CHAPTER 11
DESIRE, DISGUST, AND INDIGESTIBILITY IN JOHN CLELAND’S MEMOIRS OF A COXCOMB

Rebecca Anne Barr

John Cleland’s notoriety depends on his sexually explicit Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (1748), a work which stimulates and celebrates the satisfaction of carnal appetites through a series of erotic encounters. Despite prosecution for obscenity, Cleland claimed, with brazen disingenuity, that his writing stemmed from his desire to stimulate while avoiding vulgarity: working as a proof positive that the novel could arouse without descending to depravity, transcending pornography through polite style. Thus, Woman of Pleasure legitimizes its lurid copulations by reference to aesthetic standards: extolling sensibility, good taste, and moderation despite its scandalous and repetitive subject matter. Despite its variety, Fanny Hill’s sexual picaresque ultimately conforms to the pattern of moral romance. Once reunited with her beloved Charles, she proclaims her virtue (if not her virginity) born-again and her decency fortified by repeated lessons of sexual experience. So confident is Fanny in the moral efficacy of libertine practice that ‘anxious for [her] son's morals’, she allows her husband to introduce the youth to ‘the most noted bawdy-houses in town’ in order to familiarise him ‘with all those scenes of debauchery, so fit to nauseate a good taste’. This experience will give the boy ‘a fixed, a rational contempt for vice’. Both mother and son are saved by a form of sexual inoculation: their virtue consolidated by a constitutional recoil from the unwholesome fare of the demi-monde. However unconvincing Woman of Pleasure’s ‘tail-piece of morality’, its paradigm of healing surfeit recurs in Cleland’s Memoirs of a Coxcomb (1751), a companion piece to his infamous novel.¹ In both works, and indeed in his literary
criticism, Cleland argues for the moral necessity of representing (and indulging) sensuality. The author thus caters to lascivious tastes under the auspices of virtue by modelling himself ‘a skillful and polite physician’ whose narratives operate as a medical case histories, illuminating “the rankness and malignancy of [vice’s] symptoms” to provoke a curative ‘nausea’ to purge the reader’s inflamed imagination. Paradoxically Cleland’s erotic fictions act both to stimulate appetite and as salutary emetics to evacuate the body and mind of the reader. Once purged of their desires, the narrative ‘promote[s] a Return to Virtue’, refining the reader’s tasteful pleasures, bestowing upon them ‘more Stability, more Poignancy, and above all, more Delicacy’ after a glut.

The physicalised lexicon of appetite, taste, and nausea may seem purely conventional rhetorical tools for representing the moral proclivities of reader and protagonist. Yet, like his contemporary Tobias Smollett, Cleland was fixated on the visceral compulsions of humanity – fascinated by the moral and physical interrelations between desire, diet, and excess. Cleland’s bodies, like those of Smollett, are ‘never mere bodies because what they feel, and how they react, always bears testimony to their implication in social and moral life’. Moving away from Cleland’s erotica, this essay situates Cleland’s Memoirs of a Coxcomb (1754) alongside his idiosyncratic ‘medical’ tracts. While the sexual dynamics, philosophical underpinnings and the role of sensibility in Cleland’s writing have been much explored, his interest in human physiology has been largely overlooked. Cleland, who claimed to ‘understand the nerves better than any doctor in Europe’, published two works exploring the bodily economy: the medical-dietary treatise Institutes of Health (1761) and the pamphlet Phisiological Reveries (1765). These dietetic and medical writings show that the appetite, palate and the intestines – rather than the
egregiously overactive genitals – are integral to his Cleland’s representations of male sexuality and selfhood. His ruminations on the intricate mysteries of the viscera reveal not the importance of taste but the centrality of disgust in delineating the social and moral value of the individual. If taste aims to corral the animal urgings of appetite into cultivated and socially acceptable forms of consumption, distaste diagnoses moments where incorporation is impossible and where sensations of visceral nausea and physical immanence are inescapable. Arising in moments where bodily and subjective security is threatened and where ingestion or assimilation is impossible (even when attempted), disgust exposes the rejects of culture upon which polite society is founded. Yet, as Daniel Cottom has observed, ‘the desire to be disgusted is…the digestive trope of a social body for which the processes of incorporation and expulsion are necessarily interdependent’.

Vomiting, eliminating waste matter in order to cleanse the body of ‘diseases of effeminacy’, with ‘plentiful evacuations, bleeding, purging, and a low diet’ recommended to counter and permit bulimic cycles of sensual over-indulgence, emphasise the importance of motion – digestive or otherwise – in healthy bodies. Yet in Cleland’s work the visceral expulsions of disgust expose the vacillations of embodied subjectivity, a vertiginous oscillation between the desire to incorporate and doomed attempts to extricate the self from the sickly delights of codependency.

1. Diet, surfeit, and effeminacy

Appetite in the eighteenth-century is often viewed as metaphorical for leisured consumption of commodities, but its primary meaning of literal, bodily hunger locates desires in the very stomach of the individual. As the body was increasingly conceived
as an ‘eloquent object’ whose performances conveyed complex emotions and moral positions, so the medical and rhetorical status of organs shifted. Few organs were as central and as subject to contradictory interpretations as the stomach. As Richard Brookes’ *General Practice of Physic* (1765) confirmed, medical nosology used the stomach as a barometer for the relative health of the entire organism. Gastric well-being ensured physical harmony: ‘it can hardly be imagined what consent there is between the Brain and its Membranes, between the Stomach and the adjoining Intestines, they being greatly nervous, and indued with an exquisite Sense; whence many… are troubled with a bad Digestion, Costiveness, and the *hypochondriac Passion*. In holistic models of the body, the viscera were analogous to the brain and as complex, as sensitive and as subject to disturbance as grey matter. As modern urban lifestyles subjected men and women to new conditions, nervous anxiety often registered as somatic disorders, many of which – mysterious loss of appetite, listlessness, and wasting of the body – manifested in the stomach. Psychosomatic malaises disordered the ‘exquisitely’ sensitive entrails, so that the ‘Stomach, Guts, Liver, Spleen, Mesentery or some of the great and necessary Organs, or Glands of the lower Belly’ were invariably ‘obstructed, knotted, schirous, or spoil’d’ by nervous disorders.

Yet it was not solely nervous excitation that impeded digestion and caused gastric distress. Sociability itself placed physical demands on the stomach. Commensality subjected the inner organs to surges of rich food: to tides of alcohol, tea and coffee, stimulants and sedatives that could throw its delicate equilibrium and digestive function into disorder. Testifying from experience of vertiginous weight-gain, the obese Cheyne averred that although ‘almost all of our Diseases proceed from too *much* and too *strong* Meats and Drinks’ social miscibility insisted that fellows ‘Eat
lustily, and swallow down much *Liquor*’ to prove their good humour and conviviality, even though the frequent ‘Dining and Supping’ demanded by urban clubbability was perilous.\textsuperscript{11} If the stomach was expected to be gastronomically accommodating, habitual over-indulgence was recognised as both physically damaging and morally repugnant.

Cleland had no medical training that we know of, but as a hack writer whose livelihood was persistently precarious, he recognised a healthy market for works on regimen. Like Cheyne, who incorporates his own case illness into *The English Malady*, Cleland uses his notoriety as a denizen of the demi-monde to fortify the authority of his precepts against excess. In *Institutes of Health*, Cleland parades the bitter knowledge won by experience, telling his audience that he has ‘forfeited.... a permanently established health... suffered irretrievable damage by the most abandoned intemperance of all sorts’\textsuperscript{12} Dismissing physicians such as Boerhaave, Haller, Hoffman, and Sydenham, he laments the lack of preventative medicine and a nation in thrall to foreign cooking. ‘What with the two arts of cookery and physic, a man hardly has a chance for his life.’\textsuperscript{13} The nation is eating its way to effeminacy and dissipation, the preface argues. Britain will forfeit political liberty unless it renounces unwholesome aliment, overhauls its luxurious diet, and remasculinises its constitution. Like the eminent physician George Cheyne, Cleland makes the digestive tract and the stomach central to the health of the body natural and the body politic. The British, like the Romans before them, are victims of imperial success, only since the rise of ‘Politeness and Refinement [have] they sunk into Effeminacy, Luxury, and Disease’.\textsuperscript{14} Characteristically opportunistic, Cleland’s writings on the body follow Cheyne’s *Essay on Regimen* and *The English Malady* in emphasising practical prevention, even as Cleland often slyly invokes sexual potence as a welcome side-
effect of improved overall health. While Cheyne flatters the delicate constitutions of his middle-class audience, rendering their digestive motions material for polite conversation, Cleland’s approach is closer to the political jeremiads of mid-century Britain, which warned of the deleterious effects of ‘vain, luxurious and selfish effeminacy’ on national well being.\textsuperscript{15} Cheyne’s balance of sympathetic diagnosis and ameliorative advice contrasts with the cantankerous and splenetic urgings of Cleland’s cheap pamphlets. Yet Cleland’s malcontent persona bestows a curious piquancy to his denunciation of bodily decline and ‘unmanly delicacy’.

Both Cleland’s dietetic writings and his fiction ostensibly lambast prodigal or voracious appetite, and counsel the conventional wisdom of controlled appetites. They synthesise a distinctively epicurean regimen in which optimum pleasure is dependent on fashioning a powerful and resilient male body who locates energy and virility as epigastric in origin, yet whose primary characteristic is a valetudinarian anxiety. Such emphasis on embodiment and a propensity to debility recalls midcentury men of feeling, such as Sterne’s Yorick or Henry Brooke’s \textit{Fool of Quality} (1761), but Cleland’s narrators are divested of economic charity or benevolence. With roots in libertine concepts of natural, self-interested hedonism Cleland’s visceral sensibility imports associated anxieties of ‘loss of autonomy and dissolution of self’ that come from carnal overinvestment.\textsuperscript{16}

That fear of dissolution is clear in \textit{Woman of Pleasure}. Though replete with permanently priapic men with ‘stiff staring truncheons…like flesh brushes’, it is male bodies that are casualties of sensual excess. Several of Fanny Hill’s cavalcade of lovers are self-sickened and desensitised by their libertine ways.\textsuperscript{17} The otherwise youthful Mr Norbert, for instance, is dependent on ‘forced provocatives’ to stimulate a flagging appetite: ‘the natural power of [his] body jaded and raked off to the lees by
the constant repeated over-draughts of pleasure, which had done the work of sixty winters on his springs of life’. Cleland’s ‘indubitably masculinist’ erotica tends to depict men's physical limitations ‘more sympathetically’ than those of women: emphasizing the vulnerability of the male body. As Susan Bordo has argued, works that represent the ‘private and unprotected territory’, considering the viscera as much as genital protuberances for signs of healthy function, disrupt the imaginary dominance of the phallus. This leads Fanny to conduct anatomies of desire which trace the origins of sexual desire to more mysterious recesses of the body. Thus Mr Barville’s dependence on flagellation is declared an ‘arbitrary taste’ to be pitied. His peccadillo is ‘independent of all reasoning, as the different relishes or palates of mankind in their viands, [with] some delicate stomachs nauseating plain meats and finding no savour but in high-seasoned, luxurious dishes, whilst others… pique themselves upon disdaining them’. The language of taste connects the stomach and the phallus, implying the potential for men’s animal spirits or sexual potency to be weakened by gastric disorder.

Gustatory tendencies are not merely a metaphor for sexual dispositions or cultural degeneration, however. Tasting, eating, and digesting work as indices of bodily and subjective health. Though Fanny’s comment might seem a dismissive chacun son goût, her language connotes deep disgust at a ‘debased’ palate. Preferences for highly seasoned meats and luxurious repasts indicate an effeminate, Frenchified taste (though few things are more English than a whipping). Alimentary delicacy became a powerful metaphor for the distortion of ‘natural’ appetites. Physician and social satirist Bernard Mandeville noted that contemporary epicures compensated for flagging sexual potency and debilities in virility by an increasing inventiveness of sexual fare, since the ‘Nicety of [their] Palates’ demanded more exotic ingredients;
'as a squeamish Stomach requires the greatest Variety of Dishes'. Authoritative masculinity, by implication, is sustained on a diet of plain heterosexual nourishment: intrinsically ‘manly’ appetite does not require. If sexual and moral dysfunctions are metaphorised as digestive maladies or jaded appetite, the obverse might also be true. That is, corruption of the palate and digestion might translate into moral and sexual dysfunction. In Cleland’s writings on health, the physical constitution depends on a delicate gastric equilibrium which could be thrown into disarray by rich food or turbulent emotions alike.

Safeguarding gastric health was the faculty of taste, with its dual aesthetic and physical implications. Taste’s importance to the body is manifest in Institutes of Health, which makes cleansing the palate a preparative to maintaining the stomach. Opening with an injunction to keep ‘the mouth religiously clean’ through a daily scraping of the tongue, rinsing, and picking of the teeth to encourage salivary secretions, oral hygiene is Cleland’s first ritual of health. ‘Our taste’, he laments, ‘is become corrupted by example of vitiated habit’. Though ‘our stomach has naturally a repugnance for high-seasoned compounds or made-dishes’ the palate is vulnerable to outside influence. ‘Acquired’ taste of luxury habituates the stomach to opulent delicacies, obscuring the ‘true taste of nature’ found in plain fare. The tongue’s ‘papillae’ are smothered under accretions until only ‘French taste, such as rotten ragoos, or soups like glue’ can penetrate the dulled senses. The long vowel assonance intensifies the sense of repletion by repetition, as diet stifles appetite, the intellect and the senses:

thence the palate furred and depraved of its natural state; the appetite kept down from ever rising again, by the cloying frequency of preventative
ingestions; the clouded eye; the paralitic nerves, and the functions of the body robbed of all the sprightliness of health.25

French fare renders English men flaccid. By emulating the continental diet of the *beau monde*, the English middling-sort acquires ‘bad digestions’ that produce the ‘quality-paleness, that bloodless, sick-green look...[that is] the birthmark of the people of fashion’.26 Culinary imitation supplants native health with dyspeptic and effeminate striplings. If England’s ‘antient sturdy barons once embodied’ ‘a system of manliness’ the ‘race is now...thoroughly refin’d and fritter’d away into the more delicate modern-built frame of our pap-nerv’d softlings, who are as pale, as pretty, and almost as masculine as their sisters’.27 Cleland’s enfeebled modern man is a foppish hypochondriac whose languid nerves point to malnourishment. Fed on bland, soft, infantile food, the effeminate individual embodies national degeneration.28

Diet and taste thus require urgent revaluation. In order to remasculinise the English diet, Cleland rejects sophisticated French gastronomy as a bodily pollutant. France is a ‘fountain of false taste’; a locus of ‘spiritual and temporal slavery’ which must be embargoed in favour of culinary isolationism. Like Cheyne, Cleland counsels moderate eating and an avoidance of ‘high, rich, savoury dishes’ which deprave palates already losing their ‘native simplicity’.29 But unlike Cheyne’s easily absorbed bill of fare, which caters to the overstimulated palates of the hypersensible bourgeoisie, *Institutes’* regimen aims to reinvigorate the stomach through foods that encourage digestion, stimulating the active powers of the viscera. Liquid food’s ‘[g]libness in deglutition’ ‘defrauds the stomach of that salivary juice which a competent mastication carries down with it’.30 Chewing, swallowing, vigorously digesting: Cleland’s healthy body ‘conquers’ food, asserting its vital capacities by
processing nutritional goodness through the assimilative power of the salivary and gastric juices.

Bodily fluids in *Phisiological Reveries* are fundamental to virile competence, where the analogous ‘seminal and salivary liquids’ are credited with producing energy and maintaining bodily homeostasis.\(^3\) Saliva connects the mouth to the stomach, where it periodically returns, acting with the gastric juices as a ‘reparative’ which circulates within a liquid system of ‘animal energy’ including the blood and seminal fluids.\(^2\) Cleland is emphatic about the stomach’s role in transforming food to repair the organism: ‘chilification’ or digestion sublimes nutrition into a ‘more perfect animality’ which is conveyed through the bodily system.\(^3\) The stomach is credited with a womb-like ‘menstrual or dissolvent energy, that with the concurrence of the other digestive powers it makes of the alimentary mass, a matrix or bed, of which it is itself the vegetative feed, and thence erecting its own increase’.\(^4\) The digestive process is evoked as an organic decomposition necessary for sexual fecundity, renewing the potence of the (male) body: granting the entrails an almost womb-like fertility. *Phisiological Reveries* thus evokes a vitalist conception of the bodily economy, where physiology is co-ordinated by an interconnected system of liquid energy with the stomach at its core.

While Cheyne’s works chastely omit sexual appetite, Cleland’s assert an intimate relationship between the oral, the digestive and the ‘generative’ aspects of the bodily economy. A lively ‘appetite for generation’ is an index of proper bodily function, since ‘the amorous instinct has especially a considerable connexion with the economy of health’.\(^5\) This affirmation of robust appetite echoes that of Mandeville who contrasts ‘Platonick Lovers’ (‘pale-faced weakly People of cold and phlegmatick Constitutions’) with those ‘hale and robust of bilious Temperament and a sanguine
Complexion’ who hunger for the satisfaction of both alimentary and carnal appetites.\textsuperscript{36} Just as his erotica ‘negotiate[d] a taxonomy of pleasures developed by moralists, in which emphasis was placed on the satisfaction of natural but controlled impulses’, so Cleland’s dietetic works accommodate and valorise bodily appetites rather than reducing them to a bloodless minimum.\textsuperscript{37} Desire must be subjected to the commands of virtue and the imagination to forestall overproduction becoming a ‘self-destroying fury’ or depleting consumption.\textsuperscript{38} Enlightened hedonism incorporates self-discipline into its rhetoric of refined masculine pleasures. If erotic self-control limited the expenditure of vital energies, its alimentary corollary limited consumption as a means of preserving taste and safeguarding bodily integrity for the prolongation of pleasure itself. Foregoing gastronomy is a rational calculation designed to procure greater pleasure.

Few…have manly enough strength of mind to give their own reason fair play for their own life, and suffer it to state the account honestly between temperance and luxury!…the momentary gratification of a lickerish palate, is infinitely outweighed by the permanent voluptuousness inseparable from every function of life in a firm state of health.\textsuperscript{39}

Deploying concepts of reason and self-discipline, Cleland’s physic advertises the ‘reward of…manliness and resolution’ as the permanent sensual pleasure of bodily autonomy and physical health.\textsuperscript{40} Cleland’s account emphasises the inseparability of health and pleasure: bodily continence (sexual and alimentary) enables the self-governance, translating the frenetic movement of kinetic pleasure into the motions and ‘muscular vigor’ of a healthy digestion. ‘Enslaved to their present feelings’, the dissolute multitude are frightened by the ‘disgustful’ sensations of a low diet, and fail to calculate the ‘reward of their manliness and resolution’.\textsuperscript{41} Thus Institutes’ regimen
follows the eighteenth-century trajectory from ‘a libertine ethic toward a moderately Epicurean hedonism’, in which temperance is essential in order to prolong both enjoyment and bodily integrity since ‘moderation guarantees the ‘vigour’…of those appetites which are, in some form, indulged’.\textsuperscript{42}

As Institutes of Health attacks punitive cures which are ‘violent and torturous in their operation, or even poisonous’, so Cleland foregrounds the palatability of his nostrum.\textsuperscript{43} In his ‘most sustained and serious statement about the nature of fiction’ the author-as-physician administers his moral cure through ‘Vehicles of wholesome Advice, without its physicky Taste’.\textsuperscript{44} Literature’s ‘powerful recommendation of pleasure’ optimises its moral efficacy; enabling readers to take their moral medicine.\textsuperscript{45} Cleland suggests that even ‘obscene’ literature may be morally utile, since ‘poisons have their Use, when their Distribution is properly guarded’.\textsuperscript{46} As Hal Gladfelder notes, Cleland’s acknowledgement of fiction’s inflammatory potential is ‘self-incriminating’ at best.\textsuperscript{47} His fiction, as Jody Greene has argued, rests upon license and excess rather than prohibition: the indulgence and propagation of pleasure to its limits. Cleland shares Mandeville’s view of male sexual appetite, ‘if any Thing cures [men], it must be Satiety’; only ‘a Surfeit of unlawful Love’ will endear the ‘Chaste Embraces of Innocence before the bought smile of Harlots loveless, joyless, unindear’d of casual fruition’.\textsuperscript{48} In order to claim itself as a prophylactic against the perils of libertinism, then, Cleland’s work must stimulate appetite until the point of disgust: must please until it sickens. Despite his invectives against unpleasant cures, the trope of therapeutic expulsion persists in Cleland’s writing precisely because of fiction’s moral conventions.
2. ‘Pap-nerv’d softlings’: disgust and pleasure in Memoirs of a Coxcomb

Sir William Delamour, the eponymous ‘coxcomb’ of or ‘vain, superficial man’ of Cleland’s novel, has few depths, apart from the instinctive stirrings of appetite.\(^{49}\) Hurling himself into a vortex of dissipated pleasures following the disappearance of his first love, Lydia, Sir William’s appetites counterpoint those propelling Fanny Hill. Yet while Fanny assimilates the ‘genial emulsion’ of her lovers with gusto and profit, moving swiftly onto her next repast, Sir William’s getting and spending is characterised by anxiety, satiety, disgust. Cleland’s dual commitment to the social and corporeal processes of incorporation and elimination, to sexual activity and masculine self-discipline, binds his narrative to cycles of satisfaction, repletion, and evacuation, its pleasure punctuated (and licensed) by bouts of nausea. In order to ‘dishabituate’ the individual from dependency on lurid scenes of pleasure, Coxcomb induces imaginary evacuation. To preserve health modern readers require ‘doses of ipecacuanha, not in the Roman gluttonous intention, but in a salutary one’.\(^{50}\) Yet in Coxcomb the dual commitment to morality and sensuality generates queasy formal oscillations. The positivist pronouncements and valetudinarian anxiety of the health tracts give way to representational tropes, where bodies gorge, bloat, waste and evacuate in the throes of desire and panic. In this text the dynamics of appetite and surfeit, taste and disgust, are used both to entertain and to assert moral refinement. Coxcomb, like Woman of Pleasure, is deeply preoccupied with its claims to the discourse of polite taste and sensibility.\(^{51}\) Such commitment to the cultural capabilities of taste is not a paradox: Karen Harvey has shown that pretensions to aesthetic refinement were central to erotic culture’s assertion of masculine sociability. Fictional bodies are thus ‘products of cultural, social and political debate’: ‘screens onto which cultural, social and political concerns were projected’ and ‘saturated with
beliefs, desires and fears about sex and gender’. The embodied nature of those beliefs means that Cleland’s physiology is clearly gendered. Thus *Woman of Pleasure* jauntily credits the female interior with infinite resilience, a ‘happy habit of body, juicy, plump and furnished’ ensuring ‘a fullness of soft springy flesh, that yielding sufficiently…to almost any distension soon recovers itself so as to re-tighten that strict compression of its mantlings and fold’. While *Memoirs*’ glib confidence in female recesses is attributable to its status as ‘an it-novel… narrated by an enthusiastic vagina’ in which the parade of character-types is more important that ‘the psychology of the heroine/narrator’, *Coxcomb* focus is a passive male. In this novel, narrative probing exposes vulnerabilities in the male body and identity: rather than any triumphant phallus, it is the stomach and taste that define this ‘man of feeling’. As Cleland’s fiction explores the complex relationship between sensation and the self, body and the mind, the delicate palate and the gastric ‘bag…of Nerves and Secretions’ are indicative of a troubled and uncertain interiority that is as physiological and somatic, as it is psychological and novelistic. If sensibility often produced physical debility as a hallmark of sensitive psychological virtue, the ‘inner life’ of Cleland’s male narrator is purely gastric. Shuttling between consumption and bulimic recoil, the experiences of this novel are never properly digested.

Taste operates both formally and thematically in this novel as the physiological vacillations of the central character, Sir William, convey not merely the precarious physicality of mid-century men but also the novel’s formal inconsistency. If Sir William’s uses his physical capacity for disgust to stake his claim to genuine moral worth this response is shown to be both temporary and unreliable – undercutting the moral claims of the novel form. Displaying the power of *distaste*, *Coxcomb*’s salacious fiction culminates in a tableau of ‘dread and disgust’ designed to revolt the
sensibilities of the reader, and supposed to purge the increasingly-dissipated body of the protagonist in the hope of restoring his manly self-regulation. However, *Coxcomb*’s negotiation of disgust fails to crystallise into either a convincingly secure masculine identity or a moral outcome.

As Gladfelder has argued, *Coxcomb* participates in the mid-eighteenth-century assessment of shifting modes of masculinity and the perceived effeminization of modern men. Yet the novel’s depiction of male dissipation reveals as much about Cleland’s interest in the body as it does about the contemporary luxury. Though a self-styled ‘coxcomb’ or ‘vain, superficial man’, Sir William is not constitutionally effeminate. His is ‘a robust, healthy constitution, manifest in the glow of a fresh complexion and vigorous well-proportioned limbs’ and a blood which conveys ‘the ferment of desire’ for the opposite sex. When his pure love for the fifteen-year-old heiress Lydia is truncated by her disappearance, his ‘constitution’ ‘interfere[s] with that system of constancy and Platonics’ which stipulates love remain chastely devoted to an absent object. Innate health seems to inure Sir William against the toxicity of London’s fashionable diversions despite the kinetic pleasures of his own sexual pursuits, his bodily health allows him to claim a detached vantage point from which to view the gentlemanly wreckage. The erotic picaresque works as a kind of fictional homeopathy, including in each amatory encounter a dose of male bodily collapse to innoculate the reader against intemperance. Sir William’s affair with the aged Lady Oldborough, for example, is prefixed by the story of her recently-deceased husband. Once married into money, he ‘abandoned himself to such riotous excesses …that his constitution failed under him…Drained…consumptive, and exhausted, he died, before he was thirty, a very old man’. Such admonitory narratives confirm the fatal effects of unrestrained voracity.
The dangers of excess are nowhere clearer than in the homosocial demi-monde of the bagnio. Cleland’s evocation of the low-life world of London shows the contradictory interface between desire, the aspirational and self-legitimating discourse of taste, and the self-incriminating emotion of disgust. Despite eschewing only the ‘most sensual gratifications’ known to ‘rational votaries to pleasure’, Sir William tours a brothel in order to cement his ‘contempt for all the false, and insipid delights’ of prostitution. His comrades in pleasure are ‘woeful sons of pleasure’ wasting away from surfeit, whose ‘pale jaundiced faces, hectic constitutions, and reduced legs preach from example the virtue of temperance’. The bawdy house revolts Sir William’s sensibility. The women are ‘carrion-quarry’, the men inebriate fools, and he condemns ‘the lust-toying of the men, and the repulsive false-fondling of the women… their mock modesty…yet more nauseating’. Yet disgust at the carnal riot of male desire is displaced onto the bodies of the prostitutes and concentrated in the figure of the Brothel Madam.

As for mother Sulphur, which was a name de guerre, given her by one of her customers…there could be nothing even more shocking or disgustful than her appearance. Only imagine a tartar-phiz, begrimed with powder and sweat, that could not, however, conceal the coarseness of a dun skin; a mob, that with all its pink ribbons, was forced to give way, all round, to the impatience of confinement of stiff, bristling, grizzly locks, every hair of which was as thick as a pea-straw; then this gorgon head was sunk between her two shoulders, and carried in mock state, something in the style of the crown and cushion; descending from which blessed landskip, to where the creases and plaits of her breast triumphed over all the dirt and ceruse that encrusted it, the sight, if not the scent, was feasted with two pailfuls, at least,
of uberous flesh, which had outgrown the size, and neither in hue and consistence deserved the names of breasts. I go no lower than a busto description for the sake of nice stomachs. 

Cleland’s gleefully forensic ekphrasis conveys ‘the paradox of disgust…as a passive-defensive reaction…which seeks out its object…in its whole essentiality.’ A terrifying ‘scare-pleasure’, the beldam’s dismembered physiognomy lays up a ‘month's provision of chastity’ in those who encounter her. Vision is ‘feasted’ on her fleshly surfeit. Sulphur’s oozing corporality extends by implication to the deliquescent horror of her nether regions: her body a quagmire into which her higher functions have sunk.

As in Swift’s ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room’ visceral disgust climaxes in the horror of olfaction: ‘who sees will spew, who smells, be poison’d’. For Cleland, who imagined the pores of the skin as ‘mouths’ working analogously to that opening by continually inahlation and suspiration, the openness of these ‘air-mouths’ construct the skin not merely as sensitive but remarkably porous, ‘perforated like a sieve’. Rather than protect the body this membrane opens it to external elements: acting as an ‘organ of interchange’ perpetually susceptible to its environment. ‘Contagious miasms penetrat[e] instantaneously to the central regions of vitality’ through the open pores, sucking in noxious air in an involuntary microscopic ingestion. If merely seeing causes spontaneous vomiting, smelling threatens acute contamination. Mother Sulphur, whose name has flatuent connotations of indigestion, ‘excites extreme revulsion’ in her “disarray and decline”: upsetting Sir William’s sense of tasteful self-possession. If she, like Swift’s Corinna, turns ‘nice stomachs’, her own is buried in fat: the narrator suggesting that bawds and other ‘superannuated fussocks’ are forced to benumb their natural sensibility in ‘fogginess, and corpulence’ in order
to endure their nauseating profession.\textsuperscript{73}

The narrator’s horror at the proliferative possibilities of the flesh is palpable and also found also in *Phisiological Reveries* where fat is ‘a diseased concretion, a stagnated depose of a superfluity of indigested nourishment’.\textsuperscript{74} The ‘landskip’ of Mother Sulphur is a form of what Vittoria di Palma has classified as the ‘anti-picturesque’, an instance of the aesthetics of aversive emotion.\textsuperscript{75} Sulphur’s grotesque expansiveness materialises an environmental-moral hazard and threat to masculine security. The narrator’s disgust blocks further representation, acting as a boundary-forming reflex. It also posits the grotesque female body as the antithesis of beauty and orderly function. As Winifried Menninghaus has observed, the hag assumes an increasingly singular role in elaborations of the beautiful as the discourse of aesthetics develops in the eighteenth-century. Almost all the defects addressed and rejected in discourses on disgust, Menninghaus asserts, are compressed into one single phantasm: the ugly old woman. This phantasm ‘brings together folds and declivities, warts, larger than usual openings of the body (i.e. mouth and anus)…sunken hollows instead of beautiful swellings, drooping breasts, stinking breath’.\textsuperscript{76} Sir William’s escalating horror conforms Carl Plantinga’s analysis of disgust as beginning ‘as a guardian of the mouth’ but which ‘extends to the protection of the “temple of the body”’ until it ‘finally becomes the guardian “of human dignity in the social order”’.\textsuperscript{77}

Reifying the ‘maximum disgusting evil’ in female form helps to define the sensibility which expels it as masculine, autonomous, intact.\textsuperscript{78} Thus Sir William’s capacity for disgust – his expulsive horror – is supposed to save him from fatal sexual surfeit. Sulphur’s expansiveness materialises the threat of consumption, the silting deposits of an appetite without end. Debauchery, with all its voracity, results in desensitization, while Sir William’s disgust is paradoxically ‘geared to edibility,
nourishment, and health’: the ‘furred palate’ and paralitic stomach can neither discern nor refuse. It acts as moral regimen: in order to ‘dishabituate’ the individual from lurid scenes of pleasure, the writer must induce imaginary evacuation. However, the movement of the prose – from compromisingly intimate detail to nauseated revulsion – suggests an ongoing process rather than a successful separation from the objects of disgust. There is, in Sara Ahmed’s terms, a ‘stickiness’ to Cleland’s visceral reactions: a sense of splenetic indigestion, of never having quite cleared away the offending object. In its ramble through a catalogue of eighteenth-century comic couplings, *Coxcomb* is punctuated and propelled by bouts of nausea, sending the narrator staggering on to the next encounter. The vacillations of the central character, Sir William, convey not merely the novel’s formal and moral irresolution but the queasy innards of mid-century masculinity.

The connection between aliment, ingestion, and sexuality is further confirmed in the bagnio feast. The ‘exquisite viands’ produced for dining ‘exhaust all the refinements of modern cookery…[for] all foreign delicacies had been made to contribute, and all the seasons had been forced’.

Ingestion and incorporation, whether oral or sexual, risk transforming the body from within, dispossessing the gentlemanly self. By commingling bodily fluids in ‘the puddle of these kennels of filth and venery’ the English nobility contract ‘an habitual disrelish to the joys of sensations, seasoned with sentiment and disembruted with love’. Sir William’s continence reflects disinterested self-control: he is ‘cool, free, and tranquil’, a ‘true voluptuary’ unlike those who ‘mud-suck [their] pleasure in dirty dull debauches’.

Oral and sexual desire both threaten to disrupt the boundaries of the gentleman, polluting his lineage and leaving his palate permanently impaired, his stomach befouled.
Sir William’s figures his capacity for disgust as the embodiment of his innate health of his constitution: his inability to assimilate and digest immoral excesses saves him from the fatal effects of sexual surfeit and personal pollution. Revulsion is therefore part of a system of innate ‘taste’ in which the body is deeply involved: a ‘sensory-somatic emotion…with…cognitive sophistication’, disgust performs moral response and therefore can be claimed for the arsenal of readerly reform. The emphasis on provoking satiric disgust explains the roster of eighteenth-century misfits that the coxcomb claims as conquests. Indeed, his intrigues are more likely to provoke disdain than desire. They include a country-Pamela whose ‘vartue’ is swiftly surrendered; a butch miss; Agnes, a mindlessly pretty mannequin whom he fails to bed; the decrepit Lady Oldburgh whose person resembles ‘a desert of dried fruit’ and with whom he feels like the ‘doge of Venice, when he weds the gulph’. As Gladfelder observes, Sir William is a singularly ‘ornamental’ figure who fails to ‘achieve a confident sense of his own sexual and social identity’ throughout the novel.

This weak sense of the self is confirmed by the young man’s amour with the ‘rational-pleasurist’ lady Bell Travers; an older, experienced, witty, female rake who may be a caricature of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. It is in his encounter with the imperious, powerful, and self-possessed lady libertine that Cleland’s complex of sexual continence, dietetic anxiety, and visceral disgust is elaborated. Lady Travers is a ‘seraglio of beauties’, whose personal refinement precludes any sense of surfeit. Passive to the last, it is ‘reserved for lady Travers alone to disgust [Sir William] of lady Travers’. Driven by ‘unremitting gust’ to pursue his paramour, Sir William enters her house unseen and conceals himself in her closet. He watches a ‘perverse
sort of primal scene’ unfold after she summons her Swiss manservant, Buralt, to her chamber.90

Buralt came in, leaning upon Mrs. Vergers, with his knees knocking together, a wildish stare, and all the symptoms of debility and pallid faintness. They were followed, at a little distance, by a plain, modest-looking country-woman. As soon as this Buralt was come the length of the bed, he let himself fall upon it, without the least ceremony, whilst Lady Travers busied herself with examining the nature of the woman's milk, and the terms of her agreement. After which she brought the nurse to the bed-side; but as soon as the poor woman viewed more narrowly the object to whom she was to give her breast, she recoiled with visible horror and affright. Nor without reason; for it is hardly possible to figure to oneself a more ghastly spectre than what this wretch exhibited, wrapped in a kind of blue coat, that sat on him yet less loosely than his skin, which was of a dun sallow hue. His eyes goggled from sockets appearing sunk inwards by the retreat of the flesh round them, which likewise added to the protuberance of his cheek-bones. A napkin in the shape of a night-cap covered all his hair, (except a platted queue of it, and some lank side-locks) the dull dingy black of which, by its shade, raised and added to the hideousness of his grim meagre visage.

It was this figure, however, that this superb, this delicate lady, employed herself to support, bolster up with pillows, besides her own arms, so as to place him in a posture to receive the benefit of the restorative which she had prepared for him, in the milk of this nurse; and the fondness and humility with which she performed this tender office obviously enough reminded me of the libidinous lady in one of Scarron's novels.
She could not, however, prevail over the nurse to conquer her fears and aversion, so far as to suckle this babe of delight, but by dint of increasing her hire; and then, with her face averted, she gave him her breast, which he fastened upon, and looked more like a sucking demon, or a vampyre escaped from his grave, than a human creature.\textsuperscript{91}

This grotesque pieta combines oral anxiety, sexual desire, and existential nausea. As J. G. Sperling has observed, despite being well-known in eighteenth-century sentimental iconography, the vision of the body and sexuality that emerges from ‘roman charity’ is highly troubling. ‘It eroticises maternity and queers our understanding of practices of lactation,’ she writes, but also represents ‘an incestuous boundary violation…a quintessential figure of perversity and dissent’.\textsuperscript{92} As Gladfelder argues, Sir William’s disgust is a reaction ‘not to monstrous otherness, but to self-recognition’: Buralt is ‘a reflection of himself unmanned’.\textsuperscript{93} The manservant’s physical debility mirrors Sir William’s consumptive decline and enslavement to an upper-class woman. This foreign body, infantilised by the perverse nourishment of a monstrous lover, apotheosises the ultimate end of the ‘pap-nerv’d softling’. The sexual and oral functions combined in this ‘disgustful transaction’ externalise the threat posed by the ‘appetite for generation’ uncoupled from its productive ends and the terror of desire and dependency.\textsuperscript{94} Further, this monstrous simulacrum of maternity reflects the medical and moral controversy over breastfeeding practices during the 1740s (and beyond), where the body of the mother was simultaneously idealised and demonised for its capacity or failure to nourish or spoil its infant offspring. Lady Travers’s use of a wet-nurse to satisfy her own and her lover’s deviant hunger is the very acme of negligent luxury. Cleland’s obsession with alimentary and bodily health, his idealization of self-controlled physicality, is focused
in the figure of the female libertine who wields both the powers of love and the powers of horror as she subjects men to her luxurious, effeminizing diet. Her use of a wet-nurse implies that she lacks the feminine ‘sympathetic disposition’ demonstrated by breastfeeding, travestying both the norms of maternal selflessness and masculine disinterested benevolence.95

Immured in his closet, this scopophiliac tableau is a fantasy of maternal engulfment, but likewise a dream of somatic closure: the private interior of the closet renders Sir William a homo clausus, a being whose boundaries separate him from the world.96 Its grid of polymorphous perversity produces a hysterical repudiation which barely conceals its libidinal charge. This is at once at scene of horror and a fantasy of bodily union – a transgressive interdependency which takes the goal of sensible intersubjectivity to an extreme. The transfixed gaze of the narrator confirms ‘desire and disgust are dialectically conjoined’.97 Like the portrait of Mother Sulphur, the denunciation of lady Travers’s taboo desire serves to reroute Sir William’s self-disgust. Despite his proclaimed moral abhorrence the scene stimulates his appetite: the pleasure of the participants can be inferred ‘from my own experience’ since it ‘too sensibly began at home with me. I was more than once, upon the point of breaking out, and adding one more figure to the group before me’.98 A paralysed voyeur, this is an ‘ambivalent situation of suspended agency’, a moment of affective illegibility in which Sir William’s sense of self struggles with desire.99 As Sianne Ngai has argued, the dysphoria of disgust diagnoses ‘social powerlessness’, an emotion (and a sensation) which performs ‘obstructed agency… [and] situations of passivity’ through bodily sensations.100 Disgust exposes powerlessness, rather than extricating the individual. Sir William’s sickened stomach allies him with the expropriated maidservant who can only turn her face from grim creature latching at her breast.
‘Faint, and overcome with all the agitations and conflicts’ of what he has seen, Sir William escapes without confronting lady Travers.101 If this affair proves the maxim that ‘excesses carry with them the principle of their own destruction’ it also diagnoses profound bodily and subjective vulnerability as a defining condition of modern masculinity.102 Cleland figures the release of disgust as a cathartic evacuation. Sir William’s overflow of gall in a ranting letter repeats an earlier ‘copious expectoration of spleen’ that followed his failure to seduce the vapid Agnes.103 Here his rage and hatred are projected onto a powerful Mother figure, attacking her erotic appetites and neglecting to excoriate the insatiable and draining hunger of the male ‘vampyre’ who leeches from the female body.

Infantile and cannibalistic, the scene distills modernity’s digestive entropy as humans feed from each other. The coxcomb’s disgust conveys ‘an acute crisis of self-preservation in the face of an unassimilable otherness, a convulsive struggle in which the question is, quite literally, whether “to be or not to be”’.104 While regurgitation appears to rid Sir William of his debilitating passion, evacuation provides only brief palliation. Though he swiftly sermonises on his lesson (that his sensibility is superior to those who ‘souse’ in their vices) evacuation ironically enables further consumption. Purgation has occurred only in ‘the Roman gluttonous’ fashion. ‘Cloyed and sick of his successes’ the coxcomb is ‘benumbed in his sensation… taken torpid’ in the midst of his pleasures.105 The processes of incorporation and elimination grind to a halt. His ‘disrelish’ is reflexive; he has become an object of disgust to himself. Like a ‘pleasure-sated Sultan’ he is overtaken with the languors of satiety, and drugged even to loathing, with all the passive obedience and non-resistance round [me], [I] find at length how essential the heart is to the preparation of a feast worth the appetite of the senses.106
Resolutely non-cathartic, visceral satiety becomes a nauseating physical immanence; intoxication begets supine self-d disgust, reflexive horror. The coxcomb’s tale unveils hypermasculine sexual pursuit as feminised consumption.

The ambivalent operations of disgust thus appear to coincide with Cleland’s censure of nauseating cures for the body. Sir William’s failure to reform following his disenchantment with lady Travers seems to herald pleasure as supreme educator as well as physical panacea. It is ‘reserved for love alone to secure to [him] the benefit of this disgust, and to detach [him]’ from folly. Yet the resurgence of his love for the absent Lydia is figured as a ‘violent reflux of the tide of love’, strangely bilious language for permanent affection. Following so soon after his nervous collapse, the narrative’s return to this pure object conforms to the overall dynamic in which surfeit provokes evacuations, apparent moral conversions and compensatory assertions of potent physicality. Lydia, the inviolate and wholesome love object, allows Sir William to reestablish his discrimination and to stabilise his appetites. Though Cleland could satirise love as ‘a bodily appetite as hunger and thirst…removed by a hearty meal…a corporeal want’, he complies with the ideal that in its highest form, physical love unites the body with ‘the pleasures of the mind’, enabling pleasure to ‘bid defiance to that end which mere momentary desires generally terminate in, when they die of a surfeit of satisfaction’. He seems to subscribe to the orthodoxy that health and virtue provide the foundations for ‘permanent voluptuousness’. Yet in its mixture of desire and horror, Sir William’s response to his beloved resembles his closeted reaction to Lady Bell. Shuddering at the sight of her he is:

unable to command any motion, or exert one power of free agency, under the oppression of such sudden sensations acting unitedly upon me, and keeping
every other faculty of my soul suspended. I gazed, I devoured her with my
eyes insufficient to all the raptures and avidity of my heart.109

Though the trope is a commonplace in the literature of sensibility, Cleland’s
class character is subjected to an humiliating excess of appetite and inarticulacy. The
insatiability of his hunger exceeds his means of expression and incorporation. Words
are ‘choaked’ by ideas, until his sentiments ‘fore[e] a passage’ in sighs and broken
sounds, as he involuntarily expels before a young woman whose reception is ‘dry or
reserved’ rather than touched or effusive.110 Hurried away by a guardian, this is the
reader’s last sight of Lydia and the final pages merely summarise her story.

Seemingly flummoxed by the prospect of conventional love and deprived of the
defective or repellent characters that sustained its sordid narrative, Memoirs of a
Coxcomb shows no stomach for nuptial bliss.

The stomach so necessary for bodily health and masculine autonomy is at risk of
addiction, contamination, dependency. While directing disgust toward female figures
of excess might seem to assert bodily boundaries, the freight of bodily revulsion
reveals the dispossession of Cleland’s protagonist. Sir William’s protective disgust at
powerful female appetites, at incontinent bodies incapable of tempering their desires
or policing their boundaries, provides only temporary respite from his own fluctuating
embodiment and masochistic desires. The coxcomb’s journey toward sensible union
exposes the inequities of power, desire, and the latent perversity of intersubjective
love: it is the stomach that most powerfully expresses the sense of fear and desire.

The ‘delicate pleasure’ of ‘confessing one’s follies’, of languishing in one’s own
abasement, is ultimately self-incriminating, its repetition an example of ways in which
novels’ ‘therapeutic imperative…[is] countermanded by the pleasure principle’.111 If
the discourse of taste allows the subject to claim social discernment and to participate
in the social exchanges of gentlemanly politeness, disgust returns the subject to visceral physiology, undermining the myth of autonomy through paroxysms of bodily recoil.

17 Cleland, *Woman of Pleasure*, p. 100.
21 Cleland, *Woman of Pleasure*, p. 174. Greene provides an excellent account of the philosophical underpinning of *Woman’s of Pleasure’s* descriptions of insatiable appetite for novelty through a reading of Hume’s assertion that perverse desires are
accounted for by “defective organs” of sense. For Greene, the variability of taste and desire for incessant change and novelty undermines the novel’s claims to moral stability.

23 Cleland, *Institutes of Health*, p. 54.
24 Ibid., p. 106.
25 Ibid., p. 45.
26 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
30 Ibid., p. 12.
32 Ibid., p. 9.
33 Ibid., p. 10.
34 Ibid., p. 11.
37 Harvey, *Reading Sex*, pp. 59-60.
38 Cleland, *Institutes of Health*, p. 31.
39 Ibid., p. 48.
40 Ibid., p. 49.
41 Ibid., p. 49.
42 Tilmouth, *Passion’s Triumph*, p. 6; p. 352.
45 Cleland, *Institutes of Health*, p. 86.
46 Cleland, *Coxcomb*, p. 236.
50 Ibid., 47.
52 Harvey, *Reading Sex*, p. 9.
55 Cheyne, *Natural Method*, p. 60.
58 Cleland, *Coxcomb*, p. 41.
61 Cleland, *Coxcomb*, p. 117.
73 Cleland, *Coxcomb*, pp. 154-5; on the theorization of adipose fat as a numbing accretion see Stenz, ‘Iconography of the Belly’ in this volume.
78 Menninghaus, *Disgust* p. 84.
79 McGinn, *Disgust*, p. 66.
84 McGinn, *Disgust*, p. 45.
87 Whether this is an unflattering portrait of Lady Mary is disputed. Isabel Grundy argues that it is, while Gladfelder points to Cleland’s praise for Lady Mary’s pioneering of smallpox inoculation in *Institutes of Health* and emphasises instead the
similarity between her manservant Fribourg and Coxcomb’s Buralt rather than any direct correlation between Cleland’s lady libertine and the aristocratic Lady Mary. Gladfelder, Fanny Hill in Bombay, pp. 126-127; Grundy, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, p. 519.

88 Cleland, Coxcomb, p. 186.
89 Ibid., p. 187.
90 Gladfelder, Fanny Hill in Bombay, p. 123.
91 Cleland, Coxcomb, pp. 188-189.
93 Gladfelder, Fanny Hill in Bombay, p. 123.
94 Cleland, Coxcomb, p. 190.
98 Cleland, Coxcomb, p. 190.
100 Ibid., p. 353; p. 3.
101 Cleland, Coxcomb, p. 191.
102 Ibid., p. 191.
103 Ibid., p. 149.
104 Menninghaus, Disgust, p. 1.
105 Cleland, Coxcomb, p. 194.
106 Ibid., p. 195.
107 Ibid., p. 195.
109 Cleland, Coxcomb, pp. 207-208, my emphasis.
110 Ibid., p. 208.