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Waste Regime

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## THE REALM OF CLOACINA? EXCREMENT IN LONDON'S EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WASTE REGIME

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Human excrement was one of the major waste materials in early modern towns and cities. At a conservative estimate, the average adult in the early modern period produced at least 50 grams of faeces per day; London, with a population of 750,000 by the mid eighteenth century, had to dispose of around 37.5 tons every day.<sup>1</sup>

Given the sheer quantity, it is unsurprising that eighteenth-century London was often imagined as a gigantic sewer. In his poem 'A Description of a City Shower' (1710), Jonathan Swift describes a downpour on London's streets. Instead of cleansing the city, the rain draws all the filth of urban life, including its waste and excrement, from the drains and latrines and into the daylight. By the poem's conclusion, no one can withstand the torrent of city waste: 'Now from all Parts the swelling Kennels flow, / And bear their Trophies with them as they go: / Filth of all Hues and Odours, seem to tell; / What Street they sail'd from, by their Sight and Smell.'<sup>2</sup> In the early eighteenth century, the image of London as a great sewer was highly popular, aided by numerous authors including Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, John Gay, and Samuel Johnson. London was the city of art, culture, and trade, but it was also the stinking realm of the goddess Cloacina.<sup>3</sup>

Trans. by Angela Davies (GHIL). Proofread by Matthew James Appleby.

<sup>1</sup> These calculations are based on Barbara Rouse, 'Nuisance Neighbours and Persistent Polluters: The Urban Code of Behaviour in Late Medieval London', in Andrew Brown and Jan Dumolyn (eds.), *Medieval Urban Culture* (Turnhout, 2017), 75–92. In the following, 'London' refers mainly to the administrative level of the City of London.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Swift, *The Works of J.S., D.D., D.S.P.D.*, 4 vols. (Dublin, 1735), ii. 39–42, at 41–2. For a classic account of this see Brendan O. Hehir, 'Meaning of Swift's "Description of a City Shower"', *English Literary History*, 27/3 (1960), 194–207.

<sup>3</sup> Jens Martin Gurr, 'Worshipping Cloacina in the Eighteenth Century: Functions of Scatology in Swift, Pope, Gay, and Sterne', in Stefan Horlacher, Stefan Glomb, and Lars Heiler (eds.), *Taboo and Transgression in British Literature from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 2010), 117–34.

In terms of methodology, this provides us with an interesting starting point. There is an unclear relationship between the popular contemporary topos of the dirty city and the everyday task of dealing with excrement as urban waste. This question also leads to a conceptual issue. On the one hand, defecation is a fact of life. Humans produce excrement with specific physical and chemical qualities, the disposal of which is an age-old problem of waste and sewage management.<sup>4</sup> On the other, excrement is symbolically charged and associated with taboos and ideas of impurity.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the historiography of excrement tends to emphasize either its material or its symbolic qualities: we find either histories of (mostly urban) sewage management, or of excrement in a scatological context.<sup>6</sup> The intellectual starting point of this article, however, is what this means for an investigation of excrement as part of the urban experience. This draws on the everyday physical circumstances of dealing with human waste, as well as on various symbolic interpretations often conveyed in print media. In other words, how can we bridge the gap between materialistic and cultural historical perspectives – that is, between excrement as matter and as a symbol?<sup>7</sup> In this article, these will not be treated

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Bischof and Wilhelm Hosang, *Abwassertechnik*, 10th edn. (Stuttgart, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), ch. 2: 'Secular Defilement', 30–41. On the symbolic charge of dirt see also Ben Campkin, 'Introduction', in id. and Rosie Cox (eds.), *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination* (London, 2007), 63–7.

<sup>6</sup> This approach has mostly been taken by literary scholars. See e.g. Peter J. Smith (ed.), *Between Two Stools: Scatology and its Representations in English Literature, Chaucer to Swift* (Manchester, 2012); Sophie Gee, *Making Waste: Leftovers and the Eighteenth-Century Imagination* (Princeton, 2010); Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim (eds.), *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art: Studies in Scatology* (Aldershot, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Reckwitz argues for the materialization of the cultural in his 'Die Materialisierung der Kultur', in Friederike Elias et al. (eds.), *Praxeologie: Beiträge zur interdisziplinären Reichweite praxistheoretischer Ansätze in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Berlin, 2014), 13–25. A similar approach is taken by Mark Jenner, 'Sawney's Seat : The Social Imaginary of the London Bog-House c.1660–c.1800', in Rebecca Anne Barr, Sylvie Kleiman-Lafon, and Sophie Vasset (eds.), *Bellies, Bowels and Entrails in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester, 2018), 101–27.

as oppositional but as forming part of urban waste regimes. We will see that excrement was, in fact, both matter and symbol. It was part of everyday experience and a logistical challenge— a marker for the city’s political and social order, as well as for urban coexistence. I will argue that it was as a result of the interplay of these two aspects that a dedicated excremental waste regime was established in London. The city’s waste regime gives us a new perspective on the challenges of urban coexistence in eighteenth-century London.

I will start by examining waste as a concept and introducing the notion of a waste regime. In the second section, I will focus on excrement as a waste product in eighteenth-century London and look at how it was dealt with by London’s waste management infrastructure. The third section will investigate the function of scatology in discourses in the print media. To conclude, I will bring materialistic and cultural aspects together, examining how both formed the basis of London’s excremental waste regime.

### *Excrement, Waste, and Waste Regimes*

We must begin by establishing whether excrement can, in fact, be classified as waste. As always, this depends on the definition. If we define waste following the Basel Convention (1989) as ‘substances or objects which are disposed of or are intended to be disposed of, or are required to be disposed of by the provisions of national law’, then excrement is waste material.<sup>8</sup> The definition of waste is in the eye of the beholder, a fact which also applies in principle to excrement. Waste is defined not by the material and its intrinsic qualities, but by the reasons for and manner of its disposal. From this perspective, waste is primarily a social construct.

This definition, however, lacks a certain conceptual clarity. On the one hand, nothing is waste in and of itself: norms, value attributions, and disposal practices turn certain substances into waste.

<sup>8</sup> Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, Art. 2, Para. 1, at [<https://www.basel.int/Portals/4/Basel%20Convention/docs/text/BaselConventionText-e.pdf>], accessed 15 July 2021.

Yet some materials are more likely than others to become waste. Few substances show this as clearly as excrement, where there is a pressing need for disposal. Waste has a material dimension that cannot be interpreted merely as a social construct. The well-known smell of rotten eggs, given off by the release of hydrogen sulphide (H<sub>2</sub>S) from excrement, generally causes people to take action to remove the smell or its source. Some people may be more sensitive to the smell of human faeces than others, although it generally results in individuals wanting to remove themselves or the material as quickly as possible — more so than a broken plate, for example.

However plausible the notion of a social construct, these are specific waste materials with qualities which impact on our perception of waste and how it should be dealt with.<sup>9</sup> These effects come from the materials themselves; as a result, it may be possible to speak of their ‘agency’. Waste materials are a nuisance; they contaminate or pollute, posing a danger to the environment and to the health of humans and animals. Waste cannot, of course, be considered a conscious and deliberate actor, but looking at waste shows that it may be useful to define the concept of ‘agency’ more broadly. In engagement with Bruno Latour, Vinciane Despret stresses the nuances of the concept of agency: ‘[Agency] . . . appears clearly as the capacity not only to make others do things, but to incite, inspire, or ask them to do things.’<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the focus shifts to what Despret calls ‘inter-agency’. This is not about describing individual actions on the part of things or animals as ‘agency’. Rather, “‘agenting” (as well as “acting”) is a relational verb that connects and articulates narratives (and needs “articulations”), beings of different species, things, and contexts’.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On the relationship between materiality and waste from an archaeological perspective see Daniel Sosna and Lenka Brunclíková, ‘Introduction’, in eid. (eds.), *Archaeologies of Waste: Encounters with the Unwanted* (Oxford, 2017), 1–13.

<sup>10</sup> Vinciane Despret, ‘From Secret Agents to Interagency’, *History and Theory*, 52/4 (2013), 29–44, at 40. An interesting transfer of Despret’s concept of ‘inter-agency’ to various human and non-human actors can be found in Juliane Schiel, Isabelle Schürch, and Aline Steinbrecher, ‘Von Sklaven, Pferden und Hunden: Dialog über den Nutzen aktueller Agency-Debatten für die Sozialgeschichte’, *Schweizerisches Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte*, 32 (2017), 17–48, at 20–2.

<sup>11</sup> Despret, ‘From Secret Agents to Interagency’, 44.

Waste can encourage people to do things or behave in a particular way. At the same time, the contours of interagency between actors and materials are not entirely defined by the materiality of a particular substance, but also by norms, values, and attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

Zsuzsa Gille's term 'waste regime' provides a conceptual framework for this interplay between interagency, values, norms, and practices.<sup>13</sup> She argues that waste is reflected in historically variable 'social patterns of the social nature of waste',<sup>14</sup> which, in turn, are tied to contemporary knowledge systems and, above all, 'social institutions'. 'Social institutions determine what wastes and not just what resources are considered valuable by society, and these institutions regulate the production and distribution of waste in tangible ways.'<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Gille argues that waste should not be seen exclusively as a social construct, but that the agency of materials should also be taken into account as an essential component of waste regimes.<sup>16</sup> As such, a number of factors come into focus—namely, historic specificities, the direct and indirect interplay of materials, actors, and institutions, as well as knowledge systems, perceptions, and normative frameworks.

In the following, I understand a waste regime as a structure shaped by the interplay of various elements. These elements themselves, as well as their interactions, vary historically. At the centre of every waste regime is the material-specific interagency between waste and actors. This may assume quite different contours. In the case of excrement, it may be the smell; in the case of ash, dustiness; and so on. The discursive interpretations and practices that develop out of the specific material-human interagency are also variable; they reflect the specific waste regime tied to that particular material. Whether the

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 40. Similarly Heike Weber, 'Zur Materialität von Müll: Abfall aus stoffgeschichtlicher Perspektive', *Blätter für Technikgeschichte*, 77 (2015), 75–100, at 75. Verena Winiwarter provides a good conceptual overview in her 'Eine kurze Geschichte des Abfalls', *Wissenschaft und Umwelt Interdisziplinär*, 5 (2002), 5–14.

<sup>13</sup> Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington, Ind., 2007), 11–35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Zsuzsa Gille, 'Actor Networks, Modes of Production, and Waste Regimes: Reassembling the Macro-Social', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 42/5 (2010), 1049–64, at 1051.

stench of excrement is perceived 'only' as a nuisance or as a health threat is related to contemporary knowledge systems and social ideas of order.<sup>17</sup> This means that while the interagency is shaped by material qualities, its effects and consequences are culturally specific and highly variable; they produce waste regimes that change in response to specific waste materials. With this, we have a new perspective on the question raised at the beginning of this article—namely, the relationship between excrement as a waste material and as a symbol. Both aspects, although not directly connected, are elements in an excremental waste regime specific to London.

The concept of waste regimes can be used to uncover the mechanisms that allow particular materials, culturally linked with specific institutions, discourses, and practices, to become waste within a certain framework. In addition, it draws our attention to the fact that at different times and in different spaces, there were different regimes for dealing with waste. This makes it possible to conceive of a comparative history of waste in a synchronic and diachronic perspective. With this, a number of key questions arise: what materials were usually seen as waste in a specific setting within a city or a region? What were the contours of the interagency between materials and actors? Which institutions and actors influenced how waste was treated? What practices were associated with specific waste materials, and what norms, values, ideas of order, and systems of knowledge shaped the treatment of waste? Underpinning this article is the idea that a historically specific waste regime emerges only as a result of the specific interplay between these elements. This will be explored in greater detail below, where one waste material—human excrement—will be taken as a case study.

<sup>17</sup> The fact that 'sewer gas' (hydrogen sulphide) not only presented an olfactory problem but could also pose a health risk was discussed in the nineteenth century, when sewers were built and the water closet was introduced more widely. See Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens, OH, 2008), 40–3.

*Excrement as Waste in the City*

Londoners had a number of possibilities when relieving themselves in town or at home.<sup>18</sup> Until the nineteenth century, they typically used a latrine, also known as a privy, jericho, boghouse, necessary house, house of easement, or house of office.<sup>19</sup> Latrines were either in the house or in the backyard and mostly took the form of a simple shed over a bricked-in pit – the so-called cesspool or cesspit, privy midden, or privy vault. Although there had been water closets since the late sixteenth century, until the last third of the eighteenth century these were expensive, custom-built products reserved largely for the nobility.<sup>20</sup> Most of the population used simple latrines or privies. These could be reserved

<sup>18</sup> The best introduction to the topic from a technical history perspective is David J. Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basins: The Story of Domestic Sanitation* (Stroud, 2006), esp. 1–17. On London’s sanitary infrastructure in the Middle Ages see Ernest L. Sabine, ‘City Cleaning in Mediaeval London’, *Speculum*, 12/1 (1937), 19–43; id., ‘Latrines and Cesspools of Mediaeval London’, *Speculum*, 9/3 (1934), 303–21; and Rouse, ‘Nuisance Neighbours’. For the nineteenth century see Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight against Filth* (New Haven, 2014), 46–68. Carole Rawcliffe provides a wider view of English towns in her *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge, 2013), esp. 127–40; see also Dolly Jørgensen, ‘“All Good Rule of the Citee”: Sanitation and Civic Government in England, 1400–1600’, *Journal of Urban History*, 36/3 (2010), 300–15; Leona J. Skelton, *Sanitation in Urban Britain, 1560–1700* (Abingdon, 2016), esp. 27–33; ead., ‘Beadles, Dughills and Noisome Excrements: Regulating the Environment in Seventeenth-Century Carlisle’, *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 9/1 (2014), 44–62; and Richard D. Oram, ‘Waste Management and Peri-Urban Agriculture in the Early Modern Scottish Burgh’, *Agricultural History Review*, 59/1 (2011), 1–17. With a focus on the nineteenth century see Joel A. Tarr, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective* (Akron, OH, 1996); Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, 2000); Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); and Christopher Hamlin, ‘Providence and Putrefaction: Victorian Sanitarians and the Natural Theology of Health and Disease’, *Victorian Studies*, 28/3 (1985), 381–411, at 382–3.

<sup>19</sup> Good overviews are given by Danielle Bobker, *The Closet: the Eighteenth-Century Architecture of Intimacy* (Princeton, 2020), 76–88 and Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basins*, 1–17.

<sup>20</sup> Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basins*, 18–42.

for the use of one household or, when located in the backyard or courtyard, for that of the neighbourhood.<sup>21</sup> Chamber pots were also used. These were available in different shapes and materials, ranging from elaborate porcelain or ceramic models to 'stools of easement' (a padded chair construction with a built-in chamber pot), plain earthenware pots, or simple buckets.<sup>22</sup> Chamber pots were often kept hidden under the bed but could also be used in company. In 1784, François de La Rochefoucauld, a young French nobleman visiting a family in Suffolk, was surprised to find a row of chamber pots lined up on a sideboard. It was common, he wrote, to relieve oneself in company: 'one has no kind of concealment and the practice strikes me as most indecent.'<sup>23</sup>

The contents of a chamber pot were not always disposed of by those who used them. Instead, it traditionally fell to the maid to empty and clean them. The typical maid in London was young, between 15 and 29 years old, and did not come from London, but left her home to work in town for a few years before getting married.<sup>24</sup> Taking the parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields as an example, David A. Kent has shown that keeping a maid was not the exclusive privilege of wealthy families, but widespread among the lower social and economic classes. Labour was cheap: in the middle of the eighteenth century the majority of the female domestic workers in this parish earned less than five pounds a year.<sup>25</sup> One major difference between wealthy and less wealthy households lay in the type of work that was expected of servants. While wealthy households had different staff for different jobs, less well-off houses employed a servant as a maid for all tasks, including emptying the chamber pots. The contents of the pots mostly ended up in the privies.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basins*, 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> François de la Rochefoucauld, *A Frenchman in England, 1784: Being the Mélanges Sur L'Angleterre of François de la Rochefoucauld*, ed. Jean Marchand, trans. S. C. Roberts (Cambridge, 1933), 32.

<sup>24</sup> On this see Peter Earle, 'The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', *Economic History Review*, 42/3 (1989), 328-53, at 333-45.

<sup>25</sup> David A. Kent, 'Ubiquitous but Invisible: Female Domestic Servants in Mid-Eighteenth Century London', *History Workshop Journal*, 28/1 (1989), 111-28, at 118.

As previously mentioned, latrines in backyards or courtyards could be reserved for a single household or for the use of the neighbourhood. Witness testimony to the Central Criminal Court, the Old Bailey, are an excellent source on the history of London's privies; through them, we can see that there was a 'common necessary house' for the convenience of the residents of Old Round-Court on the Strand. Although the majority of residents had a key, the privy was most often left unlocked.<sup>26</sup> There are, however, frequent references to locks and bolts in connection with garden privies in the Old Bailey's proceedings; these suggest that access may have been restricted.<sup>27</sup>

Laura Gowing has shown that alleys, courtyards, and neighbourhoods were to some extent regarded as 'personal territory' in premodern towns and, like thresholds and balconies, were seen as an extension of the domestic sphere.<sup>28</sup> Neighbours therefore paid attention to who was loitering in their courtyards. In 1722, Elizabeth Williams was accused of stealing a brass pot with a lid from the laundry room of a Mrs Hawthorn.<sup>29</sup> When asked by Mrs Hawthorn what she was doing in the courtyard, Williams said she was looking for the necessary house. Phillip Walker, who was accused of stealing some linen in 1717, used the same pretext.<sup>30</sup> Both were acquitted.

<sup>26</sup> 'For the Conveniency of the People that live in Old Round-Court in the Strand, there is a common necessary House; which, tho' most of the Neighbours have a Key to, yet is often left unlock'd.' See Old Bailey Proceedings Online [www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 6.0, 17 Apr. 2011], henceforth OBP, 22 Feb. 1738, trial of Samuel Taylor, John Berry (t17380222-5), accessed 15 July 2021.

<sup>27</sup> On the significance of lockable rooms in the domestic sphere, see Amanda Vickery, 'An Englishman's Home is His Castle? Thresholds, Boundaries and Privacies in the Eighteenth-Century London House', *Past & Present*, 199 (2008), 147-73, at 160-3. On the subject of latrines at the Old Bailey see also Jenner, 'Sawney's Seat', 105-7.

<sup>28</sup> Laura Gowing, "'The freedom of the streets": Women and Social Space, 1560-1640', in Mark S. R. Jenner and Paul Griffiths (eds.), *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester, 2000), 130-51, at 136. On this see Danielle van den Heuvel's excellent overview of the relationship between space, city, and gender in her 'Gender in the Streets of the Premodern City', *Journal of Urban History*, 45/4 (2019), 693-710, esp. 700.

<sup>29</sup> OBP, 5 Dec. 1722, trial of Elizabeth Williams (t17221205-7).

<sup>30</sup> OBP, 27 Feb. 1717, trial of Phillip Walker (t17170227-9).

Looking for the privy was, it seems, an accepted way of legitimizing one's presence in a liminal space like a courtyard.

Of course, Londoners could always relieve themselves on the street or in empty alleyways, although as we will see later, this was regarded by contemporaries as a problem. Visitors and local residents, however, did not have to expose themselves in public. Various 'public' facilities were open to all. There is evidence of endowments for the upkeep of public latrines since the Middle Ages, some of which were enormous.<sup>31</sup> The most impressive was probably Whittington's Longhouse, with 128 seats and separate provision for men and women.<sup>32</sup> Sir John Philipot's Longhouse was supported by a similar endowment. Both latrines were still maintained by the City's wards in the eighteenth century, though with difficulty. For decades, the annual wardmote presentments contained complaints about the ruinous state of the remaining latrines, as well as requests for financial support to provide lighting.<sup>33</sup> These requests routinely fell on deaf ears.

Both because of their condition and their generally secluded locations, public latrines were often seen as sites of immorality. In December 1739, John Hassell from Ludgate Hill complained that the latrines near Fleet Market were regularly visited by 'Whores Rogues and Sodomites', and could therefore hardly be used by shoppers at the market.<sup>34</sup> The necessary houses had been erected on the eastern side of the Fleet Ditch in August 1737 for the benefit of Fleet Market and were criticized soon after their opening. Originally conceived as a unisex facility, directions were given as early as October 1737 for a screen to be built between the seats. As the City Markets Committee considered them indispensable for the market, a sign was put up in response to Hassell's complaint, dividing the privies by sex. Posts were positioned

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 155; Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*, 142-7.

<sup>32</sup> P. E. Jones, 'Whittington's Longhouse: Four Fifteenth Century London Plans', *London Topographical Record*, 23 (1972), 27-34; Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*, 142. On London's public latrines in the Middle Ages see Sabine, 'Latrines and Cesspools'.

<sup>33</sup> See London Metropolitan Archive (henceforth LMA) COL/AD/04/029, Wardmote Presentments Queenhithe, 1730, 1731, 1734, 1735, 1744, 1745, and 1750.

<sup>34</sup> LMA COL/CC/MRK/01/002, Court of Common Council, Markets Committee Journal 1737-1743, fos. 285-6.

so that coaches could no longer stop directly in front of them, making it more difficult to use the latrines for prostitution.<sup>35</sup>

Here we see that there were not only public latrines, run communally and open to all, but that markets, taverns, and theatres also provided similar facilities for visitors. With the zeal of a detective, Michael Burden investigates how opera and theatre audiences relieved themselves in the eighteenth century.<sup>36</sup> This was an important question, given that performances could last for up to six hours. Over the course of the century private facilities were increasingly made available for actors and backstage staff inside the theatre buildings, but members of the audience were obliged to relieve themselves during the interval in common houses of easement surrounding the theatre.<sup>37</sup> Markets and taverns often had privies in the cellar or in the yard, otherwise providing 'pissing posts' to encourage urination in a designated area.<sup>38</sup> Thus Londoners had various places for relieving themselves: the street (though this was seen as problematic at the time); private facilities with restricted access; and public, communally financed ones.

Privies, however, were a temporary store for waste products, as in most cases a visit to the latrine was just the start of a complex cycle of materials.<sup>39</sup> Most toilets were built over cesspits or privy vaults lined with brick walls.<sup>40</sup> These allowed liquids to soak into the ground, while solids collected on the floor of the pit. When the vault

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. fos. 300–1.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Burden, 'Pots, Privies and WCs: Crapping at the Opera in London before 1830', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 23/1–2 (2011), 27–50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 43–4.

<sup>38</sup> Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009), 50.

<sup>39</sup> On the relationship between material cycles and the city, using the example of Paris in the nineteenth century, see Sabine Barles, 'A Metabolic Approach to the City: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Paris', in Bill Luckin, Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, and Dieter Schott (eds.), *Resources of the City: Contributions to an Environmental History of Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 2005), 28–47.

<sup>40</sup> On the construction of these, see Roos van Oosten, 'The Dutch Great Stink: The End of the Cesspit Era in the Pre-Industrial Towns of Leiden and Haarlem', *European Journal of Archaeology*, 19/4 (2016), 704–27.

was full, it had to be emptied out by nightmen.<sup>41</sup> In the worst cases the excrement could form a waterproof film, causing the cesspit to overflow. This is presumably what happened in October 1660 to Samuel Pepys, who provides a great deal of information about toilet issues in general. While visiting his cellar, he stepped into a heap of excrement that had washed out of his neighbour's, with whom he shared a cesspit.<sup>42</sup>

In principle, the removal of household waste was a communal responsibility. In London it was financed by a tax—the so-called 'scavenger rate'.<sup>43</sup> Licences were granted annually to private waste contractors, known as rakers, who employed dustmen.<sup>44</sup> Between two and four times a week, they collected waste from their assigned quarter and took it to one of London's four official waste disposal sites. This infrastructure, however, covered only household waste, excluding both commercial waste and human excrement.<sup>45</sup> Residents

<sup>41</sup> Similar constructions were to be found in Haarlem and Leiden; see Roos van Oosten, 'Nightman's Muck, Gong Farmer's Treasure: Local Differences in the Clearing-Out of Cesspits in the Low Countries, 1600–1900', in Sosna and Brunclíková (eds.), *Archaeologies of Waste*, 41–56, esp. 44–9; and Roos van Oosten and Sanne T. D. Muurling, 'Smelly Business: De clustering en concentratie van vieze en stinkende beroepen in Leiden in 1581', *Holland: Historisch tijdschrift*, 51/3 (2019), 128–32, esp. 129.

<sup>42</sup> '[A]nd going down into my cellar to look I stepped into a great heap of . . . by which I found that Mr. Turner's house of office is full and comes into my cellar, which do trouble me, but I shall have it helped.' *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 20 Oct. 1660 [<https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1660/10/20/>], accessed 15 July 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Sabine, 'City Cleaning', 22; Rosemary Weinstein, 'New Urban Demands in Early Modern London', *Medical History*, 35/S11, *Living and Dying in London* (1991), 29–40, at 30; Mark Jenner, "'Another epocha'? Hartlib, John Lanyon and the Improvement of London in the 1650s', in Mark Greengrass, Michael Leslie, and Timothy Raylor (eds.), *Samuel Hartlib and Universal Reformation: Studies in Intellectual Communication* (Cambridge, 1994), 343–56, at 343–50.

<sup>44</sup> Weinstein, 'New Urban Demands', at 30–1; Brian Maidment, *Dusty Bob: A Cultural History of Dustmen, 1780–1870* (Manchester, 2007), at 1–36.

<sup>45</sup> 'Nor shall any person or persons whatsoever, cast, lay, or leave in any of the said Streets, Lanes, Alleys, common Courts, or Court-yards, any Seacole-ashes, Oyster-shells, bones, horns, tops of Turneps or Carrets, the shells or husks of any Peas or Beans, nor any dead Dogs or Cats,

therefore had to maintain their toilets themselves; they also turned to commercial contractors, the nightmen, who were only allowed to work between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m., hence the name.<sup>46</sup>

Nightmen were specialized entrepreneurs who advertised their trade accordingly. William James from Newington Butts, for example, promised to empty cesspits 'in the most cleanly and expeditious manner, and also at the lowest price'.<sup>47</sup> Charles Harper, by contrast, boasted in 1753 of being the patentholder of 'machines for night-work in general' and presented the advantages of his nightcart in a public demonstration.<sup>48</sup> Lastly, C. Potter publicized his services as a nightman and rubbish-carter in the *Daily Advertiser* in 1783.<sup>49</sup> This shows that nightmen competed with each other and tried to expand their clientele by advertising. The fact that nightmen were also rubbish-carters was by no means unusual and shows that the trade involved logistical challenges. Some specialized in different waste materials that were not covered by the scavenger tax.

Until well into the nineteenth century, nightmen emptied privies at night using simple buckets and carts.<sup>50</sup> The contents of cesspits, known as nightsoil, were usually taken to East London. It is not clear whether there was a single large collection area or several smaller ones. Colloquially, an area between the Thames, Hangman's Acre, and White Chapel Street was known as Turdman's Hole or Turdman's

offall of Beasts, nor any other carion or putrid matter or thing, nor any Ordure or Excrements of Mankind or Beast, nor any manner of Rubbish.' Court of Common Council, *Act of Common-Councell made the eleventh day of September, in the yeare of our Lord 1655. For the better avoiding and prevention of annoyances within the city of London, and liberties of the same* (London, 1655), 7.

<sup>46</sup> 1771, Public Act, 11 George III, c. 29, City of London, 75.

<sup>47</sup> *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 22 June 1780, no. 16025.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Harper, in *Hackney-Road, next door to the wheeler's-shop, near Shoreditch-Church; the first inventor of machines for night-work in general, takes this opportunity to acquaint the publick, as there hath been much fraud committed by nightmen charging three tuns and carrying away but two. Therefore to avoid such impositions I have, note, on each of my carriages, the measure they carry away* (London, 1753?).

<sup>49</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, 10 Aug. 1783, no. 17228.

<sup>50</sup> Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basins*, 12-13. Roos van Oosten describes a similar procedure in the Netherlands, 'Nightman's Muck', 44-5.

Field.<sup>51</sup> ‘Turdman’ was a humorous way of referring to the nightman. In 1797 a ‘nightman ground’ near the ducking pond was rented for twenty-one years in the same area; in May 1733 the *London Evening Post* reported an attack which had taken place on a night field between Ratcliff and Whitechapel.<sup>52</sup>

The area around Whitechapel was located outside the City of London, meaning the stench of the excrement was less problematic for City residents. The area was also used to store other sorts of waste. Turdman’s Field was in the immediate vicinity of one of the official waste disposal sites of the City of London, Mile Green, as well as Whitechapel Mount, an iconic, eighteenth-century rubbish mound. Not only was its location favourable, but the surrounding area was largely agricultural, making it easier to reuse the dung or excrement as fertilizer. Presumably the nightsoil was left on the night field for some time and, having been mixed with other dung and ashes, sold to local farmers as fertilizer.

The transport of human excrement through urban areas was overseen within the City of London by the Commissioners of Sewers.<sup>53</sup> The Commissioners were responsible for cleaning, lighting, and paving the streets of the City, as well as for maintaining its water infrastructure. Issues relating to waste and sewage fell under their jurisdiction. The Commissioners had to ensure that both the residents and waste disposal workers followed the rules. They tried to circumvent complaints by drawing up clear instructions about the times when excrement could be transported through the urban area, as well as places where unloading was not permitted. Under no circumstances could excrement be introduced into the city’s water

<sup>51</sup> ‘Turdman’s Hole’, ‘Tom Turd’s Field’, and ‘Tom Turdman’s Hole’ also appear frequently as locations in the Old Bailey Proceedings, for example: ‘On the King’s Birth-day, which was the Day after my Lord Mayor’s Day, we all went to the House of Mrs. Dick’s in the Back Lane in White-Chappel, going towards Stepney Fields; there we staid drinking till past seven at Night, and then to Tom-Turd-Man’s Hole in White-Chappel Fields, where we saw the Prosecutor coming along’, OBP, 4 Dec. 1734, trial of James Casey, William Beesly (t17341204-10).

<sup>52</sup> LMA M/93/321. *London Evening-Post*, 1–3 May 1733, no. 846.

<sup>53</sup> For an introduction to the history of the Commissioners of Sewers see Weinstein, ‘New Urban Demands’, 29–40.

system; nor could the city's streets or waste depots be used to dispose of excrement. Protecting London's water infrastructure was one of the Commissioners' central concerns, so maintaining and cleaning the city's drains and sewers was one of their main occupations. They took action against illegal latrines whose contents emptied into the city's drains, and prosecuted nightmen who disposed of sewage on the streets or in drains.<sup>54</sup> In 1720, for example, Daniel Bautier was fined one pound for permitting his employees to openly dispose of nightsoil on Bassinghall Street.<sup>55</sup> In 1721, David Meredith from Broadstreet St Giles complained about a nightman who had tipped sewage into the drains, and in 1745 a nightman was cautioned because his employees had not properly secured their cart on the way to Whitechapel Mount, meaning that their load spilled onto the street.<sup>56</sup>

If we look at the circulation of materials associated with excrement from the perspective of the Commissioners, the system functioned well in the main, aside from occasional complaints about illegal dumping of faeces. These occasional complaints, however, raise a methodological problem. Do these individual cases indicate that the system worked, or were they the tip of an iceberg of unrecorded offences?

Leona Skelton interprets complaints about the illegal disposal of excrement in seventeenth-century Edinburgh as an indication of urban ideas of order and the limits of socially accepted behaviour.<sup>57</sup> I would assess complaints made to the Commissioners similarly. Residents and Commissioners were equally sensitive in their reaction to excrement disposed of illegally. While the Commissioners were concerned to protect the City's water infrastructure, residents generally complained if the nightmen disposed of excrement on the streets. Both indicate that this sort of behaviour was not accepted as normal. We must assume, however, that conflict between neighbours about

<sup>54</sup> Similarly Mark Jenner, "'Nauceious and Abominable'? Pollution, Plague, and Poetics in John Gay's *Trivia*", in Clare Brant and Susan E. Whyman (eds.), *Walking the Streets of Eighteenth-Century London: John Gay's 'Trivia' (1716)*, (Oxford, 2009), 90–100, at 93–4.

<sup>55</sup> LMA CLA/006/AD/03/006, 7 Oct. 1720, fo. 95.

<sup>56</sup> LMA CLA/006/AD/03/006, 12 May 1721, fo. 158; CLA/006/AD/03/013, 17 Jan. 1745, fo. 227b.

<sup>57</sup> Skelton, *Sanitation in Urban Britain*, 3.

excrement was usually dealt with at a lower level and probably never recorded.

Against the background of this complex excremental infrastructure, Jonathan Swift's imagination of London as a gigantic sewer, quoted at the beginning of this article, seems at least a little exaggerated. Discourses in the print media should not be taken as an accurate depiction of reality; they must first be examined for what they were – namely, a particular way of talking about excrement. At the same time, they were playing with references to everyday experiences and, in the long run, shaped the way in which excretion in public and in private spaces was perceived. Although there was no direct causal connection between these discourses and specific experiences in everyday life, they created a framework of interpretation within which excrement was rooted. In the long term, the way excrement could be talked about, as well as notions of order associated with faeces, could have had an impact on the way they were dealt with from day to day. As a result, it is important to take excrement seriously both as a practical problem and a discursive phenomenon.

### *Representations in Print Media*

Swift was by no means the only person to imagine London as a sewer.<sup>58</sup> In 1716, John Gay, an acquaintance of Swift's, used the motif of the city as a sewer in his *Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London*. His excremental vision of London was developed over some 1,300 verses and expanded further in the 1720 version. For Gay, London was the realm of the goddess Cloacina 'whose sable streams beneath the City glide'. From a liaison with the scavenger, the street sweeper, she gives birth to both a child and a new class: the poor, born in the filth of the city's drains.<sup>59</sup>

Michael Gassenmeier has shown that literature about London at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century was

<sup>58</sup> Gurr, 'Worshipping Cloacina'; Gee, *Making Waste*, 101–20; Michael Gassenmeier, *Londondichtung als Politik: Texte und Kontexte der 'City Poetry' von der Restauration bis zum Ende der Walpole-Ära* (Tübingen, 1989), 63–93.

<sup>59</sup> John Gay, *Trivia: Or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*. By Mr. Gay, 3rd edn., 3 vols. (London, 1730), ii. 115.

highly politicized. After the Glorious Revolution, he says, there was a flood of Whiggish panegyrics on London, such as *Augustus Triumphans* (1707) by the 'city poet' Elkanah Settle. This is a work in which London was celebrated as the cultural centre of the world—as a city of trade, civilization, and politeness.<sup>60</sup> These themes were picked up by authors such as Swift and Gay, who were close to the Tories, and turned on their heads. London was only superficially a city of culture and civilization, they claimed. It showed its true face in the dirt. Poems such as *Trivia* and 'A Description of a City Shower' should be understood as mock panegyrics in the context of the political upheavals of the early eighteenth century.<sup>61</sup> Excrement was a symbol of the fact that behind London's apparently beautiful appearance and Whiggish city narratives lay an abyss—a Cloaca Maxima. With this in mind, we should perhaps not take these sorts of excremental city descriptions too literally as accounts of actual experience.<sup>62</sup> These eighteenth-century scatological satires by Swift and Gay should be read against the background of a metropolis in a process of change, not least in the wide field of politics.<sup>63</sup>

After the Great Fire of 1666, the City of London was both rebuilt and reimagined.<sup>64</sup> It was intended to become a metropolis where trade flourished—the epitome of English civilization and culture. The dirty old labyrinthine streets, courts, and houses of the Tudor period were replaced by the architectural visions of James Gibbs and Christopher Wren. The free passage of people and goods through the streets, along with paved, clean paths and watercourses, were an important element of this new idea of urbanity.<sup>65</sup>

London was both a myth and a city in transition, growing rapidly. At around 1700 its population was approximately 500,000; by the end of the century, it numbered almost one million.<sup>66</sup> By comparison, the

<sup>60</sup> Gassenmeier, *Londondichtung als Politik*, 202.

<sup>61</sup> How much this was also a commentary on contemporary philosophical discussions of humans as 'rational animals', 'men of sympathy', or 'men of feeling', is shown by Gurr, 'Worshipping Cloacina', 129–30.

<sup>62</sup> Similarly Jenner, 'Nauceious and Abominable', 90.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 94–8.

<sup>64</sup> Jerry White, *A Great and Monstrous Thing: London in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2012), 4.

<sup>65</sup> Jenner, 'Nauceious and Abominable', 97.

<sup>66</sup> White, *A Great and Monstrous Thing*, 3.

second biggest city in England around 1700 was Bristol, with a population of 20,000. As quoted in Sophie Gee, the rubbish produced by premodern cities (ashes, leftover food, slaughterhouse waste, and not least human and animal excrement) was, in Mary Douglas's words, 'matter out of place', and stood out in this gleaming new representation of London even more than it had in previous centuries.<sup>67</sup> With this newly imagined London, the yardsticks by which rubbish and dirt were measured also changed.

This becomes even clearer if we look beyond descriptions of London. Scatological texts were fashionable in the eighteenth century:<sup>68</sup> titles range from 'Meditations on a T[ur]d, Wrote in a Place of Ease' (1726) to the hugely popular 'The Benefit of Farting Explained' (1722).<sup>69</sup> Excrement, though repulsive, sparked a curious interest. Above all, its symbolic power as a link between nature and culture was a source of fascination. Through the medium of excrement, the human condition in general could be addressed. Anyone who spoke about excrement was implicitly also speaking about the relationship between nature and culture, the body and the mind.

Jonathan Swift's poem 'The Lady's Dressing Room' of 1732 is a famous example.<sup>70</sup> The protagonist, Strephon, is in love. Unobserved, he dares to glance into the dressing room of his adored, divine, and pure Celia.<sup>71</sup> What follows is an account of his deep and lasting shock at the extent of the dirt, the evidence of physicality,

<sup>67</sup> Gee, *Making Waste*, 102.

<sup>68</sup> Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2006), 187–8.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Swift, 'The Lady's Dressing Room', in *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1937), iii. 524–30.

<sup>71</sup> The many interpretations of this poem cannot be appropriately stated here. See e.g. Donald T. Siebert, 'Swift's *Fiat Odor*: The Excremental Re-Vision', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 19/1 (1985), 21–38; Norman O. Brown, 'The Excremental Vision', in Robert A. Greenberg and William Bowman Piper (eds.), *The Writings of Jonathan Swift: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York, 1973), 611–30; Douglas Calhoun, 'Swift's The Lady's Dressing Room', *Discourse*, 13/4 (1970), 493–9; Louise K. Barnett, 'The Mysterious Narrator: Another Look at The Lady's Dressing Room', *Concerning Poetry*, 9 (1976), 29–32; and Laura Baudot, 'What Not to Avoid in Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 49/3 (2009), 637–66.

and the stench that he finds there. Strephon's discovery climaxes as he approaches a cabinet, behind whose tidily closed doors Celia's chamber pot awaits him: 'The vapors flew from out the vent, / But Strephon cautious never meant / The bottom of the pan to grope, / And foul his hands in search of Hope.' His expedition into Celia's chamber teaches Strephon the sad truth: 'Oh Celia, Celia, Celia shits!'<sup>72</sup> Like London's elegant facade, female decency, in the end, is only appearance and deception.

The relationship between the body, excreta, and gender in the urban environment was the subject of intense interest in the eighteenth-century print media. Isaac Cruikshank's caricature *Indecency* (1799), in which he depicts a provocatively dressed woman relieving herself in Broadstreet St Giles, is especially telling.<sup>73</sup> The imagery leaves no doubt as to what the woman's profession was. Broadstreet St Giles was notorious at the time for street prostitution; the caricature features a small poster for Dr Leake's pills against venereal disease.<sup>74</sup> The prostitute is using the public space instead of the domestic sphere to relieve herself. She is neither embarrassed nor discreet; instead, she is in open dialogue with the observer: 'what are you staring at?' *The Inside of the Lady's Garden at Vauxhall* is similarly polemical. The women's acts of excretion are contrasted with their external appearance, and here, too, the public sphere, gender, and physicality are linked with frivolity and sexual permissiveness: lying on the floor we see another leaflet for Dr Leake's pills.<sup>75</sup>

Caricatures such as these play with taboos in that, contrary to any notion of female decency, the private business of excretion takes place in a public or semi-public space. Swift's Strephon goes a step further. Even hidden away in a cabinet in the private sphere of a lady's dressing room, female excreta trigger an excremental horror.

<sup>72</sup> Swift, 'The Lady's Dressing Room', 528.

<sup>73</sup> Isaac Cruikshank, *Indecency* / I.Ck., London: S. W. Fores, 16 Apr. 1799, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540, USA [<https://lcn.loc.gov/2003652525>], accessed 15 July 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2004), 70-1.

<sup>75</sup> *The Inside of the Lady's Garden at Vauxhall*, 1788, British Museum, Museum Number 1935,0522.4.37.

From this point of view, however, there seems to be no appropriate place for Celia's excretions. Given all this, the advertisement which T. Clark, nightman and carman, placed in *Parker's General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer* in May 1783 hardly comes as a surprise: he promises to empty latrines with the 'greatest decency'.<sup>76</sup>

During the eighteenth century, more fundamental questions about the relationship between city, body, and mind, as well as the public and the private sphere, were discussed through the theme of excrement. The spectrum of positions taken was wide, ranging from Swift's rather cynical observations about the fundamental corruption of the human body to more balanced considerations of the relationship between nature, culture, and shame. In *A Philosophical Dialogue Concerning Decency* (1751), for example, the anonymous author muses about the relationship between shame, excreta, and decency while on a walk with two companions, Philoprepon and Eutrapelus.<sup>77</sup>

The author's shame at relieving himself by the side of the road—'for I hate to do such things in publick'—provides the starting point for more fundamental reflections about excretions.<sup>78</sup> Are decency and shame in relation to bodily excreta natural or cultural feelings, learned through customs and manners? Eutrapelus is doubtful about the existence of a natural feeling of shame. Otherwise, how could different countries have developed different customs in relation, for example, to sexuality, clothing, and going to the toilet? Whereas women in Holland quite naturally shared latrines with men, English women were embarrassed at this natural process even in the private sphere of the home: 'as if it was in itself shameful to do even in private, what nature absolutely requires at certain seasons to be done.'<sup>79</sup> Given this, he suggests, it is doubtful that we are dealing with a natural decency. Only the search for suitable vessels, he argued, was a natural impulse owing to the stench of faeces: 'because it may be call'd

<sup>76</sup> *Parker's General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, 31 May 1783, no. 2049.

<sup>77</sup> Anon., *A Philosophical Dialogue Concerning Decency. To which is added a critical and historical dissertation on places of retirement for necessary occasions, together with an account of the vessels and utensils in use amongst the ancients, being a lecture read before a society of learned antiquaries / By the author of the Dissertation on barley wine* (London, 1751). On this see also Bobker, *The Closet*, 97–100.

<sup>78</sup> Anon., *A Philosophical Dialogue*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

a natural desire that, what is offensive to ourselves, may be removed, or put at a distance from us.<sup>80</sup>

Philoprepon, by contrast, places the 'toilet' question into a larger context relating to civilization, arguing that there are countries in which women serve up children at feasts, which is equally unnatural and against 'the dictates of nature';<sup>81</sup> 'and therefore such nations have been always esteem'd brutal and savage by others, who were more civiliz'd.'<sup>82</sup> Hence urinating or defecating in public is 'contrary to nature and reason . . . in as much as it is contrary to nature and reason to expose our secret parts in publick view'.<sup>83</sup> Against this background, he draws up a model of how different cultures deal with excrement and places them in a hierarchy of civilization: on the one side there are 'all the polite and well-bred people in the world. On the other side are some barbarous, rude nations, or some contemptible, impudent, unmannerly philosophers.'<sup>84</sup> At the end, the anonymous author tries to find a compromise, suggesting that probably everyone would agree that decency is 'agreeable to nature'.<sup>85</sup> As both Philoprepon and Eutrapelus see the need to dispose of excrement as natural, he closes the topic with a disquisition on latrines and chamber pots in historical perspective.

This dialogue throws light on the relationship between the body, nature, and culture.<sup>86</sup> Here too, the toilet question becomes a question of gender, but unlike Swift and Cruikshank in their caricatures, the anonymous author applies it to men and women equally. Although it starts with the author's shame, the difference between the sexes is emphasized: 'as of the two sexes the female certainly is the more

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> The author is here taking a humorous perspective on a topic that was hotly debated in the eighteenth century—namely, the question of the relationship between nature and civilization. In the eighteenth century 'nature' became a varied and unfocused but fashionable concept used equally by optimists of progress and cultural pessimists. On this see Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Europa im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart, 2000), 176–7. In their scatological satires, Swift and Pope positioned themselves within discussions about the relationship between the body and civilization. On this see Gurr, 'Worshipping Cloacina', 126–9.

proud.<sup>87</sup> The problem of interagency between people and materials is also addressed here in all its complexity. The three protagonists of the *Dialogue Concerning Decency* agree that despite their differences, all cultures have one thing in common: a basic need to dispose of excrement because of the stench. Their opinions differ as to how this is to be done, as well as about the norms, values, and attitudes which are linked to this impulse.

It is not clear whether decency in relation to excretion is an expression of civilization and, as a consequence, of a model of civilizational progress, as Philoprepon claims, or if it is a reflection of cultural diversity, as claimed by Eutrapelus. That decency is 'agreeable to nature' offers a compromise, but the reader is left with the impression that the author agrees with Eutrapelus' doubts as to notions of natural decency.

From a different angle, we find familiar references to shame, disgust, and decency in economic discourses on the use of excrement. In 1758, in his *Compleat Body of Husbandry*, Thomas Hale wrote that human excrement and urine were suitable as fertilizer, though with limits: 'As to its use . . . there is something so distasteful, not to say shocking, in the thought.'<sup>88</sup> The positive qualities of human excreta as fertilizers were contrasted with the disgust of consumers. He notes that while English farmers used them as fertilizer, they tended to keep quiet about it: 'This is a practice every where carry'd on clandestinely, for nobody would care to buy that farmer's corn.'<sup>89</sup> It was not only consumers, he points out, but also the workers who suffered from this sort of fertilizer, because for all its richness, it is 'a filthy one . . . and, of all others, the most offensive to the servants spreading it, as well as the thoughts of those who are fed upon'.<sup>90</sup>

In his first volume of 1758, Hale expressed reservations about excrement, but by the fourth volume of 1759 he was much more forthright about its positive qualities.<sup>91</sup> He explained that fertilizer prepared from excrement in the correct mix did not smell very different from fertilizer derived from animal dung; he added that there was no obstacle

<sup>87</sup> Anon., *A Philosophical Dialogue*, 13.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Hale, *A Compleat Body of Husbandry: Containing, Rules for Performing, in the Most Profitable Manner, the Whole Business of the Farmer and Country Gentleman*, 4 vols. (London, 1758–9), i. 158–9.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* iv. 272–4.

to using it on fruit trees because the type of fertilizer used had no impact on the taste of the food produced. As London generated such huge amounts of potential fertilizer, he went on, it would be wasteful not to use it. Here, too, London is presented as a Cloaca Maxima, but in contrast to Swift and Gay, Hale saw it as a gigantic and under-used reservoir of fertilizer. In the nineteenth century, this argument was taken up mainly by prominent chemists such as Justus Liebig. In Paris, it was put into practice in early industrial plants producing poudrette.<sup>92</sup>

It should be clear by now that excrement was rooted in various political, social, and economic discourses, its connotations depending on location and perspective. The spectrum ranged from poking fun at Whiggish panegyrics on London, to treatises on the relationship between gender and physicality, to the economic potential of excrement. In any case, we have seen that it is unwise to attempt to draw conclusions about actual conditions in London from these discourses. What was the relationship between varying discourses in print media and the everyday experiences of Londoners? In order to answer this question, I will examine both as elements of an excremental waste regime.

### *Early Modern Excremental Waste Regimes*

The interagency between humans and excrement, defined largely by its smell, was at the heart of the excremental waste regime. Excrement was regarded as a foul-smelling nuisance in urban areas. For this reason, various methods were developed to keep contact between people and faeces to a minimum, whether by having maids empty chamber pots regularly or by putting privies in backyards so that the stored excrement was spatially separated from the living areas of the

<sup>92</sup> On this see Erland Mårwald, 'Everything Circulates: Agricultural Chemistry and Recycling Theories in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century', *Environment and History*, 8/1 (2002), 65–84; Christopher Hamlin, 'The City as a Chemical System? The Chemist as Urban Environmental Professional in France and Britain, 1780–1880', *Journal of Urban History*, 33/5 (2007), 702–28; and Barles, 'Metabolic Approach'.

house. At the same time, the stench of excrement evoked both disgust and laughter in the print media.

As a result of this interagency, a specific excremental waste regime was established for London. From an institutional point of view, two features emerged that were typical of how London dealt with waste. First, the establishment of the Commissioners of Sewers in the City of London created an overarching authority responsible for organizing and controlling the circulation of waste in the urban area. Their tasks included, but were not limited to, protecting the city's water and traffic infrastructure from being contaminated with excrement, punishing illegal attempts to dispose of waste, and, finally, ensuring the removal of faeces from the city.

Second, there was a waste economy in the form of the nightmen, who turned a profit by emptying latrines and distributing nightsoil to the surrounding farmers. The nightmen were by no means the only ones to make a profit from waste. By the eighteenth century, London had an elaborate, market-like waste economy which also dealt with other waste materials such as ash. There were many competing waste contractors in London who drew profits from recycling waste in the context of urban material cycles. Ash, for example, could be used to produce fertilizer as well as bricks. The material cycles associated with waste connected London with its hinterland and, especially in the nineteenth century, with other areas of England and the wider world.<sup>93</sup>

In the urban context excrement not only posed a sensory, logistical, and economic challenge, but was also a symbolic marker for a city's ideas of order. Although going to the toilet was an everyday experience, the demographic, political, and architectural changes in the city from the last third of the seventeenth century meant that it was increasingly seen as a problem. This, in turn, was embedded in larger discussions about the relations between nature and culture, the body, gender, and the urban sphere. These discussions were not limited to London, but they were especially intense there. In many respects, the eighteenth century was a period of transition for London.

My intention here is not to construct a direct, causal connection between the discourse in the print media and everyday experience.

<sup>93</sup> As a result, in the nineteenth century, dung barges shipped London nightsoil to farms in Hertfordshire und Hampshire. Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basins*, 13.

New interpretations in print did not simply translate into the lived experience of all city dwellers. The issue of female decency, for example, was discussed mainly in relation to middle-class women. It is not clear whether Anne Wright, a servant who, according to testimony at the Old Bailey in 1726, emptied Mr Martin's chamber pot at 7 a.m. and rinsed it with warm water, was also plagued by feelings of shame.<sup>94</sup> The feminine decency called for in print media was, in the first instance, the decency of the middle-class woman.

How much private space a house had for these activities was not least a question of prosperity.<sup>95</sup> Where several people shared a small room, contact between the sexes and bodily wastes increased. According to her testimony to the Old Bailey in 1740, Ann Vawdrey, who held a social gathering in her room, gave her chamber pot to John Foster without hesitation, and does not seem to have been embarrassed by the presence of a urinating man.<sup>96</sup> If satirical accounts such as Swift's 'The Lady's Dressing Room' and the observations in the *Dialogue Concerning Decency* started a discussion about decency, this did not necessarily have any immediate effects.

The concept of a waste regime allows us to draw links between the spectrum of everyday experience and discourses and ideas of order without, however, assuming a direct causal influence. 'Waste regime' is a descriptive category that helps us to link the multitude of elements that have historically shaped the way waste materials are dealt with and perceived. Depending on the material and its characteristics, a waste regime can take on very different outlines: waste materials can be moist, sticky, dusty, or bulky; they can stink or make people sick. The physical materiality of matter challenges people to behave with it, or towards it, in certain ways. The materiality of waste is, according to Vincianne Despret, the starting point for a specific human-substance interagency, though its shape is historically variable.

This becomes particularly clear when we look at the transformation of London's excremental waste regime in the nineteenth century. Water closets, previously found only rarely on country estates, became

<sup>94</sup> OBP, 26 May 1762, trial of Jane Sibson (t17620526-18).

<sup>95</sup> Van den Heuvel, 'Gender in the Streets', 699.

<sup>96</sup> OBP, 9 July 1740, trial of John Foster (t17400709-32).

a more common urban phenomenon.<sup>97</sup> However, the widespread use of water closets led to an overloading of the established cesspool system and an increased discharge of sewage into the Thames. Ultimately, this resulted in the Great Stink of 1858. The stench of the polluted Thames provided the necessary momentum for long-debated projects involving the construction of a connected sewerage system finally to begin.<sup>98</sup> Simultaneously, knowledge about the health risks of sewage changed in the aftermath of the two great cholera epidemics in the mid nineteenth century. With the construction of sewers in the nineteenth century, new sewage and excrement-related subjects emerged in the public consciousness. In the English media, the dangers of 'sewer gas', toxic hydrogen sulphide, were widely discussed as a new threat. As Michelle Allen shows, at the heart of these debates were not just the potential health or environmental risks of connected sewer systems, but the invisible and excremental link between rich and poor created by sewers: 'The problem with the sewer was that it threatened to erode social distinctions, to thrust everyone into the primordial muck.'<sup>99</sup> As this brief overview shows, the handling and perception of excrement changed on the infrastructural level as well as on the level of practices, social concepts of order, and knowledge systems.

It is apparent that both the perception and handling of waste are shaped by cultural values, codes, and knowledge systems. Accordingly, we must assume a historically variable interagency between people and matter, which in turn provides essential impulses for the formation of a dominant waste regime. This is about the possibility of describing and relating different elements that shape the handling of waste materials from a historical perspective. This perspective has two advantages: on the one hand, the study of waste regimes allows for a comparative view of waste in both a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. It enables us to examine similarities and differences in the way waste is dealt with at different times and in different regions. Secondly, due to the variety of elements associated with waste regimes, they offer a unique view on the dynamics of urban coexistence. From this perspective, waste can serve as an exploratory tool to approach

<sup>97</sup> Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basins*, 115–37.

<sup>98</sup> Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 69–104.

<sup>99</sup> Allen, *Cleansing the City*, 40.

the challenges and problems of everyday life in the city. The investigation of urban excremental waste regimes not only provides a new historical perspective on excrement and defecation as basic conditions of human life, but can also serve as a way of approaching the conditions governing human coexistence in urban settings.

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