Chapter 1

The Disgusting Cardinal Thomas Wolsey

In 1544 the Flemish painter Cornelis Metsys produced an engraving of King Henry VIII, a man with three more years to live.¹ (See the front cover of this book.) In the image, a modern commentator observes, the king’s appearance is “ravaged by a combination of overindulgence, disease, and ever-increasing suspicion of those around him”; this Henry resembles an old toad, perched with “shoulders hunched, his face bloated, his mouth pinched, and his wary eyes reduced to mere slits.”² The king of Metsys’s portrait—and the king immortalized in history—bears little physical resemblance to the youthful Henry, whose beauty was sung in the courts of foreign princes:

And first of all, his Majesty is twenty-nine years old, and extremely handsome; nature could not have done more for him; he is much handsomer than any other sovereign in Christendom, a great deal handsomer than the King of France; very fair, and his whole frame admirably proportioned.³

Henry remained the stud of Christendom for the first half of his reign—a role more widely acknowledged of late, thanks not only to the work of historians like David Starkey, but also to Jonathan Rhys Meyers’s portrayal of the king in Showtime’s popular television series The Tudors (2007–2010).⁴ But Henry’s reign would have a second half, and age would not prove kind to him within it. At about the time of his infamous break with Rome, the king first complained of the “sore legge” that would increasingly plague his life; when this ulcerated wound clogged in 1538, Henry was found “without speaking, black in the face, and in great danger,” and when the same occurred three years later, he was again “really thought to be in danger.”⁵ Though the king’s mobility was severely limited, his appetite did not follow suit, and he soon swelled to infamous proportions. His condition in the final years is perhaps best indicated by an entry in
the postmortem inventory of the royal household: “Twoo Cheyres called trauewes” had been commissioned for the ailing Henry, “for the kings Majestie to sitt in to be carried to and fro in his galleries and Chambres.”

The mighty King Henry VIII—who once, “placing his hand on his thigh,” had boasted to an Italian diplomat of what “a good calf” he had—spent his last days being “moved by engines and art rather than by nature,” the same leg unable to hoist his decaying body. Time, we know, ravages all, but Henry went less gracefully than most, and did so far more publicly.

But even back in Henry’s younger days, when the lusty king kept his vigor with a steady diet of hunting, harping, and hawking, his court was still home to—and indeed dominated by—an “unwieldy hulk of corrupted flesh bearing perilously [a] supple, powerful brain, a demoniac incandescence of ambition and pride driving and lighting from within the bloating, rotting body.” This is how Garrett Mattingly assessed the life and career of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, the lord chancellor and papal legate whose meteoric rise starting in 1509 was capped by an equally spectacular fall in 1529. During the years of his ascendancy, Wolsey extended his reach into virtually every facet of English monarchical politics—a political mastery that was not unnoticed by contemporaries, for whom he eventually assumed the qualities of alter rex ("other king"). Having little of his father’s taste for bureaucratic tasks, the young King Henry left much of his realm’s daily operation to Wolsey, whose control of the Great Seal ensured that his own court at Hampton was in many ways an unmatched administrative and political center.

Nearly a century after his death, it is Wolsey who plays the villain role in Shakespeare’s King Henry VIII, a domineering royal minister whose arrogance and treachery pervade the first half of the play. (“The devil speed him!” exclaims his chief adversary, Edward, Duke of Buckingham, “No man’s pie is freed / From his ambitious finger.”) But Shakespeare’s depiction of a churlish, self-interested cardinal emerges from a pool of anti-Wolsey sentiment that had festered in England for nearly a century—and that has, despite some recent revisionist efforts, largely shaped the subsequent historical tradition. I begin my study of emotion in the Tudor court by considering one aspect of how this reputation was generated: the portrayal of Wolsey in Henrician literary culture. Ripe with images of gluttony and disease, contemporary satires of Wolsey—such as John Skelton’s Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?, William Roy and Jerome Barlowe’s Rede Me and Be Nott Wrothe, and a variety of anti-Wolsey ballads—are underwritten by the affective energy of disgust, a visceral response through which the cardinal is cast as a physical and spiritual contaminant, dangerously infecting both King Henry and his realm.
In this chapter, I suggest that the dynamics of disgust, as articulated by modern researchers in the humanities and sciences, can help us situate Wolsey’s place in the Henrician imagination. As the governor of ingestion and rejection, disgust is a key force in the emotional arsenal that was fielded against Wolsey; as we will see, contemporary attacks insistently invoke the rhetoric of disgust in their attempts to discredit the cardinal and his political influence. Furthermore, this sentiment of disgust ultimately guides the terms of Wolsey’s ruin: despite his profound role in shaping the first half of Henry’s reign—in which he is so fully incorporated into the body politic that he is often indistinguishable from the king—the cardinal is finally imagined as a sickness of the res publica, a disease that is only cured by purging him from the symbolic body of the court.

“From the Donge Carte”: The Rise of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey

“Cardynall wolsey,” so writes George Cavendish, the cardinal’s former gentleman usher and contemporary biographer, “was an honest poore mans Sonne borne in Ipsewiche with in the Countie of Suffolk.” Though few imagined that a butcher’s son would grow to become the most formidable subject in England, Wolsey apparently showed a remarkable early promise: in 1486 he took his B.A. from Oxford at just fifteen years old, earning him the famous moniker “boy bachelor.” As he continued his studies, he advanced to fellow and eventually dean of his alma mater, Magdalen College; he then turned his attention to an ecclesiastical career, taking his first benefice in 1500 at Limington and gradually acquiring more over the next decade. After securing a position as royal chaplain to Henry VII (and aligning himself with Richard Fox, Bishop of Winchester), Wolsey made his ventures into the political realm, embarking on notable ambassadorial journeys to the Low Countries and Scotland in 1508.

At the death of Henry VII, Wolsey was named almoner to the new king; by 1511, he was a fixture in Henry VIII’s council, starting the rise to power that would see, by the end of 1515, the butcher’s son named archbishop of York, cardinal, and lord chancellor. As Cavendish records, King Henry, who lacked his father’s passion for bureaucracy, soon granted his cardinal the daily operation of the realm:

[Wolsey was happy] to disborden the kyng of so waytie a charge & troblesome busynes, puttyng the kyng in Comfort that he shall not
nede to spare any tyme of his pleasure for any busynes that shold necessary happen in the Councell as long as he beyng there hauyng the kynges auctorytie & commaundemenent, doughted not to se all thynges sufficiently furnysshed & perfected.\textsuperscript{14}

Wolsey gradually installed himself as head minister and proxy to the king, displacing the de facto series of conciliar checks that had developed in the first years of the new reign.\textsuperscript{15}

The cardinal’s career enjoyed another crescendo in 1518: after a series of maneuverings, he was named papal legate \textit{a latere}, making him England’s foremost ecclesiastical authority.\textsuperscript{16} That year Wolsey also secured his greatest diplomatic coup to date: the Treaty of London, a pact in which Europe’s leading political players agreed to cease (at least temporarily) the nationalist conflicts that had for the last decade fractured the Christian world. Though Henry received nominal credit for the proceedings, Wolsey was widely acknowledged as the true architect; in the flattering words of Erasmus, it was the cardinal who “cemented with such close-knit treaties that peace which all the greatest monarchs had long desired.”\textsuperscript{17}

Over the next decade, Wolsey would continue to guide English policy—especially as it concerned the ever-warring powers in Europe, whose enthusiasm for peace quickly waned. England forged ties first with Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1521) before defecting to his rival Francis I of France (1525); with such flexible commitments, the cardinal hoped to keep Henry a player on the international scene, while blocking either of the superpowers from achieving real supremacy. At the same time, Wolsey was occupied with tending fires at home (such as widespread resentment of the levies that funded his foreign endeavors), and soon enough, matters foreign and domestic became perilously entwined, in a thread that would unravel the very fabric of Henrician court and culture.

That’s because sometime in the middle of the 1520s, King Henry had become enamored with a woman named Anne Boleyn.\textsuperscript{18} It is difficult to assess Wolsey’s initial role in the infamous scheme that soon unfolded; some contemporaries saw “the Cardinal as the cause . . . of the intended divorce,” while Cavendish claims that Wolsey made “perswasion to the contrarie . . . vppon his knees” after learning of Henry’s plan to separate from Catherine of Aragon.\textsuperscript{19} Reluctant or not, however, the cardinal was to orchestrate this mission, and it was an inability to secure his master’s wish that ultimately secured his own downfall. It does seem that he tried in earnest: Wolsey and his agents spent months canvassing possible grounds for the separation, and in May 1527 he convened a secret, exploratory trial at Westminster to adjudge the validity of the king’s
current marriage to Queen Catherine. (The famous point of contention concerned the young Catherine’s prior marriage to Prince Arthur Tudor, King Henry’s deceased older brother.) After initial arguments, on both the spiritual legality of the match and the validity of the papal bull that dispensed it, it became clear that Wolsey and Henry would have to look to Rome for satisfaction.

But conflict between Francis and Charles continued to ravage Europe, making it rather untimely for Pope Clement VII, caught in the cross-fire, to pass judgment on so realm-shaking a matter. (To make matters worse, Queen Catherine was aunt to Charles V, whose imperial troops had seized Rome in the spring of 1527 and taken the pope into custody.) In 1528 the pope would eventually order Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggio to London, ostensibly armed with a commission to try the case within England—but Clement had no intention of allowing a judgment there, preferring instead that proceedings unfold within his own jurisdiction in Rome. After months of further legal maneuverings, the trial was finally convened at Blackfriars in May 1529; Campeggio successfully stalled the operation, leaving no choice but to nullify the current action and reconvene in Rome. Wolsey’s fate, it is often said, was sealed at this moment.

I will save the climax of the story for later in the chapter, as it belongs to a different, final phase of Wolsey’s career. The cardinal’s time at the top of fortune’s wheel was much longer than that at the bottom, and it was during his long ascendancy that he provoked the ire of so many of Henry’s subjects, both noble and common—including those with sharp tongues and sharp pens.

In the decade preceding his downfall and death, the cardinal was a subject of considerable literary interest, figuring in a robust corpus of surviving satires and slanders. Collectively, these texts have been largely ignored by modern scholars, despite their tempting position at an intersection of literary and cultural concerns.

Writing Wolsey

The best known of the anti-Wolsey poems flow from the pen of John Skelton, tutor to Henry VIII and self-styled poet laureate of the English realm. Though he may have first assailed the cardinal in the allegorical interlude Magnyfycence (c. 1516–19)—in which a king is corrupted by his courtly minions—Skelton is most remembered for a trilogy of explicit poetic attacks against the cardinal in the early 1520s, setting much of the satirical agenda that would subsequently define sixteenth-century anti-Wolsey slander. The first salvo was the infamously opaque Speke,
Parott, a virtuoso performance that embeds a critique of Wolsey within a tapestry of linguistic fragments; often regarded as a masterpiece of Skelton’s canon, the poem lampoons the cardinal on a variety of grounds, including his usurpation of royal authority and his lavish expenditures. Wolsey equally figures in Skelton’s Collyn Clout, a descendant of medieval ecclesiastical satire; here, the cardinal epitomizes clerical negligence, an unchecked tyrant whose oppressive policies have left the commonwealth both spiritually and financially bankrupt. Finally, Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? is perhaps the most direct of Skelton’s attacks; framed as a warning to the English nobility, the poem records the degradation of court culture under the base-born cardinal’s malevolent influence. Taken together, these three poems entail a major assault on Wolsey’s personal and political character—and as we will see, they do so in a surprisingly consistent affective mode.

In addition to Skelton’s well-known corpus, attacks on Wolsey appear elsewhere in the records of Henrician literature. George Cavendish, Wolsey’s biographer, also penned a lesser-known poetic treatment of the cardinal; as part of his de casibus cycle of Henrician worthies, he conjures Wolsey’s doleful ghost, who laments the ruthless ambition that brought about his ruin. Equally interesting is what may be called the populist tradition of anti-Wolsey poems. At least two anonymous ballads denounce the cardinal’s ruinous authority; “Of the Cardnall Wolse” (c. 1521) is cast as a direct complaint to King Henry himself, while “An Impeachment of Wolsey” (c. 1528) develops the cardinal’s unfavorable comparison with Thomas Becket into a prophecy of Wolsey’s inevitable fall. At the other end of the social spectrum is the anonymous courtly interlude Godly Queene Hester—a hybrid-morality drama that, in the spirit of Skelton’s Magnyfycence, attacks Wolsey directly in the guise of the treacherous advisor Aman.

But perhaps the most elaborate anti-Wolsey invective is Rede Me and Be Nott Wrothe, a nearly 4,000-line salvo composed by the Lutheran exiles William Roy and Jerome Barlowe. Writing from Strassburg in 1527, the authors leave little unscathed in their treatment of England’s spiritual shortcomings; as the realm’s premier churchman, Wolsey is accordingly blasted throughout as the quintessential example of ecclesiastical corruption. This satire is most notable for its intricate paratextual structure: the complete edition consists of (1) a mock-display of Wolsey’s coat of arms, explicated in the accompanying stanzas; (2) a series of fictionalized letters between two would-be readers of the text, designed to obscure the poem’s true origin; (3) a prefatory dialogue between the author and the book, in which the personified text fears reprisal for its contents; (4)
an ironic lamentation, in which a Catholic clergyman mourns the recent
death of the Mass; and (5) finally, the main satire itself, a two-part dia-
logue on all matters religious by a pair of simple serving men. This long,
demanding text—smuggled secretly into England, to the ire of Wolsey
and his agents—suggests again how easily the cardinal could serve as a
flashpoint for extensive religious critique.

Such works comprise a dispersed, yet surprisingly consistent rejoinder
to Wolsey’s stranglehold on Henrician politics. United in their appar-
tent disdain for the low-bred, ambitious cardinal, they inevitably return
to Wolsey’s unseemly place in the contemporary political scene: he is
painted as a base usurper, slowly poisoning the commonwealth with his
unchecked, unmatched power. As such, I argue that these poetic satires
and slanders are ultimately animated by a core response of disgust, the
affective mode that dominated literary reaction to what might be called
the “Wolsey crisis.” Disgust, to be sure, is often central to the generic oper-
ation of satire—which has, in the tradition of the ancients, long deployed
scatological tropes in efforts to purge social ills. (Indeed, in emphasizing
the connection between bodily and moral revulsion, modern scientific
treatments of disgust offer much to elucidate the general psychological
underpinnings of satiric conventionality.) But literary disgust for Wolsey, I
suggest, cannot be satisfactorily attributed to mere convention: given the
cardinal’s place in the Henrician social order, we will see how the emotion
proves especially apt for denouncing Wolsey’s precise role as a noxious,
foreign body infecting the English court. First, however, we must pause to
consider what it means to be repulsed.

A Brief History of Disgust

Nowhere do the Henrician satirists employ the term “disgust,” a word
that began its career in the English language at approximately the same
time that Shakespeare was starting his as a playwright. Yet there is little
doubt that the sentiment of disgust, as we would now describe it, was
richly featured in early modern life, and the basic condition that evokes
it—“matter out of place,” in anthropologist Mary Douglas’s memorable
phrase—was of obvious interest to a culture so invested in the manage-
ment of social, political, and spiritual hierarchies.

Since Darwin’s pioneering work on emotional expression, disgust
has been considered a core emotion of human experience; disgust elici-
tors in a cross-cultural context reliably predict a stereotypical set of
responses, including facial behavior, physiological changes, and
Yet disgust has long been an undertheorized emotion, and has become subject to serious investigation only in the last several decades. Since then, new contributions to the literature on disgust have been published every year, and the emotion has occasioned several recent full-length treatments indebted to theories from both the sciences and humanities. At its core, disgust is an emotion about food—or, to be more precise, spoiled food. It is an emotion about vomit, about nausea, about noxious, putrid smells; it is about how we know what we can eat, and how we know what we cannot. In evolutionary terms, natural selection obviously favored those organisms with higher avoidance tendencies toward spoiled or rotten food, and it’s likely that this safeguard was internalized into the disgust response during the long process of human development. In fact, disgust’s basic, biological response is so integrated into human adaptive behavior that some theorists question whether it is an emotion at all—it might be closer, they suggest, to a motivational state like thirst or hunger.

Food and its rejection have long been recognized as central to the operation of the disgust response, since Darwin’s initial investigation in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. In the early twentieth century, A. Angyal confirmed that fear of “oral incorporation” was disgust’s fundamental motivation, and in subsequent decades researchers have largely agreed that the primary domain of disgust was the mouth, the site of both ingestion and vomit. In a foundational article of modern research, Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon offer a concise definition of “disgust as a food-related emotion”: the feeling of disgust, they suggest, entails “revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object. The offensive objects are contaminants; that is, if they even briefly contact an acceptable food, they tend to render that food unacceptable.” As subsequent research has confirmed, food-aversion behavior seems the fundamental component of disgust’s physiological response, which includes, most centrally, the induction of nausea. The emotion is, in other words, the “guardian of the mouth”—that which crucially prevents us from incorporating infectious or dangerous substances.

Yet disgust is also an emotion about much more than food: it is an emotion about blood, about pus, about excrement, about wounds, about corpses. Despite the theoretical foundation outlined above, it is clear that issues of oral incorporation alone cannot account fully for the phenomenology of disgust, which occurs in many circumstances that have little to do with food or orality. Accordingly, investigators have located a variety of domains in which disgust triggers can be identified, radiating outward...
from the emotion’s origins as an oral defense. Unsurprisingly, many of these domains continue to constellate around the issue of contamination, but the conceptualization of this contamination becomes increasingly abstract as we travel further out on the spectrum from disgust’s original purview. In an influential essay, Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley, and Paul Rozin introduced the “Disgust Scale,” an articulation of the emotion’s forms across a series of discrete domains.⁴⁹ Their research suggests that disgust elicitors can be broadly categorized into two tiers. The first set, elicitors of core disgust, attends to the emotion’s origins in orality: when we are disgusted by food, bodily products, or animals (particularly organisms associated with food or excrement, such as maggots, cockroaches, or rats), we are experiencing a visceral, somatic warning against oral incorporation. In evolutionary terms, these foundational elicitors originate as an oral prophylactic for a “species living with the constant threat of microbial contamination.”⁵⁰

Alternately, the second set of disgust elicitors has little to do with orality. In a process of cultural evolution, core disgust seems to have enlarged its purview, adapting to regulate matters of sex, hygiene, the body envelope (i.e., the physical integrity of the human body), and death. These domains, the researchers suggest, have in common their ability to remind human beings of their fundamentally animal origins—and as such, this category of animal-reminder disgust serves an important cultural function, as a “defensive emotion that guards us against the recognition of our animality.” They continue:

Humans cannot escape the evidence of their animal nature. In every society people must eat, excrete, and have sex. They bleed when cut, and ultimately they die and decompose. We propose that most cultures have found ways to “humanize” these activities, through rituals, customs, and taboos that serve to differentiate humans from animals. People who violate their local food and sex taboos risk being shunned and reviled by their peers, and in many cultures they are labeled as “animals.”

Because of the human need to distinguish ourselves from mere animals—to insist that our lives have a higher meaning, and perhaps even extend beyond death—we have evolved an emotional mechanism that discourages us from engaging that in the world which suggests the opposite.⁵¹

To be sure, the disgust domains outlined here are not exhaustive; in their recent revision of the disgust scale, Bunmi O. Olatunji and colleagues have suggested adding contamination as a third category of
disgust elicitors, while other researchers have advanced an entirely different taxonomy, around the categories of *pathogen avoidance, mate choice,* and *social interaction.* But the consensus is that disgust is an emotion of avoidance, by which we attempt to limit our exposure to those objects that may endanger us, either with the physical threat of illness or with the existential threat of confronting our own material nature. Taken wholly, this entails the basic notion of “pure disgust,” the feeling of disgust “devoid of moral connotations.”

But more challenging, and more pertinent to our analysis of literature, history, and culture, are the instances in which disgust seems occasioned by violations of the *moral* order—or does, at least, according to ordinary language. Some researchers have claimed that the lay sense of “moral” disgust is, strictly speaking, a linguistic slippage: that is, when we claim to be disgusted by an act of racism, for example, we are really just mislabeling the experience of anger. Yet there is compelling evidence that suggests the deep connection between the visceral, embodied experience of pure disgust and the so-called disgust that is elicited by sociomoral transgressions. While the elicitors of this sociomoral disgust are shaped by culturally specific variation, the semantic congruence of disgust’s visceral and sociomoral forms occurs across a wide linguistic range: we can point to examples from the Indo-European, Afroasiatic, and Sino-Tibetan language families in which a single word signifies both eruptions of the stomach and eruptions of the social order. As the guardian of social contamination, sociomoral disgust is a culturally inflected elaboration of core disgust’s biological purview.

In her groundbreaking study of purity regulations, Douglas tentatively explored “the relations between pollution and morals”—but it is the modern research tradition that fully articulates the deep linkage between visceral and moral disgust, and it is this tradition that helps to account for their dual operation in anti-Wolsey satire. That sociomoral infractions elicit a genuine disgust response—sometimes called the “moral dyspepsia” thesis—has received ample substantiation in the laboratory setting. The recent work of Gary D. Sherman and his colleagues reveals that viewing morally offensive images predicts the same somato-visceral responses typically associated with food-based, core disgust. That morally objectionable content should elicit the tightening of the throat and queasiness in the chest and stomach—involuntary behaviors poised to block the ingestion of offensive food, and, if necessary, expel it—suggests the deep continuity between the biological origins of disgust and its culturally conditioned adaptations. The hypothesis is further substantiated by Edward B. Royzman and his colleagues, who find that laboratory subjects
asked to imagine an act of consensual sibling incest still experience a state of “oral inhibition,” consisting of nausea, gagging, and diminishing of the appetite.\textsuperscript{62} That the orality of the disgust response adheres in such moral examples suggests that these emotional elaborations are mapped across a spectrum. To this point, neurological research indicates that both pure and moralized disgust responses are underpinned by a similar anatomical architecture: functional MRI reveals that both domains “recruited remarkably overlapping neural substrates” in the medial and lateral orbitofrontal cortex.\textsuperscript{63}

The evidence, it follows, suggests that humans have evolved a “primary” disgust system as a biological safeguard, which became elaborated in a set of culturally and historically determined “complex” forms.\textsuperscript{64} In its complex form, moral disgust guards not the human body, but the human soul: it is that which involves “the protection of the self as a spiritual entity from degrading and polluting influences,” as articulated within a particular cultural context.\textsuperscript{65} Charged with “the protection of the soul or the world from degradation and spiritual defilement,” moral disgust thus keeps vigil over “regulative concepts such as sacred order, natural order, tradition, sanctity, sin, and pollution,” just as disgust in its core form stands watch over the literal violation of our material self.\textsuperscript{66} The transition from disgust’s role as guardian of the body to guardian of sociomoral conventions seems to be an example of what evolutionary theorists call “exaptation,” the process by which an organism’s fitness is enhanced by features serving a purpose other than that for which they were evolutionarily built.\textsuperscript{67} In its primary form, the emotion of disgust helps us determine what sorts of (material) things we should allow within our physical body; in its extended, culturally elaborated form, it helps social groups collectively determine what sort of (behavioral) things should be allowed within their symbolic body. Or, as Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues aptly put it: disgust, having “evolved to help our omnivorous species figure out what to eat in the physical world, now helps our social species figure out what to do in the cultural world.”\textsuperscript{68}

Unsurprisingly, then, disgust is an emotion particularly implicated in the production of automatic, affective moral judgment. In fact, we can even go so far, as has been recently argued, to label the response of disgust as an “embodied moral judgment”: there is a “causal relationship between feelings of physical disgust and moral condemnation,” and the emotion’s visceral activation makes it particularly suited to influence cognitive processes.\textsuperscript{69} This connection has been confirmed in the laboratory, where individuals who have been primed with disgust elicitors have been shown to appraise moral situations more severely.\textsuperscript{70} This is not at all, of
course, to imply that disgust *ought* to be a criterion of moral assessment; the interaction of politics, morality, and disgust is incredibly fraught, as evidenced by any number of contemporary debates in the public sphere, and there is no doubt that the rhetoric of disgust has been routinely invoked to justify any number of discriminatory and dehumanizing practices, such as prohibitions against miscegenation or same-sex marriage. And dehumanizing is indeed a key term, because “disgust in humans serves as an ethnic or outgroup marker” that establishes “a social bond or attraction that distinguishes the ingroup from outgroups”—a distinction, in its most extreme iteration, that leads to the denial of interiority, subjectivity, and sociality to the target subject or outgroup. “When people fail to take the perspective of dehumanized targets,” it has been suggested, “they feel disgust, a strictly negative emotion often linked to perceived moral violations and subsequent aggressive responses”—and indeed, these dehumanized targets elicit activity in neural structures associated with disgust (the insula and amygdala), but *not* in the medial prefrontal cortex, the “brain region reliably implicated in mentalizing and social cognition.” In other words, the dehumanized disgust target does not register as worthy (or perhaps even possible) of social intercourse. This is hardly pleasant stuff—but current thinking suggests that, whether we like it or not, the moral politics of disgust is an issue with which we must contend, as did those in the early modern period.

The term “disgust”—a cognate of the Italian *disgusto* and French *dés-goust*, derived ultimately from the Latin *gustus* (taste)—came into the English language at the close of the sixteenth century; the earliest printed appearance that I’ve located occurs in John Florio’s Italian dictionary *A Worlde of Words* (1598). Florio’s translation reveals the semantic congruence of disgust’s visceral and sociomoral forms: the Italian *disgusto/*sgusto is rendered with the English cluster “disgust, distast, vnkindnes, dislike.” This dual usage is confirmed in Randle Cotgrave’s *A Dictionary of the French and English Tongues* (1611), which renders *Desappetit* as “a queasinesse, or disgust of stomacke” and *Desaimer* as “to fall into dislike, or disgust.” When the Catholic loyalist Anthony Copley denounces both Jesuit and Protestant prophecy, his expression equally suggests the proximity between moral disgust and distaste:

So likewise of her Maiesties end how disasterously they haue propheced, and do expect, I am sure you haue heard and do disgust as much as I. But what talke I of Protestants, seeing that also vpon very religious Catholikes they haue augured no lesse fatally, for being their known or but suspected distasters?
That, in 1602, both “disgust” and “distaste” are deployed in this context suggests the immediate connection between the concept’s gastric origins and its moral elaboration. In fact, in the years immediately after Florio’s rendering, “disgust” is used quite regularly in its sociomoral form: in the first years of the seventeenth century, the word appears often in religious polemics, as a term of moral derision. Though some researchers assert that the sociomoral usage of “disgust” is merely a figurative extension of the emotion’s true visceral form (the form suggested by its etymological origins in “distaste”), it is telling, I think, that both the gustatory and sociomoral usage enter the English language simultaneously. And indeed, in the pre-Cartesian physiology of the sixteenth century, the deep association between an individual’s corporal state and their higher-order existence has an organic connection to the disgust spectrum I have articulated throughout. Though Skelton and the anti-Wolsey satirists would probably not have known the word “disgust,” its imminent, multivalenced entry into the language suggests the general saliency of its varied forms in the early modern period.

I have reviewed this literature in such detail because the contemporary poetic reaction to Cardinal Wolsey was underpinned by these very dynamics of disgust. The domains of disgust—issues of contamination, infection, rottenness, corporality—dominate the satirical response to Wolsey’s role in Henrician politics, and disgust is the primary affective state that is elicited by the cardinal. As an emotion flexible enough to account for both visceral and symbolic alienation, disgust provided the disenchanted observers with a poignant affective vocabulary with which to denounce Wolsey. Armed with the rhetoric of disgust, they cast him as a rotten blight on the English body politic, repulsive in both body and soul.

Stomaching Wolsey

Suitable for indicting both material and moral failings, revulsion is the affective touchstone of anti-Wolsey sentiment; as we will see, attacks on Wolsey are punctuated with references to appetite, indulgence, beastliness, and disease, reflecting the domains of disgust I have just examined. In this sense, portrayals of Wolsey take pains to bar the cardinal from any association with the Bakhtinian classical body, that “strictly completed, finished product . . . isolated, alone, fenced off from other bodies.” But at the same time, this emphasis on the grotesque is hardly carnivalesque; there is little festive about the cardinal’s open body, which elicits revulsion
and terror, not celebration and empowerment. For the Henrician satirists, the disgust that Wolsey evokes is the index to his moral status—and it is this disgust that guides their smear campaign, which denounces both the cardinal and his polluting influence on England’s social body.

We can begin with food, the core domain of disgust. Among his many traits, Thomas Wolsey seems to have been a larger man—at least according to (some) early modern portraiture, and at least according to John Skelton. In the poetic context, Wolsey’s weight was an easy metonym for his greater tendencies toward gluttony and avarice; the satires routinely invoke eating habits as indicative of Wolsey’s general character, condemning his “myche bely-joye, and so wastefull banketyng” as viscerally taxing and morally sickening.

There is little doubt that Wolsey liked to eat, and he seems to have made a show of it: during his many feasts and banquets, Cavendish records, Wolsey’s tables were stocked with “ijcc [200] disshes or above of wonderouse costly meates & devysys, subtilly devysed.” In 1527 he produced a particularly lavish spread for the visiting French ambassadors:

Anon came vppe the second Course with so many disshes, subtlties, & curious devyses whiche ware above an Cth in number of so goodly proporcion and Costly that I suppose the Frenchemen neuer sawe the lyke. The wonder was no lesse than it was worthy indeade. There ware castelles with Images in the same, powlles Church & steple in proporcion for the quantitie as well counterfeited as the paynter shold haue paynted it vppon a clothe or wall. There ware beastes, byrdes, fowles of dyuers kyndes and personages most lyvely made & counterfet in dysshes. Some fightyng (as it ware) with swordes, some with gonnes and Crosebowes, Some vaughtyng & leapyng, Some dauncyng with ladyes, Some in complett harnes Iustyng with sperses. And with many more devysis than I ame able with my wytt to discribbe.

For good reason, Wolsey’s dining habits became the stuff of diplomatic legend, though not always to his credit: the Venetian ambassador Sebastian Giustinian, for example, records that during public functions “no one is served with the viands of the sort presented to the Cardinal, until after their removal from before him.” Yet even with this notable appetite, food didn’t sit well with Wolsey’s stomach; he long suffered from digestive issues, which he tried to relieve in 1520 by securing papal approval to continue eating meat during the Lenten season. Skeptics like Skelton railed against his motives:
For he hath suche a bull,
He may take whom he wull,
And as many as him lykys,
May ete pigges in lent for pikys,
After the sectes of heretykis!
For in lent he wyll ete
All maner of flesshe mete.\textsuperscript{87}

In light of such criticism, Wolsey eventually thought it wise to extend permissions to the populace; according to Polydore Vergil, in 1522 he overturned the Lenten restrictions on dairy products, in order to “lessen the stigma attaching to his name.”\textsuperscript{88}

The tension between the pleasure and pain of the gourmand’s life has a formal correlation in the literary rendition of Wolsey’s diet. For Skelton, so apt at producing rhetorical excess, the elaborate description of Wolsey’s “banketynge braynlesse” becomes stomach-turning, and the excessiveness of the catalog stands as an obvious indictment of the cardinal’s moral appetite.\textsuperscript{89} Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? offers a pointed example:

To dryinke and for to eate
Swete ypocras and swete meate.
To kepe his flesshe chast
In lent, for a repast,
He eateth capons stewed,
Fesaunt and partriche mewed,
Hennes, checkynges, and pygges.
He foynes and he frygges;
Spareth neither mayde ne wyfe.
This is a postels lyfe.\textsuperscript{90}

The rapid-fire enumeration of Skelton’s signature style renders this menu nauseating, a cumulative effect inducing sensory exhaustion. And exhaustion is a concern, given the apparent scope of Wolsey’s consumptive habits: the transitional rhyme \textit{pygges/frygges} indicates a temporary shift in registers, and the corresponding turn from conquests digestive to conquest sexual suggests the flexibility of \textit{appetite} as a category of moral critique, which readily expands (like the spectrum of disgust) from the gustatory to the genital. Indeed, the legend of the cardinal’s appetite endured long after his death—so much so, in fact, that in Thomas Churchyard’s Elizabethan portrayal of Wolsey (in \textit{The Mirror for Magistrates}), it serves as the generalized vehicle for the cardinal’s \textit{de casibus} trajectory:
So, tasting some, of Fortunes sweete consayts,
I clapt the hoode, on shoulder, braue as Son,
And hopht at length, to bite at better bayts,
And fill my mouth, ere banket halfe were don.
Thus holding on, the course I thought to ron:
By many a feast, my belly grue so big.91

Churchyard’s Wolsey learns to enjoy dining above his station—a trope originated by Skelton, whose condemnation of Wolsey’s more physical stomach is perhaps most salient in the depiction of what the upstart cardinal is not eating:

Howe ye were wonte to drynke
Of a lether bottell
With a knavysshe stoppell,
Whan mamockes was your meate,
With mouldre brede to eate—
Ye cowde none other gete
To chewe and to gnaue,
To fyll therwith your mawe—
Lodged in the strawe,
Couchynge your drousy heddes
Somtyme in lousy beddes.92

In these lines, we find the most naked connection between food and disgust; a man of Wolsey’s social standing and moral character (so the associative logic goes) should be eating rotten table scraps. As above, this gastric association soon extends to other disgust elicitors: if the world was just, the cardinal would be spending his nights not in the elaborate chambers of Hampton Palace, but in the muck and filth of its stables.

This image of the “lousy” Wolsey introduces another key disgust trope in the contemporary satires: the cardinal as a site of disease and infection. As noted above, Wolsey’s health was routinely ailing; he may have suffered from adult-onset diabetes, bouts of gallstones and jaundice, and regular infections.93 The poetic tradition, however, emphasized the illness that contained the most obvious moral dimension: Wolsey’s alleged struggle with the effects of syphilis. Roy and Barlowe broach the issue with little subtlety:

Ief: O naye, for he hath no wyfe,
But whoares that be his lovers.
Wat: Yf he vse whoares to occupy,
   It is grett marvell certanyly,
   That he escapeth the frenche pockes.

Ief: He had the pockes with out fayle,
   Wherfore people on hym did rayle,
   With many obprobrious mockes. 94

Though it is impossible to ascertain the validity of this rumor, Wolsey apparently did have a perennial ailment of the eye, which Skelton took as sign of a venereal infection:

   So fell and so irous,
   So full of malencoly,
   With a flap afore his eye,
   Men wene that he is pocky. 95

A Spanish dispatch of 1522 confirms that Wolsey had an issue with his sight, but it acquires here a very different moral valence:

   Henry leads his usual life, leaving all the cares of state to Wolsey, who is so very ill that he is in danger of losing an eye, and the rest of his body seems almost equally affected. There seems little hope of his immediate recovery, especially as he will not abandon the affairs of the kingdom to others and must see many people daily. 96

Wolsey’s “flap,” Gwyn suggests, was likely “some kind of disfigurement,” which “gave Skelton the opportunity to make an easy gibe.” 97 Nonetheless, the gap between truth and tradition is instructive: Wolsey’s physical form still provokes a disgust response, which is, in turn, still correlated with the moral loathsomeness his behavior displays.

And Skelton would gibe, ruthlessly: Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? concludes by comparing this “morbilloso Thoma” to a host of ancient lepers, monsters, and incurables. 98 Most humorously, he imagines a scene in which Wolsey seeks aid from Balthasar de Guercis, the queen’s physician:

   He is nowe so overthwart,
   And so payned with pangis,
   That all his trust hangis
   In Balthasor [who] . . .
   Hath promised to hele our cardinals eye.
Yet sum surgions put a dout
Lest he wyll put it clene out,
And make him lame of his neder limmes.
God sende him sorowe for his sinnes!²⁹

It is telling that Skelton concludes his poem, an invective of over a thousand lines, with a meditation on Wolsey’s health: after enumerating the cardinal’s social and moral maladies, the poet leaves the reader with an unmistakable sense that Wolsey is rotten to the core, body and soul. In fact, after the poem proper concludes, Skelton again lampoons Wolsey’s health in a Latin epilogue, which continues to correlate his physical and moral decay:

Oppressed with the Neapolitan disease, laid low under plaster poultices, pierced by the surgeon’s iron instrument, relieved by nothing, nor made better by any medicine . . . If only, therefore, that profligate, that bad Cretan lord, more aptly called disgusting, a mad fanatic, would keep away from the brothel.¹⁰⁰

A convergence of disease, decay, and sexual depravity, the syphilis trope is a particularly damning example of disgust-based rhetoric.

We have seen how the anti-Wolsey satirists coordinate their attacks along various points of the theoretical disgust spectrum, clothing their barbs in images of food and orality, physical illness and degeneration, and sexual indiscretions. They also routinely dehumanize Wolsey through animal associations, another of the central categories in the taxonomy of disgust. These images are not, to be clear, the conventional figures of the beast fable, which had long deployed animal allegory in a satiric mode; instead, Skelton and company employ animalization specifically to debase the hated cardinal, to strip him of his pomp and dignity, to reduce him to the barest matter. Much like the example of syphilis, animal metaphors have little trouble invoking a network of overlapping disgust elicitors: when, for example, Skelton observes that “So fatte a magott, bred of a fleshe-flye / Was nevyr suche a fylty gorgon, nor suche an epycure,” a single couplet activates images of animality, appetite, orality, rottenness, and excrement.¹⁰¹ Though merely a pest in this instance, Wolsey most often takes on a more sinister form; he is famously cast in the satiric tradition as the “Bochers Curre,” a ferocious mastiff who treats the realm as his chew-toy.¹⁰² Again, the concurrent association with orality is inevitable: the cardinal, “An Impeachment of Wolsey” laments, “gnawen hys peyyl as A dogge dothe a Catte.”¹⁰³ Skelton confirms that the cardinal is on the heels of England’s nobility, who
Rynne away and crepe;  
Lyke a mayny of shepe,  
Dare nat loke out at dur  
For drede of the mastyve cur,  
For drede of the bochers dogge . . .  
He pluckes them by the hode,  
And shakes them by the eare.\textsuperscript{104}

Happily for the satirists, the cardinal’s surname seemed to indicate his canine form, as when Roy and Barlowe denounce him as a “Ragynge courre, wrapped in a wolues skynne.”\textsuperscript{105} Because of the typographical and paleographical properties of the early modern “long” form of the minuscule $s$, detractors relished the visual similarity between \textit{wolfe} and \textit{wolse}.

In concert with their general strategy of debasement and desublimation, the satirists also harped more generally on Wolsey’s humble beginnings, quite apart from any animal association. (Though, to be sure, his father’s trade ensured that any discussion of Wolsey’s origin implicitly activates both food and animal concerns.) The poems abound with broad harangues against Wolsey’s undue elevation; “Of the Cardnall Wolse,” for example, begs King Henry to free himself “from that Churle borne by kynde / and from that vyle bochers Blode.”\textsuperscript{106} But the cardinal’s origin is also cast more basically as a source of inherent revulsion. In the Renaissance, Frank Whigham has shown, anxieties about a changing cultural order were encoded within an elaborate literary discourse of the alimentary tract, and it is thus unsurprising that early modern social warfare also borrowed more inclusively from the rhetoric of disgust.\textsuperscript{107} The satires insistently expose from “whatt vilnes [Wolsey’s] Pompe did aryse,” an indictment with both moral and material force.\textsuperscript{108} Again, Skelton is tellingly caustic:

He ruleth all at wyll  
Without reason or skyll.  
How be it the primordyall  
Of his wretched originall,  
And his base progeny,  
And his gresy genealogy,  
He came of the sank royall  
That was cast out of a bochers stall!\textsuperscript{109}

It seems to me that the phrase “gresy genealogy” is a mark of Skelton’s unique genius—one would be hard-pressed to express the sentiment in a
more revolting manner. In Collyn Clout, Skelton is even more precise in locating Wolsey’s origin:

With pryde inordynate,  
Sodaynly upstarte  
From the donge carte,  
The mattocke and the shovl,  
To reygne and to rule.  

Cast away with the butcher’s viscera, and cast up from the dung-cart; as Skelton tells it, Wolsey is a phoenix rising from a pile of filth. What’s more, his physical defilement accrues a moral analogue, when we recall that in early modern England carts were used to convey all manner of social and legal offenders to sites of public punishment and execution: by revealing the “carte” as the site of Wolsey’s generation—from which he sprang, it seems, like Athena from the head of Zeus—Skelton suggests that the corrupt cardinal is destined for that “vile deathe that is ordaind for wretchede theves.” That Wolsey has traded the cart and the shovel (the tools of his station) for the scepter and a cardinal’s hat suggests the extent to which the natural order has been perverted by his undue elevation.

There are myriad ways in which contemporary satires attempt to construct Wolsey’s physical body as a site of revulsion: he is associated materially with images of overindulgence, illness, sexual decadence, rottenness, excrement, filth, and animality. Yet as we have seen, disgust is an emotion elicited by stimuli both physical and symbolic, a reflection of its dual role as guardian of the body and the soul. And while descriptions of the cardinal’s corporeal repulsiveness carry an obvious symbolic freight, another strand of anti-Wolsey discourse tends to exhibit the ways that Wolsey enacts the more figurative dynamics of disgust.

For example, the satires condemn Wolsey as a general intruder in the courtly sphere: his very authority, quite apart from his physical loathsomeness, entails an encroachment and violation of the king’s prerogative. In this sense, Wolsey doubly relates to the notion of defilement: he both is defiled (by his low birth, polluted body, and physical repulsiveness) and threatens to defile those in his proximity, such as the king. After spending four years in the court of the young King Henry, the Venetian ambassador Giustinian concluded that the “Cardinal is the person who rules both the King and the entire kingdom”; this sentiment was apparently shared by many English observers, and a general anxiety about
Wolsey’s prominence pervades the contemporary poems. For Skelton, Wolsey exemplifies the worst type of statesman, he

That wolde conquinate,
That wolde contemminate,
And that wolde vyolate,
And that wolde derogate,
And that wolde abrogate

the sanctity of the English realm. Wolsey’s rule has descended upon the country like a plague, to the despoilment of King Henry and his subjects. This usurpation is attacked prominently in the ballad tradition: “Of the Cardnall Wolse,” for example, warns the king that “As long as one / Dothe Reyne & Rule, as ye do see, / So long in poverte this Realme shalbe.” Alternately, “An Impeachment of Wolsey” directs its address at the cardinal himself:

of yngland the Rule, & Souerente
of yngland thow haste had . . .
Vsurpyd awtoryte is thy defence;
no man darre the Resyste.

As Skelton records in his trilogy, the most damaging aspect of Wolsey’s influence is its unending scope; whether in Star Chamber, Chancery, or the Common Law courts, the cardinal’s unilateral authority demonstrates how dangerous it is “For one man to rule a kynge . . . To governe over all / And rule a realme royall.”

But as a social pathogen, Wolsey was most dangerous in his capacity to infect Henry himself. The cardinal’s influence on the king was a regular concern of contemporary observers, many of whom could not believe that King Henry would willingly subject himself to such a monster. According to legal records, an Englishman named Anthony Irby proffered (quite unwisely) one such suggestion:

It is a wonder to see the kyng, how he is ordered now a days: For the Cardynall & the duke of Suffolk, which the kyng haith brought vpp of noughte, do rewle hym in all thynges as they lyst; whedr it be by Negramancy, wytchecrafte, or pollycy no mann knoweth, but as it is thought the oon of them by his Negramancy and the other by his wytchecrafte.
More broadly, this charge was echoed by William Tyndale in *The Practice of Prelates*, in the midst of an anti-Wolsey diatribe:

And, as I heard it spoken of divers, he made by craft of necromancy graven imagery to bear upon him; wherewith he bewitched the king’s mind, and made the king to dote upon him more than ever he did any lady or gentlewoman; so that now the king’s grace followed him, as he before followed the king.  

Finally, Skelton invokes the witchcraft trope in *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*:

The kynges grace  
Is toward hym so mynded,  
And so farre blynded,  
That he can nat parcyue  
How he doth hym discyve.  
I dought, lest by sorsery,  
Or suche other loselry  
As wychechart or charmyng;  
For he is the kynges derlyng.

Whether or not such claims were literally believed by contemporaries, this textual record suggests that Wolsey’s social infection could have the imaginative quality of a demonic possession. In the nineteenth century, anthropologists argued that cultural laws of contagion were a brand of “sympathetic magic”; in these early modern accounts, Wolsey is imagined as a magician who casts his contagion into being.

The stakes of this symbolic inhabitation were not small. The latent anxiety in much of the anti-Wolsey literature is that the cardinal will eventually come to supplant King Henry entirely—a virus that has overrun its host, so to speak. A report of Giustinian’s experience in England suggests one possible form that this effacement might take:

On the ambassador’s first arrival in England, [Wolsey] used to say to him,—“His Majesty will do so and so:” subsequently, by degrees, he went forgetting himself, and commenced saying, “We shall do so and so:” at this present he has reached such a pitch that he says, “I shall do so and so.”

Ten years later, in the midst of Wolsey’s undoing, a “boke of articles whiche the Lordes had put to the kynge agaynst the Cardinall” would similarly
complain that “in all wrytynges which he wrot to Rome or any other forayn Prince, he wrot Ego et Rex meus, I and my kyng, as who woulde say that the kyng were his seruant.” In this linguistic slippage, Wolsey’s assumption of Henry’s voice nonetheless entails a symbolic occupation of the royal person—and it exemplifies, I think, a more pressing concern about monarchal integrity. This dilemma is anchored at the heart of Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?, as elaborated in its most famous passage:

Why come ye nat to court?
To whyche court?
To the kynges courte?
Or to Hampton Court?
Nay, to the kynges court!
The kynges courte
Shulde haue the excellence;
But Hampton Court
Hath the preemynence!

There is little frivolous about Skelton here, who identifies a troubling ambiguity at the center of Henrician politics. To entertain the notion that Henry’s authority may not be absolute—that it might be flexible, or porous, or even contingent—inherently entails a major destabilization of the social order of Skelton’s England. In order to account for Wolsey’s power, Skelton must essentially deconstruct the governing discourse of his political world: he must come to terms with the fact that, quite unhappily, “court” is no longer an unambiguous signifier. What happens to England, and to the English people, when one can no longer distinguish between the king’s court and Wolsey’s court? What does it mean that we must even ask “whyche court”? These questions belong to a much different conceptual register than those regarding Wolsey’s weight, or those concerning his poxy eye. Yet they share an equal concern with the mechanics of disgust—the guardian of the moral order, and the emotion to which Skelton and his allies turn to guide their response to Wolsey’s social intrusion.

As we have seen, contemporary satirists employed a regular thematic vocabulary in the denunciation of Wolsey. Poets routinely railed upon his infamous low birth, his insatiable appetite, his unseemly entry into English politics—all domains that correlate with the associative matrix of disgust. To conclude, there is a particular instance that exemplifies these trends, but that also warrants specific consideration of its own: the mock-display of Wolsey’s crest, perhaps the most immediately compelling feature of Rede Me and Be Nott Wrothe. Proudly emblazoned on the title page, the crest
offers a seductive visual guide to the contents within the volume. On the verso, the image is complimented by a verse “descripccion of the armes,” three stanzas of rhyme royal that both explicate the visual parody and introduce many of the central terms of the satire that follows.\footnote{See figure 1.} The shield, supported by “two angels off Sathan,” exemplifies in its ornaments Wolsey’s status as a lightning rod of social conflict and dissention:

\begin{verbatim}
The sixe bloiddy axes in a bare felde
Sheweth the cruelte of the red man,
Whiche hath devoured the beautifull swan.
Mortall enmy vnto the whyte Lion,
Carter of Yorcke, the vyle butchers sonne.\footnote{In these opening lines, Roy and Barlowe deploy the groundwork for the associative network that accrues as their project progresses; Wolsey’s affinity with red, for example, suggests his numerous identities as cardinal, antichrist, bloodthirsty tyrant, and butcher’s son.}
\end{verbatim}
Wolsey’s social presumptions are implicitly underscored by the beast allegory, in which the cardinal is framed in opposition to his noble adversaries the dukes of Buckingham and Norfolk, invoked by their heraldic icons (“beautiful swan” and “whyte Lion”). The animal motif is balanced by a description of Wolsey’s own mascot:

The bandog in the middes doth expresse  
The mastif Curre bred in Ypswitch towne  
Gnawyng with his teth a kynges crowne.128

It is no coincidence that Wolsey’s canine form chews upon the symbol of royalty; he incorporates Henry’s power into his own form, just as he has incorporated himself into the political center of the court. Furthermore, his predation is specifically construed as an act of leisure, suggesting the luxury that his usurped position affords; the “gnawynge” dog is one that savors the bone he chews, and there is a sense of oral sadism that attaches to Wolsey’s mastery over the crown. The poem concludes by reflecting upon the more general consequence of this usurpation (“The cloube signifieth playne hys tiranny / Covered over with a Cardinals hatt”), before delivering a final warning to the upstart Wolsey: “Wherfor prest take hede and beware they crowne.”129 Though they had no way to know it in 1527, Roy and Barlowe would not have to wait long to see this prophecy fulfilled; in two years Wolsey would be cast from the court, and in three he would be dead.

Half a century later, when lamenting that very fall, Churchyard’s rendition of Cardinal Wolsey reflects upon his own cardinal sin in a telling register:

Pryde is a thing, that God and man abores,  
A swelling tode, that poysons euery place,  
A stinking wounde, that breedeth many sores,  
A priuy plague, found out in stately face,  
A paynted byrd, that keeps a pecocks pace,  
A lothsome lowt, that lookes like tinkers dog,  
A hellish hownd, a swinish hatefull hog  
That grunts and groanes, at euery thing it sees,  
And holds vp snowt, like pig that comes from draffe.130

In Churchyard’s act of poetic necromancy, Wolsey addresses his pride via the imagery of food, animals, and disease—the very elicitors of disgust that dominated the cardinal’s satirical identity during his life.
The Abject *Alter Rex*: Thomas Wolsey’s Fall

In the final movement of Skelton’s *Magnyfycence*, the virtuous counselor Good Hope frames a telling consolation to the titular king, newly repentant for squandering his fortunes on courtly leeches and usurpers:

Good Hope, your potecary, assygned am I,
That Goddes grace hath vexed you sharply
And payned you with a purgacyon of odyous poverte,
Myxed with bytter alowes of herde adverseyte.
Nowe must I make you a lectuary softe—
I to mynster it, you to receyve it ofte—
With rubarbe of repentaunce in you for to rest;
With drammes of devocyon your dyet must be drest.\(^{131}\)

The conclusion of Skelton’s interlude, framed in the disgust-based language of diet and purgation, anticipates the thematic terms that would dominate the conclusion of the cardinal’s own story a decade later. Long cast as a source of social illness, Wolsey was a piece of spoiled meat in the belly of the body politic—and in his final years, he is ultimately purged from the Henrician social body, cast away in a remarkable, repentant act of political expulsion.

In the summer of 1529, things were not going particularly well for Cardinal Wolsey. Unable to muster enough leverage to force Pope Clement’s hand, the cardinal and his agents watched hopelessly as King Henry’s divorce proceedings were recalled to Rome—a devastating blow to the English party, who had hoped to convert its home field advantage into a favorable judgment before the case was ensnared in the papal courts. In the months preceding the unsuccessful legatine trial, Henry had already become suspicious of Wolsey’s enthusiasm for the cause; despite the cardinal’s long-standing protestations that he was “redy to expone [his] body, life, and blod for the accheving of the same,” Henry received reports that both Campeggio and Wolsey could not be trusted.\(^{132}\) The trial’s relocation to Rome was a blow to Wolsey, and his weakness in its aftermath was apparently not lost upon contemporaries. According to a report in Hall, after the legatine adjournment—and after it had become apparent that “the kings fauor was from the Cardinal sore minished”—the royal council presented Henry with a book of “thirtie and foure” articles against Wolsey; by setting out “with what dissimulacion and clokyng, he had handeled the kynges causes,” the cardinal’s enemies successfully “moued the kyng against hym” further.\(^{133}\) After the conclusion of the legatine
proceedings in mid-July, Wolsey was quietly barred access from the king’s presence, and his role in decision-making was severely restricted.

By early autumn, the writing was on the wall. In mid-September, letters make reference to “the reports which are circulated” against the cardinal, and in a dispatch of October 4, the French ambassador Jean du Bellay remarked that he could “see clearly [that] Wolsey is to lose his influence entirely” in the upcoming session of Parliament. Having failed to make headway in the divorce, and having made an enemy of the would-be Queen Anne, Wolsey was left virtually unprotected. On October 9 he was formally indicted with the jurisdictional crime of praemunire: by exercising his legatine powers on English soil, Wolsey was said to have imported a foreign legal authority into the realm, to the prejudice of the king’s royal prerogative. (That Henry had both enabled and exploited Wolsey’s legatine standing for over a decade was ignored.) Wolsey was soon commanded to “surrender and delyuer vppe the great Seale”; in late October, he admitted to the charge of praemunire, and threw himself on the king’s mercy.

The initial stage of Wolsey’s downfall was complete. He would never regain his former place by Henry’s side, and his vast fortunes were confiscated by the crown. But his ruin was not final, at least not yet. In the fall of 1529, Henry seems to have had no desire to annihilate his long-trusted minister, and there is even evidence that the king assured Wolsey of his general good standing. With Wolsey in this limbo—disgraced, but not destroyed—his enemies seized the offensive, attempting to muster a mass of evidence too damning to be ignored. In this campaign, the anti-Wolsey sentiment again seems to activate the mechanics of disgust that we have explored throughout this chapter. Wolsey’s narrative culminates in this fundamental act of rejection and repulsion: like an ill humour, his malignant influence is drained away from the king and his council, so that new blood might circulate in its place. Even the sudden, surprising charges of praemunire mirror this trajectory: Wolsey’s legatine authority was construed, appropriately enough, as an intruding foreign body, needing to be purged and expelled to restore the integrity of the English realm.

One such example is deployed by the new lord chancellor, Thomas More, who addressed his predecessor’s ground-shaking fall in his opening remarks to the Parliament of November 1529. In the midst of a general meditation on the state of the realm, in which King Henry is figured as the nation’s shepherd, More reflects upon the recent woes that have plagued the English flock:

As you se that emongest a great flocke of shepe some be rotten and fauty which the good sheperd sendeth from the good shepe, so the
great wether which is of late fallen as you all knowe, so craftely, so scabedly, ye & so vntruly iuggled wyth the kyng.\textsuperscript{140}

Given the timing of More’s oration, there is little doubt that Wolsey is the anecdote’s referent; the new lord chancellor takes care to smear his predecessor with the raw material of disgust. We’ve already seen how the poetic satires regularly dehumanize Wolsey by means of bestial identification, invoking an alleged animality as grounds for moral condemnation. In this elaboration, More imagines a dangerously infected Wolsey: he is portrayed as an ailing animal, a communicable threat that must be cast off for the greater good of the flock. “Rotten and fauty” accommodates both the material and moral registers of Wolsey’s alleged disease, and More accordingly affirms the proximity of disgust’s literal and figurative domains. Wolsey’s designation as “wether” pushes the metaphor even further: signifying both a neutered ram (and by natural extension) a courtly eunuch, the term configures the cardinal as a deviant sexual subject, another damning witness to his moral disfigurement. (With this castration, More perhaps also enforces the clerical celibacy that Wolsey infamously flouted.) Little doubt remains when Wolsey is finally denounced as scabbed, an image triply suited to More’s rhetorical aim: in Henrician usage, the word might entail a literal “disease of the skin,” a “moral or spiritual disease,” or, a specific “cutaneous disease in animals, esp. sheep.”\textsuperscript{141} Consistent with the general trend in anti-Wolsey satire, More’s oration constructs a cardinal who is repulsively compromised; his rejection from the metaphoric flock was a necessity for the well-being of the whole, as was his purgation from the room of state.

More’s rhetoric is echoed (and intensified) elsewhere. To supplement the \textit{praemunire} charge, the House of Lords apparently drafted a more inclusive catalog of Wolsey’s offenses. Many of the charges in the 44-item list concern his abuse of legatine authority, as a clear usurpation of King Henry’s royal prerogative. But the sixth item is rather different:

Whereas your grace is our sovereign lord and head, in whom standeth all the surety and wealth of this realm; the same lord cardinall knowing himselfe to have the foule and contagious disease of the great pocks broken out upon him in divers places of his body, came daily to your grace, rowning in your eare and blowing upon your most noble grace with his perilous and infective breath, to the marvellous danger of your highnesse, if God of his infinite goodnesse had not better provided for your highnesse. And when he was once
healed of them, he made your grace to believe, that his disease was an imposthume in his head, and of none other thing.\textsuperscript{142}

Hall succinctly confirms the charge that Wolsey, “hayvng the Frenche pockes presumed to come & breth on the kyng.”\textsuperscript{143} In this passage, we find Wolsey’s association with disgust nakedly literalized: not only a symbolic sore on the commonweal, he also imperils the king quite concretely with his infectious breath. Given their general emphasis on Wolsey’s coercive influence, the Lords’ complaint thus reveals how the literal and metaphoric domains of disgust find respective targets in the king’s body natural and his body politic: an assault converging here in the oral image of Wolsey’s whisper (“rowing”), the unifying act in which the sly minister pollutes the kingdom with his policy and the king with his contagions.\textsuperscript{144} This bifurcated sense of disgust is further suggested in the particular emphasis on Wolsey’s syphilitic condition; his illness entails not just a corporeal infection, but a moral one as well. Finally, there may be some irony in how the cardinal is said to have obfuscated his specifically venereal illness: though “impostume” had a generalized meaning of “sore” or “abscess,” in the sixteenth century it equally developed a figurative sense of “moral corruption in the individual, or insurrection in the state.”\textsuperscript{145}

But despite the efforts of his opponents, the cardinal endured into the New Year—and in fact, as Henry’s position continued to soften, Wolsey was granted a pardon in mid-February 1530. In return for this partial restoration, the cardinal was commanded to take residency in York—the seat of his archbishopric, and a diocese in which the absentee cardinal had never set foot—in a domain far removed from court. In the spring and summer months, Wolsey made the slow trek northward, a spatial literalization of his expurgation from Henrician politics. Yet despite his disgrace, observers suggested that the cardinal still cut an impressive figure:

It has been reported in the court that he rode in such sumptuous fashion that some men thought he was of as good courage as in times past, and that there was no impediment but lack of authority. Certain people came to him, some for debt, and some for restitution of things wrongfully taken by him; to which he answered that the King had all his goods, and he could neither pay nor restore.\textsuperscript{146}

The journey north offered many such moments of image rehabilitation, in which Wolsey embraced (or at least embraced the performance of) a pastoral care that stands in sharp contrast to his conventional guise as
the courtly wolf. In his *imitatio Christi*, the abject cardinal embraced in his parishioners that which might otherwise evoke revulsion: Cavendish records, for example, how Wolsey tended to “lix [59] poomen whos feet he than wasshed wyped & kyssed.”\textsuperscript{147} As the journey progressed, Wolsey remained a formidable politician, propped by (in Gwyn’s words) a “surprising degree of confidence that all would be well.”\textsuperscript{148}

But the increasing goodwill of his flock could not save Wolsey from his king—and only months later, in the fall of 1530, further consideration found use at home for a disgraced cardinal. On November 4, amidst a backdrop of increasing papal resistance to Henry’s matrimonial aims, Wolsey was suddenly taken into crown custody for the crime of high treason; the cardinal, it was alleged, had for several months been secretly plotting with the European powers to derail the divorce proceedings and expel Anne Boleyn from Henry’s side. The precise motive for this maneuver remains obscure, but it is clear that the king had decided (or, depending on the account, had been convinced) to ruin his *alter rex* completely.\textsuperscript{149} In a humiliating parody of his first exile, Wolsey now began the return journey back to the court—where he looked forward not to pomp and splendor, but to looming death.

Wolsey never had to face those charges; he died of illness on November 29, 1530, at Leicester Abbey. Accordingly, we’ll never know what Henry had planned for his former minister—though it seems unlikely, perhaps he would have issued a second pardon, or found another way to secure Wolsey’s obedience. What is clear, however, is that subsequent accounts of Wolsey’s life shared a profound interest in these final days, chronicling the suffering cardinal’s decay in rich detail; the relevant passages are insistently corporeal in description, demanding that we remain focused on Wolsey’s malfunctioning body. They are concerned with the alimentary component of the cardinal’s painful death, abounding with images of eating, excrement, and vomit. There is thus an implicit irony, a kind of poetic justice, in these portrayals of Wolsey’s demise: long cast as a contaminant, a noxious figure whose very presence infected the realm, Wolsey finally finds the tables to be turned. The domains of disgust turn inward, and in a striking act of self-consumption, he becomes destroyed by the same feelings of repulsion and revulsion that he so often invoked in others.

Though doubtlessly embellished, Cavendish’s eyewitness account is the most elaborate chronicle of Wolsey’s demise—and it is one that seems strangely keen on foregrounding the gustatory textures of its subject’s final days. The motif is established early in the narrative, when, on the evening of his arrest, Wolsey shares a symbolic meal with his servants:
With that came vppe my lordes meate, and so we left our comynycacion. I gave hyme water & sett hyme down to dynner . . . notwithstandyng my lord did eate very littill meate but wold many tymes burst owte sodenly in teares with the most sorowfullest words that hathe byn hard of any wofull creature. And at the last he fetched a great sighe frome the bottome of his hart . . . [He was] more fed & moysted with sorowe & teares than with owther pleas-aunt metes or dylicate drynkes.¹⁵⁰

Tears do little to satisfy a man of such infamous appetite: the scene, despite its tenderness, cannot help but parody Wolsey’s infamous gluttony, which now can do little but vomit sighs. But while food is sublimated in this example, Cavendish goes on to reveal the gruesome materiality of his master’s digestion, anticipating the gastric illness that will eventually overtake him.

In a statement that recalls the category of *animal-reminder* disgust, Wolsey feared that he would “dye lyke a beast” on his journey back to London, a remark confirming the sociomoral linkage of human dignity and corporeal integrity.¹⁵¹ Cavendish, however, does little to shield us from the animalistic details of Wolsey’s physical deterioration, which is chronicled by moments of agonizing urination and defecation. On one evening, after observers “perceyved hys color often to chaynge and alter dyuers tymes,” Wolsey announced that he had been “sodenly taken abought my stomake with a thyng that lyethe ouerywart my brest as cold as a whetston.”¹⁵² With the help of an apothecary’s purgative, he “avoydyd, excedyng myche wynd vppward,” but the relief was only temporary.¹⁵³ As the evening continued, there “came vppon hyme suche a laske that it caused hyme to goo to his stoole,” and later “he rose vppe and went in to his chamber, to his cloose stoole, the Fluxe trobled hyme so sore.”¹⁵⁴ Plagued with “laske” (“looseness of the bowels, diarrhœa”) and “flux” (“an abnormally copious flowing of blood, excrement, etc. from the bowels”), Wolsey’s entrails turn inside-out, with a violence that recalls his own sudden expulsion from the court.¹⁵⁵ After his hor-rific local description, Cavendish next works to quantify his master’s agony:

When nyght came that we shold goo to bed, my lord waxed very syke thoroughe hys newe desease, the which caused hyme contynu-ally frome tyme to tyme to goo to the stolle all that nyght. In so myche frome tyme that his desease toke hyme vnto the next day. He had above l [50] stooles, so that he was that day very weke.¹⁵⁶
Wolsey’s dozens of evacuations serve as a bathetic parallel to the dozens of dishes that once filled his banquet table. In this account, I find it hard to ignore the moral resonance of Wolsey’s hyper-purgation; in his final days, the cardinal’s long-accumulated sins are slowly (and excruciatingly) drained from his body, in a corporal prelude to the spiritual purification of death.\(^\text{157}\)

In fact, as the end unfolded, the expulsions of Wolsey’s body become an index to his degenerating condition. As Cavendish records, the cardinal himself first proffered the diagnosis:

> The matter that he avoyded was wonderous blake, the which phisicians call color adustum. And when he perceyved it he sayd vnto me “if I haue not” quod he “some helpe shortly yt will cost me my lyfe.” With that I caused oon doctor . . . to loke vppon the grosse matter that he avoyded, vppon sight wherof he determyned howe he shold not lyfe past iiiij or v dayes.\(^\text{158}\)

By reading his own waste, the sorcerer Wolsey performs a de facto act of extispicy—though in this demonic divination, it is his own entrails that foretell the future. Even without the physician’s confirmation, Wolsey could see that the end was near: his symptoms, he reflected, promised an imminent “excorriacion of the Intraylles, or Francye [frenzy], or elles present deathe, and the best ther of is deathe.”\(^\text{159}\) After a farewell to Cavendish and a (famed) speech of repentance, he expired around daybreak the following morning.

Though it is impossible to determine the precise cause of Wolsey’s death, there is little doubt that Cavendish encodes his master’s suffering in terms that are insistently alimentary. As suggested by the spectrum of disgust, the thematic matrix of illness, purgation, and excretion that pervades his account is an affective linkage to the revolting sociomoral violations that are levied in the anti-Wolsey satires.\(^\text{160}\) The chronicle tradition largely echoes (and in some cases, elaborates) the gastric focus of Cavendish’s narrative, ensuring that wretched purgation would mark the standard account of Wolsey’s final days. Consistent with early modern physiological theory, the Italian historian (and friend of Machiavelli) Francesco Guicciardini links Wolsey’s physical degeneration with a corresponding psychological/dispositional analogue: Wolsey, he notes, “was suddenly taken with a fluxe, engendred either of the humour of disdaine, or of the passion of feare.”\(^\text{161}\) In his chronicle of the age, Charles Wriothesley curtly observes (without further comment) that some “recken he killed himselfe with purgations”—a statement vague enough, at least as
I take it, to entail either an unintentional overdose or a doctor-assisted suicide. The more scandalous suggestion is made explicit by an anonymous (and questionably reliable) Spanish chronicle of the age, which gossips that Wolsey “took some poison to die, to avoid a more shameful death.” This notion of a “more shameful death” reveals an intriguing contest between the domains of disgust: the indignity of corporeal decay is thought preferable to the moral revulsion of dying a traitor in a public spectacle. (Though, to be sure, the manner of Wolsey’s agonizing death recalls the execution rites of a common traitor: both entail, echoing Wolsey’s words above, excoriation of the entrails.)

The Protestant martyrologist John Foxe similarly fixes on the physical indignity of Wolsey’s death—the result of “purgations and vomites” that were “so blacke, that the stayning therof could not be gotten out of his blankets by any means.” But Foxe takes the most pleasure in his elaborate postmortem description:

It is testified by one, yet being aliue, in whose armes the sayde Cardinal dyed, that hys body being dead, was blacke as pitch, also was so heauie, that sixe coulde scarce beare it. Furthermore, it did so stinke aboue the grounde, that they were constrayned to hasten the buriall thereof in the night season, before it was daye. At the which buriall, such a tempest, with such a stinch there arose, that all the torches went out, and so he was throwne into the tombe, and there was layde.

The trope of the putrid Catholic corpse was a favorite of Foxe, whose usage ranged historically from the “rotting stinch” of the dead Roman emperor Maximinus to the “stinking death” of his own contemporary Bishop Edmund Bonner—and when recording the demise of the Marian persecutor Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, Foxe further wondered “whether he stonke before he dyed, as Cardinal wolsey did.”

It is Edward Hall’s account, finally, that offers the most detailed connection between Wolsey’s death and his alimentary distress:

When the Cardinal saw the capitaini of the garde, he was sore astonnyed and shortly became sicke, for then he perceiued some great trouble toward him, and for that cause men sayd that he willyngly toke so much quantitie of strong purgacion that his nature was not able to beare it . . . [He was then brought to the Abbey of Leicester], wher for very feblenes of nature cause by purgacions and vomites he dyed the second night folowyng.
The scene is concluded with a telling summation: “This Cardinal as you may perceiue in this story was of a great stomacke, for he compted himselfe egall with princes, and by craftie suggestion gatte into his handes innumerable treasure.” In early modern usage, the concept of stomach entailed not only “the pipe wherby meate goeth dowen,” but also sentiments like “indignation, anger, vehement wrath, hatred, displeasure, abhorring of anie thing that liketh not”—a set of emotions with an obvious proximity to moralized disgust.\(^{167}\) In fact, the earliest examples of the verb “to stom-ach” (as in 1523, when Thomas Cromwell could barely “stomak . . . the high Inuries done by the saide Francoys”) entail only the moral application of indignation, resentment, and reluctant toleration: it is not until the nineteenth century that the verbal form reflects a more literal concern with digestive tolerance.\(^{168}\) Wolsey was a man of great stomach, both literally and figuratively—and as such, he was a man who routinely activated the affective circuits of disgust, in both how he lived and how he died.

Given the nature of contemporary attacks on Wolsey, it is no surprise that motifs of contamination, illness, and purgation are literalized in the depictions of his death. In such accounts, the metaphors of political disgust are desublimated, inscribing themselves nakedly on Wolsey’s increasingly hollow form. The cardinal, in fact, seemed aware of the implicit analogy between this evacuation of his body and the larger evacuation of his moral, even spiritual identity: according to Cavendish, in his final days he referred to himself as “a very wretche, replett with mysery, not worthy to be estemed but for a vile abiecte, vttirly cast a way.”\(^{169}\) This remark is telling—for it is in the discourse of abjection, as famously articulated by Julia Kristeva, that modern critical theory most squarely engages with the issue of disgust. As the “jettisoned object” of the symbolic order, the abject exists “on the edge of non-existence and hallucination”; it is those necessary preconditions of existence that must, in their loathsomeness, be forcefully cast from sight.\(^{170}\) Kristeva explains the notion further in a catalog of abjection:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.

Kristeva’s understanding of the abject is a meditation on the dynamics of disgust—yet it also helps account for the unmistakable ghostliness of
Wolsey’s last days. It seems likely that the ultimate destination of Wolsey’s final journey was the executioner’s block; when informed of the cardinal’s passing, the Spanish chronicler alleges, Henry VIII remarked that “I suppose he guessed that I wanted to give him a different death.”

As a walking dead man, Wolsey in his final days typifies the loathsome uncanniness of abjection: he was a grotesque parody of the Cardinal Wolsey who ruled the realm for nearly two decades, an evacuated shell that revealed the ultimate fragility of “identity, system, order.” That the chroniclers equally insist upon marking the physical decomposition of Wolsey’s body suggests the material analogue to the spiritual exile occasioned by King Henry’s rejection. We watch as the cardinal is gradually reduced to a corpse, the form of empty matter that entails “the utmost of abjection.” Wolsey ends his life as an object of disgust—in the same manner as, for many contemporaries, he had lived it.