1.3.81-82)? Suspicious from the first, Banquo wonders if the witches are a delusion produced by unknowingly ingesting something that “takes the reason prisoner” (1.3.83). His conjecture about eating an “insane root” like mandrake or hemlock that poisons their minds resembles Crooke’s concern about the odiferous plants in the Low Countries that provoke delirium in travellers. But rather than swallowing the “insane root,” Macbeth and Banquo inhale the root of insanity (the smell of weird sisters) through their noses. The pervasive language of smell-induced brain sickness makes Macbeth one of Shakespeare’s most medical tragedies. Notably, there are only seven doctors that appear across his entire oeuvre, and two are given prominence in this, his shortest tragedy.
By employing a vocabulary of air-borne disease and its symptoms – fever, shakes, insomnia, and hallucination – Shakespeare translates the abstract influence of evil spirits in the play into a concrete plague felt within the body. The witches “enkindle” Macbeth (1.3.119), make him “burn” to know more (1.5.3), and fuel his “heat-oppressèd brain” (2.1.39). That Macbeth registers the sisters’ influence as fever is apt since “ague” was known to intensify odour sensitivity and, as Bacon notes in experiment 833, heat generally made smells “more odorate” (112). Just as the smell of the witches blurs the boundary between interior spirits and exterior air, so too does Macbeth’s idea of murder arise simultaneously from inside and outside his brain:

[...] why do I yield to that suggestion
   Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
   And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
   Against the use of nature? Present fears
   Are less than horrible imaginings.
   My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
   Shakes so my single state of man that function
   Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
   But what is not. (1.3.133-41)

Macbeth “yields” to an idea ostensibly received from without, but soon subsumes this agency with the possessive “my thought.” While the passage seems to centre on Macbeth’s mental perplexity, his words are also full of bodily symptoms: shaking, hair-raising goose bumps, palpitations, and an accelerated pulse.

These symptoms of Macbeth’s mental unbalance are externally apparent to the soldiers at Birnam Wood. Caithness notes that “some say [Macbeth’s] mad,” but hastens to add that there must be a “distempered cause” to his rule (5.2.13, 15). Pointing to illness or “distemper” as the cause of his tyranny, Angus and Menteith similarly observe
a change in Macbeth’s “pestered senses” that “recoil” from himself as a plague (5.2.23-24). The solution these men offer is appropriately medicinal:

CAITHNESS: Meet we the medicine of the sickly weal,
And with him pour we in our country’s purge,
Each drop of us.

LENNOX: Or so much as it needs
To dew the sovereign flower and drown the weeds. (5.2.27-30)

A modern reader might wonder what Lennox’s rejoinder about using the “sovereign flower” to “drown the weeds” has to do with purging Scotland of Macbeth’s sickness. Even Nicholas Brooke’s helpful annotation on “sovereign” as referring to “medically efficacious” flowers remains esoteric until we consider miasma theory (198 n.30). The smell of rotting “weeds” that Lennox aligns with Macbeth was a primary component of the fogs thought to transmit disease. The sweet aromas of roses, angelica, or pennyroyal, those “sovereign flowers” Lennox smells upon Malcolm, by contrast, were believed to act as curatives. Plague pamphlets counselled their readers “to smell vpon some pleasantaunt perfume […] that is a good preseruatiue against the plague” (Bullein, Fever 30). Public Orders for Health (1630) restricted odiferous trades and prohibited the sale of “stinking fish, unwholesome flesh” or “musty and corrupt fruits” (10). Municipal authorities burned therapeutic fires on street corners, filling the air with smoke from juniper, laurel, rosemary, tar, and virtually anything with a strong odour, making London in plague-time “a smelly, smoky furnace” (Ross 442). Physicians donned hooked-nose masks stuffed with citrus, herbs, garlic, and linen soaked in vinegar or bergamot oil, and

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78 The odours that best absorbed evil were pungent, but not always pleasant. In Jonson’s Volpone (1606), Sir Politic uses “thirty livres” of “onions” to purge a ship quarantined for plague (4.1.110-11), believing that the onions’ smell would counteract the disease so that he could “charge” the ship owner for the expedient release of his goods in a “make him rich” quick scheme (4.1.44). His premise – that the onions’ scent will “naturally/ Attract th’infection” – is based in miasma theory (4.1.121-22). Oddly enough, this same idea resurfaced in response to the avian flu scare in 2008-2009; see David Emery, “Onions and Flu.”
circumspect individuals walking in the city similarly defended themselves with pomanders, perfumed handkerchiefs, or nosegays. What the shadowy figure of the plague doctor best illustrates, however, is the degree to which smell overlaps science and superstition to manifest an intermediate practice. The professional adoption of this garb lent plague-beaks medical authority, but these olfactory devices equally were used to escape the unnatural influence of invisible demons, preventing “egre” and “venymous thynges” from entering “a mannes body” (Jacobi 4). The odour of pestilence was quite literally the work of the devil, for as Robert Burton warns in his Anatomy of Melancholy (1621), the air “is not so full of flies in the summer, as it is at all times with invisible Divels” (62).

Shakespeare makes it perfectly clear that, in Macbeth, the smell of evil is catching. Whereas the Scottish Doctor demarcates physical and spiritual ailments, the English Doctor arrives only to endorse the miraculous powers of King Edward the Confessor in curing “the evil” (4.3.147). Scrofula, or the “King’s Evil,” is a particularly vicious form of tuberculosis characterised by skin deformities and swellings around the lymphatic glands akin to the buboes of plague. Tradition dictates that the evil can only be cured by the “magical healing powers” of a divinely appointed king (Tomaszewski 185). That Shakespeare chooses to dramatise this healing touch in Macbeth during the reign of King James I who disliked this “superstitious” practice is testament to the play’s fascination with plagues and their connection to supernatural agency (Willis 150). While

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79 This practice of carrying bouquets to counteract the odours of death has been cited as the origin for the tradition of sending flowers to funerals (Bollet 22). See also John Aberth on nose-witness accounts of defensive odour strategies in plague, “fortify[ing] the brain with smells” of “flowers” and “spices” (29).

80 A provocative example of catching odours can be seen among the Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea who greet each other with the phrase: “Smell no evil.” In their culture, smell represents personhood and to avoid disturbing another’s spirit smell or okom they must repeat “odour odour” if they walk behind him. Yet, as Donald Tuzin notes, they feel some wicked smells are unavoidable: “olfaction is a paradoxical moral sense, in that daily life is full of odours we do not choose to inhale, but we do so all the same” (61).
foulness primarily meant putridity the King’s Evil was also known in some cases as the
“foule euyll”: a type of “syckenes” which Boorde claims is the proper “ende of euery
skottysh mans tale” (OED “foul” 1.b). Malcolm describes the affliction of these
“strangely visited people” in similar terms:

All swoll’n and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures,
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers; and ’tis spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. (4.3.151-57)

His words emphasise that the sufferers are “visited” – or possessed – by “evil”; they
cannot be cured by surgery or medicine but must seek refuge in “holy prayers” and
“healing benediction.” Recalling the ceremony of anointing monarchs with holy balm
and the transference of the odour of sanctity, King Edward’s ability to take away the
stain of foul “malady” from this “crew of wretched souls” combines spiritual redemption,
physical purgation, and olfactory cleansing (4.3.142). Taken in combination, the Doctor
scenes gesture toward the susceptibility of the body to invasive “evil” odours while
counterpoising a “healing” medicine to the “infernal medicine” of the “witches” (Garber,
After All 718-19).

Whether or not Macbeth is possessed in his first meeting with the witches, he is
certainly entranced by them. His first line, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen”
(1.3.36), repeats the weird sisters’ opening chant before he encounters them in person,
suggesting that he has already begun to feel the influence of their “filthy air” (1.1.11).
Macbeth’s contorted syntax “have not seen” marks the atmosphere against all that has he
has experienced before visually, but also furthers its foulness as an appeal to the nose.
Wrapped in this infected air, stirred into a “charm” (1.3.35), Macbeth is conspicuously
silent. His reaction – as Banquo notes – is odd: “Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear/ Things that do sound so fair?” (1.3.48-49). While Banquo interrogates the witches, Macbeth is so utterly absorbed that he loses grip on himself, becoming “rapt withal” (1.3.55). The pun on the homonyms “wrapped” and “rapt” suggests the all-enveloping nature of the witches’ scent. An unusual word for Shakespeare, “rapt” appears just seven times across his works, and three of these are in Macbeth. Once the messengers hail Macbeth as Thane, Banquo again instructs “Look how our partner’s rapt” (1.3.141), and Macbeth reiterates this impression in his letter: “When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air” while “I stood rapt in the wonder of it” (1.5.3-5).

Brooke glosses “rapt” as meaning “carried away in spirit” (103 n.57) but Shakespeare’s use of the word is even more precise: to be “rapt” is to be “transported spiritually” by “inspiration” (OED 2.a). It is by inhaling or inspiring the smell of the witches that Macbeth accepts their demonic spirits. Where “raptam” means to carry away perforce as in the classical sense of “rape,” the witches transport Macbeth’s spirit and imagination as they combine with his body in breath.

Acknowledging that Macbeth may be possessed, or is at least infected, by the evil odour of the witches poses troublesome questions about culpability. When the play is adamant that Macbeth is “rapt” by the weird sisters, does it lessen his agency in Duncan’s murder and the subsequent dire events? Floyd-Wilson delves into the crux of the witches’ puppeteering of Macbeth through the environment: “Macbeth frequently appears to have little control over his passions, desires, or thoughts – a lack of control that raises critical questions about his free will” (“Epicures” 145). Scholars have long

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81 The question of Macbeth’s free will invites endless critical debate. See Bradley esp. 340-49 and Horace Howard Furness esp. 435-91 on the main critical trends.
wrestled with the problem of Macbeth’s responsibility, often blaming the weird sisters or Lady Macbeth as the true originators of evil. Indeed this tragedy seems to pit good against evil, or “heaven” against “hell” (2.1.64), in stark and at times gross terms that could accommodate an actual demonic possession. Reviewing Elizabethan theories of demonic metaphysics, Walter Clyde Curry concludes that “without doubt these ministers of evil do actually take possession” of the Macbeths (421). But to read Macbeth as the mere “dupe” of the witches is a crude oversimplification of the tragic protagonist: “If Macbeth could never act otherwise […] then where is the tragedy?” (Braunmuller 40-41). Ultimately Macbeth juxtaposes good and evil in order to dissolve the confines of each through smell, troubling both terms to create a nebulous alternative. While the full extent of the witches’ supremacy over Macbeth is correspondingly ambiguous, it is clear that they infiltrate his mind. Macbeth was a valiant soldier who “wouldst not play false” (1.5.20) until he breathes in the foul air of the “weird women” and becomes prepared to act “most fouly for’t” (3.1.2-3). My purpose in tracing the effects of possessing odours is not to reduce Macbeth, with its rich study of guilt, to a miasmal treatise, but rather to illuminate the vital role of smell in this play, and, in so doing, to theorise how its insidious stench was perceived by the early modern playgoer.

Smellscape

Environmental odours have the power to “change” a person; they can shift one’s inner “spirits, and worke strange effects” (Montaigne 171). While Montaigne here refers to incense in a “Church,” his words make a more general case for scent’s capacity to exert pressure on the mind – “to quicken, to rowze, or to purifie our senses” (171). Incense may stimulate higher awareness and render the smeller more receptive to divine
spirits, but its very efficacy suggests the body’s openness to invasion through smell. Seeming to anticipate the arrival of Macbeth’s witches, Heinrich Agrippa writes in his 1533 text *Occult Philosophy* (trans. 1651) that “certain vapours exhaling from proper suffumigations” can raise “airy spirits” alongside “Thundrings, and Lightnings,” and he explains that incense of linseeds, violets, flea-bane, and parsley “fit[s] us to receive” these spirits through “inspiration” (86). Some church fathers condemned incense as “food for demons” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 51). To the Protestant church, censing was an idolatrous ritual, and playwrights dramatised its threat by staging murders with its toxic fumes (consider Isabella’s scheme in Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*). Harris rests his argument about the untimeliness of smell on the abolition of incense in the sixteenth century, claiming that the scent of squibs in *Macbeth* invokes the audience’s longing for a lost religious fragrance. To be sure there are connections to be made between the spiritual-evocative powers of incense and the evil spirits borne in smell, especially because “the abolition of censing [...] was aided and abetted by a widespread pathologization of olfaction” (*Untimely* 134), but I do not believe, as Harris does, that the *bonus olfactus absconditus* necessarily generates religious meaning. This quibble is not the point; rather, I want to draw attention to Harris’s critical move in interpreting a “foul stench” in the theatre as a signifier of the “sweet scents in the church,” justifying this apparent contradiction by returning to the play’s own paradox “nothing is/ But what is not” (1.3.140-41). Harris discusses how smell’s ontological confusion of fair and foul merges two times, but his own argumentative structure implicitly conflates two places in the same way (*Untimely* 137). I see this same effect of smell happening in reverse when Duncan praises the sweetness of Macbeth’s castle.
“This castle,” the King muses, “hath a pleasant seat. The air/ Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself/ Unto our gentle senses” (1.6.1-3). Simply by breathing in the air around him Duncan has begun to engage the environment through his nose and, subconsciously, to evaluate it as a “smellscape”: a non-visual sensory landscape defined by place-specific or spatially-ordered scents (Porteous 89). Neither a castle from early Scotland nor the play’s time should delight the “gentle sense” of smell given that they were poorly insulated buildings that stank of gunpowder, mildew, and rot. Surely Duncan must have it wrong. Yet his comment on the smell of the air is surprisingly evasive. While the three lines are crowded with accolades (“pleasant,” “nimbly,” “sweetly,” and “gentle”) the true adjectives “pleasant” and “gentle” modify the castle’s seat and the King’s senses. The other two terms are not adjectives, but adverbs. This makes it all the more unclear what the smell is, or what it smells like precisely – whether blood, gunpowder, or perfume – but rather places emphasis on what smell does: it “recommends” itself to the breather. The smell, in other words, is accorded a degree of agency through its own penetrative function that alters the perceivers’ judgement of the environment as a smellscape.

Eager to curry favour with the King, Banquo validates Duncan’s assessment of the smellscape – “I have observed/ The air is delicate” – and invokes a nose-witness:

The temple-haunting martlet, does approve  
By his loved mansionry that the heavens’ breath  
Smells wooingly here. No jutty, frieze,  
Buttress, nor coign of vantage but this bird  
Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle. (1.6.4-9)

Banquo presents the nests as evidence. If this reputedly choosy bird opts to build its home on every “jutty” of Macbeth’s castle, then, he assumes, this must be a good place.
Banquo also leaves the odour indefinite, returning instead to the smell’s function: it acts “wooingly” on all passersby. The smell seduces them into a false security, just as it attracts the swallow. It is not out of place to describe the air’s action as a seduction because Banquo’s language is jarringly romantic. The air, now heaven’s “breath,” mimics the praise of a lady’s sweet-smelling exhalations familiar from sonnet tradition. He yokes together the supernatural with the mundane, elevating respiration to “heaven” in a manner befitting a love lyric. The martlet likewise endorses the air through his “loved mansionry,” where his pendant beds and “procreant” cradles blend cozy domesticity with a reproductive intent since they must “breed” (1.6.8-9). Once inhaled into Banquo’s nose, the “wooing” air shifts his normally straightforward speech into an inspired courtier’s language.

In a reciprocal return to miasma theory where foul air carries an evil that can possess unwary smellers, the air of Macbeth’s castle surprises the “gentle senses” of its observers with its fairness. At first, the air seems constructed to put the perceiver at ease, to “recommend” itself and thereby the lodging. But Shakespeare’s framing of the passage makes the air suspicious. Like the pestilent fogs that harbour witchcraft, the wooing air contains its own “benign spirit” (Brooke 116 n.9): the “haunting martlet” (1.6.4). That Shakespeare chooses the martlet is significant because popular lore held that these footless birds were endlessly in flight, a suggestive corollary to the “sightless couriers of the air” (1.7.23). The martlet was also known in early modern England as a witch’s familiar who called the coven to its meetings (Floyd-Wilson, “Epicures” 143). The

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82 Sir Philip Sidney’s Astrophil praises Stella’s “sweet breath” (12.4), Michael Drayton likewise lauds the “smell” of his beloved’s “breath’s spicery” (29.8) in Idea (1619), and Shakespeare uses this theme in sonnets 38, 54, 65, 99 – most pointedly undercutting the norm by blazoning “the breath that from my mistress reeks” (130.7).
unusualness of this moment is heightened by Duncan’s choice to stop and smell the roses when they are expressly in haste: “We coursed [Macbeth] at the heels, and had a purpose/To be his purveyor” (1.6.21-22). Why then should King Duncan and Banquo halt just outside the gates to smell the air? The answer is simple: Duncan attempts to smell out a trap before walking into one. Today, as in the early modern period, we are as likely to remark on “smelling” a “rat,” getting a “whiff” of crime, or discovering a vile secret by some unmaskable scent if something just smells “fishy.” Cognates of the word “smell” like “sagacity” associate keen scent with an aptitude for investigation, as in Othello where Emilia finds her first clue as to Iago’s misdeeds by “smell[ing]” his “villainy” (5.2.198). Of all the senses smell is most closely linked to intuition.

If Duncan sniffs the air because he is suspicious, then it would seem that he is just as ineffective at smelling out treachery as he is at finding “the mind’s construction in the face” (1.4.12). Given that the failed Gunpowder Plot took place only months before the first production of Macbeth, the smell of powder and theories of the King as “an excellent smeller” should “reolfacate” for an audience of this play as Harris argues (“Smell” 478, 481). By contrast to James I, Duncan’s nose – pardon the pun – is just not up to snuff. What is so striking here is the discrepancy between what Duncan should smell, the crime the audience knows he should detect, and what he does sense. By having his doubts about Macbeth assuaged by the “sweet” air, Duncan’s actions prove that smell can persuade against intuition as much as it can serve for it. That this misinformation is acquired through the sense most aligned with the ability to uncover secrets exaggerates

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83 To smell is also “to detect, discern, or discover by natural shrewdness […]; to suspect, to have an inkling of, to divine,” and if a person is sensed not to “smell right,” then they register as “highly suspicious” (OED 2.a, 8.c). The broadside tune I Smell a Rat (1630) exemplifies this idea of nasal detection as the singer uses smell to uncover hidden sins: “When England harboures none,/ That beares the name of Whore,/ The Rat will run away,/ And I shall smell no more” (16).
the divide between what the King perceives and the gruesome reality the audience awaits. Reading these ironic lines as some of “the play’s funniest,” Rebecca Lemon claims that they fit with Duncan’s overarching presentation as a “baffled king” (75). While it is easy to judge Duncan as a faulty perceiver, Nagler reasons instead that he must be correct. Believing that the air around the castle really does smell enticing, she infers that Lady Macbeth elaborately perfumed the castle in a deception based on “wholesome air” (52). Nagler’s interpretation of the castle’s smell may lack substantiating evidence and fail to account for the audience’s sensory experience of the squibs, but her article intelligently counters those scholars who merely dismiss Duncan’s evaluation of the smellscape out of hand. Enhancing Lady Macbeth’s role as a deceiver, she states that “just as the weird sisters compel ‘what seemed corporal’ to vanish ‘as breath into the air,’” so too does she use scent “to dissipate the inner wits which control the senses” and capture Duncan (Nagler 52). Certainly, if the environment is charmed in some way that makes him misperceive – “wooing” him towards his death in a manipulation that places the witches alongside the martlet as haunting spirits in the air – then Duncan too becomes rapt. Perhaps this is why smell has been called both the “sense of sympathy” and “the witch’s sense” (Tuzin 60).

**Gendering Smell**

As many early modern men believed, and begrudged, women had an uncanny sense of intuition, and it is this intuition that male authors disconcertingly connect to female smell. If a woman was a little too good at perceiving another’s secrets, then she would often be labeled a witch. John Webster addresses this sort of accusation in *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677) by returning to the olfactory root of sagacity:
“Sometimes they call [witches] by the name Saga, which signifieth no more than a Wife and subtil Woman, being derived à sagiendo to perceive quickly, or to smell a thing quickly forth […] which is no more than malevolus, or evilwilled” (23). While Webster intends to excuse women from such ridiculous charges, he betrays his own assumption that wives with keen smell are “evilwilled.” In the misogynist, circular logic of witchcraft treatises, the same heightened sensitivity to smell that enables women to perceive unknowable secrets also disables their defenses against infectious evil. Heinrich Krämer and Jacob Sprenger’s Malleus Maleficarum (1486) notes that women’s olfactory acuity is a miasmal weakness: “it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft” (127). The overlap between feminine intuition and smell seen in witch prosecutions intersects with another belief that has held sway across several centuries and continents – namely, that women smell different (i.e. worse) than men, and that witches must smell especially dreadful.

Early modern fantasies about the underlying foulness of women demonstrate the particularly loaded connection of smell to gender.84 Evoked by classical through contemporary authors, the “noisome smell” that “reeks” from even the fairest lady “in private” was a ready means to reinforce distinctions between the sexes (Lucretius qtd. in Classen, Howes, and Synnott 38). Where Webster explains that witches can be called “Saga” because of their proclivity for smell, the word for prostitute in many languages (Spanish “puta,” Italian “puttana,” French “putain”) is likewise related to the Latin root putère: “to stink.” One strain of derogatory sexual rhetoric in the sixteenth and

84 I choose “gender” as a term rather than “sex” because while my consideration of smell relates to biological ideas about women, I want to emphasise their constructedness. That sex-specific concepts like menstruation were applied to Jewish men to debase them in early modern texts proves that smell was associated with a social code that maintained a hierarchy between masculinity and femininity.
seventeenth centuries related the wombs of whores to toilets, and social reformers in Florence even remarked that the prostitutes vanished when the sewer drains were cleaned, linking both feminine evil and sexual licentiousness to bad smell (Corbin 145). The connection between the womb and the nose derives largely from classical antiquity. Reinforcing Plato’s idea of the “independent” smell-womb, English physicians warned that a woman might abort if her genitals were subjected to the smell of a snuffed candle, since her uterus had its own distinct odour preferences (Wiesner 33). Curiously, the pathway between the nose and womb was thought to be so direct that smell-tests were administered to confirm pregnancy, validate virginity, and to try women for witchcraft. At its core, however, the foulness of women’s smell resided in one biological anomaly: menstruation.

Early modern anatomy maintained that a woman’s blood was more superfluous and consequently less refined than a man’s in order to supply the fetus in reproduction (Paster, Embarrassed 80). Because women’s blood was impure from the start, the blood let by her body each month was thought to be doubly excremental. It is therefore hardly surprising that the odour of menses has often been deemed to be among the most repulsive and polluting of scents. Doctors (such as Crooke and Paré) and midwives (such as Jane Sharp) exhorted married couples not to copulate when the wife was in her “courses” since this relation could easily contaminate the husband, or worse, engender

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85 Jacques Guillemeau’s book, Childbirth (1612), attests that “if she receiue below any strong or stinking odor or smell, […] and the sent pierce not vp to her nose, she hath conceiued” (6). One means of confirming pregnancy was to place a bulb of garlic into a woman’s vagina; if she was with child, then you could not smell the garlic on her breath the following day. Paster describes parallel smell-tests for virginity: a woman is “asked to smell the smoke of ‘some broken patience dock leaves,’ whereupon, if she does not ‘bepiss herself, she is not a virgin’” (Embarrassed 46). The relation between smell, the womb, and urine also figures in witch-hunting guides. Bell avows that one way to recognise a witch is to throw “gross Salt in the Pipe of a Kye” onto “the Fire” to release a smoke “like that of Brimstone,” since at this smell witches “instantly shall let go their Urine” (16).
monstrous births. Medical writings of pre-modern Europe imagine the odour of menstrual blood to be so toxic that it could dim mirrors, rust iron, curdle milk, spoil salted meats, and even make dogs mad. That the odour of menstrual blood was believed to be this powerful, and that the smell-tests for virginity, witchcraft, and pregnancy were so similar, attests to there being something inherent to olfaction that serves to constrain female sexuality. But, as I will suggest, just when Macbeth would seem to reinscribe these gendered hierarchies through its return to the foulness of women, it actually upsets the norm to underscore instead how the menstrual odour of the other is a potent force: it invades, manipulates, and affects men.

Menstrual blood makes an unsettling appearance in Lady Macbeth’s conjuration of night’s “thick” spirits:

[...] Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th’access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th’effect and it. Come to my woman’s breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell. (1.5.39-50)

Jenijoy La Belle was the first of many critics to argue that when Lady Macbeth pleads “make thick my blood,/ Stop up the th’access and passage to remorse,” she is “asking for the periodic flow to cease, the genital tract to be blocked” (382). There is certainly a biological echo of menstruation, or what Thomas Brugis called the “flowing of womens natural visits” (99), to her “compunctious visitings of nature.” La Belle offers compelling evidence for reading Lady Macbeth’s speech as an appeal to amenorrhea (the early
cessation of menstruation) by detailing contemporary medical terms like “visits” and “womb passage.” In a very literal way, Lady Macbeth demands that the spirits “unsex” her by removing her womanly capacity for menstruation, eliminating any potential remorse in hardening her mind through her body. Her call to the spirits to “take my milk for gall” suggests a return to smell in the mammillary processes and complicates it since breast milk was purported to be a purified form of menses, “none other thing than blood made white” (Paré qtd. in Crawford 51). Her conversion of menses to milk to gall suggests not only a physical corruption but also that Lady Macbeth is willing to nurse a familiar in the sinister way witches used their supernumerary teats. The thickening of her blood from “crown” to “toe” provides a medical framework for understanding her psychological disturbance since amenorrhea was commonly linked to fainting (she swoons in 2.1), melancholy passions, mental unrest, and somnambulism. The Scottish Doctor’s diagnosis that Lady Macbeth is “Not so sick, my lord,/ As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies” (5.3.39-40) merges these biological and mental components of amenorrhea, and Simon Forman further links this condition to suicide: “full of fancies … She hath not her course and the menstrual blood runneth to her head … And she thinks the devil doth tempt her to do evil to herself” (qtd. in Crawford 54). La Belle, Joanna Levin, and Kaara L. Peterson all read Lady Macbeth’s call to be “unsexed” as menstrual blockage: a perversion of the womb’s blood that both relays cultural fears of the maternal body and renegotiates the boundaries between female hysteria and demonic possession.

Yet what no critic, to my knowledge, has noticed is the degree to which both the cause and consequence of Lady Macbeth’s amenorrhea depend upon smell. She wants to inhale, or be inspired by, the miasmal agents within “the dunnest smoke of hell” (1.5.50).
The hovering witches in the “filthy air” exhibit powers of prophecy, and so too Lady Macbeth divines that Macbeth “wouldst” be great but “wouldst not play false” (1.5.20). It is perhaps her increased female intuition through smell that renders her especially susceptible to the “foul whisp’rings” within the air (5.1.68). Her invocation of those “sightless substances” that cloak themselves in “thick night” to “wait on nature’s mischief” forcefully speaks to the network of elemental smell contagion that Shakespeare associates with the sisters throughout the play (1.5.48-49). But beyond this, early modern physicians reasoned that amenorrhea perturbed the brain due to the continuity between the nose and womb. The smell of menstrual blood stagnating in the female body cripples the mind. Burton clarifies that the brain is “offended with those vicious vapours which come from menstruous blood […] that fuliginous exhalation” (qtd. in La Belle 383). Cures for amenorrhea aimed to correct this imbalance through smell-treatments, using womb fumigators, pessaries, or “noxious fumes” at “the nose” to “drive the blood down” (Crawford 54). For example, the Norwich doctor Sadler prescribes “suffumigations” made of “nutmeg, cloves, bayberries, mugwort, galbanum &c.” to cure the “mother” (27). Smell is not only the source of Lady Macbeth’s amenorrhea if she is infected by miasma and contaminated by the smell of her own suppressed menses, but the same vapour that corrupts her mind stinks outwardly as a sign of tainted femininity. Where Macbeth seeks some drug or perfume, some “sweet oblivious antidote” to “Cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff/ Which weighs upon the heart” (5.3.45-47), his

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86 Recipes for womb fumigators appear in the writings of Agrippa, Burton, Culpeper, Crooke, Paré, Forman, Sadler, and Sharp, all of whom note which odours are best to burn before the vulva as a “suffumigation” and which are best to apply directly to the nose. The use of odiferous drugs for women’s treatment persisted into the nineteenth century, as Corbin remarks: “the mysterious rapport that was established between the nose and womb, led doctors to use odours as antispasmodics to calm their female patients […] fumigations with paper, old shoes, and other stinking substance soothed rising vapours and cured amenorrhea” (66). See Patricia Crawford pages 54-55 and Dugan’s Perfume 117-19.
physician is unwilling to offer such a cure. For Lady Macbeth, the smell of her blood turns against her brain as she loses her olfactory influence over her husband.

What is at stake in rereading Lady Macbeth’s amenorrhea as bound to smell is a new means of theorising her hold on Macbeth. Whereas menses were linked to the most toxic of odours and, thereby, to the “dirt” and “disorder” that required control and sanctioned the gender hierarchies that subjected – and continue to subject – women (Douglas 2), Shakespeare’s treatment of the smell of blood upends these premises to show the inescapable power of scent. It is a critical commonplace to observe that as Macbeth grows bolder in his crimes, Lady Macbeth diminishes in strength and that her sway over her husband evaporates in equal measure. What if we were to read Macbeth’s varying desire and attraction as localised in smell? Attitudes towards the scent of women are marked by a curious paradox: the odour of menses makes them repulsive and foul but, at the same time, this odor di femmina disperses a “seductive effluvia” that encourages male attraction (Corbin 44). The smell of a woman at the fertile and menstrual age could, intriguingly, “impregnate” men “with the subtle vapours transmitted” (Corbin 44, emphasis mine). Smell again intercedes between two genders and crosses their roles to produce a provocative sexual ambiguity. Before Lady Macbeth calls the spirits to unsex her she is a powerful and defiant agent – one Macbeth respects as his “dearest partner of greatness” (1.5.10). She first holds Macbeth in thrall, but after her renunciation of womanly “visits” she gradually loses her power to persuade him; Macbeth increasingly “keep[s]” to himself (3.1.44) and withholds his plans to murder

87 This is not to say that Lady Macbeth personifies amenorrhea despite the “consistency with which her troubled character embodies these symptoms” (La Belle 384). On the contrary, I believe that Shakespeare uses this medical discourse to entangle her motivation with possessing spirits and miasmal infection, rendering her more complex than either virgin or virago, good or evil, woman or witch; it is the olfactory confusion among these categories that is itself the point.
Banquo and Fleance (3.2.46-47). Lady Macbeth’s odour has changed. Where she once smelt mature and menstruous (musky, fishy, and pheremonal) or perhaps like a young mother (floral scents laced with milky sourness) – “I have given suck” (1.7.54) – she has now lost the natural odour of “womanhood” and smells of blood thickened from amenorrhea. Sadler associated the sulphurous odour of the “suppression of the courses” with rotting eggs: the woman becomes “the more foule and filthie; as appears in egges […] which vitiated yeeld the noysomest savour” (70). It may seem farfetched to read Lady Macbeth’s influence over her husband in such sensual terms, and indeed I do not mean to argue that all of her control derives from odour rather than her rhetorical strategies, but the play’s own language of blowing air, foulness, and “fume[s]” (1.7.66) suggests that there is something about the ephemeral nature of scent that operates in tandem with the supernatural forces to separate Macbeth from his wife.

For one, Lady Macbeth’s new pungency aligns her with the witches and with their troubling gender indeterminacy. Inflicted with the stoppage of her courses, she acquires a similar “peculiar s[c]ent” (Bell 16). The witchcraft prosecution records of the 1590s attest that it was menopausal women who were the most frequently accused, and these women “were particularly associated with bad smells” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 36). The perplexing appearance of Macbeth’s weird sisters recalls this putridity of older women. They incite Banquo to question “What are these,/ So withered, and so wild in their attire [?]” (1.3.37-38) and, while they “should be women,” their “beards” forbid a clear interpretation of their sex (1.3.43-44). Just as Lady Macbeth manifests the odours of defeminisation, so too the witches “have characteristics that reveal them as unsexed” sharers in “catamenial retention” (La Belle 384). Both Culpeper and Sadler link
halted menstruation to female beards: “some Women have hairs in their Chin, when their Courses stop” (Culpeper qtd. in La Belle 384). The frightening gender instability of the witches’ smell augments the malign implications of the Macbeths’ childlessness since Lady Macbeth’s amenorrhea not only makes her barren but converts her unmanning feminine odour into a perverted “otherness.”

Here the odour of woman invades man to unsex, “unmake” (1.7.54), or “undo” him (1.5.24). Fittingly, Lady Macbeth’s primary means of motivating her husband is to challenge his manhood. She fears that he is “too full o’th’ milk” (1.5.16) and so imagines infusing her “spirits” into him (1.5.25) so as to urge him toward “that which rather thou dost fear to do” (1.5.23). Whereas Lady Macbeth excels in masculine vigour, becoming so firm that Macbeth can envision her bringing “forth men-children only” (1.7.72), Shakespeare plays on Macbeth’s softness in jibes that hint at impotence or “impuissance embodied” (Barmazel 119). Instead of inflaming Macbeth with desire and masculine hardness as the odour of menses should (a “reminder of seductive power” and the “creative mission” [Corbin 46]), Lady Macbeth’s odor di femmina compels Macbeth into destructive action. Because Macbeth’s sexuality is precariously poised on his relationship to his wife, her increasing gender indeterminacy through smell taints him as well with womanliness. “Are you a man?” she taunts, charging him with the shame of “these flaws and starts” that better suit “a woman’s story at a winter’s fire” (3.4.57, 62, 64). While he tries to ready himself for the murder – which notably he imagines as a rape in his reference to Tarquin (2.1.55) – he “bend[s] up/ Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” (1.7.79-80). The phallic overtones are just as overt when Lady Macbeth retorts with
disappointment: “You do unbend your noble strength” (2.2.43). It is Lady Macbeth’s pungency that unsettles Macbeth in conjunction with the smell of witches’ miasma.

Whereas the odour of Lady Macbeth and the witches perceptibly “unman[s]” Macbeth (3.4.72), Jewish men were grouped alongside women for their unusual odour as an “other” with a “particularly repulsive smell (*foetor judaicus*)” (Katz 440). Given the contemporary medical theories about the smell-womb in women, it is only slightly more bizarre that Jewish men were believed to have been “punished” for their blood libel against Christ “with a very frequent Bloud-fluxe” or “*menstruo sanguinis*” through their noses (Calvert qtd. in Katz 441). According to early modern science, nose-bleeds provided a vicarious means for the already gender ambiguous, circumcised Jewish man to menstruate. Unsurprisingly, the medieval and early modern texts that describe Jewish odour and purgation rituals recursively circle the smell of blood. The myth of male menstruation dovetails with occult beliefs about Jews using blood “criminally obtained” from Christian children in order to “rid themselves of their fetid odour – an act intrinsic to only a fiendish faith, that is, an immoral group” (Largey and Watson 1022). Where Western nasal codes align smell with moral purity, they deem both Jews and witches threats to the social body as a whole. At peak times of plague in early modern Europe, Jews and witches were mass executed in pogroms that foreshadowed the Holocaust, burnt to expunge an ailing Christian populace from “evil” smells (Aberth 32-35). The tale which purported that the smell of blood from one crime, Christ’s murder, stuck on the Jews so persistently that it demanded both expulsion (as menstruation) and purification (through more blood), evinces the extraordinarily powerful associations of
smell and evil in Shakespeare’s contemporary culture: “It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood” (3.4.121).

In the cauldron scene of Macbeth, the three weird sisters throw the “liver” of a “blaspheming Jew” into their potion (4.1.26). As one of a series of disembodied parts the Jew’s liver may not at first seem all that remarkable, but given these beliefs about the odour of otherness, the witches’ ingredients take on new significance. Certainly the smell of the cauldron must be awful – filled with toad’s “sweltered venom,” “poisoned entrails,” and “lizard’s leg[s],” the bubbling “hell-broth” blended a variety of noxious fumes (4.1.7, 5, 17, 19). Yet the Third Witch’s additions to the brew focus on human parts that invoke the specific foulness of miscegenation, menstruation, and aborted reproduction:

Liver of blaspheming Jew,
Gall of goat, and slips of yew
Slivered in the moon’s eclipse,
Nose of Turk, and Tartar’s lips,
Finger of birth-strangled babe
Ditch-delivered by a drab,
Make the gruel thick and slab. (4.1.26-32).

The cultural and racial others “Jew,” “Turk,” and “Tartar” balance uncomfortably on the border of human and animal. Smell again marries them together in a monstrous hybrid. Where all these men are unchristened, like the “birth-strangled babe,” the Jew is likely mentioned “because of the Jews’ reputation, in anti-Semitic tradition, for obscene rites” with the blood of “Christian children” (Biggins 271). The organs of prominence, both “nose” and “liver,” revisit not only male menstruation but sexual passion. The goat was often linked to lust, and the prostitute returns us to the dirty wombs of the “putain.” Lady Macbeth is a shadowy presence here too: the moon’s eclipse recalls her halted menstrual
cycle, the “gall” of the goat is drawn instead of milk, and the drab also murders her
tender “babe.” Shakespeare compounds these allusions to a reproductive world gone
wrong with her perverted odour of femininity in the smells of conjuration.

Witches were known to use odours as a means to harness demons. As Burton
reports, “spirits ‘subjeciunt se odoribus’ [join themselves to smells]” (qtd. in Reid 143).
There is an interesting specificity to the witches’ potion in Macbeth, and especially to the
enigmatic final ingredient: “three ounces of a red-haired wench” (4.1.58). While we
cannot know if Shakespeare read treatises like Reginald Scot’s Discouerie of Witchcraft
(1584), The Newes from Scotland (1591), or James I’s Daemonologie (1597), there are
verbal similarities and, at very least, a sense of borrowing from these “common beliefs”
(Brooke 79). Shakespeare’s brew seems uniquely appropriate to Hecate as a figure of the
moon, because his witches’ potion echoes what Scot describes for lunar conjurations:

Spirits under Luna are like Ghosts and shadows, very gasty to behold;
though in humane shape sometimes male, sometimes female. Fumigations
are offered unto them of Frogs dryed, white Poppy-seed, Bulls Eyes,
Camphire, and Frankincense, incorporated with Gooses blood, and the
menstruous blood of Women. (68)

In this context, the “ounces of the red haired wench” are a probable allusion to the
unmanning odour of menses. Measuring the wench’s contribution in ounces instead of
pounds (think of Shylock), suggests that it is fluid rather than flesh that she adds to the
cauldron – and the “stench” must be its defining characteristic since it is offered to
exaggerate the smell of the brew to “make the younker madder” (4.1.56). Popular lore
held that redheads “were always pungent, both putrid and fascinating, as if their cycle
had broken down and put them in a continuous state of menstruation” (Corbin 45). That
Shakespeare stipulates that the “ounces” come from a redheaded girl after the “blood of a
“bat” and “juice of toad” is indicative of the sway feminine smell exerted, especially when blended into the “stench” of the witches’ cauldron (4.1.57). It is from this air that the three apparitions take shape to bolster Macbeth with false confidence.

**Stinkards**

For the audience of *Macbeth*, the thickness in the air was oppressive and immediate. Not only would the opening squibs have flooded the venue with odour – beginning an “experience of the play with a keen awareness of the smell of gunpowder” (Harris, “Smell” 473) – but the tallow candles and burning torches used in almost every scene made plumes of acrid smoke a reality throughout the performance. The smell would stifle in an indoor theatre and would be unpleasantly close even in an open-air playhouse like the Globe: the stage on which Forman first records seeing *Macbeth* in 1611. If we imagine that April afternoon performance, then candles become all the more important to signify darkness as a theatrical convention. After all, *Macbeth* is predominately set at night and in storm. Because beeswax candles were prohibitively expensive, the most common fuel for stage lights was a meat-fat rendered from sheep or oxen. The stench of these guttering, dripping candles was difficult to ignore. In *Cymbeline*, Giacomo attests to “the smoky light/ That’s fed with stinking tallow” (1.6.110-11). Essentially melting suet, these candles filled the room with the odour of “grease frying,” producing both an “obtrusive smell” and profuse “smoke” (Graves 15-16). Nevertheless, *Macbeth*’s stage directions repeatedly call for torches, tapers, and torchbearers (see 1.7, 2.1, and 3.3), after the murder Lady Macbeth demands “light by her continually” (5.1.21-22), and in those few instances when these props are absent, the
verbal imagery still alludes to smoke. In the first act alone, the air is “filthy” (1.1.11), it smokes “with bloody execution” (1.2.18), it “hide[s]” the fire of the “stars,” blankets the “light” (1.4.50-51), and “pall[s]” the olfactory together with Lady Macbeth in the “dunnest smoke of hell” (1.5.50). Add into consideration the tobacco in the galleries – or the “foggie fume” that “clowd[s]” the “ayr” from every “Tobacco-Chevalier” (Buttes qtd. in Gurr 45) – and the foul airs described in the play acquire palpable substance. From the perspective of the early modern spectator, *Macbeth* was a play seen literally per-fume (through smoke).

While the stench of this theatrical smoke was its dominant characteristic, by necessity it would have made the playgoers doubt their eyes. Compounding sight and smell, the smoke synesthetically realised the words described in the play to make the audience question (alongside Macbeth) what things onstage were real or imagined. In smoke, the “eyes are made the fools o’th’ other senses” (2.1.44), causing us to wonder: “Is this a dagger I see before me,/ The handle toward my hand? […] Or art thou but/ A dagger of the mind, a false creation” (2.1.33-34, 37-38)? Suspended between reality and fantasy, and between sight and smell, the dagger tempts Macbeth with its “palpable” form even as it seems a phantom “proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain” (2.1.39-40). Macbeth vacillates between doubting his mind and trusting his senses to finally conclude: “There’s no such thing./ It is the bloody business which informs/ Thus to mine eyes” (2.1.47-50). The space of disbelief opened up by the smoke also enhances the supernatural dimension of the witches’ appearance as the narrated events happen visually for the observers, leaving an olfactory trace. If diminishing one sense heightens the

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88 Visual depictions of *Macbeth* often feature tapers, clouds, and smoke. See William Rimmer’s painting of “Macbeth’s Apparitions,” or Johann Heinrich Fuseli’s “Lady Macbeth” and “Macbeth and the Witches.”
others as a compensatory response, then the audience of *Macbeth* blinded by the fumes would have registered smell all the more powerfully as they questioned the nature of what was performed before them. Were the witches real? Was the ghost of Banquo a true spirit or merely an impersonating actor? The anxiety over this confusion of categories in Macbeth’s dagger speech repeats in the play-watching experience through the fusion of olfaction and vision.

In fact, the majority of *Macbeth*’s dramatic illusions depend upon this hazy uncertainty. Of the eight stage illusions Brooke enumerates in his introduction to *Macbeth* – “darkness in light, the Weird Sisters, the dagger, Banquo’s ghost, the apparitions, Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking, Birnam Wood, Macbeth’s head” – at least six employ smoke to create their impression (6). At the exit in the third scene “witches vanish” (1.3.76), he notes that “an ingenious illusion was called for” combining “smoke, trapdoors,” and perhaps a “winch” in the Globe theatre (104n.78). Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene used the smoky light of a single taper, and the apparitions had billowing smoke from below envelop the cauldron that “sinks” through the trapdoor (Gurr 26). Iain Wright further speculates that *Macbeth* showed the dagger in a stage trick achieved with smoke and concave mirrors, and that the procession of Banquo’s offspring used a projection machine akin to a camera obscura. *Macbeth*’s language of “fog” (1.1.11) and “the blanket of the dark” (1.5.52) thus materialises as actual smoke inhaled bodily by the attendee: the conjured miasma is real, visible, and unavoidably stinky. The smell of smoke in the theatre obliterates any distinction between the group onstage and those observers offstage, shrouding both in the same ethereal world.
In a metatheatrical moment, Shakespeare has Ross smudge the border between performance and reality by centring on these smoky (and smelly) stage conventions. Conversing with another bystander, Ross observes: “Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man’s act,/ Threatens his bloody stage. By th’ clock ’tis day,/ And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp” (2.4.5-7). As one of Macbeth’s only daytime scenes, it is highly significant that Ross points to the hovering darkness that continues to smother the light. Indeed, if the “travelling lamp” is read as the sun, and if the actor playing Ross made any gesture upwards to the Globe’s painted canopy, then the performative resonances of “heavens,” “act,” and “stage” bristle with olfactory meaning. The air in the theatre, reeking of squib, candle, and tobacco fumes, did “entomb” the “living light” and – at least theatrically – veiled the afternoon sun and “day’s shame” behind these signifiers of “night’s predominance” (2.4.5-9). While Ross symbolically opposes the “heavens” against hell, his faulty plural/singular agreement makes it unclear who or what “threatens” man. What is evident from Ross’s speech, however, is that hell is localised in Macbeth’s evil “act”; and, troublingly, that the stench of his “bloody stage” spreads outwards, irresistibly contaminating the larger world to infect humans and animals alike by frenzying the falcon, the mousing owl, and Duncan’s horses. Macbeth’s “night’s business” bleeds into the daylight, “just as the reek generated by a mass of putrid flesh bears infection to many who breathe it” (Altick 176). By aligning the heavenly elements with a retribution for the evil represented on the “bloody stage,” Ross’s speech suggests a “threat” that carries into the audience. The unnatural fog of theatrical smoke was therefore all the more menacing as it freighted the air with a shared miasma (2.4.5-6).
The possible transference of contagion from character to spectator through smell—both as physical plague and as moral evil—was a very real fear. Jacobean audiences were accustomed to preachers admonishing them for attending plays, and anti-theatricalists presaging the “contagion of theatrical sights” (Rainolds 177), “filthy infections” of the stage (Munday 70), and ague attendant upon inhaling the “stenche of impuritie into their noses” (Gosson, *Playes Confuted* 51). Many Elizabethans and Jacobeanss believed that the plague was a punishment dealt directly by God: a stroke of wrath (from the Latin, *plaga*, to strike) for the sorts of abuses Gosson and Stubbes vilified. And chief among these so-called abuses were plays. As Gosson makes painstakingly clear, “they that came honest to a play, may depart infected” (*Playes Confuted* 113). The plague was endemic in England from the end of the fifteenth century and, significantly, the most virulent outbreaks in London occurred at the same time that *Macbeth* arrived on the stage: 1603-1610. *Macbeth*'s audience surely would have remembered that when the number of deaths rose in 1592 the theatres were shut. Ostensibly, this measure was to prevent the large-scale gatherings that fostered disease. Yet there was something more dangerous about playhouses than the fact that they united thousands of Londoners since other public venues, such as large churches, remained open. Instead, “authorities closed theaters in plague-time in order to contain a marginal entity” (Ross 447). The idea that the marginal “Liberties” contained some nebulous, stinking evil that was more likely to promote infection held true in the numbers of plague-deaths reported in Henry Chettle’s bill. Time and again this threat returns as the diffusion of unclean smell. In *Londoners their Entertainment* (1603), Henry Petowe decries the “excessiue abomination of filthiness practiced in those places, more than the
rest” (4). But perhaps the most compelling portraits of the stinking dangers of the playhouse came from the mouths of playwrights like Shakespeare, Dekker, and Jonson.

While the audience ran a risk of contamination from the odours of their theatrical environment, especially given that plague “strikes present death not by the sight but smell” (DeWall 80), playwrights voiced equal concern about the noisome crowd. In 1600, John Marston wrote that private theatres were preferable since there “A man shall not be choakte/ With the stench of Garlicke, nor be pasted/ To the barmy Jacket of a Beer-Brewer” (qtd. in Gurr 259). The medieval word for a lower-class audience member, a “stinkard” – the “ard” suffix means “does to excess” – was used interchangeably with “groundling” in the sixteenth century, and it was adopted with gusto by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. One of the few authors to compose both plays and plague pamphlets, Dekker relished the word “stinkard” and used it often. Between 1603 and 1609, Dekker refers to “Stinkards” in his plague treatises, lambastes their “Breath of the great Beast” (27) in Guls Horne-booke (1609), finds “two-peny” stinkers in “the roomes of a Playhouse” seated “Cheek by Iowle with a Punke” (Knights C4), and links them to a plague fog: the Globe “smoakt euery after noone with Stinkards, who were so glewed together in crowdes with the Steames of strong breath, that when they came foorth, their faces lookt as if they had been perboyld” (Seuen 27).89 Interestingly, it is the infectious breath of the spectators and their associations with smelly prostitutes that provide the charge in his insult, reprising the two odour cruxes probed by Macbeth: miasma and the unmanning scent of women. All the documentation that survives about Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres implies that these were very smelly places. There were no

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89 On Dekker and stinkards see Andrew Gurr, esp. 44-45, and Nichole DeWall, esp. 79-81.
intermissions and no toilets, except for communal buckets kept in the rear galleries; refreshments such as oranges, nuts, and bottled beer were hawked and discarded during the show; and, vilest of all, the body-odours of the overcrowded spectators were infamously “intense” (Gurr 19).

Such descriptions all too readily prompt a sneer from the modern reader. As Harris attests, today’s critic may find it perversely entertaining to characterise Shakespeare’s theatre “in an age before deodorant, showers, and air conditioning” as a “malodorous cesspit of the great unwashed” (“Smell” 465). The important conclusion to draw here, rather, is that no matter how offensive the odours of the theatre were, they were the norm. All of Shakespeare’s plays – and other dramatists’ plays – were staged in roughly this same smellscape. Jonson’s Alchemist (set in plague-time London) and Barnabe Barnes’ The Devil’s Charter both employ squibs in their staging, but they do so in ways that draw upon the associations between vice figures and fireworks instead of using the smell as a plague medium associated with air-borne bodies. What makes the smell of Macbeth so distinctively “foul” is precisely its smoky atmosphere: the tallow candles, squibs, and odoriferous onstage illusions like the witches’ cauldron. It was the combination of these performance devices with the regular constellation of scents in the playhouse that gave Macbeth its unique “smellprint.” As we have seen, the language of smell in the play centres on evil airs, miasmas, and filth, and its own staging conditions yielded more smoke and stage-blood that made the air unusually thick.

“Thickness” works as a pivot in Ross’s metatheatrical speech to blur the air in the theatre with the blood on the stage, and this move recurs throughout the play in Shakespeare’s use of this adjective. The messengers post to Duncan with news from the
bloody battle so quickly that they fell upon him “as thick as hail” (1.3.95). Lady Macbeth’s “unsex me” soliloquy repeats the word “thick” in order to unite the congealing of her menses (1.5.42) with the arrival of “thick” night and “dunnet smoke” (1.5.49-50). Macbeth calls for a “bloody” hand to abet Banquo’s murder even as “light thickens” (3.2.49, 51). And the witches combine “blood” and airy “stench” to “make the gruel thick and slab” (4.1.37, 57, 32). In each of these moments, Shakespeare invests the smokiness inside the theatre with an additional layer of significance: it becomes an embodied fug of supernatural evil, then a cloud of plague miasma, and finally a malodorous reminder of the smell of blood. Modern-day productions of Macbeth continue to generate the disturbing impression of breathing an “ensanguined mist” (Bradley 336). An audience’s repulsion at Macbeth’s crimes has a physical corollary in the foul air: the play appeals to this affective sense in order to intensify the response of fear. But even if these olfactory traces survive in the language of the play, I hope to have shown how much richer the experience of smell in performance was for the early modern spectator.

Smell demands immersion, and it creates a dramatically productive confusion of categories by diffusing across boundaries. While people may detach themselves from a visual landscape and assess it from without, as one would a painting, smellscapes necessitate continuity between the perceiver and that perceived in the development of an alternate dimension of mediated experience. This is in part a consequence of biology; neural studies demonstrate that olfactory processing is deep-seated in our evolutionary core – the reptilian brain – and that smell is most prone to stimulate motivational reactions (Engen 59). Smells “penetrate the body and permeate the immediate
environment, and thus one’s response is much more likely to involve strong affect” (Porteous 91). The application of these response theories to embodied early modern theatrical experience highlights the dangerous permeability smell imposed on Macbeth’s perceivers. The wafting odours in Shakespeare’s playhouse insist upon the crossover between Macbeth’s fictional world of “filthy air” and the attendees’ own plague-infested London (1.1.11). Where this chapter has argued that the foul smoke in the theatre would have served its own dramatic function, enacting the threat of miasma and intensifying the spectators’ response by impinging on their personhood, I have attempted to address the lack of scholarship Harris identifies in that my project aims to recover the “memories and associations” of a historical phenomenology of “odors” (“Smell” 486). In speculating as to the impact of smells in performance, my goal has been to open up alternative readings of gender, agency, and the enigmatic nature of evil in Macbeth. It is only by fully attending to smell’s immediacy in body as well as text that we can begin to reactivate the psychical and cultural registers of fear latent in Macbeth’s haunting smell of blood.
CHAPTER FOUR

“Amaze Indeed the Very Faculties of Eyes and Ears”:

Sensory Intelligencers in Hamlet

The Rainbow Portrait (c.1600) depicts Elizabeth I enveloped in a copper-coloured wrap woven with eyes and ears. Scattered across her gown, these disembodied parts function in relation to the whole as extended agents of “lawful espiaille” (3.1.34 F). These sense organs displace the Queen’s facial features in miniature – her arched brow, liquid eyes, pointed gaze, and hidden ears – even as they emblematically portray the omnipresent faculties of perception associated with her widespread intelligence network in keeping with the iconography of Tudor portraiture.

As Edward Forset avows in his Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique (1606),

90 Figure 2: The Rainbow Portrait attributed to Isaac Oliver. This image is reproduced with the kind permission of the Marquess of Salisbury, Hatfield House, England.

91 This dissertation uses The Oxford Complete Shakespeare (Jowett, Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Wells) for all Shakespeare citations, and lines marked here with “F” for Folio refer to this same edition. However, I wish to make an exception for Hamlet, choosing instead the new Arden Shakespeare (Thompson and Neil Taylor) because The Oxford Complete Shakespeare only provides the 1623 Folio text and my argument builds more directly from the Second Quarto of 1604/05. There are more than a thousand substantive variations between Q2 and F, and specifically Q2 contains additional sensory passages that are necessary for my analysis, including: “A mote to trouble the mind’s eye” (1.1.111), “Sense sure you have...” (3.4.70-82), and the more expansive ending of act four, scene four, “How all occasions do inform against me” (4.4.31). Where my claim about the eye and ear dyad holds true for all three Hamlets – Q1, Q2, and F – the Second Quarto calls attention to the synaesthetic and synecdochal nature of perception more explicitly than the other texts. To clarify, my choice of Q2 is made with the aim of localising my claims rather than making a case for the authority of this version over the others. Hamlet has a fraught textual history, and I agree with scholars such as Paul Werstine and Randall McLeod who attest that the origin of these books is destined to remain uncertain and that we should treat each play as a separate entity with enough merit to be studied in its own right.

92 Joel Fineman finds a “salacious ear” in this portrait that “both covers and discovers the genitals of Queen Elizabeth” (229). Paralleling aural and sexual penetration, the vulva-like ear hints at the danger of acoustic openness despite the powerful suggestion of her sensory omniscience.
the ruler “seeth more than the hundredth eyes of Argus” because “all Subiects will, as the
sences, play the espials and intelligencers” (15). The equation between senses and spies
was such a common metaphor in the early modern period that the senses became known
as “intelligencers” between the body and the soul. Anatomists, poets, and religious
orators alike refer to the five senses as informants, but they repeatedly single out the eye
and ear – those two senses associated with perception at a distance – for praise as diligent
spies. For instance, Vincent Alsop preaches to his congregation that “had this War been
acted upon […] our Native country, our own eyes would have been the Expresses to tell
of the burning Towns, our ears the Intelligencers that would soon have brought the
tidings” (29). In these moments, eyes and ears are more than comparable to spies; they
embody intelligence mediation in general.

Correspondingly, each of the thirty times Shakespeare mentions “intelligence”
across his works it signifies a message of some political or personal import furtively
obtained by a go-between. Hamlet is crowded with go-betweens, messengers,
ambassadors, and spies. Even the notorious ghost mediates between Denmark and an
otherworldly realm, residing in the middling space of purgatory. This chapter explores

93 Alongside the meaning of “intelligencer” as a “spy” or “secret agent,” came a figurative use popular
between 1580 and 1870 where the term was applied to “things,” especially the “senses” (OED 1.a & 3). To
name but a few examples: Tomkis defines a “sense” in Lingua (1607) as “a facultie by which our Queene
sitting in her priuy chamber hath intelligence of exterior occurrents” (3.5.56-57); Crooke calls the “sences”
“intelligencers betweene the body and the soule” (6) in Microcosmographia (1615); and George Sandys
reinterprets the Midas myth in Ovid’s Metamorphosis Englished (1632), saying that the “ignorant Prince”
was fitly punished with mule ears because he listened to “his spies and intelligencers: who […] might well
be said to heare with such eares” (390).

94 When Shakespeare uses the word “intelligence” it refers to the communication of privileged information
either from a military source, as in Richard II, “I have from Port le Blanc […] received intelligence/ That
[…] three thousand men of war,/ Are making hither with all due expedience” (2.1.278-79, 88-89), or from
a sensory spy, as in The Winter’s Tale, “I have eyes under my service which look upon his removedness,
from whom I have this intelligence” (4.2.35-37). While such knowledge is always obtained second-hand,
an “intelligencer” can equally mediate between people, armies, or worlds. In Richard III, Richard is “hell’s
black intelligencer” (4.4.71) and, oppositely, in Henry IV part two, the Archbishop is “the very opener and
intelligencer/ Between the grace, the sanctities of heaven/ And our dull workings” (4.1.246-48).
the central idea of sensory intelligence and, more specifically, sensory mediation in *Hamlet*. How is secret information communicated between two people by a third party? Why are the senses of sight and hearing especially suited to be that intermediary? While many critics have written on the growing population of spies under Elizabeth I’s spy-master Francis Walsingham and *Hamlet*’s atmosphere of “paranoid surveillance” (Garber, *After All* 484) even linking espionage to spectatorship (see Alison Plowden, Alan Haynes, and Patricia Parker) the role of the senses as intelligencers themselves has not yet received the attention it deserves. Focusing on the moments in which eyes and ears act together as spies, and stand in synecdoche for the body as a whole, sheds valuable new light on the play – revealing the coupled nature of intelligence gathering in *Hamlet* and, further, clarifying the relationship between the maintenance of power within the political landscape of Denmark and its associated body politic. The *pars pro toto* logic that allows the King to represent many individuals in one shared body also underpins the metaphor of sensory intelligencers. Synecdoche is a key figure in *Hamlet*, and whenever Claudius uses this device it is to affirm his own importance as the “head” of state.95 His synecdoches subsume an array of parts into one whole – rendering himself all eye, all ear, or all brow – in such a way as to hierarchise his ruling agency over the other subordinates as subjects. Hamlet’s and Ophelia’s synecdoches, by contrast, insist upon a lack of hierarchy within the body politic for it to work effectively as one entity; their synecdoches emphasise the interdependent relationships among parts. This is the cooperative, coupled model of the sensing body that, I argue, the play ultimately favours. Understanding the rhetoric of the play in this way, and attending to the senses in

95 On the King’s body as a synecdoche for the body politic, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz’s seminal study *The King’s Two Bodies*. 

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particular for their vital role as intelligencers within both the body natural and the body politic reveals the trouble of Claudius as a monarch and offers an explanation – or consolation – for the rise of Fortinbras as a “brother” politic at the play’s conclusion (5.2.221). As Raman remarks, “the pervasive sense in Hamlet’s early scenes of a sensory and a political kingdom under imminent threat develops in relation to an (absent) ideal: that of a properly ordered body, mind, and state” (117). As I will come to show, the aural murder of King Hamlet as a direct attack on “the whole ear of Denmark” (1.5.36) manifests this intertwining of sense, synecdoche, and body politic – because in this play as in the Rainbow Portrait the extension of the senses into an embodied intelligence network parallels the characters’ spying action within the body of the realm. By drawing qualities of the outer world “in” to the soul, these senses give acquired knowledge material “form” as literal “in-formers.”

“How all occasions do inform against me,” Hamlet sighs, seeing the readiness of the Norwegian army to battle over a trivial patch of land as a rebuke of his “dull revenge” (4.4.31-32). Using “inform” in the sense of indict or accuse, Hamlet avers that all things – “all occasions” – act as spies ready to expose his delay at any moment. Like Elizabeth’s enveloping dress, the environment itself in Hamlet seems filled with watching eyes and listening ears, and indeed a dominant pattern of eye and ear imagery suffuses the action of the play. Faced with the mystery of a silent ghost and Elsinore’s clandestine military preparations in the first scene, Marcellus asks:

Why this same strict and most observant watch
So nightly toils the subject of the land,
And with such daily cost of brazen cannon
And foreign mart for implements of war, […]
Doth make the night joint labourer with the day?
Who is’t that can inform me? (1.1.70-73, 77-78)
It is no accident that his protracted line of questions closes on the words “inform me.” Once again “inform” carries the associations of espionage all too familiar from Shakespeare’s own cultural climate in the 1590s, when Walsingham’s “secret spies” and intelligencers were primed to “draw secrets from the conscience of the body politic” (Gallagher 96). Clearly Marcellus has already seen more than the political powers of Elsinore might wish: he has witnessed the importation of foreign armaments, the relentless effort to cast “brazen” cannons and build more ships, and the “sweaty haste” fuelling this process. His first line, which comments on the state’s vigilance in this “strict and most observant watch,” also describes his visual scrutiny. Yet, while the act of eye-witnessing these preparations and the silent apparition yields Marcellus insight into the “question of these wars,” he recognises that his ocular faculties fall short of the full story – offering only “a mote” to “trouble the mind’s eye” (1.1.111) – and so he turns to an “eare witenesse” (Abernethie 1). That Marcellus invites Horatio, whose name famously resonates with oratio, to provide him spoken news of these events signifies a critical turn toward the acoustic to supplement his visual findings.

In response to Marcellus’s request for information, Horatio replies that he will serve as an aural conduit: “That can I./ At least the whisper goes so” (1.1.78-79). Importantly, Horatio acts not only as an intelligencer here, but further as a mediator of public discourse. He draws on others’ whispers in order to supply background about Fortinbras: “the source” of this “post-haste and rummage in the land” (1.1.105-6). Given that “whispers” and snatches of conversation were often enough to support inquiry in reformation England, Horatio’s insider knowledge must have sounded altogether more sinister to an early modern hearer. People were sometimes convicted upon hearsay as
aural evidence or what Edmund in *King Lear* calls “auricular assurance” (1.2.93). While at the turn of the sixteenth century “hearsay” described any report heard aloud and was thus not necessarily suspect, it began to acquire associations with “naughty talk” and a lack of credibility akin to “vain rumour” as its legal implications evolved under the treason and anti-sedition acts passed during Mary Tudor’s reign. Keith Botelho notes that Mary’s proclamations held accountable for punishment not only the loose tongues of “untrue” rumourmongers but any ears that listened to such “light talk” (17). Even though these words blend together in today’s definitions, “hearsay” was related to but distinct from “rumour” for an early modern auditor in one important respect: while rumour is directed toward a particular party with malicious intent, hearsay lacks a target. Hearsay can be true or false, but it indexes what is commonly said in passive constructions such as “it is reported that” or “some say” (1.1.157).

The language of hearsay percolates through Horatio’s testimony. Where Marcellus’s desire for an informer stems from the partial testimony of his eyes, Horatio’s information depends in turn upon a series of hearers. He turns from the ears of the ghost, startled by the rooster, to his own ears, casting himself as a reporter of common talk: “I have heard” (1.1.148). Marcellus uses further hearsay to posit a link between the ghost’s disappearance and the bird’s religious significance: “Some say […]/ This bird of dawning singeth all night long./ And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad […]” (1.1.157, 159-60). Horatio concurs, repeating: “So have I heard” (1.1.164). The cycle of hearing, telling, rehearing, and retelling concretises the process of mediation that transforms hearsay into sceptically accepted wisdom, or “so they say.” Moreover, the

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96 Recall that the British government’s punishment for a failure to hear its laws was often brutally literal: “the next punishment vnto death by our Nationall law, is losing the eares” (Egerton A7).

97 Grace Tiffany studies the Christian associations of the “crowing cock” who “troubles the ear” (80).
scene’s consistent pairing of sight with hearing, of “our eyes” (1.1.28) and “your ears” (1.1.30), echoes throughout Horatio’s advice. He concludes by shifting away from the bird’s sound to note instead the arriving vision of day: “So have I heard and do in part believe it. But look, the morn in russet mantle clad” (1.1.164-65, emphasis mine). This alternation of visual cues or “dreaded sight(s)” and acoustic signals, such as ringing bells and crowing roosters, frames the “dumb” spirit as subject to interrogation by both senses as a combined source of intelligence (1.1.24, 170).

My study of mediation in Hamlet considers how spies relay secret intelligence between two parties, and further how these agents gather information through particular senses – yoking visual (observational/ epistolary) and aural (eavesdropping/ hearsay) mediums. Where Shakespeare fixates on spies and messengers, I argue that he also characterises how sight and hearing interact as a sensory dyad: they are mutual informants paired together above the other three senses in the pursuit of knowledge, although they sometimes appear in tension and contradict one another. Rather than privilege either form, I aim to show how these senses, and corresponding sensory mediums, are twinned and indeed often blur into one another. I suggest that this overlap between oral and written media calls attention to Shakespeare’s self-consciousness about an emergent print culture that witnessed the creation of print texts alongside stage performance. Few scholars have contemplated the “persistent, almost obsessive series of allusions” to the “eyes” and “ears” in Hamlet (Caldwell 139). It was not until 1979 that Caldwell first brought forward the imagery of sense as an “undiscovered” pattern (137), and, later in the same year, Don Parry Norford argued that this eye and ear language creates a principle of complementarity that demonstrates the shortcomings of all truth in
Hamlet. My work is indebted to these forerunners, and seeks to respond as well to the newer sensory scholarship by Tanya Pollard and Parker that links the questions of aural perception and visual dilation, respectively, to the unfolding of secrets. Yet where each of these critics focuses on the failings of perception – be it either how the senses materialise Hamlet’s “paralyzing doubt” (Caldwell 147), how the ear is damaged by violent speech, or how the eye renders the female body vulnerable – I read the references to the eyes and ears instead as figuring a positive model of mediated intelligence: one that urges the audience towards sensory spying as spectatorship. This is not to say that effective theatre depends upon the sort of oppressive state awareness propagated by Walsingham’s spies, but rather that active theatrical observation calls for a cooperative model of dyadic perception in order to achieve full sensory intelligence. In other words, rather than underscoring the frailty of the senses, Shakespeare illustrates their combined strength as the body’s mediators, particularly in moments of live theatrical engagement. I contend that Hamlet’s representations of visual scrutiny and acoustic permeability reinforce not simply the susceptibility of the body, but the senses’ powerful position as gatherers in a community of knowledge.

Coupled Senses and the King’s Two Bodies

When King Claudius kneels in an attempt at prayer, he maps his personal frustrations onto a political rhetoric of self-division between the King’s two bodies by using a series of synecdoches:

Pray can I not:
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood?
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what’s in prayer but this twofold force
– To be forestalled ere we come to fall
Or pardoned, being down? Then I’ll look up: (3.3.38-50)

Describing himself as a “man to double business bound,” Claudius feels that he is the victim of a double-bind, although, as Anna K. Nardo attests, “in reality he has a clear moral choice” (181). Claudius should give up “those effects for which I did the murder,/My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen” in order to be truly repentant, or he should accept a continual state of guilt (3.3.54-55). Yet, in keeping with the play’s predilection toward twos, doubles, and dyads, he instead tries to have it both ways. Claudius divides himself into halves where the strong “guilt” of one part defeats the strong “intent” of the other, but he equally connects his own duplicity with the familiar synecdoche of the King’s two bodies as a defensive strategy. His marked shift in pronouns between the personal “I” at the start of his soliloquy and the royal “we” at its conclusion signals this turn in thought. The individual possessives of “my fault,” “my crown,” and “mine own ambition” are soon “shuffl[ed],” in Claudius’s words, for a shared compulsion “even to the teeth and forehead of our faults” (3.3.51, 55, 63, emphasis mine). This move from the personal to political is negotiated through the body. Body parts proliferate in his speech; the first synecdoche of the murderous hand who commits the crime represents the whole man and the “wretched state” (3.3.67) by extension in terms that resemble the blood-staining and purification seen in Macbeth’s tyrannical reign as discussed in chapter three. Abstracting himself from the murder, Claudius craftily replaces his “cursed hand” with “offence’s gilded hand” (3.3.43, 58),
making his private crime symptomatic of, and a synecdoche for, the general “corrupted currents of this world” (3.3.57). He then aligns his body natural (hand and visage) with the state’s body political (hand, visage, forehead, and teeth) as a means to broaden his offence and transfer the guilt away from his own “limed soul” (3.3.68). This manipulation of body politic synecdoches is one of Claudius’s favourite strategies for consolidating power throughout the play. In fact, his personification of mercy here as a figure able to confront “the visage of offence” repeats the self-division evident in the King from the opening scene. Where he splits himself into two bodies and opposite purposes, “being down” but looking “up” to heaven (3.3.50), he reprises his first synecdoche of the “warlike state” found in his own eyes, one “auspicious” – or upturned – and one “dropping” (1.2.9, 11). The crimes that encroach upon Denmark even to the “forehead” (3.3.64) through Claudius’s actions as a natural, corruptible man appear etched from the first on the immortal body politic as well, where “our whole kingdom” is “contracted in one brow of woe” (1.2.3-4).

Claudius’s recourse to synecdoche as a device to establish his unimpeachable authority as the head of two bodies fails precisely because it mistakenly concentrates too much power into one part. As much as he would like to keep his gains and absolve himself from guilt by playing false at prayer, his very insistence on his own primacy as a representative for the whole undoes the relationships necessary among the parts – uncoupling vital pairings, divorcing eyes and ears, or even both eyes from each other (in split gaze) such that “something” becomes “rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.90). Where Hamlet is a play deeply interested in couplings, showing both their advantages and failings, Claudius’s synecdoches misapply the dyadic logic in order to seize all
power for himself. The play’s doubleness is perhaps most obvious in its plot and characters. In the opening scene, two sentries – Marcellus and Barnardo – describe “this dreaded sight twice seen of us” (1.1.24), and then on cue the ghost appears twice. Claudius sends two messengers – Cornelius and Voltemand – to Norway, and summons two spies – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – whose replies are essentially indistinguishable. Events in Hamlet also happen twice, creating the opportunity to perceive and re-perceive the same action through multiple senses. Laertes twice takes his leave from his father, saying “a double blessing is a double grace” (1.3.52). Hamlet, rather awkwardly, devises the plan to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.540) through the Mousetrap first when he addresses the players and then again less than an hundred lines later. These are just a few examples, but Hamlet’s obsession “with doubles of all kinds” (Kermode 100) finds its clearest expression in the play’s paired language of eyes and ears. In both the play’s dominant rhetorical figures, hendiadys and synecdoche, “the meaning of the whole depends upon a kind” of “doubling” among the parts (Kermode 102). My chapter brings to light Hamlet’s insistent coupling of the sensory intelligencers of eyes and ears as one crucial facet that reinforces and helps to explain the other structures of doubling.

As Jonathan Baldo makes plain, “much of the political rhetoric of Renaissance England suggests that the perfect sovereign is also the perfect synecdoche: a part of the body politic that stands for, re-presents, or quasi-mystically makes present the whole; and an embodiment of the whole that will override party and faction and, because of his or her impartiality, be trusted to take the part of any of that body’s wronged members”

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98 George T. Wright notes the play’s unusual frequency of hendiadys, meaning literally “one through two,” such as “sensible and true” (1.1.56) or “law and heraldry” (1.1.86), where the hearer must mediate between two terms so as to determine their combined meaning (168).
(46). Of course, even to articulate the philosophy of the body politic in this way is to outline the problem of its construction: how can a part be impartial? Forset anticipates this objection in his analysis of the body politic, and counters that the body’s own natural system of doubled organs provides the required balance to ensure fair play within the whole being. His explanation is worth quoting at length because it speaks to the faults of Claudius as a synecdochal leader so directly:

I should make way or proofe for the ouer-greedia ingrossing of too many offices into the hands of some one man; which neyther the businesse of the state may well beare, nor the stomakes of other men [...] sith in the larger bodie politique there is greater store and choice of well-fitting seruitors for the many diuersities of affayres [...] Wee doe find, that the most industrious and instrumentall parts are giuen vs by couples, as if one (though for one worke) would not serue the turne [and] this allotting of two parts to one function might cause in our so little bodies a great faction, if the foreseeing care of nature had not also conioined them in consent, as well as in operation. Wee see both the eyes to looke both one way, the eares to conceiue alike one and the same sound [...] and by their good agreement ioyntely acting and louingly ayding one the other: [...] I wish from my heart (though I shew but by a simily) that in the realm likewise by such concordance of the parts in each degree, might fasten so their fayth each to othe[r [...] so should the eies of the wise, and the sensces of the learned bee bent all one way, for discerning and increasing of truth and goodnesse. (Forset 55-57)

To demonstrate the value of “good agreement” within the body, Forset references sensory cooperation. In this understanding, the co-dependence of eyes and ears exemplifies a successful body politic because both agents work toward the same goal, “bent all one way,” in the gathering of knowledge.

This same idea of eyes and ears, and other parts, “ioyntly acting” and “louingly ayding one the other” comes to the fore in most of Hamlet’s synecdoches. While it is a critical commonplace to note that Shakespeare figures the splintering of Denmark’s monarchy as a body “out of joint” (1.5.186), many tend to overlook how the play’s
language of jointure reinforces the concept of collaboration among coupled parts.\textsuperscript{99} Hamlet stresses the equality of parts and the necessity of their interaction, offering an alternative model of government through a diverging synecdoche of the body politic that centres expressly on the senses. As I discussed in my introduction, Hamlet chides his mother for her failure to see the unworthiness of her new suitor in terms that equate blind “judgement” with a breakdown among “joint” organs: “Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,/ Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all” (3.4.76-77). The doubling of parts implicit in his challenge – “Have you eyes?” – is not unique to vision and hearing, but rather crosses between all the senses. That said eyes and ears form a special bond in his persecution of “Sense” (3.4.69). Positioned in direct opposition to Claudius’s synecdoches of the “visage of offence” that divert his personal blame onto the political body through ideologies of kingship, Hamlet constructs a “face” of heaven “with heated visage as against the doom” (3.4.46, 48) in order to confront his mother. Holding up the twinned portraits of his father and uncle, he demands:

\begin{quote}
Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers:  
See what a grace was seated on this brow,  
Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself,  
An eye like Mars to threaten and command, [...]  
This was your husband. Look you now what follows:  
Here is your husband like a mildewed ear  
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes? (3.4.51-55, 61-63)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{99} See, for example, Garber’s short essay “Out of Joint” from The Body in Parts. I believe that Hamlet’s language of joints refers less explicitly to physical articulation than to “joint” action as cooperation. Marcellus describes the “night” as “joint labourer with the day” (1.1.77), Claudius hails Gertrude as “Th’imperial jointress” of the crown (1.2.9), and he insists that, despite appearances, the “state” is not “disjoint and out of frame” after “our late dear brother’s death” (1.2.19-20).
Describing the faces in the miniatures before him, Hamlet turns to ekphrasis as well as synecdoche to embody Old Hamlet’s virtues and Claudius’s faults (Acheson 126). Where Hamlet identifies his father through a series of synecdoches that layer and associate pieces, “brow,” “Hyperion curls,” a high “station,” and – above all – “an eye” to “threaten and command” – his uncle, by contrast, is merely one part: “a mildewed ear.” Most editors gloss Hamlet’s reference to Claudius’s “mildewed ear” that “blast[s] his wholesome brother” as a blighted ear of grain, and this is certainly an intuitive reading given the reference to feeding in the subsequent line. However, the direct alternation of the “mildewed ear” with “Have you eyes?” encourages the hearer to think about the bodily ear itself as a corrupt sensory organ, and the idea of an ear under attack by blight “recalls the literal manner of the murder” (Thompson and Taylor 340 n.63). Hamlet emphasises eyes and ears as representatives, together, for the man as a whole. Aiming to ensure the ongoing silence of Horatio and Marcellus as witnesses after their visitation from the ghost, he urges them to swear, first, “Never to speak of this that you have seen,” and then immediately – in an apparent redundancy if we do not appreciate the joint action of these parts – “Never to speak of this that you have heard” (1.5.153, 159). This unification of “two parts to one function” (Forset 56) may help to clarify a textual variant between the Folio and Second Quarto, for where in this version Hamlet promises that his tale would “amaze indeed/ The very faculties of eyes and ears” (2.2.500-01), in the Folio the two parts blend in synecdoche as one joint “faculty of eyes and ears” (2.2.568 F).

100 Katherine O. Acheson also investigates the role of synecdoche in _Hamlet_, and while our interpretations of these synecdoches and their functions significantly diverge, I wholeheartedly support her belief that “the differences between the ways that Claudius and Hamlet use synecdoche” illuminate “competing concepts of epistemology, ideology and ontology in the play” (121-22).
The synecdoches of other supporting characters in the play tend to subscribe to one of these two dominant systems of understanding the body politic. Unsurprisingly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern use the language of bodily incorporation to flatter the King and subordinate themselves to his rule: “Most holy and religious fear it is/ To keep those many many bodies safe/ That live and feed upon your majesty” (3.3.8-10). While their intent is to reinforce Claudius’s own notion of superiority wherein he “might by the sovereign power you have of us/ Put your dread pleasures more into command/ Than to entreaty” (2.2.27-29), their phrasing betrays the parasitic role they play within the larger collective. Laertes also employs the conventional trope of the “body” politic whereof the King is a “head” to explain to Ophelia why Hamlet cannot love freely as he chooses (1.3.22-23). He must rather circumscribe his wishes “for on his choice depends/ The safety and health of this whole state” (1.3.19-20); with Hamlet’s words as prince goes “the main voice of Denmark” (1.3.27). Ophelia, however, resists this type of synecdoche. Baldo maintains that Ophelia is the character who demonstrates the greatest affiliation to “synecdochic relationships and orders” (64). Rather than interpret Hamlet as the solitary “head” of the body politic as her brother does, she responds to the vicious instruction to “Get thee to a nunnery” (3.1.136) with a feeling lament: “O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!/ The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword” (3.1.149-50).

Through her curious conflation of parts, she approaches something more akin to Hamlet’s use of synecdoche. The tripling of figures (courtier, scholar, and solider) are all titles that apply to Hamlet and are subsumed within him in a marrying of parts – eye and tongue in synecdoche and sword as metonymy. It is not exactly clear who is epitomised by which part, and nor does it really matter. Her point is to underscore the relationships
of dependence fostered within the individual body of the King, or heir, as “th’expectation
and rose of the fair state,/ The glass of fashion and the mould of form” (3.1.151-53).
Where Baldo reads this moment as a gesture of collection, such that “Hamlet represents a
wholeness that gathers and unites the attributes of a host of comparatively partial
characters” (64-65), I view her equation as moreover establishing the mutuality or “co-
meddl[ing]” of equals within Hamlet’s being (3.2.65). By pointing to the tragic
disintegration or disjunction of his parts, and senses – the scholar’s “eye” and “glass” of
sight, the “musicked vows” of hearing, the “rose” of smell, “tongue” of taste, and
“sword” of touch – in these lines, she illustrates how Hamlet’s “overthrow” symbolises
the overturn of “the fair state” (3.1.151). Like Hamlet too, she ends on the note of her
sorrow embodied in these senses together, urging us to see synaesthetically through our
ears: “Now see what noble and most sovereign reason/ Like sweet bells jangled out of
time and harsh” is “blasted” with “ecstasy” (3.1.156-59, emphasis mine).

At base the sensing/spying relationship is predicated upon this familiar analogy of
the body politic, but the distance provided by the eyes and ears renders them the two
faculties most requisite for good government. The emblem of the “Common wealth” in
Peacham’s Minerva Britannia (1612) reproduces the Rainbow Portrait for a male ruler
by depicting a King cloaked in a wrap of eyes and ears. Its motto reads: “He must […]/
Be seru’d with eies, and listening ears of those,/ Who from all partes can giue
intelligence” (E3). The distanced mediators of eyes and ears collect feedback from “all
partes” in a clever pun on their ability both to cover all areas spatially and to incorporate
the rest of the body metaphorically. Renaissance depictions of monarchial omniscience
map the eye and ear dyad onto the body of the ruler in a concrete way that makes them
unique within the landscape of the body. Unlike the other senses, and indeed unlike any
other “part” of the corpus as a whole, the eye and ear dyad ruptures the logic of
Claudius’s body politic by existing both within it (on the face) and outside it (on the
cloak). Eyes and ears act as the synecdochal representatives of the entirety of the
sensorium and, further, “all partes” precisely because they manifest the sovereign’s
ability to include extranumerary sense organs or coupled intelligencers through their
subtending subjects – just as Hamlet and Ophelia would represent it. Where spies haunt
every corner of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare focuses on the mediators who intervene between
observers and observed, and further, associates intelligence-gathering with dense word
clusters of “eye,” “ear,” “look,” “list,” “see,” “hear,” “watch,” and “sound” so as to
underscore the role of the senses as spies in their own right. The viewer gazing from
the peephole becomes, in synecdoche, all eye; and so too does the man behind the curtain
find himself “in the ear/ Of all their conference” (3.1.183-84). Just as the characters who
spy on one another require the twinned powers of seeing and hearing to perceive their
target, so too do the eyes and ears themselves stand for the body and state as a whole in
the fashion of Elizabeth’s dress, extending the power of the monarch (the ruling soul or
mind). As Tomkis avers, it is because of the senses that “our Queene sitting in her priuy
chamber hath intelligence of exterior occurrents” (3.5.56-57).

101 To list only a few of the play’s many examples: Polonius hires Reynaldo to spy on Laertes, Claudius
summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to sound the prince “at each ear a hearer” (2.2.318), Claudius and
Polonius spy together on Hamlet’s exchange with Ophelia “seeing unseen” (3.1.32), and Polonius hides
behind the arras in Gertrude’s closet.
102 Hearing and seeing recur with significant frequency in *Hamlet*: a concordance search for “eye,” “ear,”
“look,” “list,” “see,” “hear,” “watch,” and “sound” shows that terms related to audition appear 95 times
and to vision an astounding 182 times. In the first act alone there are at least a dozen instances where the
eye and ear coincide: (1.1.22-33); (1.1.45-57); (1.1.111-16); (1.1.164-65); (1.1.166-70); (1.2.160-94);
(1.2.200-206); (1.2.217-19); (1.2.245-46); (1.3.126-34); (1.4.77-78); (1.5.15-22); (1.5.151-59).
Interestingly, the play never pursues the question of what Reynaldo uncovers, no one who watches the ghost hears the harrowing tale it might tell, and none that attempt to discover the cause of Hamlet’s “antic disposition” (centuries of scholars included) succeed in unearthing his secret (1.5.170). Rather, when it comes to perception, the play is evidently less concerned with “what is the matter” than how that matter passes “between” agents (2.2.190-91). Hamlet’s stress on whatever comes in between “mighty opposites” invites us to notice the typically transparent mediators and media that convey intelligence (5.2.61). In de Anima, Aristotle writes that all senses “produce sensation by means of something else, that is, through media” (199). Burton repeats this tenet in The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621), and his phrase “to the sight three things are required, the Object, the Organ, & the Medium” subtends our modern definition of the word medium: “an intervening substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses; a vehicle of light or sound” (OED 5.a). Here the “object” of sight is colour, the “organ” is an eyeball, and the “medium” is the surrounding air. Yet, in early modern sense theory, the eye not only uses the air as medium for light but serves as a medium itself for the soul to perceive colour. The eyes are at once “the windowes, through which she viewes” knowledge, and the “Spie” inside the “casement” (Davies 41-42). This curious doubleness reappears in the allegorical tradition that figures the senses as openings in the body’s architecture, such as Spenser’s House of Alma where the eyes and ears appear as “gates” and “guards” (Vinge 90): “great Bulwarkes” assailed “with open force” (2.11.7). In Hamlet, Shakespeare combines this idea of sensory doors with the theory of extromission (where the eye emits beams to illuminate its objects) in order to estrange Hamlet’s perceptual faculties when he
confronts Ophelia in her closet: “He seemed to find his way without his eyes/ (For out
o’doors he went without their helps)/ And to the last bended their light on me” (2.1.95-
97). Eyes are no longer the guides to help him navigate; instead they are the distanced
spies that “bend” their light through the air to touch Ophelia as well as the symbolic
thresholds through which he ultimately exits. Thus, the eyes and ears are simultaneously
* mediums* (the doors that the soul looks through) and * mediators* (who actively peer
through the environmental media of air or water in turn). This duality is especially true of
sight and hearing because, as George Chapman notes in *Ovid’s Banquet of the Senses*
(1595), the eyes and ears have their “medium extrinsically” (stanza 52) whereas the
other senses mediate intrinsically. In sum, *Hamlet* paradoxically advances a world
view that relies upon a desire for an inner knowledge immediately perceptible through
the synecdoche of coupled eye and ear even as it calls into question that immediacy –
both by scrutinising the obvious obstacles between truth and its discovery and by
classifying the mediums so subtle that we hardly recognise their intrusion.

As mediums and mediators for the soul, or doors opened to the outside world,
why cannot the eyes and ears peer back into the monarch for whom they garner
intelligence? The idea of the spy’s gaze turning against its source troubles Forset to such
an extent that he takes pains to delimit the senses’ inward-looking capabilities: “Against
this odious injury of the subiects ouermuch enquiring and spying into their Soueraigne,
[...] Nature hath so prouded, that no sences of the bodie doeth penetrate into the essence

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103 Chapman notes that “sight” is actually one of “three” senses “that hath his medium extrinsically” (stanza 52). He does not justify this enumeration, but his poem imagines sight and hearing as “extrinsic senses” because they travel over distances in the air, whereas taste and touch rely on “intrinsic” interaction. Smell is a likely candidate for the third extrinsic sense given its ability to cast “odors” into travelling “clouds” (stanza 29). As my preceding chapters have argued, the senses of smell, taste, and touch all demand immediacy and reciprocity between “self” and “other,” uniting subject and object in the moment of sensation either through contact or chemical interpenetration. Seeing and hearing, by contrast, require a separation between the perceived effect “in here” and the formal stimuli “out there.” See my introduction.
or inwardnesse of the soule; they bee espials for him, not spyers into him” (99). His consolation is so adamant and yet formulaic that it rings a little false, especially given that other period authors insisted upon the opposite. All the same, the crucial subtext to Forset’s assertion is that the eyes and ears do have the power to “penetrate into” the “inwardnesse” of others if not the King. By allowing the perceiver to “enter into” another “man’s heart and view the passions or inclinations which there reside and lie hidden” through the discovery of speech effects and “external operations” (Wright 165), sight and sound work together to enable transparency of intent.

The issue of the getting “inside” Hamlet is of course the dominant frame for critical discussions of this play, made famous by Francis Barker, Margreta De Grazia Stephen Greenblatt, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and others. Hamlet is fixated on “the question of how to reach this interior body” (Pollard 124). While it teases the reader with the promise of hidden secrets, “that within which passes show” (1.2.85), and includes numerous scenes of spying and eavesdropping that suggest gaining admittance, the play vigorously protects inwardness, insisting that there are simply some things that remain inaccessible to the “faculties of eyes and ears” (2.2.501). It is fitting that Hamlet should centre on the two senses traditionally aligned with perspicacity (from the Latin perspicāc, to see through or pierce), given this preoccupation with resisting penetration. Hamlet reminds us that the eye is constrained to surfaces, “seeming” rather than reality:

’Tis not alone my inky cloak, cold mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. (1.2.77-83)
Where many other early modern plays indulge in fantasies of total transparency, either allowing their characters to imagine looking into another’s body as if it were glass (for example, Bosola in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*) or actually turning them into crystal figures of “living anatomy” (as experienced by Tactus in Tomkis’s *Lingua*), *Hamlet* locates interior truth precisely by noting that it remains unknowable. By contrast to the dubious visual signifiers of a black cloak, fruitful tears, and a dejected expression, the “windy suspiration of forced breath” implies that hearing may afford a different kind of access. As the continuity of breath between inside and outside the body makes manifest, the sound of a sigh makes something known about the interior more immediately than sight. To clarify, the ear is able to hear the inside of things in a way the eye cannot because acoustic resonance exposes interior qualities. Knocking on a hollow wall produces different reverberations than a solid one, the distinctive “ping” of wine glasses tells us if they contain lead, and, in the sixteenth century, merchants tested the metal of silver coins by listening to their variances in tone. Folkerth rightly observes that when Shakespeare uses the word “*sound*” it is “almost always as a verb” (25). “Sounding” in this sense is to plumb hidden depths. While espionage today is associated predominately with visual surveillance, in Shakespeare’s time the connection was at least equally as strong to hearing. Indeed, the “sounding out” of private thoughts was pivotal to secure statecraft. Polonius advises his spy on how best to manipulate “him you would sound” (2.1.41), and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern admit Hamlet’s evasiveness by noting that he is simply not “forward to be sounded” (3.1.7).

This sounding practice becomes literalised when Hamlet invites the King’s spies to “play upon this pipe” (3.2.342). That he should seize a wind-instrument is particularly
apt because the “forced breath” used to produce sound in the recorder implies the emptiness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s words: “It is as easy as lying” (3.2.349).

When Guildenstern again refuses, certain he lacks the skill, Hamlet responds angrily:

Why, look you now how unworthy a thing you make of me: you would play upon me! You would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to my compass. And there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ. Yet cannot you make it speak. (3.2.355-60)

Hamlet equates the sounding of a musical instrument (to produce melody) with the sounding of an individual (to produce secrets). As Brathwaite attests in his essay on hearing, the ear has “a distinct power to sound into the centre of the heart” (6), and Hamlet likewise intuits the spies’ aural desire to “pluck out” the “heart” of his mystery.

The ear has long been given prominence as a direct conduit to the soul in metaphor, but this sense organ became factually linked to the interior after the identification of the Eustachian tube by an Italian surgeon in 1564. Discovered as an open passageway for bodily liquids and in-bred air, this corridor materialised the transmission of word from hearing to heart. An interest in this continuity between the ear and the deepest body is readily apparent in King Hamlet’s murder via auditus:

And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body
And with a sudden vigour it doth possess
And curd like eager droppings into milk
The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine. (1.5.63-70)

104 Crooke describes experiments where melted hog’s gristle was poured into the still “greene head” of a corpse through the “hole of hearing” in order to trace its movement along the Eustachian tube and corridors of the body (588). For more on this scientific discovery and hearing-to-heart metaphors, see McDermott “Sermonizing the Open Ear in Early Modern England” in Religion and the Senses.
Once again the ear is a liminal “porch” or door – a medium that the soul hears through – and at the same time it is a mediator who yields entry to the “alleys of the body.” The movement of the poison into the “blood” is, of course, a kind of touch through “swift,” coursing contact. That this touching of the blood occurs through the ear is significant because it invites comparison to the absorption of speech in hearing, creating both a synaesthetic crossover and a synecdochal collapse: by touching the ear with “the leperous distilment,” Claudius manages to reach into and violate the innermost man. Yet, in this murder, Claudius not only poisons the ear of King Hamlet’s body natural but that of the body politic, causing the death of a kingdom through hearsay. The play explicitly links Old Hamlet to the body of the state by addressing his ghostly form as “buried Denmark” (1.1.47). Noting that two bodies and two murders here coincide helps to make sense of his plural “porches” (1.5.63): “not only does Claudius attack one of the King’s epistemological faculties, but he attacks both ears” at once “in what would be a seeming impossibility” unless we account for the secondary level of the body politic (Diede 114). Curiously, while King Hamlet stresses that he was asleep during this attack, he traces the poison flowing beneath his skin as if he were an omniscient observer looking into one of those glass anatomies. As much as the murder is a contact-dependant aural event – the hebona flows from the ear into the heart, and his tale enters the hearer to likewise “freeze” the “blood”– it also allows us to see inside his “smooth body” (1.5.16, 73). Eye and ear play off each other again as coupled mediators of an inward knowledge, but the corruption of the King’s ears achieves a further significance through synecdoche wherein “the whole ear of Denmark” is “rankly abused” (1.5.36, 38).
Hearers and Seers in *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* opens in darkness with a question: “Who’s there?” (1.1.1). Like the guards, we are equally in the dark, unaware as to who approaches and what awaits us. The phenomenological perspective of the audience-subject and our current experience, similar to the original early modern audiences, is shaped by sound and speech; in a stichomythic exchange of questions, we soon come to learn where we stand. By asking if he has “had quiet guard?” (1.1.8), the prominence of “quiet” literalises the hearer’s duty to strain their ears to “zealous attention” (Brathwaite A2) and, positioned on the threshold, these liminal figures defending the kingdom are the embodied “ears” or “porches” of the city. As hearers they must listen for sounds of danger in the night and perceive them as the threat they are, or dismiss them as innocent, only “a mouse stirring” (1.1.9). Horatio and the guards endeavour to solve the riddling appearance of the ghost by combining the intelligence of both eyes and ears. Unable fully to believe the sight, they seek out Horatio to “approve” their “eyes” by speaking to it (1.1.28), attempting to verify its existence sonically: “If thou hast any sound or use of voice,/ Speak to me” (1.1.127-28). Yet the crowing cock with “his lofty and shrill-sounding throat” overpowers the moment (1.1.150). Emerging from the confusion the ghost inspired, the guards return to oral exchange and hearsay so as to hear and learn, as well as see, the truth of the matter.

These characters strive to couple ocular impressions with verbal explanations, effectively balancing the two in order to form a more complete composite of mixed perception without over-engrossing power into either part. Polonius also refers to sound

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105 While the play *Hamlet* begins in Elsinore at night, the performance of *Hamlet* at the Globe took place in the afternoon. The contrast between the darkness of the utterance and the daylight in the playhouse functions, as Yasunari Takahashi notes, “as a sort of equivalent to modern lighting effects” (3).
and the importance of rightful hearing, but through him Shakespeare mocks the “dull Eare” that “is either drousie, or carelesse, or ignorant” (Egerton A4), or, as Hamlet puts it: “A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear” (4.2.21-22). Where Polonius relies too heavily on the ear without the accompanying correction of the eye, as for example when he eavesdrops in Gertrude’s chamber, Gertrude errs by overly concerning herself with visual signs. Confronted with her son’s grief in his posture and clothing, she urges him to change his attitude by shifting his eyes:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust. (1.2.68-71)

Hamlet is at pains to establish a critical distance between what his trappings and “suits of woe” (1.2.86) might convey and what his inner self might actually be thinking, what “can denote [him] truly” (1.2.83), but Gertrude overlooks his warning. How well one character understands another in this play is instrumentally tied to which sense they rely upon and whether they couple the information gleaned by that sense with its partner; an overreliance on either sight or sound alone causes confusion, misdirection, or death. The best spies are those that use these two senses together as one instrument of intelligence.

Whenever Gertrude remarks on Hamlet, she pronounces visual judgements: “look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading” (2.2.165), or “He’s fat and scant of breath” (5.2.269). She infers that it may be Ophelia’s “good beauties” that are “the happy cause/ Of Hamlet’s wildness” (3.1.38-39), assuming that his plight must have a visual root. In the closet confrontation, Hamlet recognises that his mother responds more strongly to sights and so combines his verbal attack (speaking daggers to her) with a visual one (contrasting portraits for her). At first deaf to his accusations, Gertrude hears only a “rude
noise” wagged against her, and thus to “wring” her heart “of penetrable stuff” Hamlet must readjust to a visual register (3.4.33-34, 38). By juxtaposing the features of the two brothers traced as synecdoches (3.4.51-75), the miniatures finally affect Gertrude and her eyes are opened to what she has done: “speak no more./ Thou turns’t my very eyes into my soul/ And there I see such black and grieved spots” (3.4.86-88). Her answer is not only another synecdoche, but it epitomises the interpenetrative aspect of eye and ear as sensory intelligencers. For as Tiffany remarks, Gertrude “sees her sin through hearing it” (87). Even after this moment of clarity, where sound combines with vision, Shakespeare hints that Gertrude still lacks coupled mediation as the ghost remains imperceptible.

Where Hamlet sees his father, she perceives “nothing at all” (3.4.129).

Ophelia, like Queen Gertrude, acts on false information initially because she focuses on optical cues while ignoring their auditory counterpart. When she recounts to her father a distressing encounter with Hamlet, she fills her report with visual detail:

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as a shirt, his knees knocking each other,
[… ] he comes before me. (2.1.74-77, 81)

She colours each aspect of his dress and physique to imply madness. Yet Polonius makes an appeal for aural as well as visual information, asking: “what said he?” (2.1.83).

Seeming to follow Wright’s advice to uncover a “man’s heart” and the “hidden” inclinations by yoking the observation of external features to probing speech, Polonius tries to sound him out (165). Ophelia, however, ignores his request and continues to describe how Hamlet held her and stared over her face. She briefly comments on Hamlet’s deep sigh, that “did seem to shatter all his bulk” but she does not reflect on this.
only oral communication to the same extent as his physical dishevelment (2.1.92). Instead she watches him and is most disturbed by how he watches her, choosing to emphasise how his “eyes” stay fixed upon her as he exits (2.1.95).

It is only when Ophelia’s world begins to unravel, when he whom she thought loved her claims, “I loved you not” (3.1.118), that she realises she has been “the more deceived” (3.1.119). At this moment, Ophelia unites visual observations on the fallen Hamlet with acoustic inflections, hearing the “music” of his vows (3.1.155). Ophelia’s rhetoric moves beyond the personal and shifts into a larger conception of the body political in a set of synecdoches that link her romantic plight to the state’s downfall through the prince: “O woe is me/ T’have seen what I have seen, see what I see” (3.1.159-60). When she later watches the dumb-show, she attempts to unite the spectacle with aural information by asking: “What means this, my lord?” (3.2.129), and she is the first to notice that “the King rises” (3.2.258). As Ophelia achieves her new awareness, she overcompensates for her visual predilection with a shattered form of speech-in-song. Ophelia’s songs highlight her transition from a short-sighted, blissful ignorance to a sounded, insightful sorrow. The Gentleman describes Ophelia’s transformation to the Queen: “Her speech is nothing./ Yet the unshaped use of it doth move/ The hearers to collection” (4.5.7-9). Like Hamlet’s “musicked vows” her songs fill up a space in the listener’s thoughts, re-“collect[ing]” them into a shared body. In these songs Ophelia implies the sexual nature of her relationship with Hamlet, “before you tumbled me” (4.5.62), her perceived guilt of Claudius, “Lord, we know what we are but know not what we may be” (4.5.43-44), and her grief for her father, possibly foreshadowing
suicide, “he is dead,/ Go to thy deathbed” (4.5.184-85). As an initially visual character she is blind to interior truth, yet as her ears are opened to mixed perception she enters into a distressed knowledge expressed as music.

Where Ophelia’s appeals to the ear move emotion, and call for pity if not perception, King Claudius appeals to an ear that hears with distortion. Despite his best efforts at being a listener, he is unable to discern through his “mildewed ear” (3.4.62). The defects in Claudius’s hearing offer one possible explanation for his desire both to keep Hamlet safely in view – “in the cheer and comfort of our eye” (1.2.116) – and to engage associable organs, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as spies. Yet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern aver that “with crafty madness” Hamlet “keeps aloof/ When we would bring him on to some confession/ Of his true state” (3.1.8-10). Uneasy with Hamlet and unable to access his private interior, Claudius admits “I like him not, nor stands it safe with us/ To let his madness range” (3.3.1-2), sending him to England to be murdered and thus purged from his synecdochal body politic: “like the hectic in my blood he rages/ And thou must cure me” (4.3.64-65). While he can perceive that something is wrong, he cannot determine its cause; King Claudius is the “blocked” ear. One of the five mishearers identified by Stephen Egerton, the “pollution and vncleanesse” of Claudius’s life obstructs his ears as the channel for both truth and grace (10-11). He admits that his own offense stops his prayers so that he cannot perceive things sharply “though inclination be as sharp as will” (3.3.39). Like a man suffering from an ear infection, he is unable to listen with accuracy because of his own disease.

106 The tune Ophelia sings to grieve Polonius – “He is dead and gone, lady” (4.5.29) – forges another link between Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the originators of the Elizabethan spy network because this lyric is the popular “Walsingham song” (Sternfeld 67).
107 In the Boring of the Eare (1623), Egerton lists “the fiue sorts of eares that are not hearing eares”: “dull,” “stopped,” “sinister,” “itching,” or “adulterous” (A4-A5).
Claudius’s shortcomings as a hearer are all the more evident by comparison to the man he attempts to sound: Hamlet. As an observer, Hamlet consistently couples the intelligence derived from his ears with knowledge acquired through his eyes to achieve a perceptual advantage. Hamlet colours the exterior features of those he scrutinises with his aural understanding of their character. It is for this reason that Hamlet sees a similarity between Laertes and himself: “For by the image of my cause I see/ The portraiture of his” (5.2.78-79 F). Recalling the twinned portraits of his father and uncle, Hamlet compares the “image” of his cause against that of his foil and virtual “brother” (5.2.221) Laertes. This move toward portraiture, even in metaphor, links the acoustic telling of his story to a visualised showing to the eye. In much the same way, when Hamlet hears the motives underlying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s false speech, he claims to recognise the traps they lay for him by saying: “I have an eye of you” (2.2.256). Through Hamlet we may discover how a careful perceiver can gain insight by glimpsing partial-truths and how his spying pairs sensory intelligencers to furnish understanding. Gertrude, Ophelia, and Claudius provide counter examples of how characters can come to harm by placing too much trust in one part, as when Polonius meets his ironic end: stabbed “in the ear/ Of all their conference” (3.1.183-84).

The eye and ear images Shakespeare conjoins throughout Hamlet operate in this character trajectory of hearers and seers in a way that highlights the exigency of mixed perception. Sensory intelligence, spying, and spectatorship – as I will demonstrate in my treatment of The Murder of Gonzago – all depend on the eye and ear dyad. If, as I have argued, the conventional period association of senses with spies manifests itself forcefully in Hamlet’s preoccupation with watching and eavesdropping, then it is critical
to recognise the play’s attendant concern with the newly coexistent sensory media of print plays alongside spoken performance. At the end of the sixteenth century, when Shakespeare was most likely composing *Hamlet*, England was in a process of transition toward print culture; specifically, the invention of moveable type changed the social dynamics of perception as Walter Ong posits in *Orality and Literacy*. Marshall McLuhan similarly identifies the early modern period as a pivotal juncture, and rather dramatically states that with this new technology “man was given an eye for an ear” (44). To accept this, however, is to chart the transition in overly black and white terms. British aural tradition – and its accompanying world of waves and circles, of “O,” and of the Globe built for acoustics – only gradually declined, and in many ways continued to flourish alongside the rise of vision’s sight-lines, point-of-view, and horizons of existence. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare self-consciously engages with this eye/ear fluidity between oral and written forms as it was becoming increasingly present within his theatre. His characters cross apply the language of writing (such as sealing and tables) to speech and vice versa perhaps because this was a time of change when sworn oaths and written signatures were both accepted by law, and when the entertainment of a play onstage could be rivaled by scripts, romances, and toys in print.¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare’s play materialises the shifting sensory ratios attendant upon these mediums by focusing on the messengers of letters (visual) and hearsay (aural).

¹⁰⁸ Clandestine marriages offer one example of the legal validity of oaths. As B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol explain in their study of law and Shakespeare, “any expression of genuine present intent, with no need for particular formula or type of words, created a valid and binding marriage contract by spousals” (73). Where pledges sworn aloud were still widely respected as legal contracts, Englishmen in the late sixteenth century turned to written documents as a means to finalise or legitimise transactions – as can be seen in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* where Antonio and Shylock first create a verbal agreement and then record it as a notarised and sealed “bond” (2.1.144). This duplication in accounts created some tension between oral and written forms of regulation.
Letters and Hearsay as Sensory Media

Hamlet is a play filled with letters and letter-writing technologies. “Sealed compact[s]” (1.1.85), written “precepts” (1.3.57), lovers’ “remembrances” (3.1.92), and political “commission[s]” (3.3.3) are composed, dispatched, intercepted, and read aloud onstage. Claudius communicates with the King of Norway at the play’s beginning and the monarchy of England at the play’s close by means of letters; Ophelia and Hamlet exchange lovers vows as written pledges; Polonius sends notes to France with the spy Reynaldo; and, as Alan Stewart rightly observes, “Hamlet is the most prolific letter-writer” in all of Shakespeare’s drama (261). The play features at least fifteen letters and two print books, and integrates a Bellerophon letter (or vital forgery) that spares Hamlet and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their execution.109 Many of these written “words, words, words” (2.2.189) serve to advance the plot, but a striking number appear extraneous to the story; they are mentioned, paraded onstage, or passed between hands but never unfolded. The very act of “unfolding” a letter in Hamlet necessitates its transition from a visual and solitary form to shared aural experience through vocalisation. While typical editorial practice glosses the verb “unfold” as related to clothing imagery, it can also describe unfolding a letter or unfurling a scroll that subtends the characters’ appeals for further oral information. This holds true from Francisco’s opening order “Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself” (1.1.2) to the ghost’s threat: “I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/ Would harrow up thy soul” (1.5.15-16). The play’s recursive references to folding and unfolding, sealing and opening, sending and receiving exaggerate the drama of conspiratorial communication attendant upon Hamlet’s wider

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109 I take the term “Bellerophon letter” from Stewart; Claudius’s commission is “the oldest letter story in the book” because it borrows from book six of The Iliad (6:167-70) where Proteus sends his guest Bellerophon to another kingdom with folded tablets, or letters, that contain an instruction to kill him (262).
spy networks. I believe that Shakespeare goes to such great lengths to foreground letters and textual carriers in *Hamlet* because he seeks to redirect attention away from the secret intelligence contained inside these messages and toward the written media that serves as its conveyance.

The ostensible redundancy of Polonius’s instruction to Ophelia, which tells her not to “give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet” (1.3.133), hints at this coexistence of and crossover between two sensory media: written “words” and oral “talk.” When Polonius halts the communication between Ophelia and Hamlet, forcing her to give over her letters to his eyes, he informs the King that he had no other choice because as a diligent advisor he could not in good conscience pander between them, “play[ing] the desk or table-book” or “look[ing]” on their “love with idle sight” (2.2.133-35). By identifying himself with a table-book or desk in the Elizabethan sense of a box with a sloped top mounted onto a steady surface for letter-writing, Polonius tells the King that he would not “convey intelligence between them” as a messenger of spoken or written words (Taylor and Thompson 247 n.133). Yet simply by reading the words of Hamlet’s letter aloud to the curious King and Queen, Polonius does exactly the opposite of what he promises. Refusing to act as the messenger between Hamlet and Ophelia, Polonius orally unfolds their intercepted message to Claudius instead:

Perpend,
I have a daughter – have while she is mine –
Who in her duty and obedience, mark,
Hath given me this. Now gather and surmise.
[Reads] To the celestial and my soul’s idol, the most beautified Ophelia – that’s an ill phrase, a vile phrase,
“beautified” is a vile phrase, but you shall hear – thus in her excellent white bosom, these, etc. (2.2.104-111)
Polonius’s critical intrusions into the letter make his role as mediator all the more painfully apparent. He converts Hamlet’s words from something to be seen into a matter of “talk,” something which others “shall hear.” While this invasion of the lovers’ privacy might make a modern audience feel uncomfortable, cringing at the way Polonius judges Hamlet’s intimate oaths in a public hearing, an early modern audience would likely have recognised the additional threat of letters in a legal sense.

Letters, as Polonius rather clumsily reminds us, are dangerous things. The transference of our thoughts into text rather than speech allows them to become disembodied and detached from the writer. As words released into circulation, they run the risk of being found and re-appropriated, rearranged, or quoted piecemeal as proof. This was “an era where personal documents, and especially letters, were often produced in court as evidence against those accused,” and Stewart cites the trials of Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, and Sir Robert Cotton as salient examples in that both these men destroyed or doctored their letters in the moments preceding their arrest (272).110 Act two’s emphasis on the interception of Hamlet’s letters and their use to substantiate a motive for his “lunacy” (2.2.49) draws on the audience’s fears lingering from the Babington plot, some ten years earlier, where a surveillance network confiscated and manipulated letters in its trials. Indeed, this relationship to letters establishes another possible link between Polonius and William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth’s chief advisor. Cecil, Walsingham’s colleague and predecessor, not only helped to develop England’s secret service but also hired spies to follow his own son, Thomas.111 Cecil realised the

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110 For information on the materiality of letters in the period, and the difficulty of doctoring ink-and-paper letters with cutting or burning, pumicing or blotting, see Stewart pages 273-74.
111 George Russell French first proposed a connection between Cecil and Polonius in 1869, but his idea of “Elizabeth’s chief secretary” as the “original of Polonius” endures in criticism (Garber, After All 484).
powerful Catholic threat Mary Queen of Scots posed to English rule and, determined to
bring forward inconvertible evidence of her plotting, he set a letter-trap. Forcing the
cooperation of a double agent, Gilbert Glifford, they engineered the means through
which Queen Mary could exchange secret letters with someone she believed to be a
supporter of her cause. By facilitating the smuggling of these ostensibly “secret” letters
in brewer’s barrels, Elizabeth’s advisors gave Mary just enough rope to hang herself.
Each intercepted letter Queen Mary wrote to Glifford served to further implicate her in
the assassination plot. The similar ease with which Polonius shifts from spying upon
Hamlet’s written words (in letters) to a scheme to eavesdrop on Ophelia and Hamlet’s
talk (finding “Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed/ Within the centre” [2.2.155-
56]) illustrates the continuity between these two familiar evidence-gathering techniques.
While I do not mean to suggest that Shakespeare’s audience would have heard these
echoes as direct allusions to the Babington plot, they would nevertheless have been
mindful of similar kinds of events where written evidence was used in tandem with
verbal testimony to establish guilt or discredit traitors against sovereign and church.

Given this residual anxiety regarding letters, both in their interception and
tampering into forgeries, it is appropriate that Hamlet should contain so many references
to wax seals. A letter’s seal confirms authenticity even more so than the writer’s manual
signature. For a seal serves both as a personal sign of credibility and as a physical means
of excluding unwanted readers. Whereas a broken seal signals trespass, violating the
bearer’s contents, an unbroken seal offers the addressee an assurance of secrecy. In
Hamlet, however, the rhetoric of “sealing” achieves its greatest power when it is cross-
applied to spoken words. More than half of the references to seals arise in the context of
When Laertes receives permission to return to France from his father, Polonius “seal[s]” his “hard consent” upon “his will” (1.2.60), and when Hamlet tempers his violent language to his mother, he swears: “How in my words somever she be shent/ To give them seals never my soul consent” (3.2.388-89). Whereas, on paper, Norway signs over his lands to Old Hamlet following his military defeat, “by a sealed compact/ Well ratified by law and heraldry” (1.1.85-86) and Claudius likewise sends his “commission” to England under official seal (3.3.3). These seals rarely keep out prying eyes. Each of these political “entreat[ies]” is later explained aloud or read before an audience (2.2.76). Horatio reports on Fortinbras’s letter of forfeit, Hamlet opens and reseals Claudius’s letter to England by using his father’s signet ring (that he has with him by happy coincidence), and the couriers Voltemand and Cornelius know enough of the message from “brother Norway” (2.2.59) that they can summarise its news before passing the pages forward. Where seals allegedly guarantee privacy, the play’s interest in their failings demonstrates the problems of communicating over distances. Remarkably in a play whose plot depends upon a counterfeit letter, its only reference to “forgery” appears when Claudius explains his verbal “tricks” and lies (4.7.88). The language of unfolding, sealing, and forgery blends written and oral communication in ways that complicate the play’s juxtaposition of hearsay and letters.

In 1.3, as Laertes prepares to return to Paris, he implores Ophelia to write daily: “And sister, as the winds give benefit/ And convey is assistant, do not sleep/ But let me hear from you” (1.3.2-4). His letter request is interesting for three reasons. First, in that he acknowledges the difficulty and irregularity of communicating across distances by remarking on the intervening media both as air, or “the winds” that presumably speed the
ships, and as messengers, or the “convey” assistant, that carry her post forward. Second, his language of hearing suggests the residual orality of speech, but of course the physical separation between Paris and Denmark necessitates that he “hear” her only by reading her notes. Third, his demand for daily letters implies that she will either require an assistant or adopt the ill-fitting role of a secretary herself. In the well-known treatise The English Secretary (1599), Day outlines a “method of writing of epistles” with examples of specific letter-types (1). The relationship between a lord and his attendant secretary was equal parts one of service and friendship; it was a “bond” comparable to the “natural” affinity between family members, such as brother and sister, but the secretary goes one step further to be “tied in trust” (Day 105). The issue of trust is essential because a secretary was needed for more than neat penmanship or “the well writing” known as secretary hand; the name carried with it “a purpose of muche weightier effect” to be “a keeper” of “secret[s]” (102-03). Day uses the shared etymology of “secret” and “secretorie” to underline this association. Bound up with the art of letter writing is a concern with “couertnes” that Day describes as “closelie” keeping secrets “from the eyes, eares or understanding of others” (103), and Laertes’s advice to Ophelia to safeguard herself from Hamlet is fittingly preoccupied with eyes and ears. Warning her about the dangers of listening “with too credent ear” and offering the example of a hapless maid who unmasked “her beauty to the moon” (1.3.29, 36), he cautions: “best safety lies in fear” (1.3.42). Ophelia dutifully picks up on his language of enclosure and remarks: “’Tis in my memory locked/ And you yourself shall keep the key of it” (1.3.84-85).

112 “There is at least a strong likelihood” that The English Secretary was a source for Shakespeare because of its systematic catalogue of rhetorical figures (Evans XIII).
Ophelia’s promise to lock away Laertes’s words is enriched by this surrounding discourse of letters, senses, and secrets. If Shakespeare were simply using the metaphor of a locked mind familiar in our modern idiom of the “steel trap” to validate Ophelia’s keen memory, then why should he hand Laertes the key? The point here, as in so much of this play flooded with spies and statecraft, is less about memory than privacy. Ophelia’s metaphor constructs a private space or psychic closet and makes herself its threshold rather than occupant. Day notes of the “secretorie” that “it is in him principallie to […] consider that he is but the closet, wherof another hath both the key, use and commandment, that he ought to be as a thicke plated doore, where through, without extraordinarie violence no man may enter” (124). Once again, like the senses that act as both spies and mediums, simultaneous doors and the keepers of those portals, the secretary takes on a twinned role of containment and exclusion. Problematically, Ophelia is forced to break her oath at the moment she makes it, for as soon as she constructs this private room her father demands entry.

“What is’t, Ophelia, he has said to you?”, Polonius asks (1.3.87). Her honest if evasive response – “something touching the Lord Hamlet” – does not satisfy, as Polonius continues to question her like the political interrogator he is: “What is between you? Give me up the truth” (1.3.88, 97). Whereas Ophelia falters in the role of a secretary, Polonius embraces the title in his split desire between covery transparency and constant inquiry into the secrets of others. Polonius behaves as if he were Principal Secretary to King Claudius. He advises the King, offers discreet counsel, and sets up surveillance ploys. As Claudius praises in yet another string of synecdoches, “The head is not more native to the heart/

113 On closets as enclosed spaces associated both with female privacy and letters see Katharine Larson, *Early Modern Women in Conversation*, esp. 48-59 concerning Aemilia Lanyer’s closet conversations.
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,/ Than is the throne of Demark to thy father” (1.2.47-49). If the King is the head of state in the body politic, then Polonius is its heart; and if Claudius is the speaking mouth, then Polonius is the writing hand – the secretary – who mediates his words to subjects.114 Attached to the “throne of Denmark,” Polonius once again shadows Cecil, the twice Secretary of State. Polonius tells his daughter that he already knows the contents of her closet, since his informers have “put” it “on” him: “Tis told me he hath very oft of late/ Given private time to you” (1.3.90-91, 93).

Following the aims of a true secretary, Polonius defends his own closet secrets as a thick-plated door while violating the security of others’ with spies. Polonius enters women’s spaces again when Ophelia divulges the encounter “sewing in [her] closet” (2.1.74) and then by hiding behind the arras to “o’er-hear” in the Queen’s “closet” (3.3.32, 27).115 Yet Polonius is a troublingly ineffective penetrator. While Polonius echoes the advice Day gives in his manual – his precepts “give thy thoughts no tongue” (1.3.58), “Give every man thy ear but few thy voice” (1.3.67), and “brevity is the soul of wit” (2.2.90) map neatly onto Day’s “ordring and keeping the tongue” (123), belief that “we ought to heare much, […] and to speake but a little” (123), and praise for “breuiety of speech” (2) – he hardly follows his own counsel. On the contrary, he resembles the man Day exhorts us to avoid: one “disposed to speake much” who “hath in himselfe as little secrecie as silence” (123). Polonius ironically illustrates the “tediousness” of the “outward flourishes” he condemns (2.2.91), threatening to spill secrets. The language of “secretories” is tied here to “eyeing” (Day 4), spying, “eares” (Day 103) and tongues, positing sensory observation

114 On the manual role of secretaries see Jonathan Goldberg, Writing Matter.
115 Parker’s brilliant essay on women’s bodies as subject to “dilation” in Hamlet traces this intersection between secretaries and statecraft, using its “corresponding multiplication of informers” to highlight the “sexualizing” of the “office” (78-79). Using Day as well, she equates the secretary’s spying eye with a gynecological gaze.
as a key component of mediation.

Understanding the role of a “secretorite” helps to clarify a confusing early modern mindset about sensory mediation. Returning to the body politic, Davies writes in *Nosce teipsum* (1599) that the soul uses the “Senses” as “her instruments” to know “all things that are felt, heard, or seene/ […] Euen as our great wise Empresse, that now raignes, […] Borrowes in meane affaires her subiects paines./ Sees by their eyes, and writeth by their hands” (15). The secretary’s job involves the gathering and safeguarding of secrets, but it also necessitates mediation because of letter writing. The secretary acts between sender and receiver as an extension of the letter, translating the matter of voice into a visual script in the process. As Day observes, the “pen in this action is not his owne, but anothers, and for this cause the matters to him committed are to depend upon the humor of his commander, and not upon his own” (130). Viewed from this perspective, the best secretaries are transparent: they copy out exactly what the King says, no more and no less. They are a pure vehicle of communication, relinquishing their own agency or “anie affectation to his own doings […] anie private judgement” (130). Day admires the secretary who offers unaltered or – to borrow Polonius’s term – “unsifted” meaning (1.3.101) because the mediator goes so unnoticed that the message seems, by definition, immediate. Day soon contradicts this claim. He also avows that exemplary secretaries are those who know how to “choose” the “right” words (128); they help their masters most by their apt phrasing, avoiding too many conceits or too blunt a purpose (128). In this opposing view, the “part especiall and intendment most principall, consisteth […] in the use and exercise of the Pen, the Wit and Invention togethers” (129). This ideal secretary is inventive and selective, interposing his will to shape and co-author
the message. Paradoxically then, the mediator is instructed both to alter nothing and to alter everything in order to serve his finest purpose.

This is the exact tension that recurs in early modern writings about “faithfull” sensory perceivers (Crooke 698). Here too we encounter a paradoxical valuation of sight and hearing; they are ranked as the two foremost senses both for their passive transparency as mediums and for their active shaping of received messages as “authors” or “invent[ors]” (Tomkis 4.7.8). How can it be both? As Caldwell discerns, “sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scientific literature is full of controversy about how far the senses merely channel information to the mind, how far they mold and interpret that information” (144). I have argued elsewhere that Elizabethans viewed the senses as active agents who exert attention; they do things in order to perceive correctly, rather than merely receive delivered stimuli. Their activity is indicated in verbs like “harken,” “dilate,” and “iudge” – as where Brathwaite reports that “our eare can best iudge of sounds, […] ministring matter sufficient for the minde to digest” (6). The ear winnows messages, choosing which are “sufficient” for the mind and leaving out the rest. The eye likewise is “the bodies guide” (5), leading us into knowledge and “euer prying into others secrets” (4). This active agency can be viewed as positive or negative intervention. While Brathwaite commends the ear for its choice of fit matter, he also chastises the eye for its vanity. The “Eye and Eare” may be the two senses that are our best “hope” to “recollect those beames of knowledge cleare” (Davies 3), but they are far from mere lenses. These mediators meddle, impress, and reinvent what they see and hear as part of their perceptual activity.

116 On sensory attention see McDermott, “Perceiving Shakespeare.”
When these two senses change the reality they observe into something new, they – in a manner of speaking – give us the lie, trading a true world for a faulty and individual impression of that world. This is the threat inherent in sensation that Caldwell and Norford find in their studies of *Hamlet*. Caldwell claims, “we are always left with the haunting suspicion that what we see may not be reality, but an illusion fostered by the perceiver’s senses” (143). The interference of the senses with the signals they process introduces the possibility of fabrication rather than replication. As Davies acknowledges, even good spies may err: “she the *Senses* checks, which oft do erre,/ And euen against their false reports decrees;/ […] For with a powre aboue the *Sense*, she sees” (17). The need to impose checks and limits on the creative potential of the senses runs as a thread through many contemporary texts. In the same breath that Wright ennobles the senses – “the first gates whereby passe and repasse all messages” – he reminds us that “the scriptures in particular” admonish “us to attend unto the custodie and vigilance over our eyes” (150-51). Taking the senses’ capacity for error as a starting point, Caldwell reflects on how *Hamlet*’s characters return to resensing rather than conclusive action, linking the now clichéd idea of “Hamlet’s paralyzing doubt and uncertainty” to perception (147). Norford likewise blames the senses for the play’s ambiguity, saying that the eye and ear cannot grasp reality. He proposes the cloud scene as evidence of variable sensations where “like the shifting clouds, things are what you make of them” (566).

HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?
POLONIUS: By th’ mass and ’tis like a camel indeed.
HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.
POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.
HAMLET: Or like a whale?
POLONIUS: Very like a whale. (3.2.368-73)
While the inscrutability of the cloud is symptomatic of the play’s doubt, this moment does not imply sensory error. It suggests, rather, the problem of Polonius’s willingness to disavow what his senses actually tell him for the sake of humouring an indecisive prince. The jest relies on Polonius’s absurd politeness and Hamlet’s intent to prove a fool a fool. He similarly makes Osric the butt of a joke but uses the decorum of hat-doffing to score the point rather than varying perceptions, telling him to put the “bonnet to his right use” (5.2.79). The issue is not one of sensory fallibility. Whenever Hamlet’s characters refer to their eyes and ears – as they often, and sometimes gratuitously, do – they evince conviction: “Before my God, I might not this believe/ Without the sensible and true avouch/ Of mine own eyes” (1.1.55-57). Shakespeare’s other plays contain many characters who distrust their senses, questioning “Is this a dagger which I see before me” (Macbeth 2.1.33) or marvelling “This is the pearl she gave me, I do feel’t and see’t,” though “my soul disputes well with my sense/ That this may be some error” (Twelfth Night 4.3.2, 9-10). By contrast, Hamlet’s assertion “Nay then, I have an eye of you” (2.2.256) rings like a motto in this play, where the preoccupation with seeming attests to the speciousness of a real world that can only be untangled by “sensible” intelligencers.

When Hamlet wavers in his plan for revenge, pausing to note “the spirit that I have seen/ May be de’il,” he does not doubt that he has seen a spirit, although he fears that the apparition may be a “pleasing shape” sent to tempt him (2.2.533-35). Seeking “grounds/ More relative than this” (2.2.538-39), he returns to his ears and eyes together as sensory mediators to “observe his [uncle’s] looks” (2.2.531). The senses are the means through which the characters of Hamlet verify the truths of their dramatic world, and they are moreover the intelligencers that corroborate one another even when Hamlet
metatheatrically represents the drama of his world as performance. In fact, *Hamlet* establishes mutual substantiation as the dominant relationship between eye and ear most pointedly when the play reproduces theatre in *The Murder of Gonzago*. The device of the play-within-the-play layers multiple sets of eyes, ears, and observers. The King and Queen watch the performers, Hamlet and Horatio watch the King and Queen in turn – saying “I mine eyes will rivet to his face/ And after we will both our judgements join” (3.2.81-82) – and the offstage audience at *Hamlet*, by extension, is urged to “join” all their senses in “censure” of Hamlet, Horatio, and those onstage (3.2.83). After the dumb-show, Hamlet’s and Ophelia’s exchange pairs sight and sound where once again she overlaps the language of written and oral forms, or “showing” and “telling,” by asking: “Will ’a tell us what this show meant?” (3.2.136). This invites the larger audience to participate not only through a coupled form of sense perception modeled as attentive spectatorship, but further recalls Hamlet’s public hearing that combined letters (“words”) and hearsay (“talk”) as evidence. The conclusion to draw is that even in the play’s inset performance, the eye and ear are the surest mediators of knowledge only comparable to, and verifiable by, each other.

In the battle for supremacy among the five senses, Common Sense rules: “Visus and Auditius, serue your selues” (Tomkis 4.7.6). To return to the idea of the secretary, however, how can hearing serve its “self” if it supports a ruling master? Are not faithful mediators supposed to put aside personal agency in order to relay accurate messages between the body and world? Early modern descriptions of sensory mediation favour transparency as a general rule, but Crooke characterises the action of hearing and sight as containing an in-built exception. He suggests that in perception the eye creates an
impression that is in some ways a new thing; the “internal Medium” of “Sight” is the place “in which the formes or Idea of things are separated from the things themselves, and so naked are transported vnto the first Sensator” (Crooke 609). The outside world is brought into the body in one “form” and then stripped by the intervening sensory messenger into a “naked” representation, making the “thing” a new “idea” separable from the original. When Claudius hands his letters to Cornelius and Voltemand, he expressly orders them not to enlarge the “business” more than the stipulated “scope” by adding anything new (1.2.37). Claudius wants passive mediators who transmit unaltered messages. That he takes the time in front of the surrounding council to negate his mediators’ agency betrays his anxiety about their intervention: “For bearers of this greeting to old Norway,/ Giving to you no further personal power/ To business with the King more than the scope/ Of these delated articles allow” (1.2.35-38). He insists that they are “bearers” of his words rather than interposers of their own. His reference to the letters as “delated articles” is particularly slippery, and while Parker helpfully relates this delated (Q2) /dilated (F) complex to spying through the “dilations” found in Othello (82), this word has a further meaning that involves visual mediation. “Dilate” means to open or embellish in rhetorical terms but, as Walter Baley’s treatise on Eie-sight (1616) affirms, it equally implies the widening of the eye’s “pupil” to access light (26). Claudius’s command can be read as an attempt to reduce pupillary dilation so as to correct his extended watchers in synecdoche, curbing the activity of these eyes abroad. That the messengers reply in unison, saying “we” will “show our duty” (1.2.40), hints at both the unification of two eyes into binocular vision and the circumscription of their independent “power” to such a degree as they dare not “dilate” their answer aloud.
What the formality of Claudius’s dispatch throws into light is the unusualness of Hamlet’s self-written letters. The play acknowledges that the prince is behaving in a way at odds with his station (Stewart 265), doing “yeoman’s service” as his own secretary (5.2.36). When Hamlet explains his letter-writing techniques to Horatio in act five, he lampoons the exaggerated similes of secretarial writing even as he masterfully employs them: “As peace should still her wheaten garland wear/ And stand a comma ’tween their amities,/ And many such like ‘as’, sir, of great charge” (5.2.41-43). Hamlet knows how to pen the letter in a convincing manner and manipulates the paper in such a way as to make it a compelling forgery: folding “the writ up in the form of th’other,/ Subscribed, gave’t th’impression, placed it safely,/ The changeling never known” (5.2.51-53). Hamlet completes the secretarial process by refolding the creases, signing it, and wax-sealing it to ensure visible authority. Fittingly, Hamlet is not only the perceiver in the play who is most adept at retaining his own secrets while using the eye and ear dyad to find treachery in others, but he is also the most efficient letter writer or “secretorie” in the play.

While this forgery and his personal letters to Gertrude and the King are never heard, never unfolded onstage, his letter to Horatio is spoken at length:

HORATIO: [Reads.] Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked this, give these fellows some means to the King: they have letters for him. [...] Let the King have the letters I have sent, and repair thou to me with as much speed as thou wouldst fly death. I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb. Yet are they much too light for the bore of the matter. These good fellows will bring thee where I am. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England. Of them I have much to tell thee. Farewell. He that thou knowest thine. Hamlet. (4.6.13-15, 21-27).

Horatio’s reading of the letter before the audience gives Hamlet’s words breath in an apparent act of ventriloquism. The medium of the paper recesses into the background as
Hamlet’s own voice seems to ring through; however, to hear the letter this way is to ignore the difference between written and oral forms. Hamlet’s letter begins with a personal salutation and ends with a formal signature in keeping with the conventions of written rather than spoken address. He implores Horatio to conduct the sailors to the King after he has “overlooked” – a visual verb – the page’s full contents. Most critically, Hamlet contrasts the “showing” work of the letter against the “telling” he intends to do in person. His evocative promise, “Of them I have much to tell thee,” repeats Polonius’s division of “words” from spoken “talk.” There is one type of “matter” appropriate for words written out in letters and another that can be spoken to the “ear.” For Hamlet, spoken communication holds more emotion and intimacy, and the whole story thus requires both forms together. Indeed, his references to the relative weight of the content as too “light” for the heavy “bore” of the subject puns on the “boring” of the ear – revisiting ideas of aural penetration – especially because he insists that the heard message will have the power to “make thee dumb.” By urging Horatio to speed his way toward him to hear the longer tale, Hamlet’s letter brings together oral voicing and read documents while distinguishing the material suitable for each.

Hamlet’s privileging of the power of speech over writing for its candour in this instance could be taken as a classic example of what Derrida calls “phonocentrism”: the belief that written language is merely a derivative of sounded speech. If for Aristotle “spoken words (ta te phonè) are the symbols of mental experience (pathēmata tes psyches) and written words are the symbols of spoken words,” Derrida reasons, “then it is because the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity to the mind […] It is the stage of transparence” (Grammatology...
Phonocentrism assumes that writing increases the divide between thought and expression through an additional stage of translation. The utterance Hamlet promises to deliver Horatio by “speaking” to his “ear” is fundamentally present, first person, and – supposedly – unmediated, whereas the letter he sends as script implies his absence, the second-hand nature of that communication as mediated by paper. Focusing on the transmission of words via speech or writing in this way ignores the role of the body. All of these transactions are mediated. While my study of mediation in Hamlet inevitably intersects with phonocentrist discourse, I treat the play’s examples of intelligence and communication (both textual and oral) as mediated in sensory cooperation.

Where written letters hold dangerous potential, oral stories too can mislead the hearer into perilous traps. The play is littered with so many references to the ears being “split” (3.2.10), “assail[ed]” (1.1.30), or “infect[ed]” (4.5.90) that hearing seems inherently dangerous. Yet in those moments when a character seeks another’s confidence, he will often stress the validity of his speech by comparison to other reports. For example, King Hamlet asks his son to believe his hearsay even as he hopes to dispel the rumour that violates the “ear” of his country (1.5.36). What Hamlet hears the ghost say is, the play affirms, the truth of what happened although the prince vacillates between conviction and doubt, distrusting the ghost’s report precisely because it is hearsay rather than his own direct observation. This type of wariness about any oral/aural report is understandable, but other instances in the play uphold that hearsay is reliable when it is confirmed by sight. Refusing to listen to hearsay can prove equally dangerous. Near the

117 These quotes display the perils of listening as critics such as Mary Anderson, Allison Deutermann, Pollard, and Reina Green contend. However, I argue that this permeability of the ear to media also testifies to its success as a mediator of inward truths. Many seventeenth-century religious sermons use these same metaphors of piercing, stabbing, and nailing the vulnerable interior through the ear in their calls for acoustic openness.
start of the play, Claudius tells his council that Old Norway, uncle to young Fortinbras, errs in diplomacy because he “scarcely hears/ Of this his nephew’s purpose” (1.2.29-30). “Impotent and bedrid” his ears are so cut off from news that he needs a notification letter from Denmark to check an impeding war (1.2.29). Queen Elizabeth I certainly recognised the danger in failing to hear about her kingdom, acknowledging that “we princes may not hear all ourselves” and must bend our “ears to a credit a tale” told by our intelligencers (204). Her successor, James I, repeats this axiom that “in the state of princes we see and hear all with eyes and ears of others” (qtd. in Botehlo 20). It is by having King Claudius hear with his own ears, and witness with his own eyes, however, that Hamlet makes a trial of guilt through performance.

Hamlet’s musings begin with a non-semantic sound, a “hum,” and end by converting the theatre into an “organ” for sounding out interiors through reverberation, speaking – in a sense – without a “tongue”:

Hum, I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. (2.2.523-29)

His thoughts turn from hearsay about the theatre to the moving effects of hearing in the theatre. Hamlet’s question to Polonius as the trumpets flourish, “How now, my lord, will the King hear this piece of work?” (3.2.44), characterises the play as matter designed for the royal ear. One might think that this tendency to imagine plays as “hearing pieces” is peculiar to Hamlet, but virtually all of the characters evaluate the inset performances by sound. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Claudius that they passed on hearsay of the
players’ arrival to Hamlet “and there did seem in him a kind of joy/ To hear of it” (3.1.18-19), to which Polonius rejoins: “‘Tis most true,/ And he beseeched me to entreat your majesties/ To hear and see the matter” (3.1.21-23). Even the players request attention by “beg[ging] your hearing patiently” (3.2.144). This conjunction of eyes and ears within *The Murder of Gonzago* offers a solution to a play crux: while King Claudius fails to react in the slightest to the dumb-show that mimes his familiar crime, he rises aghast as soon as he hears the player name his deeds (Holland 191). It is, as Hamlet observes, only “upon the talk of poisoning” that the King shows his guilt (3.2.281).

Hamlet’s oft-quoted advice on naturalistic acting also accentuates the cooperative role of sound (delivery, pacing, and volume) and sight (in a gestural language) in performance. “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you –,” he instructs, “tripply on the tongue” (3.2.1-2). If the players merely “mouth” the words or shout, he claims: “I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines” (3.2.3). Hamlet decries overacting in a metaphor of splitting the ears that recalls Eustachio’s discovery and the aural murder as heard-touch: “O, it offends me to the soul to hear a […] fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings” (3.2.8-10). While these lines suggest the inward-reaching potential of hearing, the actor’s speech is in each case enhanced by the actor’s visual appeals, “for as the Tongue speaketh to the Eare, so Gesture speaketh to the Eye” (Bulwer, *Chirologia* A5-A6). Embedded within Hamlet’s advice to speak “tripply” is a warning against “saw[ing] the air too much with your hand” (3.2.4) and Hamlet and Polonius see the force of the actor’s pleas in his “wanned” visage and teary “eyes” as much as his “broken voice” (2.2.489-91). Eyes and ears once again work cooperatively, even synaesthetically, as mediators of theatrical expression.
In an explicitly metatheatrical moment, Hamlet questions what sort of a response he should elicit were his story, and not Hecuba’s, the subject of performance:

[...] What would he do
Had he the motive and that for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. (2.2.495-501)

The histrionics of drowning the stage in tears are hardly in keeping with Hamlet’s counsel, but the passion of the actor is not the main emphasis here. Nor is the audience’s anticipated reaction, even though Shakespeare may seem especially bold to tell the audience what they should be feeling: appalled if innocent. The passage instead revolves around how the matter of performance is mediated by the bodies of its witnesses. Hearing bleeds into visual amazement as the enjambment runs “tears” and “ears” together. The actor’s weeping eyes subtend his “horrid speech,” creating a shared impression that threatens to “cleave” the “general ear.”

Our collective noun for theatregoers – audience – arises from this “general ear.” When Hamlet was written there was no single label for a playgoing community because the large-scale gatherings of people fostered in an urban theatre space were new enough to produce a wide range of terms that only gradually narrowed down. As Gurr observes, the two remaining terms, “audience” and “spectators,” derive from distinct sensory etymologies that carry with them early modern associations about the sociality of ear and solitude of the eye, respectively (1). If the tears in the actor’s eyes individuate him from the crowd, his voice commingles with those assembled to become one entity: a “general ear” (2.2.498). This is in keeping with the idea that the eye receives singular visible
species reflected as light and colour from surfaces, whereas the ear processes sounds produced by the interaction of two or more bodies colliding within a medium. By virtue of their anatomical operations, sight isolates and sound integrates. These ongoing assumptions about the different types of experience corresponding to seeing versus hearing shape an important lexical distinction: “spectators is of course a plural word, and connotes an assembly of separate individuals with different perspectives on an event, while an audience describes a single community sharing a common experience” (Folkerth 24). Given that the Player’s Hecuba speech establishes both visual spectacle and communal aurality, it seems all the more appropriate that Shakespeare’s Hamlet should test the function of hearsay and letters together as cross-dependant forms.

Considering the difference between the sensory experiences of hearing a story out loud onstage (in an audience) and reading the same tale in a book (as a spectator), Crooke wonders why it is that “wee are more recreated with Hearing then with Reading: For we are wonderfully delighted in the hearing of fables and playes acted vpon a Stage, much more then if wee learned them out of written bookes,” Crooke reasons that “there is a kinde of society in narration and acting, which is very agreeable to the nature of man, but reading is more solitary” (698).\(^{118}\) Citing Scaliger, Crooke gives six explanations for this innate preference, but most of these return to the relationship between hearing and social experience. Where reading is “onely a dumbe Actor,” the stage performer can add emotion to his lines; where theatre encourages a responsibility to observe “because a

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\(^{118}\) Crooke’s question places theatre and books in competition with each other as forms of “recreation,” but would print scripts have endangered plays as rivals for the same audience? It is difficult to say for certain. Literacy rates in early modern England are nearly impossible to pin down (see David Cressy and Heidi Hackel for opposing accounts), but the practice of “spelling” or sounding out texts was certainly on the rise. John Heminges and Henry Condell advertise Shakespeare’s 1623 Folio to “the great Variety of readers” as well as stage-goers “from the most able to him that can but spell” (qtd. in Hackel 3).
certaine shamefastnesse [...] doth cause vs to apply our eares to him that vttereth anything by voyce,” reading allows “a kinde of remission in the minde and security from any blame”; and where hearing includes digression “as we see in Comedies,” reading forecloses interjection or elaboration (698). That Crooke addresses the different effects of heard theatre as opposed to read books as the first, and longest, of his sensory controversies on “hard Problemes about the Eares” is revealing because it indicates that early moderns conceived of these questions about different media in terms of perceptual activity and sense anatomy (698).

As playbooks started to circulate in a culture of increasing readership, the arrival of “this Printing age” changed the dynamics and economics of a theatre-going populace (Dekker, Lanthorne 177). The Folio’s move to welcome spellers, or “sound readers,” is remarkable in the view of the way it counteracts the defensive tone common among contemporary print prefaces where “other playwrights viewed the medium of print as a substitute for encountering their work in the theatre” (Folkerth 22). Marston records his unease at publishing The Malcontent by admitting “I would fain leave the paper; only one thing afflicts me, to think that scenes invented merely to be spoken aloud should be enforcively published to be read,” but entreating the reader to pardon the “unhandsome shape which this trifle in reading presents” for “the pleasure it once afforded you when it was presented with the soul of lively action” (5-6, qtd. in Folkerth 23). The assumption implicit in this quote is that buying a print script offers a shoddy counterpart to the full-bodied sociality of the stage, yet the purchaser can nevertheless complement that reading with their recollections of what they had already felt in theatre. While this print preface seems oddly anti-print, it still suggests that reading and staging are cooperative forms. By
invoking the “soul” of performance to assist in the appreciation of “the paper,” he makes an appeal for a return to live experience in reading. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, this same sensory appeal occurs in Shakespeare at the level of metaphor where full-bodied sensations survive on the “paper,” bringing the “soul of lively action” to a “great variety of readers.”

In Hamlet’s final scene, the importance of mixed perception is driven home by appealing to the full body of its audience. At the start of the climactic duel, the King calls out to the assembly: “you, the judges, bear a wary eye” (5.2.256). This the wider audience must do as well in order to follow the rapid switch of foils, the shell-game of the two cups, and the quick series of murders, “villainy,” and treacherous acts (5.2.296). This appeal to the senses of the audience becomes even more explicit when Hamlet lies dying since he directly addresses: “You that look pale and tremble at this chance,/ That are but mutes or audience to this act” (5.2.318-19). Hamlet wishes for more time to “tell” his tale to the assembled hearers (5.2.321) but, strikingly for a man of letters or “perennial graduate student” in Stewart’s phrase (261), Hamlet does not seek out his tables to record these words for posterity. Rather, he looks to Horatio to “report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied” as hearsay (5.2.323-24). Unlike the rude mechanical, Bottom, who awakes from his adventure wishing for a pen, “I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream” (MND 4.1.211), Hamlet dies upon his request for Horatio to mediate his intelligence as a composite of voice and spectacle: “draw thy breath in pain/ To tell my story” (5.2.332-33). Hamlet does not live long enough “to hear the news from England,” but imparts his “dying voice” to Fortinbras (5.2.338, 340). Hamlet’s ready acceptance of Fortinbras as the new ruler of Denmark emerges from his earlier
conception of kingship and the body politic found in his synecdoches. Hamlet imagines Fortinbras as a monarch by “election” (5.2.339) versus a hostile takeover, seeing his replacement as a necessary transfusion into a dying kingdom. Unlike his uncle who “popped in between th’election and my hopes” (5.2.64) by usurping the powers of Hamlet’s part in the seizure of the crown, Fortinbras supplies a different relationship among equals and so subsumes Denmark into his body politic as one synecdochal whole. Appropriately, Fortinbras unites his desire to see the fallen bodies, “Where is this sight?” (5.2.346), with the sound of pounding “drum” (5.2.345) and “soldiers’ music” (5.2.383).

The ambassador too returns from England, bearing yet another letter, but he realises the impossibility of its delivery since “the sight is dismal” and “the ears are senseless that should give us hearing” (5.2.351, 353). Horatio’s concluding promise to “truly deliver” repositions him as a mediator of intelligence like the senses who gather information for their governing soul or the spies and messengers who communicate back to their sovereign (5.2.370). Even as Hamlet’s conclusion underscores the role of hearing and seeing in tandem, it is ultimately the full sensory body that Shakespeare places high “to the view” on “stage” (5.2.380). For where this play demonstrates that talk and sights, hearsay and letters, have the potential to prove false, it nevertheless maintains that accurate perceptions are possible if furnished by sensory collaboration. The changing media specific to the turn of the seventeenth century call to light the different ways plays were being delivered to their audiences, both on paper and in live performance, and this shifting dynamic of mediation finds new life in the spies and sensory intelligencers of Hamlet. This chapter has questioned these changing reception and perception dynamics of a play designed to “amaze indeed the very faculties of eyes and ears.”
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