

The Bodily Fluids Forum: Introduction

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[FIGURE ONE]

This Forum—based on papers given at the ‘Blood, Sweat, and Tears: Bodily Fluids in the Long Nineteenth Century’ conference (Aston University, July 2018)—is dedicated to exploring the taboo nature of bodily secretions in the literature and culture of the period.ⁱ

Although **most** human fluids are infrequently depicted in Victorian art and literature (and are often only obliquely alluded to when they *are* discussed), it does not necessarily follow that the much-maligned Victorians were actually as prim about bodies and their functions as Michel Foucault would have us believe. Significant critical work in recent decades has chipped away at claims of prudery, while the hyperrealism of twenty-first-century Neo-Victorianism has reintegrated the filth and corporeality that was successfully expunged from many glossy mid-twentieth-century adaptations and works.ⁱⁱ

The organisation of this conference, however, reinforced its necessity: the mature, academic dispassion we *thought* we would possess could not fully override the deep-seated embarrassment we felt in promoting such an event. To link one’s name publically and professionally to processes that are best left private caused us to question not only how the Victorians thought about issues of privacy and the body, but whether this shame, felt in 2018, was connected to the Victorian era at all. Was this notion of taboo just a prevalent misunderstanding generated by twentieth-century academics and artists? Was it a genuine remnant of the nineteenth century, which saw shifting mores regarding the privacy of the home and body as part of the rise of the middle classes? Or is it a human constant, reappearing in different palimpsestic manifestations since the ancient—or even prehistoric—

Commented [Author1]: I suggest a cut- are there exceptions to this?

Commented [BA2R1]: Yes, I think tears and blood are very well documented, and you could make a case for sweat.

world? The more we considered our own contemporary squeamishness, the more ambiguous its provenance became.

[FIGURE TWO]

What follows it is an exploration of bodily fluids—some discrete, some overlapping—in a variety of contexts, and of how these fluids were understood and portrayed in Western (largely British) culture, art, and science of the long nineteenth century. Where possible, historical context is given that extends beyond the long nineteenth century: to engage with notions of the taboo (if these notions may even be accurately applied) is to recognise that they did not form in a vacuum. The specifically nineteenth-century conceptions of and responses to bodily fluids were frequently centuries or even millennia in the making, and were often formed far beyond the confines of the individual or even collective human body.

The following essays—which range from the tears of bourgeois readers to the portrayal of the ‘prolactarian’ wet-nurse, from spiritualist ectoplasm to syphilitic incontinence—show that the denizens of the long nineteenth century certainly had more nuanced reactions to and engagements with their physical emanations than they are often given credit for: their responses were often dependent on which fluid was being discussed, in what context, in which media, and by whom. The conditionality of such discussion makes it difficult to know (beyond what is preserved in writing, of which there is relatively little) what the tenor of the general public’s opinion was, assuming public opinion was any more cohesive than it is today. This topic is paradoxical: intimate yet universal, related to basic human functions but also the locus of whole systems of infrastructure, behaviour, manners, and signification – it is as if the taboo status of bodily fluids derives more from their analytical potential than from any simple sense of squeamishness.

ⁱ We would like to thank the four funders who enabled us to hold the event: the British Association of Victorian Studies, the British Association of Romantic Studies, Aston University's Centre for Critical Inquiry into Society and Culture, and the Centre for Language Research at Aston.

ⁱⁱ To name just a few, defecation and sexual fluids appear in excess in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and its 2010 BBC adaptation; Charles Dickens is depicted urinating extravagantly in the film *The Invisible Woman* (2013); menstruation and the aftermath of abortion are shown frankly in the 2017 miniseries adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*; gratuitous seasickness appears in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003); various medical and sexual effluvia appear in the hospital-based *The Knick* (2014-15) and in the police procedural *Ripper Street* (2012-16); and blood, sweat, and spittle inundate such works as *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Beguiled* (2017), *Cold Mountain* (2003), and *Mr Turner* (2014).