A table, a bed, or a body enclosed in clean linen is sheltered from the world. Smocks, shirts, stockings, table cloths, and bed sheets demarcate the discrete boundaries that separate clean objects from unclean environments. The smell of freshly laundered linen is an announcement: “This area has been decontaminated. It has been purified of promiscuous pollutions.” But grease has a way of seeping through these borders. Fats and oils indiscriminately and wantonly dribble from the body’s pores. They ooze forth from cookware and flatware, sticking to and staining skin, hair, and cloth. In his ribald poem, “The Praise of Cleane Linnen,” John Taylor the Water Poet (1578–1653) gives an example of how grease debases a white handkerchief:

A **Handkerchief**e may well be cal’d in brief,  
Both a perpetuall leacher, and a thiefe,  
About the lippes it’s kissing, good and ill,  
Or else ‘tis diuing in the pocket still,  
As farre as from the pocket to the mouth,  
So is it’s pilgrimage with age or youth.  
At Christining-banquets and at funerals,  
At weddings (Comfit-makers festiuals)  
A **Handkerchief**e doth filch most manifold,  
And sharke and steale as much as it can hold.  
’Tis soft, and gentle, yet this I admire at,  
At sweet meates ‘tis a tyrant, and a pyrat.  
Moreouer ‘tis a **Handkerchiefes** high place,  
To be a Scauenger vnto the face,
To cleanse it cleane from sweat and excrements,
Which (not auoyded) were vnsvauory scents.
(ll. 217–232, p. 168)\(^1\)

In the execution of its task, the handkerchief rids the lips and face of
impurities, but in doing so it becomes a lecher, thief, tyrant and pirate.
A simple swatch of linen becomes an unsavory thing as it scavenges
for waste and fondles the flesh in the pockets’ recesses. The poem goes
on to describe the corruptible character of an entire closet full of linens
and their daily struggle with undignified pollutions. The sexually stim-
ulating social energy of handkerchiefs and table cloths spills over into
the bedroom where a different species of linen wraps the body in sexual
caress — an image Taylor describes with mock solemnity:

Your Dinner and your Supper ouer-past,
By linnen in your beds, you are imbrac’d,
Then, ‘twixt the sheetes refreshing rest you take,
And turne from side to side, and sleepe and wake:
And sure the sheetes in euery Christian Nation
Are walles or limits of our generation,
For where desire and loue, combined meets,
Then there’s braue doings ‘twixt a paire of sheets:
But where a Harlots lust doth entertaine,
There one sheets penance, bides the shames of twaine:
To all degree my counsaile here is such
That of the lower sheet, take not too much.
(ll. 81–92, p. 167)

These lines recall how, in the Shakespearean imagination, a mother’s
“celestial bed” can become “enseamed” and “Stew’d in corruption [with]
honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty” (Hamlet, 1.5.56, 3.4.92–94);
or perhaps these lines might remind the reader of Titania’s promise to
“purge” Bottom of his “mortal grossness” on her bed of “pressed flowers”
(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 3.1.159–60); or else, surely, we remember
Othello’s fiery disgust at the thought of Desdemona’s “lust-stained” bed

\(^1\) All quotations from John Taylor the Water Poet are from All the Workes of Iohn
Taylor the Water Poet (London: James Boler, 1630). Subsequent references are cited
parenthetically in text.
and (Othello, 5.1.36). In Taylor’s paean, clean linen is a mark of unsullied sleep, “Christian” sex acts, and a chaste marriage, while a “Harlots lust” stains bed sheets with impure desires.

How then does one rid white linens of a foul stain resulting from sexual corruption? Early modern laundry was a time intensive process involving caustic chemicals that was increasingly outsourced to Dutch and Flemish immigrant women in London and its environs. Leonard Mascall’s A Profitable Booke…to Take Out Spottes and Staines (1583) describes the process involved in this quotidian labor:

Firste yee shall laye all your foule clothes to soke in colde water, then drieue them as yee doe a bucke of clothes, and when they are well drieuen: then shall yee take them all forth of the bucking tubbe, then laye them agayne abroade in the sayd tubbe, without any lye, and ejuer as ye lay them betwixt evry cloth: scrape of chalke thinne all ouer, thus when ye haue all layde them: then put of your lye vnto them, and so chaunge your lye twise or thrise after, then take and wash them forth, and they will be fayre and cleane without greace and very white withall.

The purity of water alone will not suffice as a cleanser. A fatty body such as grease cannot be dissolved in a polar solvent such as water. Grease can only be dissolved by other grease-like substances; it is only attracted to nonpolar solvents such as oils, fats, and waxes. In order to separate grease from linen dirty laundry requires a soap emulsion. To make soap, Elizabethan laundry workers typically used potash or coal ash dissolved in water. Ash mixed with water creates lye, a caustic alkaline solution rich in potassium salts. The worker then cooks lye with a fat to induce a chemical reaction called saponification—the result is soap. The newly formed soap molecules each have a head and a tail. At one end of the molecule the

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2 All quotations from Shakespeare follow The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in text.


4 Alternatively, Mascall includes a recipe for bile soap made using the alkaline gall of an ox instead of rendered fat (A Profitable Booke, 4). Mr. Ford calls Falstaff an ox at the play’s conclusion, alluding to his cuckold’s horns and his symbolic castration (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 5.5.120).
triglyceride from fat attracts grime while the strong basicity of the other end of the molecule—the lye created from potash—attracts water from the wash tub. A stain would thus be surrounded and scrubbed by soap molecules that attach both to the stain and to water, but not to the cloth. Surface tension ebbs and grease molecules detach from cloth and slip into the water.

A laundress’s washing tub is a cauldron for chemical reactions: the properties of lye soap, bleach, cold water, and dirty laundry are each mediated by some other object in the tub in a calculated and measured process of bucking, scraping, rinsing, and repeating. Each object in the tub acts as the key to some other object’s lock; each entity possesses the power to interact with other entities in ways that are unavailable to still other entities. This theory of relations between discrete entities is a crucial aspect of objected-oriented ontologies. As Graham Harman observes, “Any object is a complex and irreducible event; like the moon, one face of the tool is darkened in the silence of its orbit, while another face illuminates and compels us with dazzling surface-effects.”5 Dark to the chemical properties of water, but visible to the lathering suds of a soap emulsion, a grease stain is similarly multifaceted.

Just as the chemical properties of some objects may be withdrawn from the sensitivities of other objects, so too can the potencies of common household objects remain beyond the detection of people. Workers in London’s laundries and sculleries, having become attuned to the unique properties of objects over the course of their daily labors, came to possess a knowledge of lye soap’s potency that was unknown to English chemists. According to the inventor Hugh Plat in his 1594 book, _The Jewell House of Art and Nature_, cultural prejudices and political tensions between the Dutch and the English inhibited the sharing of knowledge of chemistry. As a result, the effectiveness of lye soap as a cleaning agent was unknown to the English except for its prominent use by Dutch and Flemish immigrant women who were familiar with it through “ancient and common

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experience.” Plat affirms that lye is indeed “better and cheaper than the Masons dust for the scouring of our trenchers, and other wooden vessels, and this can our Dutch liskins and Kitchin maids well approve, whose dressors, shelves, and moldingboards, are much whiter and cleaner kept, then those which are washed, and scalded after the English manner.”

As Natasha Korda has noted, these “liskins,” Dutch and Flemish women immigrant laborers, were frequently associated with brothels and sexual impropriety in early modern English culture. The laundress is thus linked with both the sexual pollution of linen and in its ritual purification. John Taylor the Water Poet contests this calumny in his poem, “The Praise of Cleane Linnen”:

All you man-monsters, monstrous Linnen soylers,  
You Shirt polluting tyrants, you sheets spoylers,  
Robustious rude Ruffe-rending raggamentoyes  
Terrritriorian tragma Troyrouantoyes

Remember that your Laundresse paines is great,  
Whose labours onely keepe you sweet and neat:  
Consider this, that here is writ, or said,  
And pay her, (not as was the Sculler paid)  
Call not your Laundresse slut or slabb’ring queane,  
It is her slabb’ring that doth keepe thee cleane.

(II 319–328, p. 169)

Faced with the menace of greasy man-monsters, Taylor extols the “most mondifying, clarifying, purifying, and repurifying” laundress in London,

7 Plat, *The Iewell House of Art and Nature*, 55, G4r. “Liskin” is a generic name for a Dutch maidservant, equivalent to “Lizzie” in English.
8 Natasha Korda notes that many Dutch widows profitably operated large businesses, including laundries that employed immigrant women, and accusations regarding the sexual impropriety of these business owners is best understood “within the context of their participation in a broader network of unregulated commerce, which included but was certainly not limited to sexual commerce.” Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women’s Work and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 115.
9 Undercutting the professed chastity of the laundress, however, is the poem’s sexually suggestive descriptions of the laundress’s labor as well as bawdy descriptions of the linens they are charged with washing. See Korda, *Labors Lost*, 133.
Martha Legge, as well as the object of her labor. The laundress, exercising a care for humble things, restores integrity to the linen and washes away the indiscretions committed on their surfaces. Taylor says he finds the word laundress, associated as it is with a debauched sexual reputation, “to be both vnfitting and derogatory to your comly, commendable, laudable, neate, sweet and seemely calling; for the Anagram of Lawndres is SLAVYNDER” (pp. 164–65). Taylor’s use of anagram draws attention to the multifaceted nature of objects, including laundresses, which may appear innocent and pure or, inversely, lusty and sullied.

Soap has the power to dissolve sexual sin, but the gender gap in the knowledge required for laundry-work leaves men frightfully ignorant of how stained sheets and abused women are rehabilitated. In Shakespeare’s The Rape of Lucrece, after lamenting that “prone lust should stain so pure a bed,” the narrator makes a frighteningly dismissive and cruel suggestion—“The spots whereof could weeping purify, / Her tears should drop on them perpetually” (684–86)—as if tears alone could undo the violence. The plays of Shakespeare feature several scenes in which linens, bed sheets, and handkerchiefs are literally, figuratively, or imagined to be tainted by sexual indiscretion, but only the women of The Merry Wives of Windsor treat their laundry with soap. When faced with Falstaff’s lascivious lusts, Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford employ a laundry basket to purify the household. But just as oily stains cannot be cleansed with water alone, Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page know that greasy desires cannot be repelled solely with upstanding moral purity. A slick suitor is best washed away with merry pranks.

In act 3, scene 3, Falstaff, thinking he has nearly been caught in flagrante delicto, hides inside a buck-basket in order to escape Mr. Ford’s jealous tirade. Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page conceal Falstaff—his own clothes perhaps already beshit or soiled from fear, sexual excitement, or other gross secretions—with “foul linen...as if it were going to bucking” (3.3.131–32). He does not realize that he is actually the butt end

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12 “Bucking” is the sixteenth-century term for bleaching (OED).
of a practical joke. Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page have plotted to punish the lusty knight for his sexual indiscretions by having two servants carry the buck-basket to the laundresses and whitsters at Datchet Mead. There, Falstaff will be dumped into the Thames along with the Fords’ soiled linens.

Presumably, Falstaff does not submit to being scraped with chalk and scrubbed with lye soap, as Mascall describes, and only suffers the presoak in Thames. Nevertheless, the buck-basket, like the laundress’s washing tub, is a means by which grease is transformed, heated, and broken down. Once he is clean and dry, freshly folded and returned to the Garter Inn in Windsor, Falstaff recounts his humiliation in distinctly chemical-humoral terms that recall the dissolution of a stain through a soap emulsion:

[I was] stopped in [the buck-basket] like a strong distillation with stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease. Think of that—a man of my kidney. Think of that—that am as subject to heat as butter; a man of continual dissolution and thaw. It was a miracle to scape suffocation. And in the height of this bath (when I was more than half stew’d in grease, like a Dutch dish) to be thrown into the Thames, and cool’d, glowing-hot, in that surge, like a horse-shoe; think of that—hissing-hot—think of that, Master Brook. (3.5.112–22)

The exhortation to “think of that” is an invitation to speculate about what it is like to be composed of such intemperate substances. In her incisive reading of Windsor’s domestic economy, Wendy Wall describes Falstaff’s body as a disorderly grease ball, “a barely congealed liquid mass of desires subject to dissolution.”13 As a slimy stain that threatens to defile the honor of the Pages and Fords, Falstaff’s flesh is variously likened to pudding variously likened to pudding (2.1.32), whale oil (2.2.65), and other cooking fats (2.2.68, 4.5.98). Shakespeare’s audience would also be familiar with further descriptions of Falstaff from both parts of Henry IV where he is described as a “grease tallow-catch,” “fat as butter,” and an “oily rascal,” (Henry IV, Part 1 2.4.228, 511, 526) who leaks sweat all over England (Henry IV, Part 2 1.2.206–12, 2.4.216–21, 4.3.11–15, Epilogue 30). His thick, viscous, unctuous body oozes and ingratiates itself into other substances. Glutton and lecher,

he adheres to napkins and bedsheets and leaves traces of his corrupting influence from Shrewsbury to Eastcheap. As such, his body is inherently susceptible to the corrective chemical reactions of laundry day. Falstaff prompts us to think about the entailments of reactive substances inside the laundry basket: what is it like to be a stain subjected to a laundress’s labor? What is it like to be a spot of grease washed away in the cold water of the Thames? Of course, Falstaff cannot know exactly the answer to the question; he can only translate the experience through the approximation of simile. And yet, the buck-basket enables, even encourages, speculation through the disruption and amplification of the ambient effects of objects. The claustrophobia of this strange environment makes laundry uncomfortably present in a new way. Encased in the basket and layered in dirty, fetid clothing, Falstaff confronts the qualities of substances face to face. The buck-basket represents the inverse of clean linen—whereas linen is meant to repel outside pollutions, the basket keeps the pollutions sealed inside. Confronted with this stew of grease, Falstaff is undone, deterritorialized, “like a barrow of butcher’s offal” (3.5.5). Because, as Mrs. Page alleges, Falstaff suffers from a “dissolute disease” (3.3.191), he quickly decomposes amid the greasy substances to which he is joined in the buck-basket. He experiences something approximate to what the foul blots of grease experience: separation, emulsification, and mundification.

The use of stage properties in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, particularly in the buck-basket scene, allows us to consider how an object-oriented approach to theater can help us understand the mechanics of comedy. Prop comedy finds humor in the split between objects and their qualities, or what Graham Harman defines as “allure.” As Harman puts it, “a thing becomes alluring when it...animates those properties from within by means of some ill-defined demonic energy.” The comedic prop lies in wait on stage, temporarily withdrawn from our perception, ready-at-hand. The audience is not aware of the comedic prop’s power over characters on stage until appropriated for some unexpected purpose. As Harman explains, objects that seem withdrawn to the rest of us are uncomfortably present-at-hand for the “comic dupe” who bumbles about his environment.

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much to an audience’s amusement. The unexpected deployment of a stage prop suddenly erupts as present-at-hand as the audience is forced to consider its presence anew. Props advance from the background to embarrass and ensnare the object of our laughter.16

Once the stage property is activated by an actor, the “intentional” sensual qualities of objects “breathe into their environment” like “open bottles of wine or [befouled!] linen shirts.”17 Clean linen, once ritually purified, demarcates proper boundaries.18 But when befouled, once stewed together like a greasy “Dutch dish,” dirty laundry signifies the collapse of objects into each other. The labor of laundry seeks to undo this collapse, making what is muddled discrete again. Soap and bleach absolve the dirty linen of its worldliness, at least temporarily. As Taylor writes, the laundress’s living:

…is on two extremes relying,
Shee’s euer wetting, or shee’s euer drying.
As all men dye to liue, and liue to dye,
So doth shee dry to wash, and wash to drye.
Shee runnes like Luna in her circled sphære,
As a perpetuall motion shee doth steare.
(ll. 277–82, p. 169)

The laundress is, in Taylor’s estimation, “like a horse that labours in a mill” forever circling in “perpetuall motion.” The merry wives, too, are not free from their labor after one dowsing of Falstaff in the Thames. His

18 Harman would disagree that the pleasant smell of freshly laundered linen is any different ontologically from the odor of befouled smocks, but these odors are valued differently, as evidenced by Merry Wives and Taylor’s “The Praise of Cleane Linnen.” All objects might be said to “breathe into their environment,” but not all wafting odors carry the same moral stigma. The perceived threat of grease’s foul qualities represents a particularly odious threat that should be avoided. Natasha Korda also notes that “Linen underclothes served the important function of protecting expensive costumes from the sweat of the actor’s body and would have needed laundering on a regular basis” and that it is very likely that Shakespeare’s acting company relied on the same networks of labor represented in Merry Wives and “The Praise of Cleane Linnen.” She offers the suggestive possibility that the play’s buck-basket is the one the acting company used for their own dirty laundry. Labors Lost, 116–17.
greasy desires ooze their way back into Windsor a second and third time only to be subjected to further expurgations. Burdened with an unattainable standard of immaculate purity and under continual threat of greasy corruption, laundresses and housewives are given the impossible task of policing the borders between discrete objects and their environs. Only a soap emulsion can negotiate the narrow line between clean objects and a filthy world. Drawn as it is to both grease and water, the soap emulsion is the chemical equivalent of being “merry, and yet honest too” (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 4.2.105).