

THE DRAMATURGY OF VOMIT IN *CYMBELINE* AND *RAM ALLEY*

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In early modern drama, dramatists reveal a character's interiority chiefly through the words that character says. Characters are faced, through the circumstances in a play, with situations and confrontations that allow for this expression of internal reactions to external situations. However, the means available for theatrical expression can never completely circumscribe the interior emotion. Hamlet, a character famous for his expression of conflicting internal emotions, is scornful of the limited means of outward expression available to him; he is astonished "That I, the son of a dear father murdered, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must like a whore unpack my heart with words, / And fall a-cursing like a very drab" (*Hamlet* 2.2.572-75). Hamlet can neither resist the impulse to reveal his interiority, nor can he respond to that impulse in any way but to produce words. Stanley Fish notices similar characteristics in the poetry of John Donne, which he describes as "bulimic." He claims that "the object of [both Donne and his speaker's] desire and of his abhorrence is not food, but words, and more specifically, the power words can exert" (223). I would argue that this compulsive production of words and "the power words can exert" in Donne and *Hamlet* is a primary mode of theatrical expression. Indeed, the use of vomit as a metaphor for the dramatic expression of interiority is present throughout the literature of period. Taking *Ram Alley* and *Cymbeline* as a case study in this mode of expression, it can be shown that characters interact with their fictional situations chiefly through the processes of digestion and regurgitation.

Fish's explanation of the nature of this "bulimic" language finds an interesting resonance in the medium of drama. He claims the runaway production of language "cannot be stopped because there is nothing to stop it, no extralinguistic resistance to its inscribing power" (228). Fish then references "Signature Event Context," in which he introduces Derrida's idea of "essential drift," as "the capacity of every signifier to 'Break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner that is illimitable'" (228). But the dialogic structure of drama complicates this idea of an individual's illimitable inscriptive power and, in a way, amplifies the implications of essential drift. Within dramatic dialogue, a character's power of inscription is limited by the presence of multiple speakers, each capable of themselves grafting chains of signifiers onto the speech of others.

Even outside of the fictional circumstances of the play, the speaker's production of a chain of signifiers performs more than an individual manipulative impulse. Drama is a medium that must be performed for the benefit of an audience, and it is therefore additionally subject to the "extralinguistic resistance" of audience reception. When Hamlet exclaims, "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! / O, vengeance!" (*Hamlet* 2.2.568-70), he is not merely expressing the intensity of his interior identity as a revenging son, he is also performing that identity, both for himself and the audience. An act of revenge must be performed not just as a means to discharge an ethical responsibility, but also as a means of *constituting* the identity Hamlet believes he should inhabit. This identity is performed both for Hamlet himself within the fiction and the audience that observes *Hamlet* outside of the fiction. These runaway chains of signifiers are then not simply a way in which a particular type of poetic force operates within its own fictional constraints. Rather, this form of impulsive, runaway language is based on a particular materialistic understanding of human behavior: one in which individuals are simply vessels filled with cultural contexts and sexual desires that, when agitated by a set of fictional stimuli, will endlessly empty out those things with which they have been filled.

Expulsive language is featured prominently in both *Ram Alley* and *Cymbeline*. These two works share the important contexts of time, place, and medium, but at first glance it would seem that they share little else. *Cymbeline* is a romance, written by a successful and mature William Shakespeare. *Ram Alley* is a city-comedy written by Lordings Barry, a hack writer producing

generic smut for an ill-fated company of boy actors. Whereas Shakespeare culminated one of the most respected literary careers by peacefully retiring to his boyhood home of Stratford, Barry culminated his literary career by becoming a pirate on the Irish seas (Kathman). Nevertheless, these two writers are subject to the same necessity, a need to produce verbal meaning in response to an external situation: a need to make their characters vomit up something indicative of their internal structure.

This similarity does by no means suggest that the two plays are equally vulgar; whereas *Cymbeline* examines internalized narratives of the pastoral, the ontological superiority of the nobility, and the corrupting influences of the court, the inferiority expressed by characters in *Ram Alley* is much more simplistic. For instance, when the Widow Taffata offers herself sexually to Boutcher, she does so as a “pie thrust to the lower end,” arguing “For though the pie be broken up before, / Yet, says the proverb, the deeper is the sweeter” (*Ram Alley* 283). Most of the dialogue in *Ram Alley* consists of sex jokes of this type. In the incredibly dense sex jokes that compose most of the play, the characters seem frantic to express their sexual desire, and to do so in ways that underscore their lifestyle. The Widow Taffata’s expression of sexual receptiveness comes in the image of a pie, and through the use of this image she positions her sexual impulse within the feminized, domestic sphere of the preparation of food.

For *Ram Alley*, bawdy, insatiable lust framed in terms of profession and social status forms the driving force of all language and action. The very title introduces the idea of forcing something into the body, and this concern for what enters or exits a person generates endless expulsions of dirty puns. The full title, *Ram Alley; Or Merrie Trickes*, exemplifies this “runaway chain” of sexual signifiers. Not content with the first sex pun, the writer added “Merrie Trickes,” a play on the Latin *meretrix*, for “prostitute.” The sexual puns, far from satisfying perversity, instead spur it forward, producing more of the sexual energy they seek to satisfy. Yet to effectively represent the language of the inhabitants of a particular city, the characters in *Ram Alley* incessantly cough up the culturally specific types of philosophical, technical, and dramatic speech to which the audience would already be exposed. An example of this unrestrained bulimia of sexualized and contextualized speech occurs when Dash the law clerk attempts to get Frances, a whore posing as an heiress, out of jail, assuring the sergeant that

She shall be quickly bail'd,
 She shall corpus cum causa be remov'd;
 Your action entered first below shall shrink,
 And you shall find, sir serjeant, she has friends
 Will stick to her in the common place. (*Ram Alley* 343)

The sheer number of dirty puns operating within this short snippet of dialogue illustrates exactly how saturated characters in this play are by sexual language, inundated to the point where the phrases “entered first below” and “stick to her in the common place” appear consecutively, although they make the same joke. Absolutely no respect is paid to an economic restraint of language, as sex jokes are repeatedly and urgently purged by the characters. Perhaps just as noticeable, this language is reported in specific, technical manner: legalese. In this speech, Dash’s words are not only determined by the overt sexual drive of the play as a whole, but by the fictional world of law that defines him as a character. Dash will not stop generating language, a language that appears in terms of the professional context that forms the basis of his character, and as a result of the uncontrollable sexual impulses that determine the content of his speech.

In a similar manner, when Posthumus expresses his romantic devotion to Innogen, he does so in highly financial terms. He not only commodifies Innogen’s chastity in the line “I praised her as I rated here; so do I my stone” (*Cymbeline* 1.4.73), but upon separation from her, demands that the gods, in a basic contractual agreement, “cere up my embracements from a next / With bonds of death!” (*Cymbeline* 1.1.117-18). The financial framework of his expression betrays the extent to which his exposure to court life has irreparably corrupted his language. Posthumus therefore offers numerous oaths and protestations of the immaterial qualities of his love that, due to their restrictive financial context, can never quite capture the immateriality he seeks to express. In the Italian court, the other courtiers pick up on this collation of the romantic and financial, offering him a means to appraise the value of his relationship with Innogen by testing her chastity. Yet Posthumus still insists on this distance between the financial and the romantic, outlining the difference as “The one [a diamond ring] may be sold or given, or if there were wealth enough for the purchase or merit for the gift. The other [his relationship with Innogen] is not a thing for sale, and only the gift of the gods” (*Cymbeline* 1.4.79-81). But this distinction rapidly becomes problematic;

the ring, a material object that can be given a dollar value, is the very symbol of Posthumus's and Innogen's relationship. It is the ring that forms the most satisfactory bond between the two separated lovers. Its existence, and the expression of devotion that existence performs, shows that even immaterial qualities such as love and devotion are still subject to expression in a way that can only be figured as material. The interiority of these feelings, like all forms of dramatic interiority, are expelled through the financial terms available to Posthumus. In this way, Posthumus's material wager on Innogen's immaterial chastity becomes only the culmination of his frequent expression of love as a financial exchange, an expression he is compelled to iterate even as it consistently falls short.

The virtue of Guiderius and Arviragus, however, cannot be figured in financial terms. Indeed, the largest frustration faced by the pastoral restrictions of the two royal sons stems from this inability to figure their noble impulses in any satisfactory terms. Since they exist in an idyllic, pastoral atmosphere, they are averse to phrasing their desires in financial terms. To them, "All gold and silver rather turn to dirt, / As 'tis no better reckoned but of those / Who worship dirty gods" (*Cymbeline* 3.6.52-54). Such a response to Innogen's offer of money is a manifestation of behavior inextricably linked to their environment, in which financial concerns (or indeed, almost all cosmopolitan concerns) are viewed as taboo and explicitly heretical. As a result, Arviragus is unable to describe himself in anything but naturalistic language. The introduction of Belarius, Arviragus, and Guiderius at the beginning of 3.3 is marked with this insistence on a lack of cosmopolitan or financial influence on their language. Even when talking specifically about his separation from the world of the court, Arviragus is forced to describe his brother and himself as

beastly: subtle as the fox for prey,
 Like warlike as the wolf for what we eat.
 Our valour is to chase what flies; our cage
 We make a choir, as doth the prisoned bird,
 And sing out bondage freely. (*Cymbeline* 3.3.40-44)

This description characterizes the two brothers in terms of the natural world, a common convention in descriptions of the heroic feats of battle. But the difference is obvious: what Arviragus does not have is the ability to apply

these metaphors to anything heroic, so instead he applies them back upon themselves, trapped within the framework of his naturalized world. The analogized figures of the fox and the wolf act not as naturalizations of heroic martial acts, but instead emphasize the bestial quality of the twins' existence. These similes are therefore unable to perform the function of similes in such heroic epics as *The Illiad*, in which the two spheres of martial action and natural phenomena are figured in terms of each other, such as:

As a heavy surf assaults some roaring coast,
 Piling breaker on breaker whipped by the West Wind,
 And out on the open sea a crest first rears its head
 Then pounds down on the shore with hoarse, rumbling thunder
 And in come more shouldering crests, arching up and breaking
 Against some rocky spit, exploding salt foam to the skies –
 So wave on wave they came, Achaean battalions ceaseless,
 Surging on to war. (*The Illiad* 4.489-96)

The description of battle is framed here in terms of the natural world. The “heavy surf *assaults*” (emphasis mine) the shore, and the waves appear like horses in and soldiers attacking on the field of battle. Not only are the “Achaean battalions” like the waves, the waves themselves work within the heroic framework, suggesting an interplay between the two available spheres of human experience. But instead of supplying these kinds of heroic metaphors, Arviragus and Guiderius are only capable of supplying terms of the natural world. This restriction deprives the metaphor of its very ability to act like a metaphor, that is to say, the ability to expand meanings and draw connections through the juxtaposition of two different images. In other words, his speech is full of readily available, urgent tenors due to his experience of the natural world, but all of those tenors are missing a ground.

In these examples, a character's lifestyle crucially determines the composition of his or her language. Yet a character's expressions can also result from the representation or configuration of him or her through the framework of literary conventions. Boucher continually struggles with which convention he can properly represent himself; he resists temptation by the widow Taffata at first through an appeal to classical, Platonic conceptions of the construction of the soul (*Ram Alley* 281). This intellectual idea becomes a dead end and is soon abandoned, as it only serves to generate more language

concerned with the satisfaction of sexual desire. Even given his previous appeal to misplaced intellectualism, the bizarre claim that follows, that “By one more skill’d in unknown fate than was / The blind Achaian Prophet, ’twas foretold / A widow should endanger both my life, / My soul, my lands, and reputation” (*Ram Alley* 283-84), appears shocking to an audience who, up to this point, has been watching a city comedy. At first, the widow Taffata aligns herself within the relatively realistic confines of the play and dismisses his superstition, framing such a soothsayer as “A petty rogue, / That never saw five shillings in a heap, / [Who w]ill take upon him to divine men’s fate” (*Ram Alley* 284). However, this predictable response is soon coupled with another dismissal that, strangely enough, works *within* the fiction Boutcher has introduced, laying such credulity to the existence of prophetic ability as to assert that “What is within the everlasting book / Of destiny decreed, cannot by wit / Or man’s invention be dissolv’d or shunn’d” (*Ram Alley* 284). In this case, the fictional lifestyle of the respective characters seems less responsible for their contextualizing framework than the mere fact that they are fictional characters. Boutcher can claim divine wisdom from a Greek oracle because that is the kind of thing a character in a play sometimes does. But far from the appeal resting as some special case, the widow seems more than willing to work within whatever narrative is provided, so long as it gives her license to fully express her irrepressible impulses towards the satisfaction of her sexual desires. The Widow Taffata is playing with the “essential drift” of language, and demonstrates that sexual interiority (the always privileged component of interiority of *Ram Alley*) can work through whichever framework presents itself. Like Arviragus and Guiderius, Boutcher has an internal characteristic that will be expressed, no matter how restrictive the framework he supplies may appear. He must purge what he has digested.

Indeed, language and narratives that do not admit of this simplistic satisfaction of desire are, throughout *Ram Alley*, framed as foolishness. For instance, the answer to all of Beard’s questions, “is all the world in arms? / More tumults, brawls, and insurrections? / Is blood the theme, whereon our time must treat?” (*Ram Alley* 358) is an obvious “no.” Beard is a fool because the tragic narrative of total war he has adopted does not correspond to how he is framed by the rest of the play. Beard is instead a barber, charged with looking after a whore disguised as a noble woman. That she is abducted from his custody is a further result of the misperceptions of her made by other

characters in the play. The audience is aware of all this information, and their interpretation of Beard is framed by this tragic irony: he is not a defender of virtue, and the loss of Frances is no loss at all. But his avenging claim, “Blood! To be thus o’erreach’d, / In pate and wench! revenge! revenge! Come up, / And with thy curled locks cling to my beard!” (*Ram Alley* 353), like Boucher’s citation of a Greek oracle, is not unusual in a theatrical context. Although it does not correspond to the lifestyle Beard is shown to have, it is a convention an audience is used to seeing, as in the case of the soliloquy from *Hamlet* with which I began this essay. The major difference between Beard’s performance as a revenger and that of Hamlet is that nothing else in the content of the play supports Beard’s identity. Yet the fact that Beard can frame himself in this manner underscores the arbitrary nature of any theatrical identity. The only basis of legitimacy of any performed identity is the extent to which it can satisfy one’s place within the drama. But what makes the character of Beard a figure of parody is that the interiority he expresses is not one he could plausibly have. *Ram Alley* allows for only one legitimate form of interiority: insatiable sexual desire. Beard’s expressions are incongruent with this mode of expression.

But Beard is not alone in this emptiness of expression. He signals the arbitrary nature of any adopted theatrical persona. This depiction of humanity as merely layers of theatrical convention with no underlying substance leads to the Widow Taffata’s assessment of William Smallshanks as “A fellow that has no inside, but prates / By rote, as players and parrots use to do, / And, to define a complete gallant right, / A mercer form’d him, a tailor makes him, / A player gives him spirit” (*Ram Alley* 340). This description could be directed towards anyone in the play. The people in *Ram Alley* are, of course, the players the Widow Taffata describes. But even within the fiction, characters can only “parrot” language available to them through theatrical convention or lifestyle context to interact with the over-sexualized world in which they exist. They do so by frequently modifying their language in order to rapidly assume and discard theatrical conventions, tossing out various configurations that (they hope) may express their interior sexual desires.

Cymbeline is of a different spirit altogether. In contrast to a use of literary convention to expedite sexual satisfaction, literary conventions in *Cymbeline* point to an immaterial, ontological truth. A person’s insides in *Cymbeline* are determined by a divinely ordained, hereditarily determined

hierarchy of which theatrical conventions act as justifications. These narratives of natural nobility lead to many instances depicting a natural correspondence between pre-established identity and action. The court is characterized by exactly the lack of this correspondence between interior and exterior: the play opens with two gentlemen noting how “not a courtier, / Although they wear their faces to the bent / Of the King’s looks, hath a heart that is not / Glad at the thing they scowl at” (*Cymbeline* 1.1.11-14). Arviragus and Guiderius, though unaware of their noble origins, constantly surprise Belarius with their correspondence to this inner noble identity. In one such astonished exclamation, he marvels at their natural gentility, saying, “O noble strain! / O worthiness of nature, breed of greatness! / Cowards father cowards, and base things sire base” (*Cymbeline* 4.2.24-26). A character’s interior composition is depicted here as genealogically determined. But just like Boutcher’s Greek oracle and Beard’s tragic declarations, these narratives of inherent, hereditary nobility are themselves cultural and literary fictions. The structural principle that generates language in *Cymbeline* can be seen as the opposite of that in *Ram Alley*. Instead of indiscriminate desire that receives constant opportunities to perform itself, an urgent drive towards a realization of the hereditarily predetermined constitution of the soul seems at a loss to perform itself at all. The setting of Belarius and the brothers within a country environment, far from court, allows for the naturalization of the “royal” behavior of the boys, as when Belarius muses “That an invisible instinct should frame them / To royalty unlearned, honour untaught / ...but yields a crop / As if it had been sowed” (*Cymbeline* 4.2.178-82). In order to portray Arviragus and Guiderius as naturally noble, all elements of courtly life have been exorcised from existence.

However, this exclusion from the corruptive influences of court causes a major problem of its own. When Arviragus claims, “I am ashamed / To look upon the holy sun, to have / The benefit of his blest beams, remaining / So long a poor unknown” (*Cymbeline* 4.4.40-43), he reveals an urgent need to encounter those very difficulties that consume Cymbeline’s court, and in so doing prove an interior heroicism that has been hitherto unprovoked. Whatever the immaterial truth may be, it is still subject to expression as material words or action. But this world, despite its preeminence as a medium to demonstrate these concepts of natural nobility, gives insufficient means for this very expression. Arviragus and Guiderius continually express their

urgent frustration with this pastoral inaction throughout the play, starting with his complaint at 3.3.40-44 (see above). But this desire is most explicitly framed as expulsive when Belarius comments on their willingness to rush into battle: “The time seems long, their blood thinks scorn / ‘Till it fly out and show them princes born” (*Cymbeline* 4.4.53-54). But this example is even more explicit: the strength of the truth assigned to this cultural belief in “divine right” becomes so strongly emphasized in Belarius’s speech that we are left with the image of a noble interior (i.e., “their blood”) shooting out of the body that confines it, to “fly out and show them princes born,” and to desperately meet this compulsive demand to express their interiority. But paradoxically, this natural nobility can only be expressed when it encounters the polluted world of the court. It is the sick world of money and political impulse that provides the right purgative for Arviragus and Guiderius.

Whether generating meaning based on sexual desire or political fiction, this provoked jettison of a character’s internal makeup forms one solution to a persistent problem of dramatic representation: how to show a character’s interiority. Left with so many insufficient options for expression, it is no wonder writers find it useful to cycle through various speech patterns and conventions, producing large amounts of text that never quite expurgate (and, on the contrary, often substantiate) the persistent force of the desire. Envisioning speech as vomit resonates throughout the drama of the period. This essay, in restricting its consideration to two plays, has not even begun to consider instances of actual vomit present in early modern drama. Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster* features a character representing John Marston, who is given a purgative and vomits up all of the ridiculous words he has inserted into his plays. At the beginning of John Webster’s *The White Devil*, Gasparo says to Count Lodovico, explaining the Count’s former flatterers’ sudden condemnation, “Your followers / Have swallowed you up like mummia, and being sick / With such unnatural and horrid phisic, / Vomit you up i’t’h’kennel” (1.1.16-19). The list of examples stretches on, and in each instance recognizes vomit as a form of expression. But even when not dealing with vomit explicitly, the dramaturgical practices of the time show vomit to be remarkably analogous to theatrical expression. Although this “you are what you eat” mentality may at first seem reductive, it allows characters within a play to act as microcosms of the culture in which they exist, as separate yet reflective entities that digest and interpret prevalent beliefs and then reveal the conclusions to the public.

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