

February 2017

Skin as an Index to Moral Character in English Renaissance Tragedy

Uwe Klawitter

Ruhr-Universität, Bochum, uwe.klawitter@rub.de

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Klawitter, Uwe (2015) "Skin as an Index to Moral Character in English Renaissance Tragedy," *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*: Vol. 8 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc/vol8/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Literary Magazines at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

Skin as an Index to Moral Character in English Renaissance Tragedy

Uwe Klawitter, *Ruhr-Universität, Bochum*

As cultural historians of the body point out, the dominant Renaissance paradigm of medicine, the ancient theory of humors, established a direct link between a person's mixture of bodily fluids and their psychological disposition. This disposition was held in turn to have a decisive influence on the individual's moral bearing. A 'dyscrasia', an imbalance of humors, was regarded as making the body susceptible to sinful behavior (Healy, *Fictions* 34). As the contemporary semantic shift of the term 'complexion', from 'mixture of bodily fluids' to 'tone of facial skin' (Connor 19f.) implies, skin was regarded as a readable index to a person's inner self.

The conception that skin exposes that which is within must have appealed to dramatists. Elizabethan and Early Stuart plays are replete with references to skin. There is hardly a quality of skin, skin condition or bodily practice relating to skin which does not figure. The references serve to indicate health, temperament, age, beauty, gender, social status, ethnicity and race but are most frequently employed to register emotions and to qualify moral stature. One could talk about a veritable rhetoric of skin which focuses on facial skin, in particular cheeks and forehead, and also on hands, but much less frequently on other areas of the body or skin in general. The decisive differential qualities are here color and smoothness of skin.

Despite a vivid interest in the cultural coding of the body and its various parts as well as the use of body language in drama, the critical interest in skin took some time to develop and has been rather one-sided. A preoccupation with anatomy, the period's most influential method of scientific enquiry, directed critical attention to the interior of the body rather than skin. However, two aspects of skin have certainly found considerable interest: the psycho-physiological skin reaction of blushing, which has been explored in its ambiguity and with respect to the politics of

visual control,¹ and the cultural and theatrical practice of face-painting, here in particular the construction of the gendered and racialized other.²

While there is certainly scope for further enquiries into the performative dimension of skin – the act of touching, for example, has hardly been investigated – I would like to draw attention to limitations in the performativity of skin. In theatrical practice, at least in the arena-type playhouses, the exposed parts of the actors' bodies would not have been equally visible to all playgoers (Beckerman 129). Moreover, skin conditions like rashes, wrinkles and scars and involuntary skin reactions like sweating, flushing, blanching and goose-flesh are difficult or impossible to perform. What can thus be often found is a verbalization of the not easily observable and the unactable. The transcoding from the visual to the verbal entails a symbolization of the somatic. What is noticed or invoked is almost always *interpreted* skin.

That dramatic characters take note of skin is part of the increased bodily awareness which can be observed in Renaissance drama. As Manfred Pfister points out, “[i]n such speeches thematizing the body, the characters decipher or read their own and each other’s bodies and we, reading these speeches, read these bodies with them” (113). The dramatic characters’ obsession with a scrutiny of the body reflects the humanist striving for knowledge of the self and of human nature. It can be also related to a specifically Protestant conception of evil, which regards sin not so much as a matter of external action, but of interior, and therefore hidden predisposition (Douglas 8). In a time when the body was deemed to reflect the state of the soul (Grigsby 159), the right reading of bodily signs amounted to nothing less than the ability to recognize moral corruption.

Renaissance dramatists realized that skin offered them an ideal vocabulary for moral qualification but also for a consideration of the problems inherent in the reading of character. Apart from carrying rich cultural meanings, skin could be conceptualized as a page or book and therefore related to one of the most frequently used metaphors of cognition in Renaissance culture.³ As Steven Connor notes, “the implication of the skin in the idea of the book is more than a metaphor ... books were primarily things of skin” (42). But skin is also connected with the idea of

¹ See Fleck and Iyengar.

² See the studies by Drew-Bear, Dolan, Hall, Callaghan, Karim-Cooper, Iyengar and Stevens.

³ For the rich tradition of book and writing-metaphors see Curtius 323-346.

the mirror, the other central heuristic metaphor of the Renaissance.⁴ According to the Platonic view, skin mirrors a person's inner self: fair, smooth skin – virtue; dark, diseased, blemished skin – vice.⁵ The correspondence between external appearance and inward character⁶ is clearly implied when Hamlet tells his mother: “I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you.” (3.4.18-19). Important is here also the use of mirrors in Renaissance art which aims to direct the viewer to a moral or spiritual message (Shuger 22-31; 34). Significantly, it takes words, the setting up of a ‘spiritual’ mirror, to denounce moral failings. Hamlet's action corresponds to the mimetic endeavor of the playwright (Grabes 228-234).

It may be instructive to compare Hamlet's use of the mirror image in shaming Gertrude with Othello's use of the page or book image in judging Desdemona: “Des. Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed? / Oth. Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon it?” (4.2.72-74). It is here that the usefulness of skin's unique ability to bear signs, to function as a scriptural space comes to the fore. The authoritative inscription envisaged is an act of stigmatization, a public shaming of what is regarded as an “undesired differentness” (Goffman 5). The metaphorical conception of skin as mirror and skin as page (by extension also as canvas or screen) is evidently tied up with the exertion of social and ideological control.

In the given example Othello becomes unsure when faced with the platonic signs of Desdemona's virtue. Fixated on “ocular proof” (3.3.363) as he is, he cannot bring himself to accept the outward sign of inward virtue. Obsessed with dissimulation, he cannot do what Desdemona did in his case, namely read his “visage in his mind” (1.3.253). What should therefore also be expected in drama is a negotiability of the traditional semiotics of skin and an epistemological uncertainty about bodily signs.

⁴ For the importance and use of the mirror metaphor see Grabes. Although discussing the body-as-mirror tradition, he does not specifically focus on skin.

⁵ Interestingly, this notion is not taken up and elaborated by the influential physiognomist Giambattista Della Porta. His *De humana physiognomonia Libri 4* (1593) explains the significance of features observable in various parts of the body, but does not pay special attention to skin.

⁶ This Platonic conception, in Greek ‘kalokagathia’, is very well explained by Biewer 151-164. As becomes clear from her exploration of the reading of faces in Shakespeare's comedies, eyes and facial features received most attention. Biewer takes the view that the congruence between looks and moral character was a ‘maxim in Shakespeare's time’. According to Bevington, it was already made much use of in Tudor moral drama (2).

So how are moral qualities diagnosed or inscribed on skin? To what extent are references to skin used to question the readability of human character? And what ideological implications arise? The genre of tragedy seems to me a fertile ground for such an investigation. I will focus on the pathologization of immorality and on instances of stigmatization, which I regard as particularly representative. To show how skin is used for reflections on the danger of surface impressions, I will briefly turn to bodily practices connected to skin.

The idea that moral corruption surfaces on skin is informed by the Bible where skin-affecting diseases occur as a visible sign of divine punishment for sinfulness.⁷ It is also familiar from the traditional description of the Seven Deadly Sins, where each sin tends to be marked by a disease.⁸ Renaissance dramatists make extensive metaphorical use of skin diseases to mark depravity. In Shakespeare's plays, for instance, Jean Goens and Peter Gheeraert have noted a large dermatological vocabulary which is used by characters – in line with contemporary habits of swearing – to express moral condemnation (n.p.). Leprosy and pox, which is syphilis, figure high in the practice of vilification.

Evil influence is frequently expressed in terms of cutaneous symptoms. King Lear, for example, describes the effect of Goneril's cruelty on him as follows: "Thou art a boil / A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle, / In my corrupted blood" (2.2.412-414). And the description of the poisoning of the king in *Hamlet* is typical in its drawing on medical knowledge. The applied "leperous distilment" affected the blood and, as the ghost recalls, "a most instant tetter bark'd about, / Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust / all my smooth body" (1.5.64 and 71-73). The horror of the regicide is conveyed by the hideous eruption of skin, which symbolises a desecration which will have a fatal effect on the body politic.

Writers of revenge tragedies outbid each other in imaging evil in terms of disease and decay. John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1601) yields many graphic examples. There is talk about the "flux of sin / from [...] tainted body" (4.3.3-4) and "the polluting filth of ulcerous sin" (4.3.33). Individual sinning is here usually indicative of a more widespread moral corruption at court which calls for purgative action.

⁷ For examples see Olyan 56.

⁸ See Bloomfield 233 and 242. Grigsby, who also discusses the tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins, states that "the idea that diseases reflect sins" was "deeply ingrained into the collective consciousness" (165).

The identification and shaming of socially unacceptable behavior is closely related to the forehead, the highest and most visible part of the face. In the Renaissance the brow is coded as the seat of virtue and as such also a space where shame is proclaimed; as Karim-Cooper explains, “the forehead could be read as a metaphorical map of the internal moral condition” (70). To give an example from *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607), where Vindice rebukes his mother, who nearly became a bawd: “Oh you of easy wax, do but imagine / Now the disease has left you, how leprously / That office would have clinged unto your forehead” (4.4.62-64).

Dishonor is also often expressed in terms of the staining of skin (see *The Revenger’s Tragedy* 1.2.1-6); sometimes even in the wounding of skin, as a drastic example from George Chapman’s tragedy *Bussy D’Ambois* (c. 1604) demonstrates. Here the Count of Montsurry avenges himself on his adulterous wife Tamyra by making her write a letter in blood to entrap her lover and stabs her with the words “I’ll write in wounds, my wrong’s fit characters” (5.1.125). The established notion of a textualization of skin is used to conflate stigmatization and retribution.

The guilt that results from the exacting of revenge is also projected onto skin. As Amidea in James Shirley’s *The Traitor* (1631) remarks to her revenger-brother: “I see Pisano’s blood / Is texted on thy forehead, and thy hands / Retain too many, too many crimson spots already” (5.1.118-120). Numerous passages could be cited where speckled or bloodied hands signify guilt – Lady Macbeth comes to mind – and white or ivory hands innocence.

The association of skin conditions with depravity is deeply engrained in the language. The attribute ‘scurvy’, for example, means ‘like scurf on skin’ but is also used to refer to ‘contemptible company’ (*OED*). When Flamineo curses Lodovico in Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612) “And let the stigmatic wrinkles in thy face / Like to the boistrous waves in a rough tide / One still overtake another” (3.3.65-67), he does not only refer to creases of the skin but puns on another denotation of ‘wrinkle’, namely ‘A moral stain or blemish’ (*OED*); a meaning reinforced by the attribute ‘stigmatic’, which at the time did not only denote ‘ill-favoured, ugly’ but also ‘having a deformity or blemish’ (*OED*).

The cultural coding of skin for moralizing purposes is dependent on a polarity between inward and outward, concealed and uncovered. This leads to the aspect of nakedness and cultural practices related to skin such as dressing, cosmetics and masking.

Nudity is traditionally connoted with truth and essential nature. Lear's vision of man as a "bare, forked animal" (3.4.106) comes immediately to mind.⁹ The acknowledgement of 'naked frailties', to borrow a phrase from *Macbeth*, is regarded as crucial to the understanding of human vulnerability and fallibility. While smooth, immaculate nakedness signifies angelic virtue, hairiness and pockiness point to man's beastly nature. The eponymous heroine of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (1623), for example, is characterized by her "delicate skin" (4.1.118), whereas her revengeful brother Ferdinand is described as having "a wolf-skin ... on the inside" (5.2.17f.). Lisa Hopkins interprets this as consequence of "his resolute denial of conscience" (27).

Men in powerful positions were expected to curb their passions and to hide their designs, but the resulting inscrutability of character could be disturbing; witness Lorenzo's remark in Shirley's *The Traitor* (1631): "Wise men secure their fates and execute / Invisibly, like that most subtle flame / That burns the heart, yet leaves no path or touch / Upon the skin to follow or suspect it" (4.1.190-193). The courtly ideal of self-control assumes here a sinister twist.

Anything that covers skin, cosmetics, masks and clothes, is regarded as potentially deceptive. Moral didacticism demands that dissimulation is finally discovered and punished. The making of faces and the adoption of masks has to be denounced as a loss of the inner self. As Alsemero in Rowley's and Middleton's *The Changeling* (1622) points out to Beatrice, "There was a visor / O'er that cunning face, and that became you; / Now impudence in triumph rides upon't" (5.3.46-48). 'Visor' does not only denote a mask, but in those days also 'a countenance' (*OED*). The inherent notion of a 'doubled skin'¹⁰ can also be found in the closet scene when Hamlet remonstrates with his mother: "Mother, for love of grace, / Lay not that flattering unction to your soul, / That not your trespass but my madness speaks. / It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, / Whiles

⁹ For the symbolic types of nudity differentiated in Christian art see Ferguson 49. Lear's *nuditas temporalis* would be, according to Ferguson's scheme, "a result of the trials and difficulties of life which cause a man to live in a condition of poverty".

¹⁰ See Connor 135f.

rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen” (3.4.146-151). The medical image – sores were treated with ointment – draws attention to the spiritual consequences of protracted self-deception, but speaks also to the contemporary fear of contagion.¹¹ If one still needed evidence for the significance of skin, it is this shift from index of moral character to an image for the soul itself. Contemporary drama and art yield further examples of this corporealization of the soul as skin.¹²

What my examples demonstrate is a vivid ‘communication about skin’¹³ in the most productive phase of English Renaissance tragedy. That the characters’ statements about skin are often rhetorically heightened fantasies of sight rather than observations, has to be seen in the context of the extensive figurative use of the human body in early modern culture. Although the epidermis did not have a more prominent role in drama than other organs or parts of the body, it certainly fulfilled special functions. Skin was, as playwrights increasingly realized, a useful means of communicating passion and dramatizing moral conflict, but also a way to expose the inherent issues of power.

Despite a keen sense of the deceptiveness of appearances, one can register an insistence on the legibility of cutaneous signs.¹⁴ The fact that skin can be both, visible *and* covered surface, exterior *and* interior, made it ideally suited to developing the theme of appearance and reality. Actually, the double-layer introduced by visors, clothes and cosmetics could be seen as a means to retain trust in the truth-telling power of skin.

While early Elizabethan dramatists like Marlowe and Kyd made hardly or only very stereotypical use of skin, Shakespeare, Middleton, Webster and Shirley were foremost amongst those who developed its

¹¹ Healy draws attention to the “anxiety about physical and moral infection polluting the soul” in Shakespeare’s time (“Bodily Regimen” 65); for the fear of concealed infection see Grigsby (165).

¹² Cf. Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607), where Gratiana says “Take this infectious spot out of my soul” (4.4.52); John Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (1629/33) “The leprosy of lust / That rots the soul” (1.1.74f); James Shirley’s *The Doubtful Heir* (1636-40), where Olivia states “for I here defy you / And bring an innocence shall strike / A blush upon your souls, that sinned in my suspicion” (4.2.n.l.); and his tragedy *The Cardinal* (1641), where the villain talks about his “poor sweating soul” (5.3.205). Cf. Connor’s view of skin as “the soul’s body” (10) and Benthien’s notion of “skin as expression of depth, of soul, of inner character” (11).

¹³ Certainly no less important than the ‘communication with skin’, to use a distinction made by Benthien (12).

¹⁴ So playwrights did not follow the sixteenth-century adage “When one looks on the outer skin / one knows little what is within”; see Whiting and Whiting S365. Cf. Bevington’s finding on Shakespeare’s use of body language: “That Shakespeare was profoundly attracted to this idea of certitude in the meaning of images can perhaps best be demonstrated by his use of the convention even when he most devastatingly illuminates its inadequacy” (2).

expressive potential. Noticeable is an increasingly self-conscious reading of skin and a more elaborate and daring metaphorical exploitation. The latter is curiously unaffected by contemporary anatomical descriptions of skin, which stress its porousness or regard it as a fabric woven of nerves, veins and arteries.¹⁵ The playwrights rather cultivated the analogy with the mirror and especially the book, which allowed a self-reflexive, critical consideration of moral assessment. If English writers of tragedy were, in the words T.S. Eliot wrote about Webster, “much possessed by death / And saw the skull beneath the skin” (52), they certainly also saw skin itself and its potential for signification.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- Chapman, George. *Bussy D'Ambois*, ed. Maurice Evans. London: Ernest Benn, 1965.
- Ford, John. *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, ed. Martin Wiggins. London: A & C Black, 2003.
- Marston, John. *Antonio's Revenge*, ed. W. Reavley Gair. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978.
- Middleton, Thomas. *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons. London: A & C Black, 1991.
- Middleton, Thomas and William Rowley. *The Changeling*, ed. Joost Dalder. London: A & C Black, 1990.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Methuen, 1982.
- . *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- . *Othello*, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Shirley, James. *The Traitor*, ed. John Stewart Carter. London: Edward Arnold, 1965.
- . *The Cardinal*, ed. E.M. Yearling. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- . *The Doubtful Heir*, ed. Alexander Dyce. *The Dramatic Works and Poems of James Shirley*. London: John Murray, 1833.

¹⁵ The diagnosis of skin was too useful to playwrights to be supplanted by the influx of anatomical imagery. For the impact of anatomy on English Renaissance literature and culture see Sugg. Grabes draws attention to the competition between the old mirror and the new anatomy metaphor and suggests that the latter gradually superseded the former in the seventeenth century (242f.). This is not confirmed by the use of skin references in English Renaissance drama.

- Webster, John. *The White Devil*, ed. Christina Luckyj. London: A & C Black, 1996.
- . *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan. London: A & C Black, 1993.

Secondary Sources

- Beckerman, Bernard. *Shakespeare at the Globe 1599-1609*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.
- Benthien, Claudia. *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*. Trans. Thomas Dunlap. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.
- Bevington, David. *Action is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Biewer, Carolin. *Die Sprache der Liebe in Shakespeares Komödien: Eine Semantik und Pragmatik der Leidenschaft*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2006.
- Bloomfield, Morton W. *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature*. Michigan: State UP, 1967.
- Callaghan, Dymphna. *Shakespeare without Women*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Connor, Steven. *The Book of Skin*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004.
- Curtius, Ernst Robert. *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*. Bern: Francke, 1953.
- Dolan, Frances. "Taking the Pencil out of God's Hand". *PMLA* 108 (1993): 224-239.
- Douglas, Mary. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: The Cresset Press, 1970.
- Drew-Bear, Annette. "Face-Painting in Renaissance Tragedy". *Renaissance Drama* 12 (1981): 71-88.
- Eliot, T.S. "Whispers of Immortality". *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.
- Ferguson, George. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Fleck, Andrew. "The Ambivalent Blush: Figural and Structural Metonymy, Modesty, and *Much Ado about Nothing*". *ANQ: A*

Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews 19.1
(2006): 16-23.

- Goens, Jean and Peter Gheeraert. "Skin Diseases in Shakespeare's Works".
<http://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/sfhd/ecrits/shakes.htm>;
accessed 6 January 2016.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- Grabes, Herbert. *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance*. Trans. Gordon Collier. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Grigsby, Bryon Lee. *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Hall, Kim F. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996.
- Healy, Margaret. *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- . "Bodily Regimen and Fear of the Beast: 'Plausibility' in Renaissance Domestic Tragedy". *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period*. Ed. Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman. Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, 51-73.
- Hopkins, Lisa. "With the Skin Side Inside: The Interiors of *The Duchess of Malfi*". Ed. Corinne S. Abate. *Privacy, Domesticity, and Women in Early Modern England*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, 21-30.
- Iyengar, Sujata. *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2005.
- Karim-Cooper, Farah. *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U P, 2006.
- Olyan, Saul M. *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Pfister, Manfred. "Reading the Body: The Corporeality of Shakespeare's Text". *Reading Plays: Interpretation and Reception*. Ed. Hanna Scolnicov and Peter Holland. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, 110-122.

- Porta, Johannes Baptista. *Die Physiognomie des Menschen* (Lat. De humana physiognomonia Libri 4). Trans. Will Rink. Radebeul/Dresden: Manaas, 1930.
- Shuger, Debora. "The 'I' of the Beholder: Renaissance Mirrors and the Reflective Mind". *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday*. Ed. Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999, 21-41.
- Stevens, Andrea Ria. *Inventions of the Skin: The Painted Body in Early English Drama, 1400-1642*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013.
- Sugg, Richard. *Murder after Death: Literature and Anatomy in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.
- Whiting, Bartlett Jere and Helen Wescott Whiting. *Proverbs, Sentences and Proverbial Phrases: from English Writings Mainly before 1500*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1968.