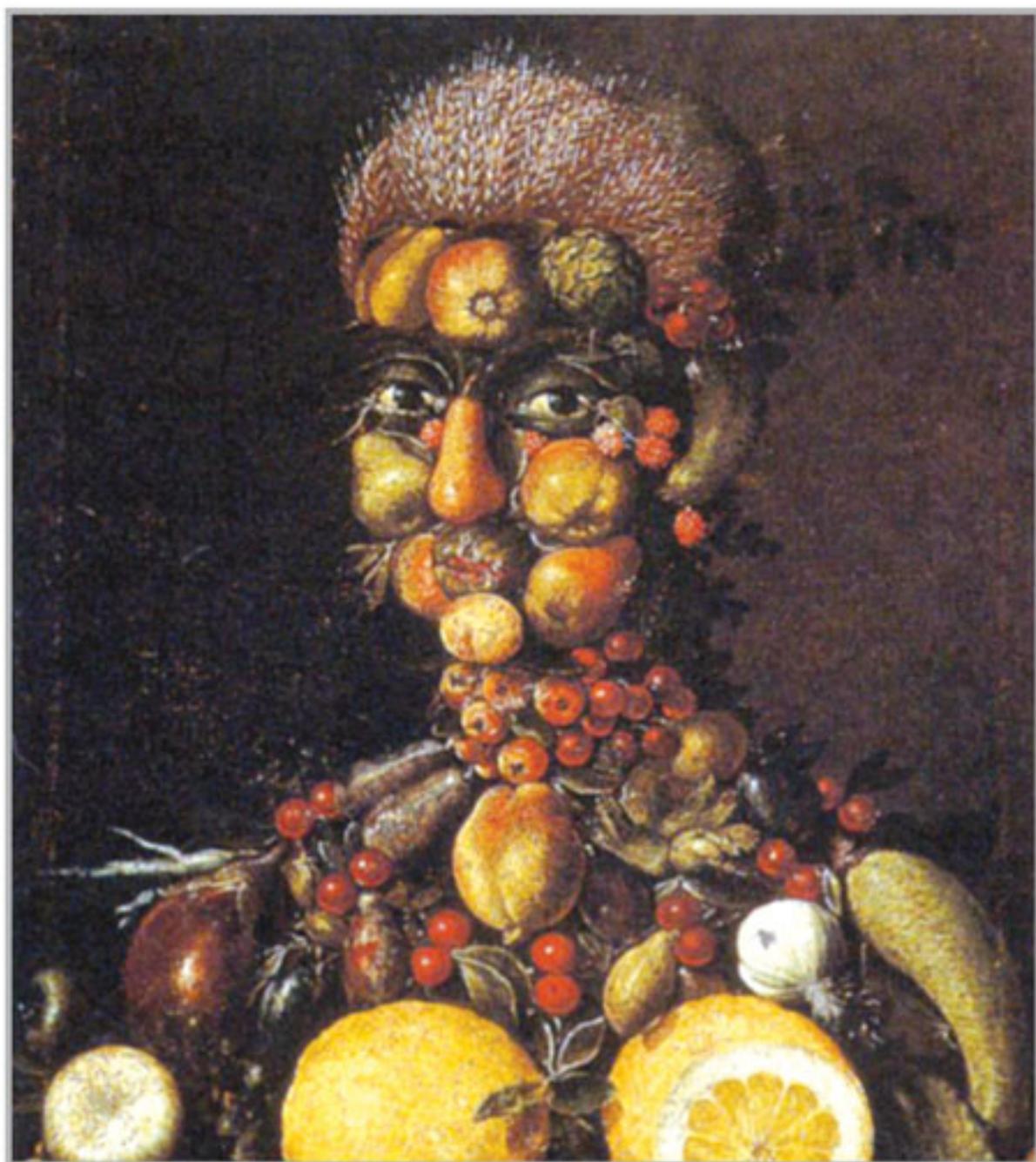


Knowing Shakespeare

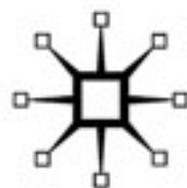
Senses, Embodiment and Cognition



*Edited by Lowell Gallagher
and Shankar Raman*

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Knowing Shakespeare

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Senses, Embodiment and Cognition

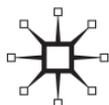
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1

Introduction

Lowell Gallagher and Shankar Raman

Democritus, after having stated that “in reality there is no white, or black, or bitter or sweet,” added: “Poor mind, from the senses you take your arguments, and then want to defeat them? Your victory is your defeat.”

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958: 275)

PORTIA. The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark
When neither is attended, and I think
The nightingale, if she should sing by day
When every goose is cackling, would be thought
No better a musician than the wren.
How many things by season season'd are
To their right praise and true perfection!

The Merchant of Venice, 5.1.102–8.¹

From the time of Democritus through Shakespeare to Arendt, the proper relationship between the senses and cognition has remained a topic of debate – and an occasion for great art. Both the laughing philosopher and Shakespeare’s heroine recognize the impossibility of simply seeing things “as they are.” But whereas Democritus wryly concedes the mind’s pyrrhic victory in mastering the senses, Portia “seasons” that skepticism with an appreciation of their suasive power. Her nocturnal rumination eschews the pugnacity and poignancy of Democritus’s metaphor, enlarging the field of maneuver. Now contingency appears not only in thought’s dependence on the vagaries of sense perception, but also in our ability to profit from this mutability. After all, Portia’s own “season”

in Venice has shown her (and her spectators) how mistaking may produce unanticipated “perfection.” She is indeed a “season’d” skeptic, not paralyzed but emboldened by the prospect of double truth in which both thought and senses trade. A wily pupil of Democritus as well as Bellario, the hybrid figure of Portia/Balthasar serves as an apt sentinel to the terrain covered in this book.

Viewing the legacy of Portia’s attitude from a Whiggish – though not necessarily for that reason inaccurate – vantage point, we might say that that the radical skepticism of David Hume represents the logical endpoint of early modern discourses on the senses and cognition:

I may venture to affirm of ... mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions. Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change: nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same.

(Hume 1978: 252–3)

Hume’s insistence on sense perception as the unmitigable basis for knowledge; his assertion of the vivacity of belief produced by sensory impressions as the ground for rational judgment; his defense of a probabilistic knowledge resting on inductive inferences drawn from *a posteriori* experience of the world: these distinctive features of Humean skepticism can all be traced to the re-envisioning, over the course of the long sixteenth century, of knowledge and the role of the senses in its acquisition.

For Hume, sense-perception is the *sine qua non* of the only kinds of knowledge we are likely to obtain. Not only is the body ultimately nothing more than a “bundle or collection of different perceptions,” but its ostensibly higher operations – be they the passions or thoughts – are equally tied to impressions derived from sensory data.

And were all my perceptions remov’d by death, and cou’d I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate, after the dissolution of my body, I shou’d be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. If any one, upon serious and unprejudic’d reflection, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can

allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me.

(Hume 1978: 252)

This refusal to grant the existence of such totalities as a self or body which endures beneath constantly changing sense-perceptions serves as a guiding-post in reconsidering two decades of productive scholarly engagement with the topic of the body in early modern culture.

These labors have led to an ambivalent result. While confirming the body's centrality for the period – as organizing metaphor and material substrate – they have equally sparked awareness that to speak *the* body is already to simplify. Certainly, all bodies are not the same. Taking into account gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class rightfully acknowledges the need to differentiate among societal bodies. But such distinctions still rely on a body – *any* body – as the natural and elemental unit of analysis, a post-Cartesian stance that privileges dualistic formulations opposing body to mind, soul, world, society, and so on. Granted, there is a long pre-Renaissance tradition of related dualisms, reaching back to Plato and to elements of pre-Socratic thought. But these very oppositions become blurred and challenged at the outset of the humanist project. When Leonardo da Vinci represents man as the measure of all things, it is not his physical body alone that is signified; when Pico della Mirandola describes man as a chameleon, he invokes more than the domain of instrumental rationality.

Looking back upon the early modern period from Hume's perspective allows us to reassemble the body by starting with the senses and the forms of cognition, experience, and discernment they make available. What if we treated embodiment as a constellation of different kinds of sensory and perceptual engagement with the world, rather than as a predicate or object of knowledge and power? What if we think of bodies as sites of an interrelationship among multiple discourses that run diffusely across, over, and around their contours? Pursuing such questions returns us to what a tradition of skeptical philosophy has long grappled with, but is often neglected by scholars. The shift in perspective might allow us to assign the Cartesian understanding of the body its proper place; it would also enable a suppler grasp of the diverse modes of experience and cognition than is afforded by the Cartesian legacy. Such is the impetus behind *Knowing Shakespeare*: it stages the dramas of the early modern senses, as they are disclosed to us within Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre.

The drama of the senses

That there are indeed such dramas is amply borne out by the wide-ranging arguments developed by our contributors. They reveal in Shakespeare's plays not only deep engagement with distinctive features of early modern phenomenologies, but also tendrils of thought that make him seem our phenomenological contemporary as well. The essays gathered here suggest that Shakespearean drama is underwritten precisely by the *agon* between, on the one hand, received understandings of how the senses produce knowledge and experience, and, on the other, alternative cognitive and emotive frameworks, be these contemporaneous, historically emergent, or merely potential.

The premodern view finds telling expression in Aristotle's enigmatic concept of a "common sensation" (*koinē aisthēsis* or *sensorium commune*) through whose unifying agency the information from the external senses reached the mind.² As is well known, the overarching early modern category through which physical sensations were understood was that of the bodily passions, which included the emotions and the perceptions of pain and pleasure. Moreover, as Jean Starobinski reminds us, the category of the passions was internally differentiated: "For a long while, pain and pleasure were not attributed to specific sensory systems ... whereas the traditional term, *internal sense* (*sensus internus*), referred to the conscious activities that the mind developed in and of itself (reason, memory and imagination) on the basis of information provided by the *external senses* (sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell)" (1989: 354). Aristotelian common sense thus mediated complex sensory perception as well as the sensation of sensing. But it informed, too, the hermeneutic aspect of sense (where "sense" denotes "meaning"). A trace of this complexity survives in the pun held by the word "sense" – as sensation, signification, and direction.

A number of our contributors unfold the implications of Shakespeare's nuanced evocation of the Aristotelian archive (which broadly includes Hellenistic and Latin developments in medical doctrine and natural philosophy). By deciphering Shakespeare's encodings of the commingled adventures of sense perception and sensory engagement, they show how the plays test the seams of Scholastic faculty psychology (McDowell, Smith); register gains and losses attending the emergence of new scientific paradigms (Crane, Raman, Marchitello); and mediate our own subjective and intersubjective ways of knowing and experiencing the world (Tribble, Cahill). While these chapters emphasize the epistemological dimensions of the senses, they also show how early modern

understandings of bodily sensation opened onto the domains of affect, emotion, and social opinion (Smith, Cahill, and Henderson).

Of course, the Aristotelian is not the only relevant body of thought to leave an imprint in Shakespeare's works. Biblical tradition covered a wide range of devotional and mystical idioms that mobilized variously spiritualized senses of sensation.³ Notably, Shakespeare's religious and poetic cultures remained conversant with Pauline, Augustinian, and Thomist intuitions of the mystical envelope surrounding and penetrating the human sensorium. Paul's vision of a world transformed by the onset of grace; Augustine's eroticized sense of the supersensuous order of creaturely affect induced by the experience of divine love; and the Thomist conception of a permeable boundary between natural and supernatural life: these legacies, though vigorously debated in Reformation and Counter-Reformation strongholds, nonetheless named important branches of the era's *lingua franca* of sensory experience.⁴

A Shakespearean touchstone appears in Bottom's report of his "most rare vision" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 4.1.204–5): "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was" (4.1.211–13). The comic undertow to Bottom's bottomless confusion (as he promises, the dream "hath no bottom") derives mainly from the garbled memory of Paul's messianic transfiguration of sensation's empire:

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
Nor the human heart conceived,
What God has prepared for those who love him" –
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.
(1 Cor 2.9–10)⁵

Bottom's inadvertent caricature sounds a dissonant echo of the Augustinian and Thomist reflexes noted above, particularly when you consider how the substance of Bottom's "dream" (the sylvan folly with Titania) combines accents of disorienting wonder and pleasure with a subnote of fear at the prospect of unsolicited congress between creaturely and divine realms.

If the joke here is on Bottom, it is not entirely so, because the comedy of Bottom's patchy literacy is "season'd" by the sheer diffusion of senses it conveys – not least the sense that the wonder of his "rare vision" expresses itself through, not despite, the garbled Pauline reference. Tellingly, the term commonly used in modern literary criticism to describe Bottom's transgressive commingling of senses – synesthesia – comes from Romantic

and Symbolist poetics rather than the Renaissance rhetorical tradition.⁶ But Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* raises the intriguing possibility that the Romantic sublime may well owe a silent debt to Bottom's unruly imagination, a debt we continue to forget to pay:

Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear, and feel.

(2002: 229)

That the ways we describe the world shape the ways we experience the world has become a virtual shibboleth for contemporary cultural materialist studies on the senses and the emotions. Consider the currency of the assumption that critical attention to the language of early modern physiology and theology enables an "unlearning" that yields imaginative access to how early modern subjects sensed and felt.⁷ This impetus is reflected in a number of the essays collected here as well. They seek to reconstruct what the editors of *Reading the Early Modern Passions* might term the changing "cultural scripts" of early modern sensation, seeing texts less as discrete artifacts awaiting unified interpretation than as force fields or vectors of divergent mechanisms of sense production. Recovering anterior phenomenologies, Gail Paster and others have suggested, demands sustained attention to the "materiality of the passions," which is achieved in part by "literaliz[ing] those locutions that we have long presumed to be figurative" (Paster et al. 2004: 16).⁸ Accordingly, textuality is itself redescribed; it turns into a mode of witnessing the sensed and felt conditions enabling changes in culture's grasp of the real.

Yet Bottom's mingle-mangle equally emphasizes the extent to which the letter itself is always already a figure or symbol. If we take him at his word, "it is past the wit of man to say what dream it was." Even as the sensory scripts of early modern experience are only disclosed to us through the letters of their texts, the experiences themselves are literally foreclosed to us – as the litany of negations in Bottom's speech suggests. The passage retrieves, if fleetingly, an essential aspect of the kinesthesia gestured at in the biblical archive: a dynamic and transitory experience that evades the senses even as it builds upon and (re)configures them. It reveals in sense perception itself a necessary relation to what lies

outside or beyond the senses – be it the thing itself, the ineffability of the divine, or (as Bottom’s paradox shows) the lability of the very sense of sense. His “mistake” provides a window onto Shakespeare’s habitual modes of playing and working on the senses to intervene in inherited philosophical and religious understandings of the primordial communicability, as well as the received distinctions, between the sensible and the intelligible, animal and human, flesh and spirit. Our contributors make sense of this persistent dimension in Shakespeare’s plays in different ways. On the one hand, this problem occasions other historical turns that detect in Shakespeare a struggle over the nature of *kinesis* or motion (Raman), or that query the very category of experience and how it is made (Rzepka, Deutermann). On the other hand, we are led through and beyond the letter of Shakespeare’s texts to their performative actualizations (Cahill, Henderson). Such translations – “Bless thee, Bottom ... Thou art translated” – hold out, if obliquely, the promise of realizing in our own sensory affections the imprints of senses past.

Skeptical traditions

The conjunction above of theology, Renaissance Aristotelianism, and Humean empiricism points to a context implicit throughout *Knowing Shakespeare*: the evolution of fideist skeptical thought in early modern Europe. This context furnishes, too, the motive for choosing Shakespeare as focal author. Given the institutional and cultural surroundings for most of our academic labors, the choice does not immediately require special pleading. Shakespeare’s canonical position – reaffirmed with ever more generous consequence over the past few decades – has meant that our most vital critical debates are drawn almost ineluctably toward his texts, as their gravitational center. The essays collected here make a more specific case for Shakespeare’s importance, by calling attention to the pervasive engagement of his plays with how the sixteenth-century revival of skepticism produced or reconstituted the senses as objects of inquiry and analysis.

To say this is to make explicit an as yet unstated assumption: that the senses have a history. In *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson clearly intended this assertion as provocative:

The scandalous idea that the senses have a history is one of the touchstones of our own historicity; if ... we still feel that the Greeks, or better still, primitive peoples were very much like ourselves, and

in particular lived their bodies and their senses in the same way, then we surely have not made much progress in thinking historically.

(1981: 229)

Today, in the wake of a number of excellent studies on the senses and on the emotions, the claim seems far less controversial. Indeed, among scholars, it may well seem more provocative to assert the converse.⁹ Nevertheless, it is worth pausing here to consider briefly what it means to assert the historicity of the senses.

For it must be said that the early modern period assumed, as do the essays gathered here, that as biological organs and capacities the senses are largely universal. This assumption holds even for texts that turn a skeptical eye on biology. Sir Walter Raleigh posthumously published *The Skeptic*, for instance, first insists that the nature of things in the world must remain obscure because sensory organs vary from species to species, and from person to person:

If then one and the very same thing to the eye seem red, to another pale, and white to another: If one and the same thing seem not hot or cold, dry or moist in the same degree to the several creatures which touch it ... [then what] they are in their own nature, whether red or white, bitter or sweet, healthful or hurtful, I cannot tell. For why should I presume to proffer my conceit and imagination in affirming that a thing is thus and thus, before the conceit of other living creatures, who may well think it otherwise to them than it doth to me.

(1651: 11–12)

Despite his relativism, Raleigh does not in fact challenge the assumption that the *mode* of functioning of the senses – be it across or within a species – is shared. That certain animals have sharper senses than humans supplies grounds for defending the legitimacy of what they perceive as against what we perceive, but such insight does not qualitatively distinguish between mechanisms of perception.

Michel de Montaigne seems even more extreme, since he is perfectly willing to entertain the notion that there may be more senses than the five apparent to us. “I have my doubts,” he says

whether man is provided with all the senses of nature. I see many animals that live a complete and perfect life, some without sight, others without hearing; who knows whether we too do not still lack

one, two, three or many senses? For if any one is lacking, our reason cannot discover its absence. It is the privilege of the senses to be the extreme limit of our perception. There is nothing beyond them that can help us discover them; no, nor can one sense discover the other.

(1965: 444)

Tellingly, Montaigne does not deny that each sense has its “proper effect”; the knowledge of things continues to depend upon the “consultation and concurrence” of the senses, however many there may be (1965: 446). That humans lack, say, the faculty to perceive magnetic attraction – and must necessarily be unaware of their lack – supports a skeptical stance regarding the possibility of complete and certain knowledge; but the concession does not entail doubt as to how the senses work. All human beings are assumed to share, with a greater or lesser sensitivity, roughly the same biological apparatus, even if the precise modes of its functioning remain obscure. No doubt, biology too evolves; however, its evolutionary time-scale is of a different order not only from that of human life-cycles but from that of social cycles as well. From this vantage point, the senses cannot be said to have a history, or at least not one discernible to us as a distinctive narrative, *causa sui*.¹⁰

If the senses are nonetheless historical, their historicity takes shape precisely in the spacings between selves and things, expressing itself in how we understand the ostensible givenness of the shared biological inheritance mediating between us and what we sense. This interstitial lodging of the senses speaks to what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the fundamental “transimmanence” of sensory experience (1997: 55).¹¹ Simply put: how we explain how we think, know, and experience our world is both a historical and a historicizing question. After all, any explanation of sense-perception necessarily presupposes that we know what needs to be explained as well as what would count as an adequate explanation. Yet even a cursory comparison reveals the vast difference between, say, late medieval and early enlightenment approaches to such issues. For the scholastic tradition, to explain something meant to specify its cause: by demonstrating why that thing is the kind of thing that it is. Accounting for sense-perception required, then, specifying its constitutive material, efficient, formal, and final causes. Much of this scheme drops out in Hume, who turns causality from an explanatory category into an effect of “constant conjunction.” It becomes something like an after-image resulting from the habitual association of external things and sense impressions. The contrast between these divergent