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Volume 8, 2017
DISGUST

Phillis's Foul Linen: Sexual Disgust at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

A recent trend among female comedians today is to prove they are as funny as men by engaging in humour that provokes disgust. In doing so they defy a long tradition that sees men's discourse about the body as frank and courageous, and women's as prudish and euphemistic. But a look at the gender wars of an earlier age may challenge this dichotomy. Comparing the writings of Rochester and Swift with those of their contemporaries Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley, one may appreciate the courage required to resist disgust, and to focus instead on love and beauty. For these women writers, that meant breathing new life into the pastoral, romantic conventions, inherited from Virgil and Ovid, that their male counterparts were attacking with satire. This observation may help us to reframe the current debate over the relative funniness of women, and to begin to seek an antidote to disgust suitable to our own time.[1]

Keywords: female comedians, 'dirty' humour, satire, Rochester (John Wilmot), Jonathan Swift, Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, pastoral, gender war, disgust.

> I used to hide what my vagina did to my underpants. And, by the way, what all vaginas do to all underpants, okay? There is no woman who ends her day with, like, a clean pair of underpants that look like they've ever even come from a store, okay? They look like little bags that have fallen face down in, like, a tub of cream cheese, and then, like, commando-crawled their way out. And then, like, carabinered up, like, into a crotch.
>
> *Obvious Child* (2014)

The above epigraph, from the movie *Obvious Child* (2014), is part of a monologue recited by the protagonist, a young female stand-up comic. The description of her soiled underwear seems intended to prove, among other things, that women in comedy can be just as fearless as men in provoking disgust. In fact, it perfectly illustrates two main aspects of disgust introduced in an anecdote that has become fundamental to its study by modern theorists (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 23). In *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Charles Darwin described an encounter with a 'native' in Tierra del Fuego who was watching him eat potted meat: the softness of the meat disgusted the 'naked savage', who then touched it, causing

[1] This article is based on a paper presented by the author at *Disgust*, the eighth *Skepsi* conference held at the University of Kent, 29–30 May 2015.

Darwin to feel disgusted in turn (123). The incident reveals both the primary evolutionary function of disgust: to prevent the ingestion of dangerous substances, and one of its secondary functions: to mark the difference between 'us' and 'them', or those whose bodily secretions we are most and least willing to contact (Rozin and Fallon 26; Jones 2000). Both these functions operate in the movie monologue, as it virtually forces an audience of strangers to think about food — in this case cream cheese — contaminated by the comedian's vaginal discharge. Disgusted the audience may be — but they will not be surprised if they have listened at all lately to real-life women in comedy, such as Sarah Silverman and Amy Schumer, airing their dirty linen in public. Disgust, as they say in social media, is trending.

This development makes a certain amount of feminist sense. Given that in comedy a woman can be hooted off the stage with the declaration that 'women aren't funny' (a phrase Bonnie McFarlane took for the title of her 2014 documentary), her very survival in the field depends on proving that women can do whatever men can do. And until recently, that has meant braving disgust. In a 1983 essay on 'male humor', Isaac Asimov explained that 'dirty jokes' provide an escape from 'the distortions of social hypocrisy' and are therefore 'an important contributor to the mental health of males'. He invited women to join their brothers in this liberating enterprise, and thirty years later, women in comedy have taken up this invitation. In doing so, they also may appear to challenge a broader assumption, noted with great sympathy by John Stuart Mill in 'The Subjection of Women' (1869), that centuries of 'subjection' have made women too fearful of breaching social convention to create anything truly original, and for that reason they have failed to achieve 'greatness' in any of the arts (1970: 204).

Yet any historical view longer than one's own generation will remind us that disgusting humour, though masculine, is far from new or original — and neither is the gender war that is now surfacing as a debate about the relative 'funniness' of women. More than three hundred years ago, male and female writers were already engaged in a contest over disgust. At the turn of the eighteenth century, male writers used scatological humour to deflate what they saw as false and dangerous romantic conventions. Yet during the same period, instead of imitating their male counterparts, women writers persisted in using those conventions without irony. Which side was really more brave, and more free? An examination of writings by John Wilmot, Lord Rochester and Aphra Behn in the 1670s and 1680s and by Jonathan Swift and Mary Delarivier Manley in the first decades of the eighteenth century may reveal that the male writers' readiness to make aesthetic capital of disgust was the less courageous and less

liberating choice.[2] Rather, by resisting this trend, the women writers proposed an antidote to disgust, a means of achieving equal opportunity for women in love, and a truce in the gender wars. They also provided those of us revisiting their writings today with a way to reframe the issue of disgust in comedy and, perhaps, to imagine a different path to liberation.

First, however, some key concepts in recent disgust theory may help us to see why the language of disgust is not necessarily liberating, to women or to humans generally. Disgust is thought to arrive in children during toilet training and to peak again during puberty, when a desire for intimate contact with others competes with previously learned avoidance of strangers' bodily fluids (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 33–34). As William Miller remarks, 'A person's tongue in your mouth could be experienced as a pleasure or as a most repulsive and nauseating intrusion', and could go from one to the other within seconds as the specific relationship with the 'person' is forming (1997: 137). The resulting 'tension' (Asimov 1983) may be released in a 'dirty joke', and since until recently the joke-tellers have been male, their target is usually female. When women comedians appropriate these jokes, as in the *Obvious Child* monologue, they assume a male, disgusted gaze toward their own bodies — not a very helpful move given the role of self-disgust in the development of the various body dysmorphic disorders so prevalent among young women today (Onden-Lim and Grisham 2013). Furthermore, since 'taste' — the etymological converse of disgust — through metaphor expresses a culture's moral and aesthetic values (Jones 2000), these jokes may reinforce the misogyny that persists beneath the politically correct surface of our social conventions.

Nor is the language of disgust necessarily as freeing for men as Asimov contended. Basic, food-based disgust tends to arise almost universally from animal organs and by-products (Rozin and Fallon 1987: 28). Some theorists attribute this common factor to a fundamental unease with our own animal nature: as Miller remarks, 'It is not that animal bodies decay, excrete, suppurate, and die that makes these processes sources of disgust to us: it is that ours do' (1997: 49; quoted in Jones 2000). To express this feeling in words, to reveal our private discomfort to others and allow them to admit their own, does alleviate the pressures of polite behaviour. But it doesn't cure disgust or dispose us to accept our physicality, much less to celebrate the beauties and pleasures of the body.

[2] The author was generally referred to as 'Mrs. Manley' in her day, and there has been much discussion about what her Christian name was, and how it is to be spelled: sometimes 'de la Riviere' or 'Delariviere'. Fidelis Morgan makes a good argument for dropping 'Mary' altogether, and for the spelling 'Delarivier' (14). Because material on 'Mrs. Manley' is so variously catalogued, I have kept 'Mary' but adopted Morgan's suggested spelling of her second name throughout the text. However, I use the spelling adopted by any authority cited where necessary.

With these warnings in mind, then, let us turn from the *Obvious Child* monologue to some lines written more than three centuries earlier, probably in the mid-1660's, about another young woman's dirty underwear — Rochester's mock pastoral love poem to 'Phillis in foul linen' ('Song': 46, 1.16):

> Fair nasty Nymph, be clean and kind,
> And all my joys restore;
> By using Paper still behind,
> And Spunges for before. ('Song': 45, ll. 5–8)[3]

The first time I read this poem, in college, I speculated that the earl had composed it in the Restoration version of junior high school. But I was quickly warned to view this unclean shepherdess, not as some real person, but merely as a trope intended to hasten the demise of the moribund Virgilian and Ovidian conventions that were still decorating the Cavalier lyrics of Rochester's older contemporaries; only one of many false idols that drew his satiric fire. His satires are what Rochester is known for today, probably in part because poems such as 'Upon Nothing' seemed to prefigure the existentialist world view of twentieth-century editors of anthologies. It therefore surprised me to learn, on first looking at his complete collected poems, that he also had a romantic side that must have been familiar to his contemporaries, for here are several completely unsatirical love lyrics, as full of Cynthias and Corinnas as any Cavalier or court lady could wish. Even Phillis gets her share of polite adoration. No wonder in Aphra Behn's elegy upon his death he appears as the 'Swain' Strephon, whose selfless worship of women has led to his heroic death—at age 33, of syphilis: 'Mourn, all ye Beauties, put your *Cyprus* on, / The truest Swain that e're Ador'd you's gone' ('Late Earl of Rochester': 369).[4] She even decorates his tomb with some baroque Petrarchan Cupids in mourning, whose darts have become 'useless Toys', not because they have gone out of style, but because Strephon, who gave them power, has departed (Ibid: 369–70).

The satirist Rochester denied the romantic one: 'A song to Phillis I perhaps might make, / But never rhymed but for my pintle's [i.e. penis's] sake' ('Satyr [Timon,]': 78, ll. 21–22). This disclaimer serves as a reminder that his Phillises were not in fact mere tropes but real, numerous sex partners — 'ten thousand' if his own verses are to be believed ('The Imperfect Enjoyment': 31, l. 38). It also reminds us that this was war; even in Restoration comedy the happy ending could be achieved only through prolonged negotiation between the male party, who wanted sex

[3] References to quotations from Rochester's poems follow the system: 'title of poem': page number(s), line number(s).
[4] References to quotations from Behn's poems follow the system: 'title of poem': page number(s), stanza number (if any) in capital roman numeral.

without commitment, and the female party, who for safety's sake required marriage. No wonder Petrarch's battle imagery still seemed relevant, from the woman's point of view. In Behn's sophisticated lyric 'Love Arm'd', the god Love still lingers in modern-day England only because the lovers in the poem have 'sett him up a Deity' ('Love Arm'd': 164). Furthermore, she gives new life to the old convention of courtly love by reversing the genders, so that the man, not the woman, is victorious and 'free' (Ibid: 164), and the woman, not the man, penetrated by the 'Killing dart':

> From me he [Love] took his sighs and tears,
> From thee his Pride and Crueltie;
> From me his Languishments and Feares,
> And every Killing Dart from thee ('Love Arm'd': 164).

This 'dart of love' becomes even more literal, to the point of ludicrousness, in Rochester's 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', an adaptation of Ovid's poem about a failed erection:

> This *Dart* of love, whose piercing point oft try'd,
> With Virgin blood, Ten thousand Maids has dy'd;
> Which Nature still directed with such Art,
> That it through ev'ry Cunt, reacht ev'ry Heart.
> […]
> Now languid lies in this unhappy hour
> Shrunk up and sapless like a withered flower ('The Imperfect Enjoyment': 31, ll. 37–45).

Here he juxtaposes the Petrarchan metaphor with coarser Anglo-Saxon words as if in sheer boyish delight in making this fancy old figure do some hard, dirty work for a change. This is the voice of the frustrated male complaining, with humour, to an audience of other men. In contrast, when Behn adapted the same poem, the scene is presented, not by a participant, but by an omniscient narrator who offers up the pretty 'nymph' to the reader at the same time she offers herself, in vain, to her 'o'er-Ravish'd Shepherd' ('The Disappointment': 180, stanza VII).

Both poets' works make clear that women enjoy sex as much as men do. Why then can't we all just get along? A sort of answer is provided in Behn's 'The Golden Age', which describes an ancient pastoral utopia where 'a Thousand Cupids' ('The Golden Age': 141, stanza VI) once hovered over nymphs and swains making love in all innocence: 'The Nymphs were free, no nice, no coy disdain / Deny'd their Joyes, or gave the Lover pain' (Ibid: 141, stanza VI). But all this was spoiled by men's imperialist ambitions:

> Right and Property were words since made,
> When Power taught Mankind to invade:
> When Pride and Avarice became a Trade:
> […]
> And Rapes, Invasions, Tyrannies,
> Was gaining of a Glorious Name ('The Golden Age': 140, V).

Women became part of that 'property', protected on their owners' behalf by 'cursed Honour!' and its attendant 'shame' (Ibid: 141, stanza VIII). As the partnership in love devolved into a power struggle, 'Honour' supplied women with the weapon of coquetry to wield in their own defence: 'Honour! Who first taught lovely Eyes the art, / To wound, and not to cure the heart: / With Love to invite, but to forbid with Awe' (Ibid: 142, stanza VIII). Coquetry, in its turn, begot the fashion industry, as elaborate clothes would now be needed to hide 'all the Charmingst part of Beauty' and expensive hair stylists to '[Gather] up the flowing Hair […] / No more neglected on the Shoulders hurl'd; / Now drest to Tempt, not gratify the World' (Ibid: 141, stanza VIII).

Implicit in 'The Golden Age' is the assumption that in nature, men's and women's bodies are beautiful in the same way; both 'shame' and gender difference are imposed from without. This resemblance is a basic feature of the pastoral aesthetic, as seen, for example in Honoré d'Urfé's romance from around 1607, *L'Astrée* (1928) — a source for one of Behn's nicknames, Astrea. Here shepherds and shepherdesses look so much alike that the hero, Celadon, can spend much of the narrative dressed as a woman and finally unmask himself by simply announcing his true sex, without even changing his outfit (d'Urfé 1928: 300). Behn's other nickname, the English Sappho, also provides a classical tradition for an even further interchangeability of the sexes, as several of her love poems were addressed to female friends such as Lady Morland, Elizabeth Barry, and Emily Price, with whom she may or may not have had actual affairs (Duffy 1977: 128–29). One of these lyrics, 'To the Fair Clarinda, who made love to me imagined more than woman', argues that lesbian relationships are a sin-free alternative to heterosexual love:

> In pity to our Sex sure thou wer't sent,
> That we might Love, and yet be Innocent:
> For sure no Crime with thee we can commit;
> Or if we shou'd—thy Form excuses it ('Fair Clarinda').

Rochester also wrote homoerotic lyrics, but predictably in a very different style. Instead of both sexes resembling each other in beauty, here they compete with each other in avoidance of ugliness. In 'Love a Woman, Y'Are an Ass', he brags, 'There's a sweet soft Page of mine, / Does the trick worth Forty Wenches' ('Love a Woman': 25, 15–16) — implying that at least this boy, unlike poor Phillis, doesn't stink. Again, the extent to which homosexuality was a real lifestyle choice for Rochester rather than mere verbal bravado is unknown. We do know, however, that for Behn the vanished ideal of the Golden Age was more than a fantasy. She belonged to a mixed group of friends calling themselves the 'cabal' who really did cavort in the countryside dressed as shepherds and shepherdesses (Goreau 1980: 140; Woodcock 1989: 99).

An occasional participant in these picnics was her sometime lover, the lawyer John Hoyle, a sort of wolf in sheep's clothing whose lack of sustained interest in their affair may have been due to his preference for men (Goreau 1980: 189–206; Woodcock 1989: 105–118). One may easily imagine Hoyle as a middle-class Rochester wannabe whom Behn tried, and failed, to see as a libertine in manners with the heart of a Virgilian shepherd. The affair may well have led to her tragic end, since she too would die, in 1689, at age forty-nine, of syphilis — or as she might have said, of love (Goreau 1980: 216; Woodcock 1989: 193).

Behn's nickname 'Astrea' had as its ancient eponym the goddess of justice from Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* who leaves the earth at the end of the Golden Age. Not coincidentally, this Astrea figures prominently in *The New Atalantis* (1709), the best-selling novel by a woman writer of the next generation, Mary Delarivier Manley. By the turn of the eighteenth century a growing conservatism made it virtually impossible for a woman to publish anything without accusations of 'lewdness' (Todd 1998: 18 ff.), thus escalating the gender war and causing Manley to spend much of her professional life deflecting insults on her writings and character, which were treated as inseparable. Of course, the female poet did have a classical precedent, but since this was Sappho — a legendary victim of her own intense passions whose poetry had been almost completely destroyed by the Catholic Church centuries before — she wasn't much help to an eighteenth-century author's reputation. The only topic this ancient lyricist left open for her descendants was love, extensive knowledge of which could cast a shadow on the respectability of any woman from the seventh century BCE on downwards. Manley, who did consider herself a love expert, was fortunate to have a close working relationship with Jonathan Swift, who defended her against personal attacks by Whig writers such as Sir Richard Steele, and who thought her talented enough, for 'one of her sort', to make her editor of the Tory *Examiner* in 1710 (quoted in Zelinsky 1999: 12, 140). This move somewhat extended her field of expertise, though even her most political satires never strayed far from the expected feminine topic.

Swift, perhaps even more than Rochester, is known today for the scatological imagery with which his satires targeted not only his political enemies but also the conventions of courtly love that set women up as objects of worship. And so once again we find ourselves looking closely at a shepherdess's dirty underwear — for example in 'The Lady's Dressing-Room', where the contents of 'Celia's' commode:

> Send up an excremental Smell
> To taint the Parts from whence they fell,
> [And] the Pettycoats and Gown perfume
> Which waft a Stink round every Room ('The Lady's Dressing Room': 91).

Unlike Rochester's libertine persona, Swift's is a neutral onlooker, impervious to Cupid's weaponry. In fact, he wields the powerful arrows of satire to rout Cupid and his darts from English poetry once and for all — literally. In 'Strephon and Chloe', as the bride reaches for the chamber pot on her wedding night, 'the little Cupids hov'ring round […] / Abash'd at what they saw and heard / Flew off, nor ever more appear'd' ('Strephon and Chloe': 107). If only Strephon had '[s]py'd her on the privy' much earlier, the 'Idea' would have kept him safe from love, as the narrator himself claims to be ('your heart had been as whole as mine' [Ibid: 108]). In other words, a man's best defence against love — that is, against women — is disgust.

Manley earned Swift's respect with her own satires, though critics often dismissed these — even until quite recently (see Carnell 2006: 38) — as mere gossip. Her several *romans à clef* attacked many known figures associated with the Whigs; but they also criticised, in what John Richetti has called 'rhetorically swollen' and 'melodramatic' language, 'a world of blasted female innocence and brutal male lust' (1991). This 'swollen' rhetoric is the next generation of the language of Ovid, Virgil, and Petrarch we have seen used with contrasting attitudes in the poetry of Behn and Rochester. By Manley's time it had made its way into popular culture through the medium of seventeenth-century French romance and Restoration heroic drama. Manley herself often satirised this 'bombast' in her novels, as it was commonly used as a tool of seduction by male predators and then hastily abandoned after the act. In some episodes the seducer claims to have adopted heroic language merely 'to allow [the female's] Virtue that pretence for yielding', as if both parties were only play-acting (*New Atalantis* I: 240, repr. I: 512).[5] Yet for the unwitting victim this heightened discourse may have had an emotional truth, and her abandonment was likely to have consequences that would indeed be 'melodramatic' rather than tragic if the ruin of women's lives happened only on the stage. In Manley's novels the French romances that transmitted this idealised language of love to a wide, especially female, readership are blamed for making inexperienced girls — including her own younger self — vulnerable to the machinations of cynical libertines who, if they don't quite 'rhyme', at least declaim 'but for their pintles' sakes'. Reading these romances, as we learn in the autobiographical story of Delia in *The New Atalantis*, led to the young Manley's seduction into

[5] The edition of Manley's works referred to in the Bibliography has a dual pagination system. As it is a facsimile edition, the pages retain the numbering of the original works; these start at 1 for each work. Each volume of the edition is also paginated, starting from 1 and continuing until the end; this is the 'reprint pagination', indicated by 'repr.' in the references. The references in the text give the page(s) according to both systems. In the Bibliography, the page ranges of each work are indicated by the reprint pagination, as the original pagination would be of no help. The two volumes of *The New Atalantis* are treated as one, but the page range is split between the two volumes of the original.

a bigamous marriage with her cousin John, though the world wrongly assumed she knew he was already married (*New Atalantis* II: 2.181–92, repr. I: 713–24). Fortunately, unlike most other women of the time, she had means to spin her resulting reputation for 'lewdness' into a profitable area of literary expertise.

In Manley's novels, she fought back against the double-standard that made the 'charters' of each sex so unequal by creating imaginary worlds at least as complex and rich in ironic possibilities as *Gulliver's Travels* (*Rivella*: 7, repr. II: 743). In *The New Atalantis* Astrea is returning to earth from the lunar sphere to consult the goddesses Intelligence and Virtue on the best way to educate the prince who will one day rule the moon. On this utopian planet, the goddess intends to create gender equality by imposing chastity on both sexes and punishing seducers with death (*New Atalantis* II: 192–93, repr. I: 724–25). Meanwhile, in Atalantis—which like Lilliput both is and is not England—Intelligence describes the romantic escapades of (mainly Whig) public figures, while Virtue and Astrea interpret these stories from a female point of view that validates women's perceptions of male guilt.

Manley's own seduction is one such story, which she later described at greater length in her fictionalised autobiography, *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714), again using an elaborate frame, this time filtering the story through the perspective of fictitious, sympathetic males. The narrator is Sir Charles Lovemore, who has long cherished an unrequited love for the heroine, and who has been asked by the young Chevalier D'Aumont, a fan of her writings, to tell him her history. The Chevalier is predisposed to fall in love with 'Rivella', coming from a society that values 'Wit and Sense' in women above 'Youth or Beauty'; in other words, France as it is transformed here by the author's romantic imagination into a utopia for women scorned by their own society (*Rivella*: 2, repr. II: 738). D'Aumont remarks: 'If she have but half so much of the Practic, as the Theory, in the Way of Love, she must certainly be a most accomplish'd Person' (*Rivella*: 4–5, repr. II: 740–41). When Lovemore warns that she 'is no longer young, and was never a Beauty', the Chevalier is undaunted, 'provided her Mind and her Passions are not in Decay' (*Rivella*: 5, repr. II: 741).

We learn from these characters' conversation that Manley was chiefly famous for her erotic scenarios, though these could also have a satirical edge. In one of D'Aumont's favourites, a duke seduces his ward, 'the Young Charlot', by getting her to read Ovid's 'romance' between Myrrha and her father, which he thinks will arouse her passions. The scheme works, but not exactly in the way the Duke intended:

> The young Charlot, who had […] a strong propension of Affection for the duke, whom she call'd and estem'd her *Papa* [...] wrought her Imagination up to such a lively heighth at the Fathers

> Anger after the possession of his Daughter, which she judg'd highly unkind and unnatural, that she drop'd her Book, Tears fill'd her Eyes, Sobs rose to oppress her […] (*New Atalantis* I: 63–64, repr. I: 335–36).

Her guardian takes advantage of her distress by moving in with 'pursuing Kisses. […] Calling her his admirable Charlot! His charming Angel! His adorable Goddess!' (*New Atalantis* I: 64-65, repr. I: 336–37). Amidst all the ranting, Manley keeps the reader constantly aware of the lovers' bodies:

> He prest her Lips with his, the nimble beatings of his Heart, apparently seen and felt thro' his open Breast! The glowing! The trembling of his Limbs! The glorious Sparkes from his guilty Eyes! His shortness of Breath. […]. But the duke's pursuing Kisses overcame the very Thoughts of any thing, but that new and lazy Poison stealing to her Heart, and spreading swiftly and imperceptibly thro' all her Veins, she clos'd her Eyes with languishing Delight! Deliver'd up the possession of her Lips and Breath to the amorous Invader […] and in a word, gave her whole Person into his Arms […]! (*New Atalantis* I: 64–65, repr. I: 336–37).

Such scenes could raise her readers' temperatures, as D'Aumont claims; but they also manage to make the point that men and women have very different ways of reading Ovid.

The men and women in Manley's erotic stories, true to pastoral tradition, look so much alike as to be interchangeable — are in fact interchanged, as in these two passages from *The New Atalantis:*

> Tuberoses set in pretty Gilt and China Posts, were placed advantageously upon Stands, . . . upon the Bed were strowd with a lavish Profuseness, plenty of Orange and Lemon Flowers, and to compleat the Scene, the young Germanicus in a dress and posture not very decent to describe; it was he that was newly risen from the Bath, and in a loose Gown of Carnation Taffety, stain'd with Indian Figures, his beautiful long, flowing Hair, for then 'twas the Custom to wear their own tied back with a Ribbon of the same Colour, he had thrown himself upon the Bed, pretending to Sleep, with nothing on but his Shirt and Night-Gown, which he had so indecently dispos'd, that slumbring as he appear'd, his whole Person stood confess'd to the Eyes of the Amorous Dutchess, his Limbs were exactly form'd, his Skin shiningly white,.[…] his Face turn'd on one side […] was obscur'd by the Lace depending from the Pillows on which he rested (*New Atalantis* I: 33–34, repr. I: 305–06).

> She had nothing on but her Night-Dress, one Petticoat, and a rich Silver stuff Night-Gown that hung carelessly about her. […] She got into a shade of Orange Flowers and Jessamine, the Blossoms that were fallen cover'd all beneath with a profusion of Sweets. […] Diana. . .threw herself under the pleasing Canopy […] the dazling Lustre of her Bosom stood reveal'd, her polish'd Limbs all careless and extended […] (*New Atalantis* II: 227–28, repr. I. 759–60).

The striking similarity of these descriptions, the equality of the gaze, may seem refreshing to readers of our own time, accustomed at least until recently to a more clearly gendered camera. But that equality in fiction was there to compensate for the lack of it in reality. Unlike Behn, who saw gender difference in love affairs as a sign of man's corruption of Nature, Manley believed nature made the sexes incompatible, causing females to cling at the precise post-coital moment when males experience an urge to flee: in other words, to 'take up their Fondness exactly where their Lover leaves it' (*New Atalantis* I: 229, repr. I: 501). So far advanced was the alienation of the sexes by this time that when Manley speaks of a 'cabal', it is not Behn's

mixed group of costumed shepherds and shepherdesses but strictly a sisterhood with no men allowed, whose members 'reserve their Heart, their tender Amity for their Fair [female] Friend: an Article in this well-bred wilfully undistinguishing Age, which the Husband seems to be rarely solicitous of' (*New Atalantis* II: 47, repr. I: 579). The only way she could envision heterosexual love that was anything but tragic for women was through erotic set pieces, such as those quoted above, as static and highly wrought as the paintings of Watteau.

Manley's erotic scenes deftly bridge the gap between ideal beauty and ugly reality, as if to suggest optimistic possibilities for the beautification of the real. The insistence on fresh, floral fragrance in the above passages suggests its absence in the real sexual encounters a woman of Manley's background might experience. Since many more middle-class women than men read French romances, these men might know nothing of style — or even foreplay — as an aspect of lovemaking, or have even considered bathing, like Germanicus, to make their own bodies more pleasing. Manley's best-sellers could culturally educate her English male readers and improve the lives of the women associated with them; for, as Chevalier D'Aumont asks, 'After perusing her Inchanting Descriptions, which of us have not gone in Search of Raptures which she everywhere tells us, as happy Mortals, we are capable of tasting?' (*Rivella*: 4, repr. II: 740).

The 'happy Mortals' of Atalantis achieve these Raptures through shrewd management of the disgust reaction that, as modern theorists tell us, can so easily interfere with love and intimacy (see Miller 1997: 109–142). The savvy Lovemore and D'Aumont purposely cultivate a 'well natur'd and civil' attitude toward any possibly disgusting 'defects' in their prospective partners. They agree that 'Red Hair, Out-Mouth, thin and livid Lips, black broken Teeth, coarse ugly Hands, long thumbs, ill form'd dirty Nails, flat, or very large Breasts, splay Feet' might be daunting if they were all found in the same person, but spread out among several, they should 'prove no Allay to the strongest Passions', for a reasonable lover (*Rivella*: 9, repr. II: 745). Raptures are the reward of those who can focus on the positive, Disgust the punishment for those looking for airbrushed and photo-shopped perfection.

Unfortunately, even if Manley's male readers had taken her hints about personal hygiene and a cheerful attitude, her world would have been far from a pastoral paradise. Lovemore and D'Aumont, though idealised beyond all believability, are still men discussing the problem of women's bodies. And even if the pleasures of love could be shared equally by both partners, Manley everywhere insists that the costs of love were not. Today things would seem to be somewhat more just. Women may still be 'slut-shamed', but probably not for one mistake. Nor do today's men need any lessons in the aesthetics of sex. That may in fact be one reason that

even in our freer world the voice of disgust is becoming louder rather than softer: all the 'true Symmetry' and 'Perfections' (*Rivella*: 9, repr. II: 745) we see on our various screens every day make it a challenge to be that 'happy Mortal' who can love imperfect bodies — our own or those of others. And as the poems of Rochester and Swift strongly hint, no one is more prone to disgust than the disappointed romantic.

Disgust can be salutary: it makes us laugh while reminding us not to pretend to be something we're not. And Isaac Asimov may have been right to predict that the sharing of 'dirty jokes' can promote close friendship between men and women. We see this on the television series *Louie* (2010–present) in the relationship between Louis C.K. and poker buddy Sarah Silverman as they confront their own self-disgust, fears about ageing, what might more grandly be called existential nausea. Louie's own preoccupation with incontinence has led to more than one monologue about his own soiled underwear.

Yet the limitations of this type of sharing appear in Louie's perennial failures to find a relationship in which he can express a tender emotion without being sneered at. If love requires the suppression of disgust, then conversely, the persistence of disgust may signal a failure of love. Disgust may destroy false idols, but it does nothing to satisfy the desires that set up those idols in the first place. I don't suggest we bring back the little baroque Cupids, which today not even Hallmark can reference without irony. But some antidote to disgust does seem to be sorely needed: some language for envisioning the body as a source of tangible beauty and attainable pleasure. Disgust is easy. The real challenge is happiness.

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