

# The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness

Edited by Jen Boyle and Wan-Chuan Kao

## THE RETRO-FUTURISM OF CUTENESS



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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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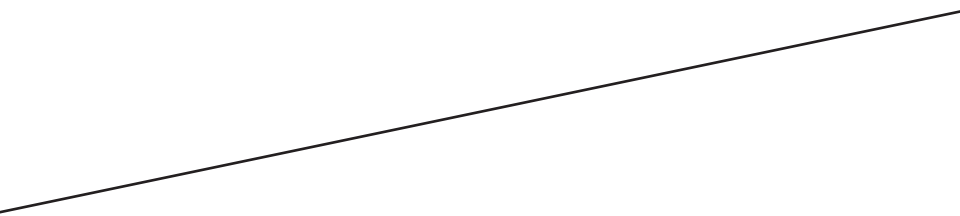
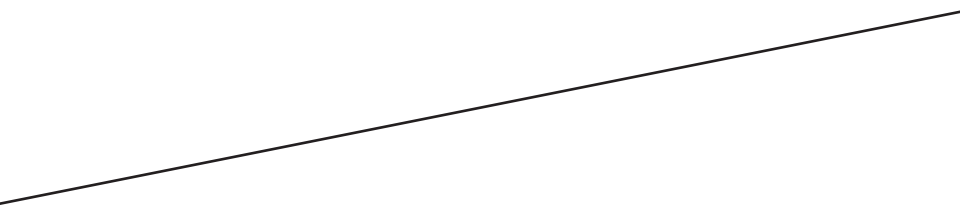
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# Introduction: The Time of the Child

*Wan-Chuan Kao & Jen Boyle*

The Pokémon Go craze went global in the summer of 2016. Gamers, through their smartphone screens and cameras, could see an “augmented reality” — one animated by adorable pokémon that they had to find, catch, and collect — superimposed on the world around them. Playing the game inside the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, we found ourselves mesmerized by the eerie entanglement of the embodied works of art all around us and the disembodied figures of cuteness overrunning the place. A strange temporal nexus had transformed and overtaken the museum. There, behind a Greek statue, lurked Pikachu. Inside one of the major aesthetic archives in the world, we witnessed not only the backward mapping of the postmodern cute onto old artifacts but also the forward projection of cute potential from the same relics of art. Moving through a space of clashing aesthetic modalities, we were children once more.

The study of cuteness, at its heart, is an investigation of the problematics of temporality. Faced with a cute object, the subject makes a simultaneous double move: the subject regresses to the time-space of childhood and projects the child onto the future. The cute is always already the child, the childlike, and the childish across species and animacy lines. Even among more “adult” manifestations of the cute — say, sado-cute or porno-cute — the ghost of the child, or more specifically, the *body* of the child, remains the foundational source of sensual, emotional, and cog-

nitive arousal, despite transformations that might have rendered the child utterly unrecognizable. Cuteness is therefore a retro-futuristic aesthetic-affective category, at once nostalgic and teleological. In the rapture of the “Awww” utterance, the cute child is endlessly reborn in a tautology of adoration.

The default double temporal movements of the cute response might be explained by Konrad Lorenz’s theory of “child schema” (*Kindchenschema*) that postulates a set of juvenile features—such as a round, soft body with a disproportionately large head and round eyes—that trigger a person’s instinctual caretaking response. The tenacity of the figure of the child, or the *idea* of the child, is driven by biology. Cuteness is an evolutionary adaptation, an aesthetic in the service of biology. But as powerful as Lorenz’s theory has been, scholars have questioned and complicated the child-schema thesis. As social scientists have demonstrated, caretaking is but one of a range of cute responses possible; the broader aim of cuteness is to facilitate greater socialization, which may or may not involve nurture and protection. We have overprivileged the child in the affective economy of cuteness. Put differently: not every child is cute, and not every cute object is a child. The cute object may take the subject backward to the primal scene of trauma or forward to a postapocalyptic ruin. Thomas LaMarre, analyzing the figure of the child in Hayao Miyazaki’s films, contends that “Miyazaki’s children or tweens are not so much about purity or innocence as about a sensory-motor openness, elasticity, and malleability. The child does not simply return you to the old pretechnological world but opens the possibility of a posttechnological world” (130). There may be a cute child in the past or the future, but this child is Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, howling in the wilderness of civilization.

If cuteness, mediated through the child, facilitates a kind of aesthetic time travel backward and forward, it paradoxically freezes time as well. Part of the charm of the cute object is its seeming stasis, permanence, and resilience—qualities that contribute to a sense of security. Cuteness, as much as it allows for temporal fantasies, remains outside of time. The child does

not grow up. Frances Richards suggests that cuteness “stabilizes infancy, or the frailty of old age, or the foolishly unconscious actions of a supposedly competent adult, by reframing them in an atemporal, nonbiological, and consequence-free zone, not entirely unrelated to the fixed reality inside a picture” (95). In effect, the cute object is the commodity par excellence, with its promise of eternal sameness of the pleasure of consumption.

On the one hand, cuteness is inextricable from modern capitalism and consumer culture. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) dates the first reference to “cute” in the sense of “attractive, pretty, charming” to 1834. Daniel Harris, Sianne Ngai, and Joshua Paul Dale, in their foundational studies of cuteness, have mostly replicated the *OED*’s etymological impulses and confined their analyses of cuteness attached to a historiography of the rise of modernity, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The commodified cute thereby charts the emergence of modern categories of gender, sexuality, growth, development, production, consumption, habits, and habitats.

On the other hand, because of its temporal versatility (the ability to move backward and forward or to freeze), cuteness also holds the promise of endowing subjects with agency and the possibility of moving before, beyond, and also along with, if not entirely escaping, modernity. Ngai suggests that the cute object essentially functions as D.W. Winnicott’s transitional object, which is crucial to an infant’s transition from a world of “me” (the Lacanian realm of images) to a world of “not me” (the Lacanian realm of symbols). A transitional object facilitates the infant’s adaptation to the mother’s failure to sustain the illusion of being part of the infant’s self by serving as an object that is simultaneously “me’ and “not me.” Through the transitional object, the infant deploys various coping mechanisms, among which are “[r]emembering, reliving, fantasizing, [and] dreaming the *integrating of past, present, and future*” (Winnicott 10, emphasis added). What is crucial here are the flexible temporal maneuvers available to the subject in possession of the cute or transitional object.



But what happens when the integration of past, present, and future fails to take place? Or, what happens when one consciously rejects such integration in the first place? The possible disavowal of the project of identity formation and integration, we contend, is one of the charms of cuteness. In this sense, cute studies shares an uncanny kinship, as well as a set of critical apparatuses, with queer studies. Cuteness's outsideness of time, as much as its situatedness within time, mirrors the complex and ambivalent relationship between temporality and queerness. Queer time, for Jack Halberstam, is a perverse turning away from narratives of heteronormativity, modernity's categorical thinking, and consumerist models of gender identity and sexuality (Dinshaw 182). And Michael D. Snediker recently reflects on the shared anachronism between cuteness and queer theory: "cuteness's flirtation with anachronism — the only slightly dubious fantasy that what presently counts as cute would have similarly registered across history — both arises from and gravitates toward the same questions of investment and interstitial being that queer theory continues to help us re-articulate" (292). If Lee Edelman associates the future with "the fascism of the baby's face" (151), Michael O'Rourke, channeling L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, notes that "a rejection of futurity [...] is at least partially about a refusal or recusal of cuteness" and invites us to consider cuteness's capacity for sustenance — to have lived, to be living, and to live on. There may be a cute child in the past or future, but this child was and will be decidedly queer.

Acting on her queer desire for history, Carolyn Dinshaw reaches out and holds onto queer touches across time made possible by "affective connections with the past" (178). In *The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness*, we similarly call for aesthetic and affective connections to cuteness across time. But this volume is not a genealogy of aesthetic that rescues premodern stillborns, present orphans, or future unborns of cuteness. The contributors examine cuteness archives, a kind of aesthetic media archaeology, without the anxiety of producing historiography. Moreover, we question whether or not the time of commodity must be the critical paradigm for the aesthetic organization of temporality.

The time of commodity, we contend, has led to a restrictive and problematic mapping of aesthetic value judgments onto cute embodiments across past, present, and future. That is, the condescension to and dismissal of “minor” aesthetic categories, in tandem with the politics of respectability, are the results of an understanding of time based solely on capitalist production and consumption. Cute studies has been persistently relegated to a critical-aesthetic ghetto precisely because of the commodified ghost of the child schema.

The history of aesthetics, of course, did not begin with Kant and Burke. Albertus Magnus, in *De Pulcho et Bono*, defines universal beauty as one that demands “mutual proportions among all things and their elements and principles [...] with the clarity of form” (qtd. in Eco 25). And while there are elements of what could be called an “impure” aesthetics throughout the early modern period, sublime affects and proportionality continue to be the markers of aesthetic robustness. Cuteness is neither the sublime nor the well proportioned. It is a bastard child of the dainty and the dumpy; what’s beautiful may not be cute, but what’s ugly and monstrous may be. Cute cues and affects: softness, roundness, infancy, femininity, helplessness, vulnerability, harmlessness, play, enjoyment, awkwardness, neediness, intimacy, homeliness, and simplicity. At the same time, cuteness is cheapness, manipulation, delay, repetition, hierarchy, immaturity, frivolity, refusal, tantrum, and dependence. Cuteness is perhaps *the* aesthetic threshold: “*too* cute” is a backhanded compliment. And more than the pop-cultural *kawaii* (literally, “acceptable love”), “cute” — the aphetic form of “acute” — also carries the sense of “clever, keen-witted, sharp.” The Latin *acutus* embraces the sharpened, the pointed, the nimble, the discriminating, and the piercing. To be cute is to be in pain; cuteness is a figure of Roland Barthes’s punctum or Georges Bataille’s point of ecstasy.

The pain of the cute experience is symptomatic of the forces of deformation at work in the aesthetic-affective encounter. For Harris and Ngai, deformation is sadistic: the cute object invites violent handling or mutilation by the subject. The test of cute-

ness is the transitional object's capacity to survive the "squeeze." For Dale, in contrast, deformation is masochistic: the subject invites violence out of the desire to project the cute object. We suggest that deformation is also a temporal maneuver: squeeze, hold, and release. If time were a cute object, it too must survive the sado-masochistic deformation. The contributors, with a flair for cuteness (a queer pose), "squeeze" the cuteness archive. Acknowledging the tenacious hold of the child, the essays in this volume nonetheless seek embodiments of cuteness outside of, other than, around, or beyond the child.

### Let the Cute Times Roll

Cuteness offers not only an aesthetic-affective "good time" but salvation time. In "Torturer-Cute," Andrea Denny-Brown investigates the stylization of Christian salvation history in late medieval cycle drama, where temporalities of the human and the divine intersect in both the private reading of drama as text and in the public staging of drama as performance. Denny-Brown focuses on the fifteenth-century Towneley *Play of the Dice* by the anonymous Wakefield Master, which reenacts a crucial moment of the Passion when a group of Roman soldiers, known as "torturers" in medieval Europe, cast lots for Christ's unseamed garment. Stylized expression, Denny-Brown argues, generates aesthetic experience across various affective registers: verbal, visual, auditory, and kinetic. The *Play of the Dice* deploys an aesthetic modality akin to Ngai's notion of "mute poetics": miniaturization and deverbalization as means of cutifying language. As a macaronic hybrid text, the *Play* stages the cute fetishization of the Latin speech of Pontius Pilate vis-à-vis the comedic vulgarization of the Middle English vernacular of the three Torturers, who are portrayed as childish dandies obsessed with the pursuit of pleasures and buffoonery. Cuteness becomes an affective creative mode; the speeches, bodies, and appearances of the Torturers mirror the lowbrow doggerel verse form that shrinks in size as the play progresses. The resulting effect is what Denny-Brown terms "torturer-cute," an aesthetic modality rooted

in the Latin *tortura* (twisting) that works to inflect and absorb the shock of salvation violence. In the confluence of temporalities, cute bodies, objects, and feelings become twisted. Cuteness serves as a strategy for engaging with trauma and also deferring painful confrontation.

The twisting of bodies, made possible by cuteness, finds real-life manifestation in religious asceticism. Elizabeth Howie, in “Indulgence and Refusal: Cuteness, Asceticism, and the Aestheticization of Desire,” offers a reflective and provocative theoretical twisting of temporality via cuteness. The spiritual discipline of the mortification of the flesh is not so different from the cuddly pleasures embodied in the cute object; both, Howie contends, place the body under duress and amplify desire. A tiny community of medieval monks that dwelled on the small island of Skellig Michael, off the coast of Ireland, practiced self-denial that aroused tiny and childlike desires for comfort and fullness. The ascetic body, imitating the crucified body of Christ, shares with the cute body a willful woundedness that heightens the body’s vulnerability and capacity for intimacy. Allowing for contradictions without collapsing them, asceticism simultaneously denies desire and places it at the center of spiritual yearning—refusal works in tandem with indulgence. The ascetic’s desire to master the body leads to recognition of his surrender to its needs. And the “sweet lack” of cuteness that triggers revulsion, Howie suggests, parallels asceticism’s embrace of disgust as a desirable form of spirituality. If medieval asceticism’s bodily deformation is an aestheticization of piety, contemporary cuteness’s bodily distortion is a secularization of asceticism under capitalism.

The machinery of capitalism is inseparable from the production and consumption of the modern cultural phenomenon of cuteness. In “From ‘Awe’ to ‘Awww’: Cuteness and *The Idea of the Holy* in Christian Commodity Culture,” Claire Maria Chambers examines the alignment of consumerism, theology, devotion, and aesthetics. Chambers contends that the postmodern commodification of Christianity via the cute aesthetic exemplifies Rudolph Otto’s concepts of “creature-feeling” and the “numi-

nous.” For Otto, the holy is the numinous because it is terrifying and fascinating. In the face of the numinous, the devotee experiences creature-feeling, a sense of lowliness that gestures to the absolute might of the divine, and seeks approach to divinity through religious icons and relics. The consumer culture of cuteness, however, has transformed traditional object-oriented devotional praxes. In particular, the Precious Moments commercial empire of dolls, figurines, and illustrations has given rise to what Chambers terms “devotional Christian kitsch”: adoration is possible because of the adorability of the cute object, and vice versa. Precious Moments sells because it performs the comforts and therapeutic functions of faith; the figurines’ cuteness is numinousness. More important, Precious Moments fuses the figures of the Child, the Christian, and the cute object. Cuteness’s logic of power through powerlessness is thereby mapped onto faith. The ideal Christian is not simply meek but cute and childlike. Interpreting the Precious Moments chapel at its company headquarters, Chambers argues that the moment of bodily death is transformed into the moment of rebirth; the Christian gains a saint-like new body through regression, infantilization, and cutification. The cutified religious object suspends the moment of death and retreats into prepubescence. The Precious Moments figurine is what Richard Lindsay would label a “hyperreal child”; it is *like* a child. As the faithful move from “awe,” in the presence of numinousness, to “awww,” in that of cuteness, the desire for the impossible is the desire for the real.

Cuteness’s power resides in its logic of adoration and arousal. As Justin Mullis argues in “‘All the Pretty Little Ponies’: Bronies, Desire, and Cuteness,” cuteness ignites forms of desire other than innocuous affection or care giving. In fact, one of the most charged encounters with the cute object is premised on the object’s promise of erotic arousal. Through ethnography and critical analysis, Mullis investigates modes of erotic engagements with the culture of cuteness among “bronies,” adult male fans of the animated *My Little Pony* franchise. Digital technology has made possible the proliferation of brony fan art and fan fiction, especially erotica depicting cute, anthropomorphized female

equine characters engaged in sexual acts across the spectrum of sexual orientations. Mullis focuses on a crucial site of cuteness culture: fandom that reappropriates commodities for its own use and pleasure. Cuteness here is a locus of erotic mobilization — adoration and stylization are tools of possession. Mullis further suggests bronydom as the American counterpart to the Japanese *otaku* subculture: young male fans of *kawaii* young girls in anime, manga, and video games. While the two are not the same, the cross-cultural parallels share a desire to reshape the logic of consumerism and form alternative communities of desire. Within the “equestrian economics” of *My Little Pony*, bronies profess their affection for fantasy characters — a form of desire akin to the Japanese *moé*, affection toward fictional characters from fans. It is a desire for the ideal, which is recognized by bronies as a desire for the impossible. Yet the impossible, mediated through cuteness, is no less real.

The battle over possession of the cute thing is never about the thing itself. Marlis Schweitzer, in “Consuming Celebrity: Commodities and Cuteness in the Circulation of Master William Henry West Betty,” examines the intersections of celebrity culture, memorialization, objects, and the performance of gender and class identities. A child actor, Betty rose to fame in the early nineteenth century and captured the imagination of British audiences. As he became ill, Betty’s smallness, vulnerability, weakness, and inaccessibility further accentuated his cuteness and thereby inflamed his fans’ desire for him. Biographies and objects bearing his likeness quickly saturated the market. Schweitzer argues that the triangulation of cuteness, commodification, and the child in the early nineteenth century did not cater only to women to satisfy their maternal instinct. Instead, most of Betty’s fans were men who owned snuffboxes that bore miniature portraits of him. The male consumption of snuff through literal inhalation was a homosocial performance of status and masculinity. Cutified objects permitted men access and proximity to Betty; they offered vicarious possession and protection of the boy actor. Celebrity commodities, however, complicate the temporalities of cute objects. While an object has its own bi-

ography through production, circulation, and consumption, its temporal history exists in tension with the temporality of cuteness imprinted on it. If the cute object moves through linear history, cuteness itself is suspended in childhood. Betty's memorabilia weathers the passage of time, yet his infantile cuteness is immortalized.

But if cuteness is eternal, does it have a future? A past? Or does cuteness, like queerness, struggle against its futurity as much as its past? In "Embracing the Gremlin: Judas Iscariot and the (Anti-)Cuteness of Despair," Mariah Junglan Min reads medieval representations of the Judas legend alongside contemporary figurations of Judas in Japanese manga. If medieval aesthetic is rooted in theology, in the equivalence of beauty and divine goodness, where does cuteness fit in? Min argues that a theology of cuteness is not alien to but exists *within* theology. More provocatively, Min contends that one iteration of medieval cuteness takes the form of failure and powerlessness, emblemized in Judas, one the most cute-resistant figures in Western thought. The death drive, in the form of existential and theological despair, anchors the Judas legend; he is a litmus test for the reach of divine grace. Yet Judas's sinfulness has salvation value, just as deformity has cute cache; here lies Judas's cute futurity. Despair's anti-cuteness is blurred with cuteness. Min finds an illuminating postmodern revision in Hikaru Nakamura's manga series *Saint Young Men*, in which Judas appears as a cute teenage prankster who is always cheerful and whose transgression has already been forgiven by Christ. The manga serves as a secular sequel to medieval exegesis, and the cuteness of this Judas is possible because of his subjugation to divine will and his deviation from beauty. A little queer he is. Nakamura's Judas is more than a form of medievalism; he is an avatar of cuteism itself.

### The Proleptic Cute (Human)

Looking forward and backward in time, the child has become a powerful surrogate for the cultural and evolutionary development of humanness across scientific and humanistic discourse.

Rebekah Sheldon's recently released book, *The Child to Come*, traces deep pressures in a contemporary context on representations of the child. Well beyond metrics of capitalist consumption, the child now reveals a calculus of biopolitical reproduction amid rhetorics of catastrophe and post-anthropocene logics. The child has formed as an indicator of new hybrids at the intersection of human and nonhuman, and conjoined to forces that threaten to exceed and disrupt human control and power.

Alicia Corts's contribution to this volume, "Cute, Charming, Dangerous: Child Avatars in Second Life," explores the disjunctive power of the virtual-actual hybrid and how the child becomes the embodiment of an "unstable performance" in such spaces: "virtual worlds mask the biological body of the user behind the digital body of the avatar," allowing the avatar child in an immersive virtual world like Second Life to become a conveyor of "temporal dissonance." Such dissonance is so deeply disruptive to the normative discourse of sexuality and desire that it is re-formed as a regulatory system for subjectivity within the virtual environment.

While Corts's chapter focuses on contemporary virtuality as a portal into a world where the child betrays a radical reconfiguration of human agency, her reworking of virtuality as a concept that redefines embodied temporality more broadly—beyond the digital—provides a means of rethinking the child across historical spaces. The constitution of the child in the Victorian era is not just a precursor historically for models of later capitalist logics or for a reordered aesthetics of subjective power, but also points to the emergence of biopolitical schemas conventionally attributed to a much later period. Such schemas offer glimpses of an investment in the nonhuman vitality attached to objects, animals, and non-normative modes of reproduction.

In "What's Cute Got to Do with It? Early Modern Proto-Cuteness in *King Lear*," James M. Cochran identifies in Shakespearean cuteness (across and between animals and humans) an affective, conceptual figure that is itself a virtualization of "embodiment, desire, and identity" caught at the antithetical



crossroads of senility and childishness, which, Cochran finds, are both proto- and hybrid subject-objects that lack a well-defined subjective order. What emerges from this order is a form of critique based in the “anti-cute”: a hybrid cuteness that is conjoined with the monstrous and vile. This critique points us toward a performative aesthetic in *King Lear* that “rejects normative modes of reproduction, even ‘altering’ reproduction into something unrecognizable as reproduction.” We find in this reading of Shakespeare a biopolitics that anticipates the ends of a coherent and effective human control of nature that is less about a temporal finale than a concomitant limit point to human reproductive capacity, inherently defined by the non-normative. The “end is near” in *Lear* is less an apocalyptic closure than a virtual limit to the human that is conjoined with each performance and articulation of the normative boundaries of early modern domesticity and society.

Kara Watts, in “*Hamlet, Hesperides, and the Discursivity of Cuteness*,” picks up on this early modern conceptualization of “thingness” through “cuteness” and offers a stunning counter-response to Ngai’s strict aesthetics of cuteness as commodification. Like Cochran, she finds within Shakespearean cuteness an engagement with an undefined power of the object. Yet Watts pushes this assertion even further to argue that in *Hamlet* we discover an intensive immersion in the virtual and transgressive power of the discursive itself. Cuteness within *Hamlet* not only returns cuteness to the problematics of language; it investigates how such problematics can become forms of virtual empowerment that redefine entirely an embodied relationship to texts. “Preciousness,” a model of cuteness in the early modern context that predates a contemporary understanding of the “cute object,” informs Hamlet’s self-presentation throughout the play. Watts describes Hamlet’s base power play as one of “cute antics.” His antics are a display of reliance on self-belittling. Such a performance, however, must steer between the language of aggrandizement and undercutting, resulting in a kind of virtual performance of selfhood that careens between the assertion of and the undoing of personhood. This example leads Watts into a

consideration of a queer philology in play that again challenges conventional frameworks of temporality: “focusing temporally on when certain terms appear or develop, queer philology asks about relationships of terms and their networks.” This approach not only challenges our assumptions about cute aesthetics in a contemporary context, but reorders our methodological habits, insisting on the queering of cute studies as a transhistorical enterprise.

In “Cute Lacerations in *Doctor Faustus* and *Omkara*,” Tripti Pillai takes up a transhistorical study of Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and *Omkara*, the 2006 Bollywood adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. A version of Watts’s interest in lexicons and the virtual power of discursive networks as an approach to excavating cuteness can be found in Pillai’s work as well. Returning to the problem of language and performance, Pillai approaches cuteness in Marlowe and *Omkara* as a “violent instrument of organizational breakdown.” Violence is understood in this sense, with assistance from Hannah Arendt, as the principal signifier of “the instability and demise of power.” In Marlowe, this violence is traced as a “lacerating” cuteness, an incisive performance that displaces reproductive and sexual normativity with an absence of purposiveness to social performance and gesture. A similar function is found in the “itemizing” song-and-dance routines of *Omkara*, where conventional sexual narratives are distorted and displaced through “cute” manipulations of spatial and temporal registers within the film. Like Hamlet’s antic cuteness in that it cuts two ways, lacerating cuteness is empowering precisely because it disguises itself as powerlessness.

The volume closes with an expanded critique of the cute aesthetic as it appears in Katie Sokoler’s Tampax Radiant campaign and the work of Japanese media artist Yayoi Kusama. In “Katie Sokoler, Your Construction Paper Tears Can’t Hide Your Yayoi Kusama Neurotic Underbelly,” Kelly Lloyd investigates the stickiness or odd “associative logics” of cuteness within popular art. She reads for acute similarities in the colorful and manic ad campaign for Tampax by freelance photographer Sokoler and the work of Kusama. Lloyd asks, how do these very similar ap-

appropriations of the cute aesthetic manage to form highly distinct audiences and publics? The formation of disparate publics, for Lloyd, betrays a “power struggle inherent to cuteness” itself. The viral spread of competing and expansive publics through cute aesthetics also foregrounds the infectiousness of cuteness across a full discursive spectrum. Watts refers to this mimetic function of cuteness as a broad “spectrum of appreciation” that cuts across “disinterested reaction” (i.e., the “cute” responses elicited on websites and social media) as well as “affective experience of an artwork or object” on the order of the Kantian or Burkean sublime.

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# Torturer-Cute

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The stylistic qualities of the late medieval English play cycle known as the Towneley cycle have long intrigued literary scholars, with no aspect demonstrating this more clearly than the concept of the “Wakefield Master,” the name given to an anonymous playwright deemed to have written the most distinctive sections of the cycle.<sup>1</sup> Known for his remarkably inventive uses of poetic form, rhyme words, colloquial expression, and verbal play, the Wakefield Master’s verbal intensity in the cycle has been read in different ways, including as a demonstration of “the abuses of language” and the moral complicity of poetry (Stevens); as a reflection of humanity and “the variety of the world” (Meredith); as evidence of anticlericalism (Dillon); and as critical commentary on the forms of more urban, civic-minded play cycles

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1 The precise date of the Towneley cycle remains uncertain. While the single extant manuscript (San Marino, Huntington Library MS HM1) is usually dated circa 1500, performances of the play cycle in Wakefield are thought to have occurred by the mid-fifteenth century. The cycle’s authorship is similarly uncertain. Most critical assessments agree that large parts of the cycle have been written or revised by a distinctly creative writer commonly known as the “Wakefield Master,” also known as the “Wakefield author” and “Wakefield reviser.” Both A.C. Cawley and Martin Stevens have published extensively on the style of the Wakefield Master and also discuss the subject in their edition of the text; see Stevens and Cawley 1: xxviii–xxxi. Peter Meredith also supplies a helpful description of some of the features of the author’s style (150–57). For a more skeptical treatment of this author, see Dane.

(Nisse).<sup>2</sup> This chapter will focus on what the Wakefield Master's style says about the affective pursuits of style itself, examining a single play from the cycle — the *Play of the Dice*, which comes directly after the *Crucifixion* play — that seems designed to pose questions not only about modes of verbal expression and the judgments that accompany them, but also about the extent to which aesthetic experience can be generated by stylized expression across different, often simultaneous media (verbal, visual, auditory, kinetic). If the Towneley cycle as a whole might be said to be characterized, via the ostensible talents of the Wakefield Master, by pockets of radical ingenuity, then the *Play of the Dice* should rightfully be understood as the play in the cycle that is most compulsively preoccupied with innovation as a site of both thematic and formal inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the play's innovation lies in the way it takes on the late medieval aesthetic modalities involving a particular biblical scene: that of the Roman soldiers who, at the moment of Christ's Crucifixion, cast lots (and in later medieval tradition, play dice) for Christ's "seamless garment." The scene of the soldiers who cast lots for Christ's garment is an important one. Prophesied in Psalm 22 and described in all four gospels (Matt 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:24), it was the occasion of one of the better known biblical passages, the moment when Christ looks down from the crucifix, sees the men playing lots for his garment, and says "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).<sup>4</sup> In medieval Europe these characters

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2 Stevens, "Wakefield Cycle," quotation 156 and "Language as a Theme" 100–17; Meredith 153; Dillon 47–49; and Nisse 75–98.

3 Rosemary Woolf describes the *Play of the Dice* as "almost inexplicable invention" and an "ambitious attempt at a tour de force" (268), although she does not think the play realizes its ambitions.

4 The phrase spoken by Christ in Luke 23:34 is the first of the Seven Last Words of Christ, a popular devotional practice that was often included in late medieval Books of Hours. See for example the fifteenth-century illumination by Sir John Fastolf, where all seven "last words" are included in the illumination of the Crucifixion (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Library MS 5, fol. 16v). It can be viewed on the Getty Museum's website. The verse from Luke is also directly quoted in the previous play of the Towneley cycle, the

were understood to be the same men who mocked, scourged, and crucified Christ; they were known as “torturers,” and they were imagined in a particular way: that is, as dicing galaunts whose obsession with frivolous things—fashion, gambling, dancing, and buffoonery—makes their vicious treatment of Christ all the more monstrous.<sup>5</sup>

In the hands of the Wakefield Master, the alarming verbal and visual presence of these biblical torturers offers almost unlimited opportunities for witty experiments with forms, patterns, and textures. Together with their perpetually frustrated leader, Pontius Pilate, the three Torturers are the central characters of the *Play of the Dice*, and their predilections for stylized amusement are dramatized across a variety of registers, each of which tugs mercilessly at the soberness of the tragedy that has just taken place for humanity in the form of the Crucifixion.<sup>6</sup> Their frolicking, silly demeanor; their love of pranks and games; their doggerel, tail-rhyme speeches; their obsession with their own garish appearance and attire; their social and intellectual stupidity and uncouthness; their attempts to prance and dance; their mannered displays of neediness and cowardice—such performances present the torturers of Christ as aestheticized, childish figures of naïve, inappropriate merriment whose moral deficiencies shift during the play from abhorrent, to pathetic, to almost forgivable.

The *Play of the Dice* seems determined to both perform and produce this experience of shifting, overlapping, often contradictory affective responses. What does it mean, the play asks its readers and audience members, simultaneously to experience revulsion and sympathy? That the play focuses its aesthetic cu-

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*Crucifixion*, lines 295–96, a moment that prompts the torturers to answer defiantly that in fact they *do* know what they’ve done (297–98). See Nisse 75 for a discussion of the scene.

5 On the literary figure of the “galaunt” in late medieval England, see Denny-Brown 148–78.

6 In this essay I capitalize the word *torturer* when discussing the characters in the *Play of the Dice*. I leave the word in lower caps when I am discussing Christ’s torturers as biblical characters or cultural figures.



riosity on ostensibly frivolous objects, such as the cut of a garment, the butt of a joke, or the roll of dice, merely adds to its potential potency. As the work of literary theorist Sianne Ngai has shown, ordinary aesthetic experiences — what she calls “trivial aesthetic categories” (21) — speak to a series of often-dominant cultural practices quite distinct from more traditional and rarefied aesthetic categories, which deal primarily with beauty. For Ngai, everyday aesthetic categories such as cute, zany, and interesting are inherently “non-theological” (22) in that they are resolutely disengaged from ideas about sublime transcendence, a feature she ties to the postmodern condition of production. Despite the obvious differences in historical context, intriguing parallels can be found in the *Play of the Dice*. To point to one of the more basic intellectual formations of the play, in coveting and gambling for Christ’s garment, the materialistic Torturers reveal its power as an object of consumer desire and exchange value. Unlike Ngai’s postmodern examples, the subject matter and medieval context of this play do not allow the experience of this coveted object to be entirely separated from its theological significance; most medieval audience members would have understood the garment’s exchange value to be a humorous misinterpretation of the true (i.e., immaterial) value of Christ’s garment. Moreover, at the end of the play, the Torturers are, almost despite themselves, on the verge of converting to Christianity, perhaps the ultimate experience of sublime transcendence — and the opposite of what Ngai argues.

As I argue in this chapter, however, the *Play of the Dice* deals with the aesthetic impact of the Crucifixion, including the potential for Christ’s crucifiers to become the first post-Crucifixion converts, by mobilizing aesthetic categories that look much like those described by Ngai. Ngai’s work reveals the experience of cuteness, for example, to be intimately related not only to tenderness, but also to aggression, violence, and social dominance — experiences that, as I will discuss, are similarly linked in the Towneley *Play of the Dice*. Likewise, the idea that the Torturers might be understood through the concept of zaniness helps articulate the affective potential of their manic, stylized

movements, through which work and play become outlandishly confused. Could the torturers of Christ be considered cute? Or zany? Following the work of visual artist Takashi Murakami, whose “sado-cute” characters conflate menace with innocence, it may be more accurate to think about the *Play of the Dice* as offering an experience one might call “torturer-cute”: an aesthetic that sets out to brutalize the audience’s sensibilities, but that does this in ways that can also elicit feelings of pleasure.<sup>7</sup> The Torturers are sinister and yet also — strangely charming. Presented as agents of violence who are also clearly victims of violence (from Pilate’s hands, primarily), they seem to participate in what Ngai describes as “the unusual readiness with which cute reverses into its opposite” (85).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, although they themselves were involved in Christ’s torture and death (a fact they make clear in their initial monologues), in this play the Torturers are also positioned as the first humans to experience a world in which the Crucifixion has occurred. Their torturer-cute aesthetic directs attention to this fact, and to the way these characters simultaneously inflict and absorb the affective blow — the emotional impact, tortured atmosphere, and symbolic weight — of the Crucifixion itself.

### Pontius Pilate’s Mute, Cute Poetics

The Towneley cycle has been designated as the most literary of all the medieval play cycles, with apparent intertextual references to Virgil, Langland, and medieval lyrics, among other literary

7 For a recent example of the sado-cute aesthetic in Murakami’s work, see *Hustle’n’Punch by Kaikai and Kiki* (2009), in which Murakami’s charming characters express themselves with numerous sharp fangs. See Ngai 80–88 for her discussion of Murakami’s “stylistic mutilation” in the DOB series. Daniel Harris discusses a similar idea when he explores the sadism of the consumer who buys cute things (5).

8 On Murakami’s cute objects as both agents and victims of aggression, see Ngai 85. See also Harris 16 on the relationship of cuteness to “anti-cute.” On the spectacle of violence as a particularly inventive and potentially pleasurable element of medieval drama, see Enders 174.

texts, and yet it was also written to be performed.<sup>9</sup> The mixed register of the plays, along with the possibility that the intended audience might have been made up of a blend of learned and unlearned people, can be seen from the first monologue in the *Play of the Dice*, which starts with a long stanza of untranslated Latin and then moves, with much flourish, to colloquial Middle English.<sup>10</sup>

The play begins on the night of the Crucifixion, which has taken place earlier in the day (and in the previous play of the cycle). The opening monologue is spoken by Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect responsible for authorizing Christ's Crucifixion, and its ninety-one-line rant seems designed simultaneously to establish Pilate's tyrannical character and to quell audience noise. Pilate demands in various ways that audience members recognize his godlike power and authority; he threatens to kill them in equally various ways if they do not. Beginning with its linguistic structure, the primary mode of Pilate's monologue is flamboyant verbal showmanship: the speech starts with a thirteen-line stanza in Latin, the only stanza exclusively in Latin in the cycle, which then slips into four equally long stanzas of half-Latin, half-Middle English lines, and finally ends with a smattering of shorter stanzas in Middle English only. The rhyme scheme of Pilate's speech is equally elaborate and devolutionary: the first Latin stanza begins as a wall of sound, eight consecutive lines ending in identical monorhyme — in *rime riche*, no less — after which the stanza shapes itself into four lines in tail-rhyme format (*aaaaaaaaabcccb*). Unlike the perfect Latin rhymes of the homogenous initial stanza, the macaronic tail-

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9 On this cycle as “the most ‘literary’ of all the medieval Corpus Christi Plays,” see Stevens, “Wakefield Cycle” 156. For a summary of the cycle's uses of non-dramatic literary works, see Meredith 148–50; for particular examples, see Woolf 183 and Nisse 79, 80–94. On the manuscript's stage directions, see Meredith 141–42. I've found Nisse's discussion (77–78) about the difficulties of discovering the performance context of the plays especially helpful.

10 On the probability that audiences for a variety of cycle plays were mixed clerical and laypeople, see Dillon 31–34; on the uniqueness of the Wakefield Master's use of Latin throughout the Towneley cycle, see Dillon 31–50.

rhyme stanzas that follow (using the newly alternating rhyme structure *ababababcdddc*) include imperfect rhymes and some slant rhymes. By line 66, when Pilate switches to speaking English only, the characteristic thirteen-line tail-rhyme stanza form in which he has been speaking breaks apart into several shorter stanzas of fragmented or reversed-order tail-rhyme schemes.

Pilate's opening speech does fascinating things with poetic form, not only in the way it plays with the different textures of Latin and Middle English rhyme and rhythm, but also in the way it explores its own stanza structure, reorganizing the Wakefield Master's signature thirteen-line stanza into a series of different forms that comment on their own aesthetic and structural creation. He seems to be writing for two audiences — one, the kind of literary elite that understands Latin and recognizes the radical nature of his formal experiments, and two, the boisterous local audience that experiences the performative impact of his aesthetic. The Wakefield Master's verses are hybrid in another way as well, in that they seek to heighten the often jarring differences between what characters say and how they say it — between content and style. What the characters say is often terrifying; *how* they say it is often, in Ngai's terms, rather cute. One example is in the Latin portion of Pilate's speech. If the audience member understands Latin, he or she would hear a series of sharp commands, boasts, and threats in short order:

*Cernite qui statis*  
*Quod mire sim probitatis;*  
*Hec cognoscatis,*  
*Vos cedam ni taceatis.*  
*Cuncti discatis*  
*Quasi sistam vir deitatis*  
*Et maiestatis;*  
*Michi fando ne noceatis,*  
*Hoc modo mando.*  
*Neue loquaces*  
*Siue dicaces,*  
*Poscite paces*

*Dum fero fando.* (1–13)<sup>11</sup>

[Notice, you who stand (by)  
That I am of wondrous valor;  
Know this,  
I will slay you unless you keep quiet.  
Learn, all of you  
That I am a man of god-like nature  
And majesty;  
Do not harm me by speaking,  
Thus I command.  
(Be) neither talkative  
Nor garrulous,  
Demand peace  
While I speak.]

For the members in the audience who do not understand Latin, however, the meaning of Pilate's speech would have been severely blunted by the fact and form of its Latin language. "Verbal swagger" being a hallmark of the Wakefield Master's villainous characters, Pilate's lengthy, rhymey use of Latin necessarily marks him as a pompous braggart who speaks high-style nonsense.<sup>12</sup> For these audience members, Pilate's arrogant directives that they must, under pain of death, keep quiet and *notice*, *know*, and *learn* what he dictates, can offer at best an empty, if rhythmic, demonstration of Latinate sounds, and at worst a blast of ardent blather. Even when the form of his monologue breaks down to include whole lines in Middle English, his aggressive commands in Latin, such as *Caveatis!* (22; Beware!) and its tail-rhyme twin, *Me paveatis!* (26; Tremble before me!), have a similar effect — that of a deadly threat muted almost entirely by its inaccessible linguistic casing. What Pilate means to be verbally piercing, vicious, terrifying, and commanding is instead

<sup>11</sup> All citations of the *Play of the Dice* are from Stevens and Cawley.

<sup>12</sup> I borrow the phrase *verbal swagger* from Stevens and Cawley 2: 584. Pharaoh, Herod, and Pilate all speak in versions of this boastful, blustering style.

redirected to present aesthetically as verbally silly, flouncy, and misguided.

The affective mobilization and manipulation of Pilate's language can be helpfully understood through Ngai's work on mute poetics. Mute poetics cutify language in various ways, beginning with forms of littleness — the minimizing and objectifying of poems, poetic lines, and words — and extending to poetic practices that explore noncommunicative or nonconceptual language, such as deverbalization.<sup>13</sup> That Pilate's use of Latin poetics is partly intended to fall on deaf ears engages an aesthetic of diminished intelligibility — perhaps benign *unintelligibility* — that softens and tenderizes the aggressiveness of the speech as well as the man who says it. This speech has the potential to make Pilate's tyrannical nature seem pitiful and pitiable, to compel a certain kind of affective response from an audience predisposed, by virtue of Christ's Passion, to respond sympathetically to aestheticized powerlessness. Importantly, the paradox of Pilate's stylized and forceful, yet mute and incommunicative speech connects to a series of other binaries that structure the play's aesthetic interests and judgments, including the dialectical pairings of vernacularity/Latinity, hyperactivity/stillness, and abundance/restraint.

Pilate's mute poetics also correspond to the most fundamental aesthetic judgment in the cycle, the judgment associated with God. In the larger Towneley cycle, God and Jesus are profoundly still and serious characters, often saying nothing or no more than a few English words at a time. Critics have described the abbreviated quality of divine speech acts in these plays in different ways. For Stevens, the language is simple and artless, fundamentally opposed to the overly clever, stylized speech associated with the morally reprehensible characters ("Wakefield Cycle" 88–180; "Language as a Theme" 100–17); for John Gardner, God speaks in "flat statements of fact" (17); and for Meredith, the style of Christ's language is "ordered" and "old-

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13 See Ngai 87–109.

fashioned” (152).<sup>14</sup> While Pilate’s bilingual verbosity seems inherently to contrast with these examples of vernacular flatness, muteness, and restraint (the unstyled combined with the unspoken), Pilate is in fact desperate to claim some comparable form of divine muteness for himself. In the same way that he references himself as divine-like (6) and mimics God by wearing a gilded facial mask (the costume worn by God in previous plays), so Pilate tries to invoke God’s capacity for muteness by demanding, under threat of violence, silence from his listeners.<sup>15</sup> Yet Pilate’s attempt fails miserably. Designed from the beginning to be thwarted, Pilate’s obsession with peace and quiet — his own as well as others’ — provides much of the humor in the speech, turning his quest for silence into a kind of ongoing joke where the desired objective is increasingly poked and prodded until Pilate, vexed to the point of distraction, loses his temper and explodes in another round of excessive (self-deflating, self-defeating) verbalization.

Take, for example, the exasperation evident in Pilate’s final Latin lines, followed by the moment when he shifts into Middle English for the rest of his monologue and for the rest of the play:

*Silete,*  
*In generali*  
*Sic speciali;*  
 Yit agane byd I,  
*Iura tenete!*

Loke that no boy be to bustus, blast here for to blow,  
 Bot trully to me talkyng loke that ye be intyndyng.  
 If here be any boy that will not lout till oure law,  
 By myghty Mahowne, hygh shall he hyng! (61–69)

14 For a more general discussion of the ways that biblical villains are associated with transgressive language in the cycle plays, see Clopper.

15 On the likelihood that Pilate wears a golden mask, see Stevens and Cawley 2: 585.

[*Be silent,*  
*In general [and]*  
*In particular;*  
 Yet again, I command,  
*Obey the laws!*

Look that no boy be too noisy, blowing a (verbal) blast,  
 But truly look that you listen to my talking.  
 If there is any boy that will not succumb to our law,  
 By mighty Mahowne, he shall be hung high!]

Here we see the extent to which Pilate's final Latin lines are deliberately made small, truncated to a mere three to five syllables per line and fetishized into a littleness that cannot help but draw attention to itself. As happens throughout his speech, Pilate's repeated and strident calls for law-abiding silence signal the difficulty he experiences in bringing his audience to complete attention; his attempts to perform strength and command are undermined at every turn by the apparent refusal of audience members to be silent. His final shortened, staccato bursts of sibilant Latin in this passage — "*Silete, / [...] / Sic speciali*" — might be seen as an indignant shushing of his impudent audience: a distinctly nonverbal way to suppress resistance. Rather than hushing his audience into silence, however, Pilate's punishing Latin is the thing silenced.

Pilate's shift to Middle English in this passage offers another form of cutified poetic language and another comment on the aesthetic of silence: while the final Latin lines are foreshortened, clipped, and approaching deverbalization, the Middle English lines, by comparison, are maximized and overstuffed — long, tumbling lines of thirteen or fourteen syllables crammed full of unfussy alliterative English words and sounds. If Latin's cutification is via miniaturization, Middle English cuteness is achieved via chubbiness. What takes two words in Latin — *Iura tenete* (65) — takes twelve in Middle English (68). Instead of addressing the entire audience, here Pilate singles out the kind of audience member that most irks him — the unruly "boy" in the





The aesthetics of sleep, as Daniel Harris points out, is inherently cute. Its appeal stems from the sleeping object's vulnerability and docility, its "languorous postures" and "defenseless immobility" (7). Pilate still has the capacity to be frightening, of course. When he spouts the seemingly innocuous proverb "He masters a night's rest who naps not at noon," it serves as a chilling reminder of what Pilate *was* doing at noon instead of napping: turning Christ over to his crucifiers (John 19:14). Yet, in a complete reversal of his previous threats in Latin, Pilate's citing of an English proverb — about naps, no less — also firmly situates him in the realm of the aesthetically familiar and pleasing. The person who cites a proverb is not a threat; he or she uses indirection to rest in the cushion of common wisdom — predictable, comfortable, cheerfully banal.<sup>17</sup> The inherent cuteness of Pilate's sleepiness is further enhanced by his attempts to get cozy — his requests that his servant lay him down softly and wrap him up in soft bedding and a blanket to nuzzle — and also by the protective nature of his servant. Pilate has become someone malleable and vulnerable, who needs soft petting and security so he can doze.

As with his previously frustrated attempts to create silence, however, Pilate's carefully orchestrated sleep is destined to be interrupted. Not the "boyes" from the audience, but another, not-unrelated group of unruly young men interrupt his peace and quiet with their excited chatter and activity.<sup>18</sup> Moments after Pilate lays down his head, the first Torturer arrives on the scene, singing a jaunty tail-rhyme speech about his recent experience at the Crucifixion.

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17 See Ngai 96, however, on the ways that "already-said language" can also be used aggressively. On the rhetorical comfort of proverbs, see Yankah 326–28.

18 On the likelihood that the Torturers emerge, one by one, from the audience to say their first monologues, see Diller 98–99.

## Torturers and their Transitional Objects

Like his treatment of Pilate, the Wakefield Master's treatment of Christ's torturers implements cuteness as a powerfully affective creative mode. The Torturers are stylized to best display their childish, pranking, fun-loving, stupid, frantic behaviors. If Pilate's potential for cuteness rests in his mute poetics and his need to nap, the Torturers' centers on their bouncy speeches, playful physicality, and affectionate mauling of the garment at the center of the play's biblical plot. While the Torturers begin the play as menacing, violent characters, their demeaning interactions with Pilate and their constant fears that Christ's garment will be taken away from them (fears that are ultimately realized) leave them feeling dejected and helpless and looking for new forms of enjoyment.

The *Play of the Dice* uses several poetic and structural devices to characterize the Torturers, starting with the curtailment of Pilate's macaronic thirteen-line stanzas into regularized eight-line double tail-rhyme stanzas in a swinging, thumping English doggerel verse. Doggerel verse, usually associated with rustic popular poetry, is best known from its use in Chaucer's "Tale of Sir Thopas" from *The Canterbury Tales*, where it is first named as a style of its own ("rym doggerel" [925]), and where it is considered so offensive that it causes Chaucer the pilgrim to cease rhyming altogether — in essence, to stop being a poet.<sup>19</sup> While the literary-minded members of the play's audience might understand the Torturers' use of doggerel in this context, however, the *sound* of the style carries its own meaning: as an aggressively rhythmized, doggedly irregular series of thumps or jog-trots, doggerel matches well the amusing physical presence of large, slightly bumbling men. That the sound of the Torturers' doggerel verse is coupled with sing-songy, overnice tail-rhyme — rhyme scheme *aaab cccb* — adds to its aesthetic punch: this is a combined style that offers audience members the aesthetic experience of brutality sweetened by dainty cuteness.

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19 On Chaucer's doggerel in the "Tale of Sir Thopas," see Gaylord.

The three Torturers are unnamed, and they are so formally similar that it is easy to get them confused. Each enters the scene after having sprinted there from the Mount at Calvary where the Crucifixion took place, and each opens his monologue with a formulaic warning to the audience to “War, war!” (Beware, Beware!) and with a boast about his own badassery. As with the mute poetics evident during Pilate’s opening speech, however, where the gradual miniaturization of Pilate’s Latin words serves to infantilize and cute-ify, each of the Torturers’ three speeches is noticeably shorter and more puerile than the previous. Torturer #1, who is presented as the most refined and attractive of the Torturers, gets there first and speaks for a full five stanzas; Torturer #2, a crass prankster who says he ran so fast to get there that he nearly “beshytt” his britches (138), is given four stanzas to make his case; and Torturer #3, slow, fat, and violent, who says he “brysten both my balok-stones” (166; broke his balls) to get there and that his favorite pastimes are murdering and hanging others (169), is allowed a speech of only two-and-a-half stanzas. This is torturer-cute poetics in triplicate, where the excessive use of playful, slightly dubious poetic practices by almost indistinguishable characters — doggerel, tail-rhyme, repeat tag-lines, and verbal jokes — creates a parody of what should be villainous style.<sup>20</sup>

Christ’s torturers get their name from the Latin word *tortura*, meaning “twisting,” and their aesthetic manifests this concept in different ways. Figure 1, for example, from the Fitzwarin Psalter, shows the extent to which one late-medieval English artist imagined the torturers not only as wearing clothing with twisting stripes, but also as contorting their own bodies into twisted shapes.<sup>21</sup> Such images are often read as a physical manifestation of the torturers’ deformed morals, but they also serve to

20 On the Torturers’ use of rhyming nonsense, see Woolf 255. On the ludic sensibility of medieval cycle plays, in which Christ’s torturers “turn almost all their necessary actions into competitive games,” see Kolve 182.

21 The folio in figure 1 from the Fitzwarin Psalter (Paris, BnF MS lat. 765, fol. 12r) can be viewed in detail on the website of the Bibliothèque nationale de France: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b60005131/f25.image>.

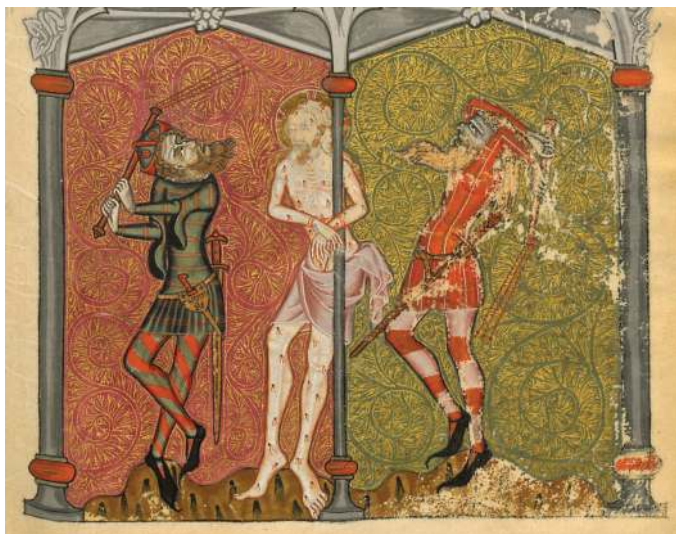


Figure 1. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 765, fol. 12r.  
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manifest the viewers' feelings when they observe the torturers in the act of torture. The *Play of the Dice* seems to comment on this tradition, introducing a variety of distorted (i.e., torturous) forms and styles in speech and appearance, and then re-aestheticizing those forms with a series of softer, gentler, more potentially enjoyable affects. Just as the play associates its Torturers with manipulations of poetic form and linguistic register, for example, so it associates them with distorted comportment and movements. Whereas Pilate, when finally woken from his sleep, remains passive by being carried around by his servant and placed on his chair (an imitation of Christ's extreme passivity that seems to last for much of the play), the Torturers are presented as excessively mannered jesters or minstrels, not only running to the scene at top speed, but also skipping, leaping, and dancing their way through their lines. In a typical moment of self-narrated hyperactivity, Torturer #2 can't help but exclaim "I will lepe and I will skyp / As I were now out of my wytt" (136–

37) when he arrives. The Torturers' haphazard, manic physicality speaks to Ngai's category of zaniness, in which "the activity of spontaneous, goalless play" (188), often by multiple characters and within the context of almost certain bodily injury, becomes a source of laughter and pleasure. But because the Torturers in the *Play of the Dice* tend to physically distort themselves as a bodily reflection of their desire for a coveted object — Christ's garment — we might also see their prancing, frolicking leaps as manifestations of those feelings deformed by want: seeing or imagining the object of their desire and affection, the Torturers take on the contorted quality of the objectified thing itself, the cute object that, in Ngai's words, is "shaped or deformed by the subject's feeling or attitude toward it" (65). In their process of cutifying Christ's garment, they themselves become cute.

Christ's seamless garment, the object at the center of the Torturers' attention, is verbally cited with obsessive frequency in the *Play of the Dice* — nineteen times in the 430-line play, and by at least seven different terms, some common (such as "clethyng," "cote," "gowne," and "wede") and some cutifying (such as "harnes" and "frog").<sup>22</sup> As the first to arrive, Torturer #1 carries Christ's garment with him on stage, and while it is not always clear who has possession of the object throughout the action that ensues, it seems likely that the garment passes from character to character at key moments, ultimately ending up in Pilate's hands.<sup>23</sup> Suffice to say, the seamless garment, like the body it once belonged to and now symbolizes, represents a

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22 See Stevens and Cawley 586, note to line 117.

23 While it is the central prop of the dramatic action, without proper stage directions the unseamed garment's whereabouts are not always as easy to decipher. Torturer #1 appears to carry it throughout the first half of the play and seems to be the most possessive of it until it is apparently snatched away by Pilate at line 264. There are moments — such as when Pilate allots separate parts of the garment to each character, beginning at line 275, and when the torturers are searching the garment to find its seams, for ease of cutting it, at lines 296–98 — when the garment is likely to have been held out by several of the players at once, or perhaps stretched between them. Torturer #3 likely takes the garment as his own at line 352, after winning the dice game; and at line 371, he finally hands it over to Pilate.

kind of exaggerated passivity. Like the sacrificial body it once dressed, the garment is destined to be manipulated, toyed with, and pawed — or as Ngai puts it, when describing the affectionate mauling of cute objects, “excitedly loved and mutilated” (89).<sup>24</sup> Harris also describes the compelling physical passivity of cuteness, which creates a perverse attraction, “a world of stationary objects and tempting exteriors that deliver themselves up to us, putting themselves at our disposal and allowing themselves to be apprehended entirely through the senses” (8–9). As opposed to the earlier plays in the cycle, such as the *Buffeting* and *Crucifixion*, where the Torturers’ violence is enacted against Christ’s physical body, here they maul a soft, blanket-like object instead. Moreover, because the events of the play take place at night, when most people — including Pilate, as we’ve seen — are asleep, the garment takes on the feeling of a transitional object, an object of comfort that is carried from one scene to the next (and from one play to the next, since it was taken off Christ’s body in the previous play of the cycle) and that protects its new, childish owners from real and imaginary fears. Torturer #1 states as much at the end of his monologue, addressing the mythical protective powers of Christ’s seamless garment:

For whosoeuer may get this close,  
 He ther neuer rek where he gose,  
 For he semys nothyng to lose,  
 If so be he theym were.  
 But now, now felose, stand on rowme,  
 For he commes, shrewes, vnto this towne,  
 And we will all togeder rowne,  
 So semely in oure gere. (124–31)

[For whoever may get these clothes  
 He never cares where he goes  
 For he seems to lose nothing  
 If he wears them.]

24 See also Ngai 93 on the exaggerated passivity of cute things.

But now, now fellows, stand aside  
 For here come shrews into this town  
 And we will all together talk  
 So seemly in our clothes.]

The fact that the speaker draws attention to the Torturers' own "semely" or visually pleasing clothing here means the players were likely wearing some form of ostentatious costume. The tradition of portraying Christ's torturers as flamboyant dressers can be seen throughout the visual and plastic arts in medieval Europe, where they are often depicted wearing bright, fashionable garments, bicolored hose, and other excessive finery.<sup>25</sup> These images were pervasive and, as figure 1 shows, symbolically powerful, often using vibrant colors and luxurious textures to heighten the colorless purity of Christ. On stage, the Torturers also ornamented their showy costumes with symbolic objects related to the play's narrative, such as nails and dice—yet another example of the torturer-cute aesthetic they embody.<sup>26</sup> Their costumes were also sometimes ornamented with external symbols of Jewishness, such as Hebrew letters, which suggests the extent to which torturer-cute aesthetics relied on racial caricature.<sup>27</sup>

In the moral world of medieval sumptuary laws, the torturers' love of fashionable clothing marks them as frivolous and materialistic consumers, and in this way further informs their desire for Christ's garment. But while the Torturers in the *Play of the Dice* covet the seamless garment, with the exception of Torturer #1, they cannot explain exactly why. Instead they think about the garment in terms of its affective impact, as shown in this quotation from Torturer #2, who anticipates his response to the pleasure he will feel upon obtaining the garment:

25 Schiller 154–57 and Mellinkoff 1:21.

26 The Coventry Smiths' accounts for 1490, for example, describe "iiiiij Jakketts of blake bokeram for þe tormentors with nayles & dysse upon þem" [4 jackets of black buckram for the tormenters with nails & dice upon them] (Ingram 73).

27 Schiller 154–57 and Mellinkoff 1:21.



Both on earnest and on hethyng  
 This cote I wold I had;  
 For if I myght this cote gett,  
 Then wold I both skyp and lepe,  
 And therto fast both drynke and ete,  
 In fayth, as I were mad. (158–63)

[Both in earnest and in jest  
 This coat I wish I had;  
 For if I might this coat get  
 Then would I both skip and leap  
 And to that fast both drink and eat,  
 In faith, as (if) I were mad.]

By contrast, Torturer #1 is especially vocal about the aesthetic register of his actions, and his attempts to understand the world through his own sensibilities serve as a kind of affective “mind-er” throughout the play. He is the character who first brings the seamless garment onto the stage, and appropriately, his favorite word is “semely,” meaning pleasant, comforting, or visually pleasing. He is the individual who first comments on the garments they all wear, “so semely in oure gere” (131). Torturer #1 also describes spitting in Christ’s face until it is “So semely to my sight” (103); and he describes his own attractiveness in similar terms, stating, “I am right semely and fare in the face” (192). He describes Pilate as “semely suffrayn” (247; seemly sovereign). And, in the best pun of the play, he states, when the torturers are looking for a place to cut the seamless garment so as to divide it among themselves, that “Most semely is, in certan, the seym to assay” (296): it would certainly be most *seemly* to test the *seam*.

While the speaker’s first few mentions of this word might connote the appearance of substance, by the third, fourth, and fifth uses of the same word by the same person, it becomes more of a verbal tick than a meaningful descriptor, an example of what Ngai calls “markers of affective insistence” in poetic writing (184). In this play about Christ’s seamless robe, seemliness — the experience of sensory pleasure — is a running joke, the kind that

gets cuter with each repetition. In addition, the attempt to cut the seamless garment at the seam plays into the idea that cutified objects, by virtue of their aestheticized passivity, not only invite physical distortion and abuse, but also make significant affective demands upon their subjects. Here, in a humorously vulgar parody of the Crucifixion itself, a garment without seams presents itself as a challenge to the Torturers to find its seams or to *make* seams (holes, wounds) of their own, and thus to find a way to satisfy their sinister pleasure at destroying the cute object in order to possess it.

### Conclusion

Cleverly written, cutified violence is a hallmark of the Towneley *Play of the Dice*. By way of conclusion, what I've been describing as the "torturer-cute" aesthetic in the play might be understood as a reflection of the playwright's curiosity about something that also fascinates Ngai: shifting, uncertain aesthetic experiences that conflate positive and negative affects (2). While the *Play of the Dice* explores the ambivalent, slightly unstable nature of aesthetic experiences and judgments throughout the play, at the end it directs our attention to a more extreme example. The play ends when Torturer #3, fed up with the sorrow and violence he experiences when he plays dice games (which, he complains in rhyme, usually start with men's "laghter" [422] and end with "mens slaghter" [420]), decides to change allegiances and serve the Christian God, because he is the "gentlyllyst" (427) of judges. To be *gentil* speaks to noble status in the medieval period and carries with it related aesthetic judgments about charm, grace, courteousness, and beauty. The implication is that the most vehement of all the Torturers decides to convert because he finds pleasing the Christian God's elegance and tenderness, as opposed to the more severe affective tactics of the tyrants he has been used to serving, Pilate, Mahowne, and Fortune. Pilate mocks Torturer #3 for his newfound cleverness, his "conyng" (431), but the effect remains: Torturer #3 has shown himself to be considering, even analyzing, the variety of his aesthetic expe-

riences. This is something the Towneley *Play of the Dice* asks of all its readers and audience members. The affective demands of the *Play of the Dice* play are substantial: from the wall of Latinate sounds in the beginning of the play, through the physical pliability and sinister petting of Christ's garment in the middle of the play, to the sudden appreciation of the transcendent possibilities of *gentil* aesthetics at the play's end, readers and audience members are confronted by a post-Crucifixion world preoccupied with the way stylistic expression can provoke complex, changeable affective states, and further, with the capacity for analytical thoughtfulness about the aesthetic categories that emerge from such experiences.

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# Indulgence and Refusal: Cuteness, Asceticism, and the Aestheticization of Desire

*Elizabeth Howie*

Centuries before the late nineteenth-century advent of the cute, not to mention its twentieth-century flowering in consumerism, ascetic medieval Christians resisted temptation in a way that served to inflame desire, to make it more acute, with the ultimate goal of eradicating it to achieve greater holiness. Early twenty-first-century scholars, such as Sianne Ngai and Daniel Harris, resist and refuse the restrictions of traditional scholarship to explore critically the so-called minor aesthetic category of cuteness, finding it a form that, like asceticism, also arouses desires and embraces seemingly incongruous qualities. While asceticism calls attention to desire by denying its fulfillment, cuteness conceals the power of the commodity's insidious desirability behind a masquerade of innocent powerlessness.

Asceticism is a practice of self-denial in the pursuit of purity, whereas cuteness is an aesthetic that indulges in the small, helpless, fuzzy, and childlike. My impulse to explore relationships between such seemingly incompatible concepts comes from an admittedly romanticized fascination with the tiny Irish island of Skellig Michael and its examples of early Christian monastic

structures.<sup>1</sup> From around the sixth to thirteenth centuries, the rocky island off the west coast of Ireland harbored a monastic settlement comprising tiny beehive huts made of stacked stone (six) and tiny oratories (two), with tiny gardens built on tiny ledges made of stacked stone, where tiny plants were grown to make tiny meals. This barely habitable landscape was home to a tiny community of monks (at most twelve, with their abbot making thirteen), near silent except for repetitive prayer, who resisted the simple comforts available at their mainland monastery. Their lives were, by choice, incredibly difficult. Their self-denial would have aroused not-so-tiny, sharp desires for fullness, comfort, safety, even level ground.

To interpret such austere monastic life in terms of cuteness may seem wildly inappropriate for several reasons. The aesthetic of cuteness was not articulated until the nineteenth century (Ngai 15), and the monks of Skellig Michael would certainly not have perceived their surroundings in terms of cuteness; they devoutly sought separation from the world and viewed suffering as a path to holiness through the radical simplification of their existence. Nevertheless, my twenty-first-century understanding of asceticism persists in conjuring up imaginary moments of medieval ascetic cuteness that address overlaps between cuteness and asceticism in relation to desire and aestheticization, finding commonalities including self-denial, vulnerability and neediness, intimacy, woundedness, and bodily distortion. Resisting looking for anything literally cute in medieval asceticism,<sup>2</sup> this project finds some asceticism in cuteness, and will flirt with analogy — not to force similarities, but instead to sift through

1 See Horn, Marshall, and Rourke, especially pp. 7 and 10. More recently, Skellig Michael served as a location for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) as well as *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, scheduled for release in 2017.

2 There are exceptions. In a startling arena, the visions of holy female ascetics, I find threads of the cute: Margery Kempe had visions in which she “cuddled with Christ in bed and was bold enough to caress his toes” (qtd. in Bynum 246); Anna Vorchtlin “said to the infant Jesus [...] ‘I would eat you up, I love you so much’” (qtd. in Bynum 250). Indeed, as medievalist Carolyn Walker Bynum points out, “communion was consuming” tiny sips of wine and tiny nibbles of bread that stood for the extremities of suffering (250).

morsels of overlap and relation. In the Derridean sense, here analogy bridges two very different, and broad, territories, seeking similarities while maintaining distinctions (Bannet 655).<sup>3</sup>

### Defining Cuteness

Recent scholarly attention to cuteness provides rich and complex ways to characterize it, the elaboration of which will reveal what Ngai terms its instability as an aesthetic (88): its inclusion of seemingly opposite tendencies such as powerlessness and aggression. Ngai lists qualities such as small size, soft edges, simplicity, and malleability; cuteness may also be squishy, silky, smooth, and resilient to being crushed (59, 64). Lori Merish adds that the cute object typically demonstrates qualities associated with infancy, such as roundness, as well as eyes and a head that are large in proportion to the body (187). For Merish, cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness because of its relationship to the childlike (187). Ngai concurs, adding that part of the appeal of cuteness lies in its vulnerability (58). Cuteness in distress, suffering, is at its most powerfully powerless. Needy, weak, and adorable, it elicits a desire that is often protective and maternal (Merish 186), and therefore acceptable, regardless of how commercially engineered the cuteness may be. For Ngai, the cute object must seem particularly sensitive to the viewer's affective response (65). If aestheticization involves the objectification of affect, for Ngai, cuteness is the epitome of affective aesthetic objectification (65).

Cuteness's powerlessness may be mitigated by barely to mildly threatening, slightly aggressive sharpness, traces of which appear in the etymology of the word, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Acute, clever, keen-witted, sharp, shrewd" (qtd. in Ngai 59). It is not hard for something to be so cute that

3 While analogy may oversimplify comparisons between different entities by making two entities seem more similar than they actually are, and thus artificially eliminate their individuality, Derrida uses analogy to explore the indeterminacy of meaning. Analogy then becomes a vehicle for the translation, in the sense of carrying from one place to another, of meaning.



it is painful, especially when it arouses desire that cannot be satisfied. Ngai suggests contemporary artist Takashi Murakami's anime-inspired sharp-fanged character, Mr. DOB, as a manifestation of the duality of cuteness: Mr. DOB, a recurring character in Murakami's work since 1993, resembles Mickey Mouse, with round face, ears, and huge, wide-set eyes, but with a tiny button nose replacing Mickey's mouse-snout. Over time, Mr. DOB's grin has grown ever wider and more maniacal, revealing increasingly menacing sharp teeth, yet his roundness and big eyes keep him in the realm of the cute.

Cuteness, seeming to have a will of its own, also demonstrates aggression by imposing demands (Ngai 64). For example, it may demand that we allow it to submit to us. Its immediate visceral impact is often counteracted by the viewer's sense of having been manipulated, arousing the viewer's suspicions. It desperately awaits our evaluation of and interaction with it. It is a supplicant awaiting our judgment, a judgment that will give it power over us. Cuteness thereby engenders its own discipline by enforcing particular behaviors of the viewer (Ngai 25); in turn, it engages and disciplines its viewer. Its disavowal of power is one of its powers.

### Definitions of Asceticism

Geoffrey Galt Harpham notes asceticism's capacity to allow for contradictions without collapsing them (xi). Like cuteness, asceticism works through disavowals while calling attention to that which it rejects, in particular, desire and its satisfaction. At its most general, asceticism refers to a practice involving acts of self-denial, which are steps toward a desired outcome, often spiritual; for Harpham, this definition makes asceticism the foundation of all culture. As Harpham and others have demonstrated, asceticism is cross-cultural, and may be identified in practices both inside and outside of religion (xiii). For these reasons it is impossible to define asceticism conclusively; it resists, denies, and foregoes definition.

This paper works with a broad definition of Christian asceticism, which takes many forms and has varied greatly between sects, genders, geographies, and historical eras. Walter O. Kaelber's summary from the *Encyclopedia of Religion* is a useful place to start, shifting away from Harpham's more secular definition: asceticism is "a voluntary, sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual, or profane gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred" (441). The ascetic's desired outcomes from these behaviors range from a negation of human subjectivity, to a closer relationship with the holy, to ensuring a positive afterlife, for example (Deal 426).

Kaelber points out five consistent traits of religious asceticism: fasting, sexual abstinence, poverty, seclusion, and self-inflicted pain (442). All of these traits may exist independently of asceticism, but combined with desired outcomes and embedded in a faith tradition, they become semiotized, part of a system of signification. As semiotized performances, ascetic acts exist in a complex web of meanings that are dependent on each other and rooted in centuries-old traditions.

Grappling with desire is at the heart of asceticism's practices. Harpham points out that denying what one desires doesn't eradicate desire (45). Instead, to deny oneself something is to acknowledge its desirability, to amplify awareness of one's longing for the forbidden item. Desire also inspires and motivates ascetic practices, which are undertaken in response to a passionate longing for a goal such as ridding oneself of desire; yet paradoxically a desire to get rid of desire is still a desire (45). For example, denying the body serves to accentuate the experience of the flesh, of human existence, in acknowledgement of the Incarnation's miraculous merging of the divine and the human (Bynum 294). The suffering ascetic's behaviors are designed to fulfill his or her desire to emulate Christ's suffering on the cross.

Ascetic performances and practices discipline the body and mind, even to the point of changing the body's instinctual responses to desire and the senses (Flood ix, 4). Asceticism denies

subjective affect: its behaviors are intended to quash the subjectivity of the practitioner. It is a shrinking of the self (Malina 162–65), a distortion of the self—including the psychological, the social, and the physical self—that results in a purified self whose every action is embedded in a new semiotic system.

Such behaviors have been helpfully contextualized by theologian Richard Valantasis in terms of performance; asceticism's relationship to performance marks its difference from more ordinary religious behaviors like prayer and devoutness (107). Ascetic performances may be not only semiotized but also aestheticized, while ordinary religious behaviors are far less so. In terms of aestheticization, in ascetic practice, the ascetic body becomes a symbolic form (Harpham xiv). Here I use the concept of *aestheticization* not in relation to beauty, but instead to describe the way that something is intentionally formed, stylized, or objectified, resulting in its being perceived in terms of its formal qualities and the affective associations with that form, rather than for itself. Such an act of aestheticization makes what is formed expressive of the intentions of the one who forms, as well as of its embeddedness in ideology, without necessarily signifying as a sign would. It distinguishes it from the nonaesthetic, such as everyday behaviors. The aestheticized and semiotized ascetic act awaits the interpretation of its audience, and ascetic performances always have an audience, whether that audience is the inspired faithful (like those who gathered at the base of Saint Symeon Stylites's column to witness his holy suffering), other ascetics (like those who sought out Saint Antony in the desert), or God (Valantasis 2).

### Ascetic Cuteness

Asceticism, with its amplified denial of desire in the service of religious devotion, and cuteness, with its exaggerated appeal to desire on an immediate, visceral level, seem incompatible. Yet like a body weakened by starvation, the cute, hungry with sharp teeth, needs our tender, loving care. It seeks intimacy, as the ascetic seeks profound intimacy with God. Sometimes lonely and

isolated, but not by choice or through discipline, the cute prays to its viewer for salvation.

Cuteness longs for indulgence, while asceticism enacts refusal. To indulge is to give in to desire, to permit oneself the experience of satisfaction. This is what cuteness demands from its viewer — whether by fondling, eating, buying, or other ways the viewer seeks intimacy with the cute object. Cuteness sanctions a lack of resistance: if something is cute, it's more acceptable to be unable to resist it. Cuteness seems to justify giving in, even when it fails to provide complete satisfaction. Asceticism denies such experiences. The acute pleasure associated with cuteness would be exactly the kind of human affective response ascetics seek to discipline into nonexistence. Yet science has demonstrated that sexual pleasure, eating, and mind-altering drugs stimulate the same parts of the brain that feel pleasure when processing images — just images! — of baby animals (Angier). Cuteness thus impinges on the types of pleasures and satisfactions that ascetics seek to renounce. Where asceticism denies sensual pleasure, cuteness, by contrast, has such a broad and consistent appeal that Ngai uses the term “promiscuous” to describe it (24).

Both cuteness and asceticism have a tendency to excess: for example, cuteness with ever-larger eyes and chubbier softness, and asceticism with self-deprivations leading to emaciation, or to flagellation that inflicts suffering without quite causing death (James 354). Even giving in to the urge to endure increasingly extreme privations was considered dangerous and could earn a medieval monk a reprimand from his abbot (Bynum 240). Yet the excesses of cuteness and asceticism are often tied, paradoxically, to lack. Cuteness is often cute because it lacks something (Harris 4), whether that lack is indicated by a generalized neediness, or more specifically by helplessness or homelessness; whereas asceticism is built on lack, whether of food, sleep, human companionship, etc. Lack serves a purpose, and is another element of both cuteness and asceticism that may be considered aestheticized.

Cuteness's sweet lack, as Harris and Ngai point out, is often paired ambivalently with revulsion (Harris 2–4; Ngai 60). In this context, what would normally be unpleasant and undesirable

becomes appealing, a contradiction that also has a role in asceticism. Disgust associated with the body and its weaknesses operates in both cuteness and asceticism. Disgust evokes pity; being pitiable equates to powerlessness. But as cuteness theorists have shown, powerlessness, in cuteness, is a kind of power. Cuteness and asceticism share a paradoxical relationship to bodily functions and disgust. On the one hand, both cuteness and asceticism emphasize the body freed from bodily functions. Harris observes that excretions are eliminated from the cute (11), and Merish notes more specifically that defecating or vomiting have no place in the cute (189). In asceticism, such an absence of bodily functions, whether from deliberate self-starvation or a posthumous absence of decomposition, is a sign of saintliness (Bynum 211). On the other hand, both cuteness and asceticism also make room for disgust in relation to desire. Disgust can be a marker of a kind of power in cuteness if it accentuates the cute object's powerful powerlessness. In asceticism, what would ordinarily be deemed disgusting can instead be a desirable sign of piety if it demonstrates evidence of piously undertaken bodily privations. Asceticism's relationship to disgust and aversion has to do with canceling out the desirability of the body, and with visible signs of suffering being aestheticizations of piety. The sometimes-disgusting mortifications undergone by ascetics are signs of a movement away from subjectivity and toward purity (Adams 29). Disgust removes the conventional sexual desirability of the ascetic body: for example, Saint Symeon Stylites suffered horrendously from a gangrenous leg filled with maggots. Yet to his followers, this wound was by no means an indicator of ordinary suffering, but a semiotized mark that took on holy meaning. Symeon's biographer Antonius describes a man who "picked up one of the worms that had fallen from Symeon's thigh and saw it as a priceless pearl" (Miller 147). (I can't help but imagine some anime version of this wherein a cutified big-eyed maggot preens at being perceived as pearly, manifesting the type of pride that would be anathema to a good ascetic.)

Such atrocious wounds would be out of place in conventional cuteness, but woundedness of a lesser variety can augment cute-

ness, as Harris comments in relation to British teddy bear “Little Mutt,” who wears an orthopedic boot (6). Further exploring the sufferings of the cute or ascetic body, one divergence comes from the fact that the cute object, image, or toy is designed as suffering, by a (perhaps sadistic) designer who “maims and hobbles” (Harris 5). The ascetic, by contrast, is suffering for a creator who does not maim or hobble him or her, in many cases; the maiming or hobbling is self-inflicted in the name of that creator.

One attribute of physical anomaly that overlaps strangely between the cute and the ascetic is bodily distortion. Limited movement and nonfunctional body parts play a role in both asceticism and cuteness. Harris points out that teddy bears, which looked more or less like anatomically proportionate bears when they were first marketed, have been altered over time so that pawless and jointless pudgy limbs stick straight out uselessly, or at best, ready for a hug (5, 10). The deliberate distortion of limbs, at times to the point of uselessness, is also a component of extreme asceticism. For example, as a child, Saint Kevin of Glendalough had his arms outstretched to pray when a blackbird landed in them and built a nest; the (cute) child and future saint stayed in that position until the last (cute) fledglings had departed (Plummer 137).

Another feature of both cuteness and asceticism where overlap exists, which at first might seem counterintuitive, is the way that neediness and/or helplessness become attractive (Harris 4). Harris argues that cuteness aestheticizes “unhappiness, helplessness, and deformity” (5), part of the dynamic of powerlessness that makes the cute appealing. Deformity, a mark of saintly ascetic suffering, is also a mark of the neediness of the cute, but only to a certain degree. In asceticism, helplessness is part of the practice of resistance and self-denial, and if resistance and self-denial lead to bodily infirmity that make the ascetic even more helpless, then the ascetic’s piety is literally a successful embodiment of ascetic tradition. Deformity as a result of self-inflicted suffering is an aestheticization of piety. Valantasis notes that ascetics who seek solitude as hermits may only do so because they have a support network, and that community in turn becomes

the audience for the ascetic's sufferings (116). Skellig Michael was such an ascetic situation: while rough seas prevented travel between the island and the mainland for much of the year, the monks were not completely separated from their monastery on the mainland, at Ballinskelligs. Archaeological investigation by Edward Bourke, Alan R. Hayden, and Ann Lynch demonstrates that items providing additional sustenance such as wood for fires, and meat from domesticated animals like goats, sheep, pigs, and cattle, which were not raised on the island itself, were at times provided by their brethren (403–4, 411, 467). The hermetic ascetic's willingness to give up not only comfort and food but self-sufficiency is a willful embrace of neediness.

### Cuteness, Asceticism, Desire, and Capitalism

Cuteness's association with capitalism and commodification makes the analogy of cuteness's indulgence and asceticism's refusal seemingly counterintuitive. Asceticism, with its refusal of comfort and embrace of poverty, would logically appear to be completely incompatible with capitalism. For example, in Matthew 19:21, Christ tells a young man that he must sell his belongings and give to the poor if he is to attain the treasures of heaven. This anti-capitalistic, anti-consumerist direction has been interpreted to mean that similar renunciations are expected of those who became monks (Williams 377). Yet connections between asceticism and capitalism, the foundational context of cuteness, may be found in the work of Max Weber, who, considering the roles of desire and resistance in capitalism, labeled capitalism as "worldly asceticism" (Harpham xiv). For Weber, the way that capitalism required self-denial and discipline made it an adaptation of asceticism. Instead of transforming the subjectivity of the ascetic, it created a new economic world (Valantasis 36).

Weber contends that with the end of feudalism, asceticism became part of everyday life, not just a religious vocation (Harpham 29). Capitalism requires one's capacity to forego immediate gratification and suffer in the present in hopes of future profit, which Marx referred as "the science of renunciation" (Adams

110). If consumers were to buy into this self-disciplined deferral of reward, their desire had to be aroused first by commodities (111). As loosening class boundaries at the end of the Middle Ages eventually made it possible for wealth to be earned and amassed, renunciation of everyday pleasures made asceticism integral to capitalism (Harpham 29).<sup>4</sup> The ascetic capitalist, like the early Christian ascetic, at times even sacrificed family relationships to the pursuit of profit (29). Weber draws connections between monastic, community-based asceticism's emphasis on conformity and the type of labor required for factory production under capitalism (Harpham 20). Harpham goes so far as to say that because of asceticism's emphasis on labor, "Early asceticism is capitalism without money" (30).

Secularized asceticism could instill discipline. But if everyone were disciplined, there would be no one to buy the goods. Something was needed to inspire consumption (Adams 111). As James Livingston argues, "the desiring subject is a new form of subjectivity under capital" (44). One solution, as Ngai so powerfully demonstrates, is cuteness: just the thing to arouse consumers' desire for intimacy with cute commodities (54).

## Conclusion

If asceticism were broadly built on refusal and denial as its practitioners seek closeness to the divine, cuteness would seem perfectly engineered to thwart ascetic accomplishment. With its often childlike powerlessness, cuteness at least pretends to appeal to the viewer's goodwill and charity, as if the viewer's submission to the cute were always an ethical act, when in the case of the commodity, the act supports exploitative economic systems. Cuteness seems designed to lead the ascetic astray to founder, by disguising indulgence behind a mask of need.

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4 However, Harpham argues that the abandonment of spontaneous enjoyment in the pursuit of wealth happened far earlier than Weber claims, as early as the fourth century.



Cuteness also threatens asceticism because of its ability to reconcile the otherness of the inanimate and nonhuman commodity into a familial nurturing setting, to bring the commodity in from the cold (Merish 64). Asceticism, in contrast, denies conventional family structure in favor of either solitude or a community likewise devoted to self-denial; separation from loved ones is a necessity (Bynum 280). What is cute, with its helpless appeal to the maternal, would remind the ascetic of the deliberately painful loss of familial bond.

Neither opposites nor analogues, cuteness and asceticism may speak to each other productively through a Derridean translational analogy. Perhaps in its powerful powerlessness, the cute could usefully serve as a poignant device to remind the ascetic of much of that from which asceticism must abstain. Cuteness's sharp aestheticization of desire supplements more prosaic desires for food, warmth, or companionship. The tiny island of Skellig Michael — thinking of it in terms of cuteness, I long to call it “my” tiny island and incorporate it into a fantasy of the familial — has an even tinier neighboring island, Small Skellig or Little Skellig, which today is a bird sanctuary. With even steeper and more treacherous terrain than Skellig Michael, Little Skellig appears never to have been inhabited by humans; instead, it has been home to great colonies of birds, some of which no doubt fed the hungry monks over the centuries (Horn et al. 36). Were a bedraggled baby bird to wash up on the rocky shore of Skellig Michael, could even the most devout monk resist it?

Should such a treat be for the soul or for the belly? If it is denied the belly, does its worldly cuteness become a danger to the soul? Or, with its multiple seductions contained in one precious package, would it instead be aestheticized as the perfect vehicle with which to engage the aches of temptation? Where cuteness foments desire, asceticism deliberately seeks out desire in order to deny it. Asceticism could find in the cute a most demanding and exacting source of discipline.

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# From “Awe” to “Awww”: Cuteness and the Idea of the Holy in Christian Commodity Culture

*Claire Maria Chambers*

Can God, the divine, the absolute, or the holy be cute? A quick foray into contemporary commodity cultures associated with several world religions yields “cute” objects and images that play mediating roles in the faith lives of practitioners. In South Korean Buddhist temples, small, chubby, plaster monks bought for a few thousand won adorn shrines and altars, accompanying the prayers and intentions of the purchasers. Buddha himself may be depicted on posters and lamp covers for his birthday celebration in May as a cutified, childlike being, while at temples devotees ritually bathe a statue of the Buddha as a small boy (figs. 1–4). Contemporary Hindus wanting to teach their children about the complex pantheon need look no further than Sanjay Patel’s *The Little Book of Hindu Deities: From the Goddess of Wealth to the Sacred Cow*. Each bright spread of the book features a god, goddess, demon, warrior, or diva as a cute cartoon character with round, exaggerated eyes. The Bala Krishna, or Krishna the divine child, may set some precedent for cute depictions of Hindu gods, with his exploits — especially the tale of his



*Figure 1.* Figurines of monks at a seaside temple in Busan, South Korea. Photography by author. *Figure 2.* A child Buddha receiving ritual bath in Seoul, South Korea. Photography by author.

butter thievery—captured in popular devotional images that picture him as a soft, round toddler shaded in sky blue.<sup>1</sup>

And in Christianity, the Christ child has always had a special place in the liturgical year, from nativity scenes or pageants to

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1 An Internet image search using the term “Krishna butter thief” yields thousands of examples.



Figure 3. Buddha on a May festival lamp in South Korea. Photography by author. Figure 4. A ritual lotus-shaped bath with a child Buddha for sale in Seoul, South Korea. Photography by author.

the story of his precocious answer to his parents at the temple after having gone missing for three days: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). Christian commodity culture suffers no dearth of products that cutify the Christ child himself, along with choruses of angels, saints, and biblical characters. This chapter will analyze one specific product line of cute Christian devotional imagery. The Precious Moments world of figurines, dolls, and illustrations signifies consumers' devotion to the divine through their adoration of cute, smiling-but-weepy-faced, (mostly) white children with strange, teardrop-shaped eyes. While the question of whether God, gods, or holy personages themselves are cute is one thing, it seems that the answer to the question of whether or not cute depictions of the divine exist is a resounding yes. What is it, then, that such cute *religious* imagery performs?

Focusing on Precious Moments imagery, this chapter will explore the cute in Christian commodity culture as a schema for the nonrational self, using Rudolph Otto's argument in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) that it is only through the nonrational experience of "creature-feeling" at the foot of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the mystery that is both terrifying and fascinating) that anything of the absolute transcendence of God can be humanly grasped. According to Otto, creature-feeling is not a conceptual or rational explanation of a phenomenological experience, but "the *emotion* of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (10, emphasis mine). Because creature-feeling, Otto contends, refers primarily to an object outside the self, it points toward the numinous (after the Latin *numen*, divine power or spirit). For Otto, the numinous is precisely the experience of creature-feeling referring to that which transcends the self (10–11). After introducing Precious Moments in more detail and analyzing specific images via Otto's ideas, I will conclude by suggesting that *religious* cuteness, especially as signifying a believer's relationship to time and the absolute via the history of salvation, provides a clear example of cuteness as retro-futuristic because it conflates childish innocence (representing the past) with adult decisions regarding one's faith that focus on the future (soteriology and apocalypse).

### Cute Studies and *The Idea of the Holy*

Several definitions of cute within the emerging field of cute studies blend well with Otto's concepts of nonrationality and creature-feeling. In particular, what Joshua Paul Dale refers to as the "awww factor" (5) may also reveal what we could call the "awe factor." Daniel Harris's jeremiad against the cute aesthetic in capitalist consumer culture argues that consumers are effectively brainwashed into believing that they possess individualized personal taste, when in actuality it's been spoon-fed by advertising. He turns on its head Konrad Lorenz's well-known evolutionary reading of cuteness as a trigger for maternal af-

fection and concern that therefore increases the likelihood that animals will care for their offspring. For Harris, "cuteness is the aesthetic of deformity and dejection" (7); stump-limbed and weepy-eyed dolls and toys signify a sadistic drive to consume and control the other. More recently, Sianne Ngai also critiques cuteness as "a kind of consumer fetishism redoubled" that "tries to seize hold of and manipulate, as its 'raw material,' the unavoidable fantasy of fetishism" (63), while it "foregrounds the violence of its production" (78). For Ngai, cuteness as a "soft" aesthetic emerges from mass culture in differentiation from "high art" as an explicit appeal to powerlessness. However, "[t]he cute commodity, for all its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands" (64). For example, the consumer may be "seduced" into feeling that buying the product carries out the wish of the product itself. This leads Ngai to conclude that "[t]he feelings that underpin and traverse cuteness, a sentimental desire for a simpler and more sensuous, more concrete relation to commodities, are thus more multiple and complex than they may initially seem" (64). Cute objects that appear to be victims of aggression readily morph into agents of aggression themselves, and the consumer may become the consumed (85). This "power of the powerless" echoes Otto's language of the experience of the numinous, in which the lowliness of creature-feeling actually refers to the ultimate mightiness of the absolute. It also parallels a common trope of Christian theology: that the first shall be last, the meek shall inherit the earth, and that "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Turning away from the more negative nuances of Harris's and Ngai's cute commodities, Dale argues that instead of engaging aggressive energies toward weaker others, cuteness actually strengthens positive community bonds. While aggression may accompany the feeling of being overwhelmed by cuteness, Dale suggests that "our response to this feeling has a built-in safety mechanism that displaces this aggression, bending it back towards the subject in order to preserve a helpless, unthreatening object from harm: thus, the pleasure felt by a subject overwhelmed by cuteness is not sadistic, it is masochistic" (6). The



idea that displaced aggression bends back toward the subject brings to mind more masochistic rituals of religious devotion wherein the practitioner may “punish” him or herself by acts of contrition — whether in an extreme manner, as with flagellation or self-mortification, or in softer forms, such as kneeling or praying for a certain amount of time.

The connections among aesthetic response, consumerism, therapy, and religion deserve careful consideration. Reading Max Weber’s study of John Calvin, semiotician Arthur Asa Berger notes that there is an important, though generally unrecognized, religious or sacred dimension to the passion for consumption. “[T]he same passions and fervor that animate religious belief in people take on a secularized form and shape their behavior as consumers in contemporary societies. Adopting a religious perspective on things, we can say that shopping becomes, in an unconscious way and in a disguised form, a sacred act” (39). If shopping can self-soothe, the cute object of Christian commodity culture performs this therapeutic function quite concretely, especially if the object embodies the comfort of religious belief.

The most recognizable images in the Precious Moments line of products are doll-like child figures with teardrop-shaped eyes and bulbous heads. They were first created by Samuel Butcher in the 1970s for a line of greeting cards, which he then expanded into a giant gift industry that includes porcelain figurines, all kinds of printed posters, cards, calendars, devotional Bibles, videos, T-shirts, inspirational picture frames, dolls, and Christmas ornaments. For devotees of Precious Moments collectibles, appropriately themed caskets and headstones are also available. Even though the popularity of Precious Moments paraphernalia is staunchly an American Christian phenomenon that appeals to both Catholics and Protestants, the imagery is recognizable the world over, thanks to the global reach of the gift industry. Curiously, not all Precious Moments products are religiously themed — in fact, American patriotism is another common subject of the imagery — but overwhelmingly the ideology that underpins the company and its products is a generalized style

of Christian worship and fellowship that emphasizes humility, meekness, and gentleness, or "loving, sharing, and caring" ("Precious Moments Supporting Foundation").

### Cute Devotional Imagery and the "Hyperchild"

Before discussing Precious Moments collectibles, I would like to turn our attention to the Precious Moments park and chapel located in Carthage, Missouri. Described as artist Samuel Butcher's "way of sharing the joy of his faith with the world" and apparently modeled on the Sistine Chapel, the chapel interior includes scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The crowning feature is a mural called "Hallelujah Square," which celebrates the lives of children whose lives ended too soon. What is striking about the artistic depiction of these children, apart from the anatomical oddities of the teardrop-shaped eyes and ballooning heads, is that it transforms any human figure into what Richard Lindsay calls a "hyperreal child." In perhaps the only critical treatment available on the subject of Precious Moments, Lindsay's essay is a report on his visit to the chapel. Lindsay reads the Precious Moments imagery through the words of Umberto Eco, as "those instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake" (Eco 8). According to Lindsay,

Precious Moments children are *like* children, but better. They're pastel-colored and clean, usually light-skinned and fair-haired (the American ideal of beauty). They're always in adorable poses, with puppies and kittens, or playing dress-up as doctors or teachers. Their shoes and clothes are patched and faded to make them look like lovable ragamuffins. And they usually reflect some Bible verse or Christian virtue in the most innocent, un-self-conscious way. Although they are sometimes depicted as mothers and fathers — even as grandparents — or doing adult work or driving cars, they are always large-headed and pre-pubescent.

But in an uncanny turn, the thing—or rather, the moment—that is presented as the better-than-real absolute fake is the moment of death, which is memorialized over and over again throughout the chapel and its visitors' center, gift shop, and surrounding gardens, spaces attended and interpreted by these curious “urchins” with their almost-featureless faces.

According to the chapel's website, the “Hallelujah Square” mural depicts the entrance to heaven through the eyes of a child (“The Stories in Hallelujah Square”). The mural is composed so that the eye is drawn past a golden gate where a blonde Precious Moments boy (Peter?) greets newcomers, down a path past a welcoming committee holding signs that say “Welcome!” and “To your heavenly home,” and up toward a larger, cathedral-like gate that opens into a mountainous landscape. Puffy white clouds frame the mural, on which perch Precious Moments angels in prayerful attitudes. One of the little angels in the welcoming committee holds his sign upside down—his innocent ignorance intensifies his cuteness, of course. A rainbow arches between the clouds, and, in the distance right at the foot of the cathedral gate, Jesus himself greets the little newcomers, his presence centered in the composition but relatively small in terms of size due to the perspective. Butcher has incorporated stories of personal loss into the mural, with portraits of his own dead relatives, including his son and brother. Butcher also has memorialized several other children in the mural, including a young woman named Coleenia. Let us consider in detail the way in which Coleenia's story is theologized in context of the mural, according to its accompanying literature:

Coleenia came to the Chapel several years ago. She had never walked or talked. She was in her twenties but only weighed 45 or 50 pounds. Mr. Butcher was so touched by the sweet smile of this young woman who did not even need her breathing machine while she was being shown the paintings in the Chapel. He remembered that sweet spirit and when he learned that she died, wanted to comfort her parents, so he painted her here, dolly in her arms and standing like she

had never been able to do on the earth — a reminder of the wholeness that awaits us in this very special place. (“The Stories in Hallelujah Square”)

Coleenia is an example of a “hyperchild” already weakened by illness or disability, who is then further cutified by Butcher as a Precious Moment. Even though at her death she was more than twenty years old, Butcher portrays her as a blonde child holding a toy. Her spiritual wholeness, seemingly possible only after death, is signified not by a realistic portrayal but by a stylized portrait that simplifies features and infantilizes the body. Although spiritual progress here takes the form of psychological and physiological regression, such imagery speaks to a Christianity that prizes simplicity and unquestioning faith. In one’s last days, one is *literally* born again.

### A Critical Reading of Cute Devotional Imagery

For as many devotees there are of Precious Moments, there are equally as many who find the imagery disturbing or even morally questionable. But rather than dismiss Precious Moments’ cute aesthetic as somehow not “seriously” religious, I seek a more critical reading that invites complications. In her groundbreaking essay on cuteness and commodity aesthetics with regard to the child and the childlike, Lori Merish argues that “cuteness engenders an affectional dynamic through which the Other is domesticated and (re)contextualized within the human ‘family.’ Cuteness aestheticizes the most primary social distinctions, regulating the (shifting) boundaries between Selves and Others, cultural ‘insiders’ and cultural ‘outsiders,’ ‘humans’ and ‘freaks’” (188). While aestheticization can certainly be—and often is—executed as an act of control, I argue that it could just as easily play out as an invitation to communion with the transcendent. For example, another part of the chapel is dedicated to Butcher’s son, Phillip, who is memorialized in another mural that depicts Phillip’s family gathered around an empty bed, while Phillip himself is greeted above by angels at the en-



Figure 5. *Precious Moments* bride and groom. Artifact from author's private collection. Photography by author.

trance to heaven. Although Phillip was an adult when he died, Butcher portrays him as a *Precious Moments* child. The family members surrounding the bed are also represented as children, even though this family clearly includes adults. The deliberate conflation of disparate temporalities—the moment of death and the suspension in prepubescent childhood—plays at the boundaries of the beautiful and the grotesque, and allows the cute object of religious devotion to represent the experience of human limitation (Otto's creature-feeling) as the experience of the numinous. Indeed, for some the imagery is uncanny and grotesque, but that perhaps is the flip side of what creates its great appeal. What seems to be an oversimplification is actually a complication. The cutified imagery may simplify life, but it actually offers a complex and nuanced spiritual understanding of life as moments *already* lived in death.

As Ngai reflects, "To consider aesthetic categories like the cute and the interesting not only as styles of objects but as subjective, feeling-based judgments—relatively codified ways of sharing our pleasure and displeasure with others—is to go straight to the heart of philosophical aesthetics" (38). The cute objects

of Christian commodity culture mediate subjective feelings as the experience of transcendence. To engage with a cute figurine that represents a life-changing event, such as baptism or marriage (fig. 5), is to see one's feelings of smallness, preciousness, and innocence being mediated by an aesthetic that is simultaneously religious and secular, spiritual and commercial. Religion is a mediating practice, according to Hent de Vries (3–42); in fact, it is fair to consider religion itself as a kind of media. As religious anthropologist Birgit Meyer explains, "Positing a distance between human beings and the transcendental, religion offers practices of mediation to bridge that distance and make it possible to experience — from a more distanced perspective one could say produce — the transcendental" (705). But what if that object of mediation, a kitschy *bisque* figure of a child, offers a less-than-awe-inspiring encounter with the transcendent, and more the tendency to produce a gurgle of affection for the cute ("Awww... aren't you adorable?"). What truly is the difference, in terms of performing as a mediating object of the experience of the numinous, between, for example, a Byzantine-style icon, with its austere contrasts between light and shadow emphasizing the severe and penetrating gaze of the saint, and a Precious Moments figurine, with its dopey smile and weepy eyes? Is one more effective than the other as a religious mediator because it is perceived as high art rather than a commodity?

### Art versus Kitsch

Otto is clear on this question, and his answer is "yes" — high art is a more effective mediator of spiritual experience than commercial art. However, I depart from his model and argue that Precious Moments figurines are demonstrably effective mediators of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* as much as any Bach mass or Byzantine Madonna, and manifestations of creature-feeling itself. Otto's treatment of different kinds of artistic media for approaching the *mysterium* enacts a hierarchy; in fact, he disparages "low-brow" and commercial attempts to depict or symbolize the holy because they cannot match the

“feeling-nature” of more explicitly “nonrational” art forms, such as poetry and music: “[The living ‘something more’ of the *fascinans*] lives no less in those tense extolling of the blessing of salvation, which recur in all religions of salvation, and stand in such remarkable contrast to the relatively meager and frequently childish import of that which is revealed in them by concept or by image” (35). He especially disparages concert music and the operas of Wagner as preventing nonrational experience because they attempt to represent feeling rather than provoke it. “[A]bove and beyond our rational being lies hidden the ultimate and highest part of our nature, which can find no satisfaction in the mere allaying of the needs of our sensuous, psychical, or intellectual impulses and cravings” (36). Should Otto be alive today to witness the popularity of Precious Moments, surely he would class it with Wagner.

But this is where Otto seems to contradict himself. In creating a hierarchy for the effectiveness of artistic or religious media, he overlooks his own argument that the experience of the numinous cannot be categorized by degrees of intensity; it always refers to the transcendent, no matter how slight or how strong the incident. In fact, he makes a compelling case for the gentle and the soft as effective mediators of the “awe” of religious experience—and to this we may also add the cute: “The awe or ‘dread’ may indeed be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man’s hair bristle and his limbs quake. But it may also steal upon him almost unobserved as the *gentlest* of agitations, a *mere* fleeting shadow passing across his mood” (16, my emphasis). Following Otto here, the cute can be understood as a soft form of the experience of the *mysterium tremendum*. If, as Otto suggests, there is a spectrum of feeling across which dread and fear are at the most intense and a softer “mystical awe” occupies the lower register, then the *mysterium tremendum* is no less or more present. The believer can move from the “awesome” power of daemonic horror to the “awww” of the cutest Christ child: “[T]he ‘uncanny’ or ‘awful’ [...] survives with the quality of exaltedness and sublimity or is symbolized by means of it. And this element, *softened*

though it is, does not disappear even on the highest level of all, where the worship of God is at its purest" (17). If the feelings of personal nothingness and submergence before the awe-inspiring object that characterize creature-feeling are just as present in "softer" experiences as in the exalted, then it follows that these same feelings can be just as adequately elicited by cute objects of religious kitsch as by soaring classical architecture and ancient sacred hymns. Devotional objects are intensely personal; rosaries, scapulae, Bibles, and home altars may be sacred objects but are often handled with the familiarity of the quotidian and profane, and chosen with personal tastes for aesthetic expression of the religious self in mind. This is no different for commercial objects like Precious Moments figurines. Our aesthetic categories are matters of personal taste, and nothing is more personal than what compels creature-feeling.

Returning to the notion of religion as media, Otto offers a similar approach to religious practice and art as "schema" (he also sometimes uses the term *ideogram*). Even those artworks of which Otto approves remain limited symbols or schema for the numinous to which the non-rational experience of creature-feeling refers. Put simply, the rational is a schema for the non-rational. For example, to engage in the rational exercise of the composition of a poem is to create a schema for the non-rational experience of transcendence. In another example, Otto refers to sex as a schema for the erotic: "[T]he non-rational numinous fact, schematized by the rational concepts we have suggested above, yields us the complex category of 'holy' itself, richly charged and complete and in its fullest meaning" (45). Ideograms or schemas can only symbolically indicate the *fascinans*, which is "purely a felt experience" (59). I contend that Precious Moments function as schema for "high" religious experience because of their low aesthetic value as religious kitsch. They are approachable and play between the nonrational existence one may have experienced in childhood and the rational decision to practice a life of faith as an adult. Precious Moments offer identification with experiences of creatureliness, smallness, in-



nocence, and purity in the face of that which transcends the self, but do not assume to explain the transcendent.

The world of Precious Moments figurines is vast. The online catalog is divided into categories dealing with the memorialization of life events and the celebration of holidays. Looking at the category of “Sympathy” will yield several compelling examples that Precious Moments function as a schema for the nonrational experience of the numinous, especially if we return to the difficult topic of the death of a child. In terms of representing the *mysterium*, Otto argues that commercial artworks “are attempts in some way or other, it little matters how, to guess the riddle it propounds, and their effect is at the same time always to weaken and deaden the experience itself” (26). Although the figurines would certainly fall under this description of rational representation of the “riddle” of Christian faith, they also sincerely express experiences of comfort, love, and community in the face of the difficulties that the riddle of faith presents for thousands of consumers around the globe. While some might approach the imagery as gratuitous indulgence in a kind of emotional sensationalism, the ubiquity of Precious Moments and its longevity in Christian commodity culture must speak to a way that it touches the lives of its consumers. A page on the official Precious Moments website is devoted to “testimonials” from customers. One customer writes, “‘Safe In The Arms Of Jesus’ is one of my favorite Precious Moments. In November of 2006 I miscarried my second child, it was one of the hardest days of my life. But when I received this Precious Moment it put a smile on my face. Now every time I see it I know my baby is safe in the arms of Jesus!” (“Testimonials”). If one consults the “Sympathy” section for this figurine, a few different products devoted to the loss of infants and the experience of miscarriage appear. One, titled “Mommy’s Love Goes with You,” shows a mother, with a tear on her plump, childish cheek, handing over her baby to a gently smiling angel. Apparently it was discontinued but later brought back after the company received many customer requests (“Figurines”).

Another customer writes, “Our Precious Moments are so special because of what they represent, the beautiful and sweet

way they signify great messages from the Bible, and the memories and special precious moments with my mom. Thank you, Precious Moments, for the great adventures and memories in each figurine" ("Testimonials"). For this customer, too, the figurines memorialize a loved one and help the customer process grief and loss. The imagery represents a belief in not only a heavenly afterlife, but also a divine order wherein that which goes beyond human understanding — such as the inexplicable death of a child or loss of a parent — resides in the greater purpose of the *mysterium*.

Again, a "Christianized" reading of Ngai's approach to cute commodity aesthetics is helpful here. Elaborating on Adorno's idea that kitsch parodies catharsis (325), Ngai writes that the cute is what "transcends [language] by subordinating itself to it, reinforc[ing] one of its simplest but most important claims: that art has the capacity not only to reflect and mystify power but also to reflect on and make use of powerlessness" (109). For Precious Moments imagery, that powerlessness is the powerlessness of the self in comparison to the terrifying yet fascinating mystery of the numinous. Helpless at the moment of death as at the beginning of the life, the powerlessness of the believer pictured in the imagery is in fact a powerful statement of faith. While the figurines are indeed kitsch and may perform a cathartic function by directing emotional release, this does not diminish the reality that the experience of the numinous that they may embody for their owners is felt sincerely.

### The Cultural Biography of Cute Religious Objects

As individual objects and as a line of products, Precious Moments narrate the faith lives of the people who purchase them. In cultural anthropology, the notion of the "biography of objects" is one that "leads us to think comparatively about the accumulation of meaning in objects and the changing effects these have on people and events" (Gosden and Marshall 177). Western anthropologists diagram the relationship between people and things by way of analogy or comparison with non-Western cul-

tures. For example, Marilyn Strathern posits that “while Westerners understand objects to exist in and of themselves, Melanesians see objects as the detached parts of people circulating through the social body in complex ways” in a process she calls “partible personhood” (qtd. in Gosden and Marshall 173). Janet Hoskins’s work with the Kodi people in Eastern Indonesia produced a “paradox” for her research process; while informants were loathe to answer direct questions about the events of their lives, if questioned about the significance of a particular object in their ownership, they would reveal much more about their own personal history. Objects as narrative devices, writes Hoskins, “do not so much reflect ‘the truth’ as construct it in a particular way” (4). The Kodi people shape the “narrative creation of the self through the vehicle of an object” (21), while *Precious Moments* gathers under a cute aesthetic the desire of Christian believers to do just that.

While objects indeed narrate individual lives, objects themselves also carry cultural biographies. Cultures construct objects in much the same way that they construct people, as Igor Kopytoff argues: “In the homogenized world of commodities, an eventful biography of a thing becomes the story of the various singularizations of it, of classifications and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context. As with persons, the drama here lies in the uncertainties of valuation and of identity” (234). *Precious Moments* imagery, especially that of the large-headed, short-limbed, and rounded child with the teardrop-shaped eyes, can be understood as similar to the commodities Kopytoff analyzes because it represents its buyers. The “drama” of the *Precious Moments* child is one wherein the individual consumer is subsumed into the homogenization of the cute aesthetic, which erases differences and individual features so that all are collected into the arms of Jesus and the angels. To identify with a *Precious Moments* child is to see oneself enveloped within the all-encompassing embrace of the Christian God, where “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). This experience of being

subsumed can be likened to Otto's description of creature-feeling in the experience of the numinous.

### Conclusion: Cuteness and Retro-Futuristic Devotion

Thinking of the relationship between the singular and the many, I will end by discussing a curious fact about the "Hallelujah Square" mural in the Precious Moments Chapel. Jesus himself, even though his were the ultimate "precious moments" — the crucifixion and the resurrection — is not consistently depicted through the cute aesthetic. The Christ *child* is allowed the Precious Moments treatment in nativity scenes, but never an *adult* Christ; he is always "real," with adult proportions, stature, and detailed facial features (where Precious Moments children lack noses and eyebrows and have almost no mouths). Christ is the only singularity among the many Precious Moments children, because he is, among all the other figures, the most human as much as he is divine. Christ cannot be a Precious Moment because a Precious Moment is the manifestation of one's relationship to Christ himself. The well-known hymn by Charles Wesley sums up the theology of Precious Moments perfectly: "Gentle Jesus meek and mild, look upon a little child, pity my simplicity, suffer *me* to come to *thee*" (Wesley 180) — that is, I am of the indistinguishable many who, in coming to Christ, discover singularization through him. This is a kind of mysticism of creature-feeling practiced through the consumption of cute commodities. According to Otto, the experience of creature-feeling leads toward self-annihilation: "the estimation of the self, of the personal 'I,' as something not perfectly or essentially real, or even as mere nullity, a self-depreciation which comes to demand its own fulfillment in practice in rejecting the delusion of selfhood" (21). This is not "feeling of our createdness' but 'feeling of our creaturehood,' that is, the consciousness of the littleness of every creature in face of that which is above all creatures" (22). In being like every other Precious Moments child, the individual embraces his or her own nothingness, trading singularity for entry into the kingdom of God.

The retro-futuristic story of salvation in the Precious Moments world is one where the individual believer must first regress to the past and re-experience the innocent faith of childhood in order to approach the saving grace of the yet-to-return messiah through self-obliteration and suffusion with the divine at the moment of death. Precious Moments imagery therefore deploys a retro-futuristic aesthetic through its cuteness, an aesthetic that reimagines the past as somehow occurring in the future (or the future as somehow occurring in the past), blending older technologies and styles with the yet-to-be. Soteriologically, Christianity performs religious retro-futurism because it reimagines the past events of Christ's manifestation to his disciples after his resurrection as occurring again in the future and ensuring the salvation of believers. This final revelation of God's plan for the world is the "apocalypse."<sup>2</sup> The future-oriented messianic story of Christian salvation is embodied in the Precious Moments figurine. In identifying with a Precious Moment, the believer "goes back" in time to reimagine oneself as a child meeting Christ/God (that is, experiencing the precious moment of death). One must regress in order to progress; one must unknow oneself by stripping away identity and individuality in order to "know" God — a helpless, innocent, and cute child at the foot of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

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2 Not unrelatedly, postapocalyptic punk is a popular subgenre of steampunk style, which epitomizes the retro-futuristic aesthetic.

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# “All the Pretty Little Ponies”: Bronies, Desire, and Cuteness

*Justin Mullis*

Bronies are adult male fans of the hit animated TV series *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* (2010–present). It is the latest incarnation of the 1980s My Little Pony franchise, a toy line of cute plastic pony figures created by Hasbro with an accompanying animated series. According to Patrick Edwards and Marsha Redden — the nation’s “premiere bronyologists” (Orsini) — self-identified bronies have a medium age of twenty-one and are predominately male, heterosexual, and college educated.<sup>1</sup> What makes bronies truly remarkable is the sustained media coverage they have received over the past seven years from a number of diverse outlets.<sup>2</sup> Such widespread coverage has thrust brony fandom into the public eye, transforming bronies into “figures of fascination and derision in equal measures” (Manuel). The most popular assertion, made by both supporters and detractors of brony fandom, is that the adult male fans’ affection for *Friendship Is Magic* — a show made for and sold initially to elementary-school girls — indicates a shift toward more egalitarian at-

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- 1 Bronies range from fourteen to fifty-seven in age and are 86 percent male, 84 percent heterosexual, and 62 percent either college students or college educated (Edwards and Redden).
  - 2 Outlets include *Slate* magazine, the *Jerry Springer Show*, the *Colbert Report*, *Fox News*, *New York* magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, *NPR*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, *PBS*, *TV Guide*, *Cosmopolitan*, and the *Howard Stern Show*.



titudes among North American young men with regards to the gendering of pop media. This egalitarianism has become the key premise of many brony studies, both lay and academic. Edwards and Redden, for example, compare bronies to the hippies of the 1960s and their message of peace, love, and understanding in the wake of the Vietnam War. Brony fandom thereby emerges as an oppositional response to 9/11 and the ongoing American War on Terror (Stohs-Krause).

However, what such examinations of bronies either neglect or downplay are the erotic facets of fandom, specifically the practice of “clopping,” brony slang for masturbating to eroticized images of female pony characters (Alvarez). Such images, most commonly found online but also at brony conventions, depict the *Friendship Is Magic* ponies engaged in a wide spectrum of sexual poses and erotic acts ranging from soft-core to hard-core, straight to queer sex, BDSM, and *futanari* (female characters with male genitalia). Brony erotica is also featured in a range of styles, from a purist devotion to the visual look of the show to revisionist expressions of the ponies as zoomorphic humanoids or even cutified anime girls with mane-like hair.

If we are to truly understand the brony phenomenon, I believe we must engage it fully at every point, including how bronies express themselves sexually through creative acts such as cutified erotic fan art and fan fiction, as well as through sexual practices such as clopping. I also juxtapose bronies and the Japanese *moé otaku*, adult men with a predilection for anime targeted at young girls and fan productions that portray the cute female anime characters in sexually explicit ways.

### The Rise of Brony Fandom and Sexuality

Developed for television by Lauren Faust, *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is set in the land of Equestria and centers on a bookish unicorn named Twilight Sparkle, who is tasked with learning about “the magic of friendship” with the help of her four pony friends. The group embarks on adventures ranging from the mild mannered — organizing a birthday party — to

the epic — stopping the evil chaos-dragon Discord from taking over Equestria.<sup>3</sup> *Friendship Is Magic* received strong initial reviews from critics, who cited it as an outstanding children’s program for young girls (Ashby; VanDerWerff; Lloyd). However, the show also garnered the unexpected attention of members of the infamous online English-language image-board community 4chan.org, specifically the /co/ subforum that is dedicated to discussing cartoons and comics. Modeled after the popular Japanese image board 2chan.net, the site’s main attraction and source of over 30 percent of its Internet traffic is the infamous /b/ subforum, based on 2chan.net’s own *Nijiura* subforum, where users post random images in an attempt to “shock, entertain, and coax free porn from each other” (Douglas).<sup>4</sup> Though 4chan.org users initially sought out *Friendship Is Magic* in order to ridicule it, many who watched the show ended up becoming fans of it instead (LaMarche).

It was on 4chan.org that *brony* and *bronies* originated as catch-all terms for these adult male fans of *Friendship Is Magic*. While the most popular etymological explanation for *brony* is that it is a portmanteau of the words *bro* and *pony*, some, such as Mike Bernstein, program director for the brony-centric online radio channel Everfree Radio, maintain that the term’s true origin was a play on the aforementioned 4chan.org subforum, “/b/”, where the brony phenomena first began (Griffiths; *A Brony Tale*).

While Edwards and Redden acknowledge that “sexual fan fiction and fan art are a large part of the Brony community” (Orsini), they have nevertheless declined to explore this aspect of the fandom as part of their statistical analysis. They claim that it has proven “too sensitive” if brought up, often causing

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3 Faust’s prior credits include the acclaimed Cartoon Network series *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998–2005) and *Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends* (2004–9). See Strike.

4 As Terrence McCoy notes, 4chan.org’s notoriety is based on the fact that it is both the birthplace of “wildly popular memes such as Lolcats” and the source of such unsavory activities as the 2014 celebrity photo leak scandal (McCoy).

their interviewees to shut down on them completely and thus necessitating that all questions regarding sex and sexuality be left out—especially questions such as “whether fans have sexual feelings toward the show’s equine characters” (Orsini). Some researchers, such as Venetia Laura Delano Robertson, have acknowledged the practice of “clipping” but likewise have failed to explore the subject in much detail (31). The exception is Bill Ellis’s very thorough analysis of clipping as part of the larger body of “bronylore” that exists on the Internet (303–11). Others, including Bethan Jones, Alexis McKinnis, Sadie Genis, and Lane Moore—have asserted that those who produce pornographic *My Little Pony* fan art for sexual gratification are either a “subgroup” within the larger brony community or do not exist at all.

Conversely, in my ethnographic exploration of brony fandom, I have encountered no difficulty getting bronies to talk openly about the existence of *Friendship Is Magic* fan-produced cartoon pornography and erotica. The bronies I’ve spoken with readily admit to knowing about such material, and some even acknowledge having created it and/or used it for its intended purpose. Even those who denied partaking in it were all too eager to tell me where to find it, naming websites that have been set up specifically to host such content—with the two most frequently mentioned being Rule34.paheal.net and e621.net.<sup>5</sup>

One example of erotic fan art found on Rule34.paheal.net, by an artist identified by the name “cobra\_mcjingleballs,” depicts the female pony Fluttershy and the male pony Big Macintosh engaged in doggy-style sexual intercourse. Fluttershy’s bunny friend looks on in shock and disbelief. Here the characters are drawn exactly as they appear in the animated TV show, with the

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5 When I began researching Bronies in 2013, Rule34.paheal.net hosted 53,731 images tagged “My Little Pony,” among which 49,419 were also tagged as featuring characters from *Friendship Is Magic*. As of January 2017, the number has increased to over 95,401 sexually explicit images. Meanwhile, e621.net surpasses Rule34.paheal.net with a total of over 147,037 images tagged. Unlike Rule34.paheal.net, not all the images on e621.net are explicitly pornographic or erotic.

obvious exception being that both characters now possess human genitalia that is clearly visible in the drawing.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, an image by artist “swissleos” on Rule34.paheal.net features no sexual activity. It simply depicts the six main female pony characters reimagined in a highly anthropomorphic manner, drawn essentially as anime-style women but with pastel-colored skin and equipped with pony ears, tails, wings, and horns. All the characters are on their knees with exposed human breasts and genitalia and are completely naked except for the fetishistic attire of black thigh-high stockings, shoulder-length gloves, and neck chokers.<sup>7</sup>

A final example, also from Rule34.paheal.net, takes the form of a comic created by artist “MegaSweet” and depicts the six main female pony characters as fully human anime-style women with their hairstyles modeled after their respective ponies’ manes. Each panel depicts one of the characters engaged in doggy-style sexual intercourse with an anonymous human male and is accompanied by a speech bubble featuring mid-coitus dialogue of the variety frequently found in pornography.<sup>8</sup>

In each of these examples the composition contains a number of recurring stylistic motifs that conform with Hiroki Azuma’s *moé* character schema and Masubuchi Sōichi’s definition of *kawaii*. Some common features include the use of pastel colors; soft, rounded line art; unnaturally colored hair; the presence of animal ears and tails; large, reflective eyes indicative of anime characters; and expressions of juvenility. This last point is especially evident in all of the pieces of bronny erotic fan art cited above: the female characters are all drawn in a manner suggesting a combination of sexual naiveté and embarrassment, including the presence of flushed faces, characters biting their lower lips or squinting their eyes in apparent discomfort, or characters trying (unsuccessfully) to hide their naked bodies from their partners or each other. In the comic drawn by

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6 Cobra\_mcjingleballs. *Rule34.paheal.net*, 6 Aug. 2012. Web.

7 Swissleos. *Rule34.paheal.net*, 24 Aug. 2015. Web.

8 MegaSweet. *Rule34.paheal.net*, 19 Apr. 2011. Web.

“MegaSweet,” the mid-coitus dialogue bubbles feature such coy expressions of sexual satisfaction as, “My books never said it’d be this goooooo~!” (Twilight Sparkle), “Hoo Boy! I’m walkin’ funny after this!” (Applejack), and “Wowie zowie, my brain just went powie!” (Pinky Pie). All of these expressions lend an air of cuteness to the images common in such erotic fan works.

For bronies this kind of erotic fan art is often treated with a remarkably blasé attitude, as well as an overarching assumption that such pornography is a part of everyone’s everyday lives. Mark, a twenty-nine-year-old brony who lives in Austin, Texas, and who was very open with me when I asked him if he had ever partook of any erotic *My Little Pony* fan art or fan fiction, put it this way:

I mean everybody, everybody watches porn, everybody reads porn. It’s not a secret. If you say you don’t then you’re either a liar or a liar... So some of the stuff I have seen and I do kind of like it. Um... there was a *dōjinshi* [a fan-produced comic book, often of an erotic nature] that like a year or two ago, that had some REALLY SPECTACULAR art in it. And it is one of those things where you’ll be looking at something and you’ll kind of think to yourself, “I don’t know if I should be turned on by this?”

Another interviewee, a twenty-two-year-old brony named Jeff whom I met in Charlotte, North Carolina, was more hesitant but also acknowledged the existence of *My Little Pony* erotic fan art:

I either tend to ignore or I... I mean every once in a while I would look at it... just one! That’s it! But I’m not a big perv of that kind of thing but uh... I just tend to let the other people enjoy what they enjoy and like when it comes to that sort of stuff.

In Chicago, I put the same questions to John, a twenty-five-year-old filmmaker, theater technician, and part-time illustrator, and

asked if he had ever produced and/or read any erotic *My Little Pony* fan art or fan fiction:

I’ve never done any Clop-fic. There was a comic I was sent at one point, by someone who does pursue it, which was kind of adorable, I’m not going to lie. But yeah... I’ve seen some erotica. I’ve read the one or two comics... because it really was kind of adorable and the writing was really kind of adorable and it happened to be erotica. And I liked the stylization because they weren’t like ponies fucking, they were more like humans. And the art was well done, I’ll use that phrase. There was no clopping involved, but it was well rendered. But at some point... you will see some *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* erotica.

This last sentiment was also echoed by Paul, who lives in Atlanta: “The visual stuff you will see at some point. You’re on a forum and you’ll scroll past some stuff. So yeah at a certain point you really can’t escape it.” Indeed, the reality is that erotic *Friendship Is Magic* fan art is so pervasive that the New York-based brony convention Ponycon recently had to implement “strict rules against” fan artists bringing “adult content” to the show since they were billing themselves as a family-friendly venue (Toth).

If bronies are willing to be forthcoming regarding such practices, then the reason this topic has proven problematic for some journalists and researchers must undoubtedly be that it elicits feelings of unease, as Anne Gilbert has documented. Likewise, Edwards and Redden, in an interview with the *Daily Dot*, openly acknowledged that they are bothered by the sexual aspect of brony fandom, which they refer to as “the dark side” of the group (Orsini). However, if we are ever to truly understand bronies, we must be willing to move past such discomfort and address the issue of brony sexuality head-on.

## Otaku and Bronies

How, then, are we to think about the sexual aspect of brony fandom, which many find particularly troublesome? I would suggest taking a cue from the bronies themselves and begin by considering the common interest in Japanese pop culture that the majority of bronies seem to have. Brony fandom's origins, history, and practices draw heavily on Japanese fan culture, including its beginnings on Japanese-style image boards, the use of Japanese terminology like *dōjinshi* and *futanari* in reference to erotic fan-produced comics and art, and the fact that all my interviewees described themselves as being fans of anime. All the bronies I have spoken with proved very knowledgeable about anime and readily compared scenes from *My Little Pony* to those from popular anime series. In fact, several of my interviewees told me that their first encounter with brony fandom was at an anime convention.

Japanese pop culture enthusiasts are often referred to as *otaku*, a term that Tamaki Saitō explains is most often “used to indicate adult fans of anime, but can obviously be expanded to include fans of manga and video games, those who collect scale model figures of characters from these media, aficionados of monster movies and other special effects genres, and so forth” (“*Otaku Sexuality*” 83). In other words, the term *otaku* can be applied generally to anyone who has an obsessive hobby or interest, roughly corresponds to the English terms *geek* or *fan*, and can easily accommodate bronies as well (Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* 12).

Like bronies, *otaku* are mostly men who are in their late teens or early twenties, are primarily heterosexual, and attend college. And like bronies, adult male *otaku* are often active fans of *shōjo* manga and anime series whose target audience is actually elementary-school-age girls (Galbraith, “*Otaku*” 205). Many of these *shōjo* (literally meaning “young girl”) titles fall into the superhero genre known as *Mahou Shoujo*, or “Magical Girl,” such as the internationally recognized series *Sailor Moon* that features “cute young girls” who wield magical powers (Ellis 300).

Many *otaku*, like bronies, claim that they enjoy these girls' shows because of their high production values. Patrick W. Galbraith and Anne Allison note, however, that another reason is that “Magical Girl” shows like *Sailor Moon* share some of their DNA with popular Japanese boys' shows like *Super Sentai*, the basis for *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, with its winning formula of “a group of superheroes who morph from ordinary teenagers, fight alien enemies, and diversify by season (adding new characters, costumes, tools, and powers)” (Allison 131). The parallels between the two kinds of series are entirely intentional, as both *Sailor Moon* and *Super Sentai* have the same parent companies: film and TV production company Toei Co. and toy company Bandai.<sup>9</sup> Many of these story tropes and marketing strategies are present in *Friendship Is Magic* as well, with one interviewee adamantly insisting that creator Lauren Faust must have “watched herself some *Sailor Moon*” while formulating her *My Little Pony* reboot. This conclusion is not hard to come to since Faust also worked on *Powerpuff Girls*, which is essentially an American take on the “Magical Girl” genre and was created by her future husband Craig McCracken, who has been very open about discussing his love of Japanese pop culture (Allison 158–59).<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the case, many *otaku* also openly acknowledge that they think the female protagonists of these series are sexually attractive, and that they enjoy producing, collecting, and “getting off” to explicitly *ecchi* (erotic) or *hentai* (pornographic) images and of characters from these anime, which are identical to those featuring ponies from *Friendship Is Magic*, and are likewise created by fans and posted online or sold at conventions like the

9 See also Jenkins, “In Defense.”

10 For McCracken's discussion of the influence of Japanese pop culture on his work, see McCracken. The parallels between *Friendship Is Magic* and *Power Rangers* are also noted by Dan Mintz, a writer for the animated sitcom *Bob's Burgers*. In an episode, Mintz pokes fun at brony fandom via the fictitious “Equesticles,” adult men obsessed with a children's TV show called *The Equestranauts*, “a sort of hybrid of the cute ponies and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*” (Ham).



popular Tokyo-based *dōjinshi* fair Comiket (Saitō, “*Otaku Sexuality*” 228). This has resulted in *otaku*, like their brony counterparts in the US, occupying a rather tumultuous position in Japanese culture and being constantly viewed as a source of public sexual anxiety and aspiration.

It is not surprising, then, that researchers who specialize in the study of *otaku* have made the subject of *otaku* sexuality key to their understanding of fandom. Drawing primarily on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Saitō argues that because our experiences with reality are always mediated and thus inherently fictional, what makes *otaku*—and fans in general—unique from other more passive media consumers is their ability to shift their orientation effortlessly from one mediated reality to another, to have “multiple orientation(s)” (Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* 26), which thus allows them to become fully invested in the alternate realities depicted in various media. Saitō is quick to stress that this does not mean that *otaku*, and fans in general, cannot distinguish between “reality” and “fantasy.” Rather, they simply do not privilege the de facto reality of their daily lives to such an extent that it interferes with their ability to become completely immersed in different realities, such as those encountered in manga, anime, or even a cartoon about a magical land populated by talking ponies. The immersion is so complete, Saitō argues, that male *otaku* can even achieve sexual gratification from an animated character because, for them, the animated character is just as “real” as any flesh-and-blood woman (Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl* 28–31).

In Japan, the phenomenon of *otaku* developing sexual feelings for fictional characters is so prevalent that it has its own term, *moé*, with “*moé* culture” becoming a source of great academic interest since the early 2000s. Galbraith defines *moé* as “an affectionate response to fictional characters [...] situated in those responding to a character, not the character itself” (Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto* 5–6). This is to say that those who claim to experience *moé* understand that their feelings originate from only themselves and not the fictional character. Galbraith stresses that those who experience *moé* are not responding to

a “material object, sound, costume or person, but rather to the character” (Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto* 7). In other words, fans are not falling in love with animation cells, plastic toys, or real women in costumes, but rather with an abstract personality that such materials represent.

As briefly mentioned before, Hiroki Azuma has identified a series of recurring key elements in female character designs that are most likely to elicit feelings of *moé*. These include unnaturally colored hair, animal ears and tails, large reflective eyes, and loose-fitting gloves and socks that obscure the shape of the hands and feet (Azuma 42–44). Such elements conform to the aesthetic known as *kawaii* that, according to Sōichi Masubuchi, “is typically characterized by smallness, juvenility, innocence, and dependency, as well as physical components such as roundness, pastel shades, and animal qualities like ears and tails” (qtd. in Robertson 24), but which, Ellis notes, is nevertheless often deliberately “juxtaposed with violent and sexually explicit images” (307).<sup>11</sup>

Both Azuma and Masubuchi also make clear that within *moé* culture, fictional characters do not have to be strictly human but simply anthropomorphic. As *moé* advocate Toru Honda explains,

In *moé* culture, anything can take the shape of a cute girl. Machines. Utensils. World nations. As long as it is female, and human in shape, a *moé* character does not have to be based on a human. You can get a lot of pleasure from anthropomorphizing objects into cute characters. You can’t have a relationship with an object, but if it is in the shape of a girl then there are more possibilities. A cat, for example, can be

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<sup>11</sup> Azuma and Masubuchi’s formulations of *kawaii* features overlap with and expand on the work of ethologist Konrad Lorenz’s influential child schema (*Kindchenschema*), which argues that conventional notions of cuteness are primarily based on physical features most commonly found in infants such as a large head, a round face, big eyes, and juvenile behavior, and which serve an evolutionary function in motivating caretaking behavior in adults and enhancing offspring survival. See Morreall.

represented by a cute girl with cat ears and tail. It's obvious that the cat-ear phenomenon began with someone thinking "I wonder what a cat would look like if it was a human?" Then all sorts of desires get wrapped up in that image. (qtd. in Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto* 121)

Here, the cute anthropomorphic cat-girls to which Honda refers are a staple, almost a cliché, in Japanese pop culture. Fred Patten notes that these characters "first appeared in [...] mid-1980s direct-to-video erotic anime as fantasy sex kittens and *Playboy*-type bunny-girls" (Patten) and later migrated to mainstream fantasy and sci-fi anime, even crossing over into the "Magical Girl" genre with series like *Tokyo Mew Mew* (2002–3) that proved popular both domestically and abroad.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, many of these characteristics are also present in Faust's anime-esque pony designs as well as the erotic fan art inspired by them. Perhaps the reason bronies feel sexually drawn to these equestrian characters is because they are part of a generation brought up on anime, and many of them had their first real taste of female sexuality in the form of the cute female characters that appear in these shows (Robertson 29).

However, Saitō argues that what *otaku* find most sexually appealing about these cute female characters is their inherently fictional nature. In an interview, Saitō stated: "When I wrote my book [*Beautiful Fighting Girl*] in 2000, it was assumed that drawings of cute girls were a substitute for real girls. The thinking was that those who could not make it with women in reality projected their desires into fantasy. But with *otaku* that was never the case. The desire for the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional are separate" (qtd. in Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto* 179–80). Setsu Shigematsu similarly argues that while the desire for fictional girls is indeed a "substitute," what it is substi-

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12 The predilection for erotic anthropomorphism in Japanese manga and anime can be traced to the mediums' founding father, Tezuka Osamu (1928–89), whose daughter discovered a secret stash of sexy mouse-girl drawings by him in 2014 (Baseel).

tuting for is not real girls but rather “a lack of desire for the ‘real thing’ — a lack of desire that young men are ‘naturally’ supposed to possess for real young women” (Shigematsu 131–32). Moreover, Saitō contends that what *otaku* want is not to see their fantasies brought to life but instead to be transported to “an utterly imagined space with no correspondent in the everyday world, a space of perfect fictionality” (Saitō, “*Otaku Sexuality*” 245) where they can live out their fantasies, including sexual ones, in a way that sociologist Volker Grassmuck has characterized as “pure, abstract sex, the simulation of stimulation.”

Such a space is best found in comics and cartoons, especially Japanese manga and anime, which avant-garde Japanese artist and pop-culture historian Takashi Murakami maintains adheres to a style called “Superflat.” As Azuma explains, Superflat “indicates an imaginary space without depth or thickness, where even the eye of the camera does not exist” (qtd. in Saitō, “*Otaku Sexuality*” 241–44). Because this imagined space “escapes the regulation of the camera’s eye, [it] appears structureless” when in fact “the control exerted by various contexts supersedes everything else and establishes an order distinct from structure,” creating in the process an environment of “sexual intersubjectivity” in which the limitless “imaginative power” of “otaku sexuality” can assert itself (Saitō, “*Otaku Sexuality*” 245).

Fans in the postmodern era, as Azuma observes, no longer approach media such as manga and anime from the standpoint of a narrative, but rather as a series of recurring visual motifs that can be catalogued across the medium as a whole, and whose reoccurrence and recognition form the main source of pleasure. Azuma calls this fixation with the elements of a work at the expense of an actual narrative the “database theory” of media consumption and argues, in an almost behaviorist mode, that fans are naturally drawn to products that possess such elements (Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto* 172). Furthermore, by divorcing these elements from the confines of the narrative, fans are free to explore endless imaginative possibilities surrounding said elements, possibilities that either could not exist within the confines of the “official story” or because they involve what Mi-

zuko Ito describes as “depictions of what many people would consider ‘alternative’ forms of sexuality” that are deemed taboo or dangerous in real life (qtd. in Jenkins, “*Otaku*”).

Likewise, the female characters that fans are most likely to encounter in an imagined Superflat space are no more likely to be realistic than the space itself. Galbraith observes that the physical appearance of anime characters “does not resemble” that of “a human [...] but takes on its own internal realism within manga/anime” (qtd. in Jenkins, “In Defense”) and that the sexual appeal of such characters is not rooted in the “desire [for] a human with such a face” but rather is wholly “separate from [the appeal of] a human face” (Galbraith, “*Lolicon*” 106).

This means that the admittedly offbeat desires of *otaku*, Saitō contends, cannot be accurately labeled as “perverse” because the objects of their affection do not exist in reality but are fantasy characters—often superhumans or anthropomorphized animals—who are incapable of existing apart from their fictionalized contexts (Saitō, “*Otaku Sexuality*” 245). Likewise, bronies should not be labeled as closeted zoophiles since the objects of their sexual fantasies are not real ponies but rather cute anthropomorphic stylizations of animals; the level of anthropomorphization notably increases in erotic or pornographic fan works (Ellis 298). In fact, bronies seem to have no interest in actual ponies at all, as one interviewee told me: “I don’t really care for the look of real ponies [...]. But I find [the ponies in *Friendship Is Magic*] appealing because [...] they don’t have hooves, they have these weird little stumps and these little tiny nubby noses and the big giant anime eyes.”<sup>13</sup>

Critical work on *otaku* sexuality is important because it shows how the sexuality of brony fandom is a crucial aspect of the community that need not be ignored, neglected, or shunned. It is, rather, a normal byproduct of male fans who are heavily invested in a given fictive universe; the pop-cultural elements of which allow them to explore their own sexual identities (Ellis 304). However, while Saitō maintains that the desire for fictional

13 See also Ellis 310.

characters is not perverse, he also acknowledges that it is not natural insofar as one is not born desiring relationships, be they amicable or erotic, with fictional characters, and that such desires must instead result from “training or study” and be developed over time (qtd. in Cather 239).

But why should one wish to cultivate such desires? The common-sense answer would be that such individuals are lonely and desire partners. Indeed, Edwards and Redden report that the overwhelming majority of bronies, 96 percent, are single. But even if that were the case, why turn to fiction? What is motivating these young men’s “lack of desire for the ‘real thing’” (Shigematsu 131)?

### Equestrian Economics

One explanation for why some young men prefer cute fictional women to relationships with real women is that they simply don’t believe they can afford to date real ones, in the most literal sense of the term. In the late 1990s and early 2000s Japan suffered a major economic downturn from which it has failed to recover. In such an economy, many men are unable to obtain the financial status needed to successfully attract romantic partners or even “be eligible to fraternize with young women” at all (Shigematsu 132). Toru Honda calls this “love capitalism” and paints a cynical picture “of commoditized romance that forces people onto expensive dates to fashionable places [...] not only out of reach for most men, but also entirely unappealing,” and that reduces “women’s motives for dating and marriage [...] to economic ones” (Jenkins, “In Defense”). Given such a worldview, many young men instead chose to “opt out of this competition and [...] invest in [...] two-dimensional images of cuteness” (Shigematsu 132).

If a bad economy is the catalyst for the birth of *moé* culture, then there is no reason to believe that such a phenomenon is limited only to Japan. Takuro Morinaga predicts “that the pressures contributing to the [*moé*] phenomenon are shared globally, and that *moé* will become a big market in other countries

too as more and more men end up on the losing side of the economy” (qtd. in Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto* 132).<sup>14</sup> The United States was itself in the grips of an economic recession between December 2007 and June 2009, the summer before *Friendship Is Magic* debuted, and struggled to climb out of this financial pit with “the unemployment rate for men and women 20 to 24 years old,” the median age of most bronies, being just “11.4 percent, versus a low of 7.2 percent in 2007” (Pethokoukis). Only 32 percent of bronies are employed either part-time or full-time (Edwards and Redden).

For James Pethokoukis, America is currently in a cultural climate very similar to that of Japan, where young, college-educated adults find themselves living with their parents while working dead-end jobs as “baristas and bartenders with Bachelor’s degrees” and trying to deal with this depressing reality by periodically escaping to worlds of fantasy. If more American young adult men are following the trend first set forth in Japan of “escaping to virtual worlds of games, animation and costume play” (Giles) to deal with the existential uncertainties of life and love in a bad economy, it only makes sense that these same young men would begin turning to fictional women as “a low-cost, low-stress solution to this problem,” as Honda terms it (qtd. in Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto* 122). I contend that brony fandom is best understood as a manifestation of *moé* culture within the United States and that the practices of bronies creating, trading, and consuming *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* erotic and pornographic fan works are reactions to the perceived sexual cynicism of dating in a depressed economy.<sup>15</sup>

But as Galbraith points out, the adoption of what Saitō calls “drawn sexuality” opens up a host of problems as men engaged in *moé* culture “still seem to maintain goals for success, namely

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14 Another recent example of *moé* culture invading the United States is Pharrell Williams’s 2014 hit song “It Girl,” whose music video combines elements of anime and Japanese “dating simulator games” and was produced by Takashi Murakami’s company Kaikai Kiki. The “It Girl” is a young anime girl, an “archetypal *moé* character” (Alt).

15 See also Galbraith and Jonathan B., “Moé Manifesto Interview.”

getting paid and laid, that are recognizable to hegemonic masculinity.” Rather than abandoning these goals or reevaluating their means of obtaining them, men simply “want things on their terms, which can come off as somewhat entitled” (qtd. in Jenkins, “In Defense”). More than entitlement, Tatsuhiko Shibusawa argues that *moé* is in essence a “one-way street” where the fictional female “most perfectly satisfies the essential sexual urges of the male [...] because both socially and sexually” such a character “is utterly ignorant. And being ignorant [is] like little birds and dogs — symboliz[ing] the total object, the object of play, and one that cannot express itself of its own accord” (qtd. in Galbraith, “*Lolicon*” 116 n.10). Shibusawa’s comments also recall feminist scholar Meenakshi Gigi Durham’s declaration that what a patriarchal society most desires of its women is “compliant, docile sexuality” (Galbraith, “*Lolicon*” 116 n.10). And what kind of woman is more docile than a fictional one? In fostering relationships with fictional characters, bronies are creating what Galbraith calls “a space of autonomous sexuality” that can only be maintained through the active rejection of real women, thus marking it as an inherently “sexist position” (qtd. in Jenkins, “In Defense”).

### The Male Colonization of a “Girls’ Show”

The irony of brony fandom is that a show originally designed to shine a spotlight on the diverse ways in which young girls can express femininity has instead been colonized by adult men as a way of demonstrating an alternative means of masculinity. This fact was recognized early on by Emily Manuel:

The bronies’ own behavior en masse in the fandom reinforces the same old male-center/female-margin dynamic, as does much of the media coverage. Female fans are squeezed from the frame as objects worthy of consideration of their own. Some have proposed the male-centric term “brony” be applied to all adult MLP fans, an un-reflexive marking of the male as universal. This is indicative of a broader claiming of



the text as normatively the domain of men, a far from unique dynamic in fandom — just one of a million reasons why a feminist narrative like MLP:FiM is still so sorely needed by girls and women.

As Manuel notes, the media's love affair with brony fandom betrays an obvious double standard. For girls of any age to be interested in boys' toys, like Transformers, is neither remarkable nor indicative of the progressive redefinition of traditional gender roles (Truitt). This is because guys who like *Friendship Is Magic* are special not simply because they like a show targeted at children but because they like a show targeted at girls, who are presumed to be inferior to boys in every way, including their taste in toys and cartoons. By liking a girls' show, bronies are seen as rejecting their superior male status in favor of an inferior female one, while girls who embrace men's entertainment are simply adopting a more cultivated sense of taste.<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, bronies do not represent a significant shift in young men's understanding of gender politics, what it means to be masculine, how they view women's entertainment, or even women themselves — a stance that was made possible only because its pundits chose, for whatever reason, to ignore and/or dismiss the sexual aspects of brony fandom. When such aspects are taken into account, however, the picture changes dramatically and claims that bronies constitute a progressive movement in gender politics crumble.

Nevertheless, the creation and use of pornographic fan art featuring the *Friendship Is Magic* characters is a complicated phenomenon. It not only demonstrates the bronies' own immersion into the world of the show but also serves as a means for young men, frustrated with what they perceive to be a romantic market of increasingly diminishing returns, to express themselves sexually. From this perspective it becomes clear that bronies' infatuation with the cute pony characters from *Friendship Is Magic* is not pathological but rather "a survival mechanism

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16 On female exclusion from fandom, see Gosling.

in a media-saturated world” (Shamoon 96). Cuteness serves as a source of sexual arousal for bronies because it is understood as an indication of feminine naïveté and innocence — assurance that the woman in question will not attempt to exploit them either emotionally or economically. Because such assurances are impossible in real life, however, bronies have chosen to insulate themselves in an imagined space of sexual autonomy where the objects of their desire are fictional and thus lack independent wills.

Lastly, such practices also serve as a means for these fans to avoid the stigma of safe, domestic superficiality that is so often associated with women’s media by actively rejecting female participation. Joanne Hollows notes that one of the chief ways male fans discourage the participation of female fans is by populating their fandom with graphic pornography that objectifies women. This not only reinforces its “illicit and ‘outlaw’ status,” both seen as fundamentally male attributes, but also serves as a means for members to display how truly masculine they are by “demonstrating how far or low you can go” (43–44). Bronies, by deriving pleasure from masturbating to images of cartoon ponies from a children’s show, visibly mark themselves as practitioners of a non-mainstream form of sexuality, thereby reinforcing their masculine status and alienating female fans who find such displays misogynistic.

None of which is to say that bronies are not truly transgressive. Embracing a work of commercial art not expressly made for you is a transgressive act in itself, as is being open to alternative forms of sexual expression such as *moé* and clopping. But as Hollows reminds us, “in every act of transgression there is always something, or someone, that is transgressed” and that often such acts of transgression are “only sustained by processes of ‘othering’ and it is always important to remain aware of who, and what, is being ‘othered,’” often unintentionally (49).

It is in the same vein that brony fandom is best understood as an American variation of Japanese *moé* culture. But such an understanding also necessitates an acknowledgment that, knowingly or not, the rise of the bronies has further contributed to

the othering of both women and women's entertainment so as to further promote the masculine as normative and superior.

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# Consuming Celebrity: Commodities and Cuteness in the Circulation of Master William Henry West Betty

*Marlis Schweitzer*

On a shelf in the vaults of the Folger Shakespeare Library sit several snuffboxes bearing the image of Master William Henry West Betty, the child actor who dominated the British stage between 1803 and 1806 (figs. 1 and 2). Small, pretty, and delicate, these snuffboxes are undeniably “cute,” in keeping with the association of cuteness with fragility, empathy, and desire (Merish 187). Like other cute objects, they invite human touch despite their vulnerable materiality, as if to say, “Hold me carefully or I will break.” The tiny portraits painted onto the ivory lids enhance the boxes’ cuteness by depicting the “Young Roscius” in his most famous roles, from Shakespeare’s Romeo to the character of Norval in John Home’s *Douglas*. In turn, the skillful miniaturization of Betty’s image amplifies the cuteness of the boy himself, whom audiences admired as much, if not more, for his physical charms as for his convincing stage impersonations.

It may seem anachronistic to apply the term *cute* to objects created in early nineteenth-century Britain since the word *cute* did not enter common parlance until the mid-1800s, when it





Figure 1. Box with Master Betty as “Romeo” in *Romeo and Juliet*. Courtesy Folger Shakespeare Library. Figure 2. Box with Master Betty as “Norval” in *Douglas*, dark blue base, mirror inside lid. Courtesy Folger Shakespeare Library.

was marked as a distinctly American term (Ngai 59; Steinberg).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a study of Master Betty and the commodities produced to celebrate him reveals that both the concept of cuteness and the triangulation of cuteness, commodities, and children were well underway in Britain decades before the word itself took hold.<sup>2</sup> By focusing on Betty’s popularity with male audiences and detailing the various performances of masculinity that arose in response to him, this chapter also advances new

1 According to Steinberg, the word *cute* first appeared in the 1700s as a derivation of acute and was typically used as a synonym of “clever, keen-witted, sharp, [and] shrewd.”

2 On cuteness as a mid-nineteenth-century development, see Merish 188 and Ngai 59.

understandings of the social functions of cuteness, pushing beyond tendencies to associate cuteness with maternal care.

As one of the first child celebrities of the modern era, Master Betty circulated within an evolving economy of cuteness wherein he was valued for his size, charm, and vulnerability, especially when he was ill or otherwise indisposed. Audiences admired Betty's physical appearance and collected biographical pamphlets, caricatures, and a range of souvenirs bearing his likeness out of a desire to commemorate his performances and engage with him socially in form if not being. Such objects were central to the production of what we now recognize as celebrity culture, as they mediated the relationship between Betty and his audience in both public and private spaces.

Although some historians see celebrity culture as a distinct phenomenon of late capitalism, Simon Morgan insists that celebrity needs to be understood "less as a somewhat arbitrary status assigned to this or that individual, and more as a cultural and economic formation which plays a wider role in society as a whole" (98). In Morgan's equation, individuals become celebrities in the moment when "a sufficiently large audience is interested in their actions, image and personality to create a viable market for commodities carrying their likeness and for information about their lives and views" (98).<sup>3</sup> Celebrity culture thus emerged in tandem with the rise of capitalism, and both were enhanced by the production of cuteness. Indeed, as Charles Harmon contends, "from the broadest vantage, cuteness can be seen as instrumental to the stabilization of capitalism itself" (133–34). Put bluntly, the cute keeps the wheels of capital turning. "Cuteness might be regarded as an intensification of commodity fetishism's kitschy phantasmatic logic but also as a way of revising it by adding yet another layer of fantasy," Sianne Ngai writes (62). When the cute object entices onlookers

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3 Other scholars share this view of Betty, as the title of Jeffrey Kahan's recent study, *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture*, attests. In his book, *It*, performance studies scholar Joseph Roach traces the emergence of celebrity culture to the court of Louis XIV.

to hold, caress, cuddle, and care for it, it “speaks to a desire to recover what Marx calls the ‘coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects’ that becomes immediately extinguished in exchange” (63). Far from passive, innocent, or amoral, the cute can issue “surprisingly powerful demands” as it stirs intense feelings of desire and longing (64).

Historically, children have been aligned with commodities through their performance of cuteness, while miniature commodities have in turn been associated with children through their apparent vulnerability and fragility (Merish 186; Stewart 43). For Lori Merish, this link between commodities and children often provokes a maternal or feminized response in those who encounter the cute: “[T]he cute always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother and is constructed to generate maternal desire; the consumer (or potential consumer) of the cute is expected [...] to pretend she or he *is* the cute’s mother” (186). This association of cuteness, children, and deep maternal longing can be traced to the groundbreaking work of the zoologist and ethnologist Konrad Lorenz, the “father of modern cuteness research,” who in the 1950s observed that “the perpetual pattern known as cuteness [...] was a sign stimulus which served as an ‘innate releaser’ of the human caregiving response” (Sherman and Haidt 248). For Lorenz, cuteness in animal and human babies awakened dormant responses in adult parents, compelling them to devote special care to their young.

While Lorenz’s work continues to inform cute studies, recent research has complicated his understanding of the biological function of cuteness and its association with caregiving and the maternal. In a 2011 article, psychologists Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt assert that “[c]uteness is as much an elicitor of play as it is of care. It is as likely to trigger a childlike state as a parental one” (248). Moving away from Lorenz’s suggestion that cuteness releases caregiving, they maintain that cuteness “releases sociality” in humans and invites a broad range of what they term “affiliative behaviors,” which include various forms of social interaction that range from touching and cuddling to teasing and playing (249). Caregiving *might* arise from these af-

filiative behaviors, but it isn't immediately released, nor is it necessarily the primary response to cute entities, whether human or nonhuman.

Sherman and Haidt's theory helps to explain one of the most troubling and paradoxical aspects of cuteness: cute objects can simultaneously provoke caretaking urges as well as intense feelings of disgust or anger (59–73). Indeed, for Ngai, the materiality of cute objects, namely “their smallness, compactness, formal simplicity, softness or pliancy,” can “call up a range of minor negative affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency” (64–65). Daniel Harris similarly identifies cuteness as an “aesthetic of deformity and dejection,” citing the popularity of the blundering Winnie the Pooh with his snout in a honey pot or the fully equipped “Vet Set” that allows caregivers to bandage a wounded (stuffed) puppy and other imaginary pets (6–7). Cute commodities and cute children thus activate much more than an “erotics of maternal longing” (188). They release diverse forms of sociality that include both tenderness and harm.

As this chapter demonstrates, Master Betty and the cute commodities created in his image prompted a range of complicated social *and* antisocial responses, from declarations of love and admiration to vicious attacks on his image and reputation. This is not to deny the importance of maternal longing to Betty's appeal but rather to suggest that Betty and the objects that constellated around him provoked “affiliative behaviors” that extended well beyond maternal caregiving to include the desire to hold, possess, occupy, and dominate.<sup>4</sup> To explore these behaviors, this chapter traces Betty's rise to fame and follows fan efforts to gain access to him through biographical pamphlets. It then turns to caricatures of Betty's performances and offstage life as evidence of artists' attempts to package the child actor's cuteness for public consumption. More than documenting the

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4 In her study of cuteness in Japanese culture, Anne Allison observes that while girls were primarily associated with cute commodities in the 1970s and 1980s, cuteness as a commodity is now desired as much by men and boys as by women and girls (40–41).

boy's celebrity, however, these images point to the anger, disgust, and threat of violence that erupted in response to Betty's cuteness. Finally, I look to several commemorative objects, notably the series of Betty snuffboxes discussed above, to consider how audiences consumed and quite literally inhaled the boy.

### Bettymania

William Henry West Betty was born in 1791 in Shrewsbury and raised on the outskirts of Belfast. According to contemporary biographers, the boy fell in love with the stage after attending a production of *Pizarro* starring the celebrated actress Sarah Siddons in the role of Elvira. Siddons's performance apparently made such a strong impression on young Betty that when he returned home he set about learning all of Elvira's speeches "in imitation of Mrs. Siddons" (12), and begged his father to let him pursue a theatrical career, to which his parents acceded (Harley 13). Curious to know whether their son had potential, Betty's parents approached Mr. Atkins, manager of the theater in Belfast, and his "ingenious and experienced prompter, Mr. Hough," for advice (13). The men agreed that with proper training Betty might be a success, and Mr. Hough became the boy's tutor.

In August 1803, several weeks shy of his twelfth birthday, Betty gave his first public performance in Belfast, playing the role of Osman in Aaron Hill's *Zara*. Surprised and delighted by the boy's portrayal of the tragic hero, the audience responded "with universal admiration [...] and tumultuous applauses" (Harley 15).<sup>5</sup> Betty's next performances, as Young Norval in *Douglas* and Rolla in *Pizzaro*, drew increasingly larger crowds. Following this success, Betty embarked upon a series of provincial tours, performing in Dublin, Cork, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Birmingham, Sheffield, and Liverpool. According to biographer George Davies Harley, audiences were "delighted and astonished" by Betty in the role of Richard III: "a higher opinion

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5 See also Kahan, as well as Slout and Rudisill, for details of Betty's earliest performances.

cannot be conveyed of his imitative powers, than that a mere child should convey the justest conceptions of the character, although his voice and appearance so little correspond with the spectator's idea of the crook-backed tyrant" (72). Here it is the miniaturization of Richard III — the juxtaposition of a juvenile voice and figure with the words and actions of a tyrant — that renders Betty both cute and astonishing. This cuteness took on a decidedly erotic turn when Betty as Richard wooed Lady Anne; according to Harley, his address "never fail[ed] to gratify the female part of his audience" (72), who presumably felt something much stronger than maternal desire for the actor.

As this account suggests, Betty's growing fame and delightful cuteness invited audiences and would-be audiences to display a range of "affiliative behaviors" that, in Haidt and Sherman's terms, included "attempts to touch, hold, pet, play with, talk to, or otherwise engage" him (249). Some fans were satisfied with a glimpse of the actor; for example, en route to Birmingham, his chaise was surrounded by hundreds of curious fans "who seemed perfectly happy in the opportunity of viewing the theatrical prodigy" (Bisset 37). Hotels and coach companies likewise benefited from the surging "Bettymania" as "families of distinction" traveled from London to gain access to the young boy and learn what all the fuss was about. At the Doncaster Races, a special "Theatrical Coach" conveyed passengers from the racing grounds to Sheffield where the Young Roscius was playing (47).

As the Betty hype intensified, a growing number of authors published competing accounts of the actor's early life, drawing on biographical details, critical essays, and poetry to sing the young boy's praises — or in some cases, to challenge those who were mesmerized by the child. Collectively, these pamphlets demonstrate how cuteness in a child "releases sociality" and arouses the desire to hold or engage the cute subject. Indeed, the number of Betty pamphlets in circulation between 1804 and 1805 provides evidence of a market hungry to consume details and images of the young boy and the recognition on the part of male pamphleteers that claiming affiliation with Betty would

yield significant financial rewards, if not some degree of personal satisfaction.<sup>6</sup>

One of the earliest publications was *Strictures upon the Merits of Young Roscius*, written by J. Jackson, a theater manager in Edinburgh and Glasgow who “had the honour of first introducing Betty to the notice of a British audience” (qtd. in Harral 35). Despite his enthusiasm, however, Jackson lacked the insider knowledge asserted by later pamphleteers. By contrast, when J. Bisset of Birmingham published his *Critical Essays on the Dramatic Excellencies of the Young Roscius*, he claimed to provide “the most authentic information respecting every particular of this wonderful Child of Thespis,” since “the account of the birth and commencement of his theatrical career” had come directly from “the Parents of his juvenile Hero” (“This Day” 71). And certainly Bisset’s compilation of Betty criticism, letters to the editor, and excerpts from Hough’s correspondence with theater managers offers a wealth of detail about the juvenile actor’s early performances. Like other pro-Betty biographers, Bisset positioned himself as a caring surrogate father figure dedicated to upholding Betty’s reputation. At the same time, the biographer’s physical and emotional proximity to the child actor presumably enhanced his own social status and performance of gentlemanly conduct.

Not to be outdone, Harley declared that his *Authentic Biographical Sketch of the Life, Education, and Personal Character, of William Henry West Betty, the Celebrated Young Roscius* was superior to others because it included Betty’s “correct Portrait, engraved from an original Sketch” (“Mr. Harley’s” 71).<sup>7</sup> Like Bisset, Harley boasted about his access to the young boy and to artists who had accurately captured his likeness. “I have undertaken to

6 Not all pamphleteers and critics had favorable things to say about Betty. Between 1804 and 1805, at least twenty Betty pamphlets entered circulation — some complimentary, others skeptical.

7 Harley’s claim points to disagreements among artists who asserted that their portraits of Betty were superior to those of their competitors and accused others of misappropriating their work. See “The Young Roscius” 27 Dec. 1804, and Betty.

pen the following pages of *authentic matter*,” he wrote, “presuming that an intimate knowledge of him both on and off the stage, together with the documents which I have had an opportunity of procuring, may enable me to form a more accurate account of his talents” (5). By emphasizing the authenticity and accuracy of their accounts, Harley and Bisset fed the growing economy of cuteness that surrounded Betty, offering readers the kind of imagined access to that they already enjoyed (or so they claimed).

### Betty in London

On 3 December 1804, Betty gave his first London performance at Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, in the role of Achmet (Selim) in *Barbarossa*, John Brown’s tragedy about the Algerian ruler. Curious to see if the boy was really all that others claimed him to be, a huge crowd gathered outside the theater hours before the doors opened, making it impossible for those closest to the entrance to move. The situation went from bad to worse, as a journalist recalled:

In this state, the heat and pressure, after a time became so intolerable, that a variety of persons fainted, and others were in danger of suffocation, and other injuries, from the weight and force of the numbers from without, who could not be prevailed upon, by the representations or the shrieks of the people confined within, to desist from attempting to force their passage.

The danger at last becoming extreme, the guards were almost unanimously called for, by the terrified persons who were included between the inner and outer doors, and who could not make good their retreat. (“Covent Garden Theatre” 72)

This account vividly documents the intense desire that Betty’s name and presence aroused in the London audience. Primed by circulating pamphlets, newspaper accounts, and images, the men and women gathered outside the theater could no long-



er contain their yearning to see and potentially touch the boy. Significantly, however, the urge to engage with Betty produced a kind of sociality that was destructive and self-serving rather than loving and tender. “[A]ssembled with the same intention” (i.e., to encounter the child), the Betty-crazed crowd paid little heed to those suffering around them.<sup>8</sup>

While audiences were somewhat more restrained in the weeks following Betty’s debut, large crowds continued to flood Covent Garden and Drury Lane in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the boy. His admirers included the Prince of Wales, the Duchess of York, and other members of the royal household, as well as the prime minister and members of Parliament.<sup>9</sup> Throughout this period Betty continued to whet the public appetite with a diverse repertoire, resuming his celebrated personations of Young Norval in *Douglas*, Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Frederick in *Lover’s Vows*, alongside more ambitious portrayals of Hamlet and Richard III, miniaturizing and thereby cutifying roles that were typically associated with mature male actors. For many fans the diversity of these parts testified to Betty’s uncanny virtuosity, though some critics observed that he was much less convincing as a romantic hero like Romeo (“Covent Garden” 70) and suggested that he was overstretching the limits of his talent as Hamlet (“Drury Lane Theatre” 81). Against such criticism, Betty’s friends and fans sprang to his defense, protecting him from attacks they considered unwarranted and unjust (A Sincere Friend 82).<sup>10</sup> Such passionate efforts point to the intensity of (male) fans’ imagined relationships with Betty, whom they perceived as delicate and vulnerable and therefore in need of their protection.

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8 The critical response to Betty’s London debut was largely positive. London critics praised his technical skill, his “bold, correct and graceful” attitudes, his “striking and elegant” posture, and his convincing portrayal of strong emotion (“Young Roscius” 73).

9 In February 1805, Betty visited the House of Commons with his father, where he chatted with several representatives and dined with the Duke of Clarence (“Master Betty accompanied” 77).

10 See also Bisset 50–63.

These responses to Betty criticism point to the ways that fans expressed their devotion to the boy and sought contact with him both inside and outside the theater. “The attraction of the young Roscius is not limited to the stage,” claimed one report, “for he cannot walk along the streets without drawing crowds, who naturally press after him to see the most extraordinary *pickpocket* that the Theaters ever knew” (“The attraction” 75). Although the author’s description of Betty as a “pickpocket” — presumably a reference to the boy’s salary and inflated ticket prices — alludes to a more skeptical view of his talents, most theatergoers saw Betty as a precious object. Indeed, the writer’s description of crowds surrounding and “naturally press[ing] after” Betty in the streets recalls the incident when hundreds of fans surrounded the boy’s carriage. Here the desire to hold, touch, and possess the cute child gave rise to social behavior that stretched beyond love and admiration to include more physically threatening behavior. According to another account, those unable to acquire tickets to see him at Covent Garden or Drury Lane went so far as to wait in the street outside the front door of Betty’s Southampton row house, hoping to catch “a peep before his *drawing-room* curtain!” (“Some people” 75). Pushing beyond public space into private space, the crowds pursued Betty with a hunger tinged with the threat of violence — just how far would they go to catch “a peep” of him in his own home, this account seems to ask, and what would happen after that? The harder it became to access Betty’s physical person, the cuter he became to those privileged enough to catch a glimpse of him on the stage, in the street, or behind closed curtains.

These accounts of close encounters with the cute child gesture toward the entanglement of cuteness with access. Inaccessibility amplifies cuteness and enhances desire, fueling a capitalist economy of cuteness that can be directed toward the acquisition of surrogate objects that carry similar attributes. When individuals are thwarted in their desire to touch and hold the cute, they become susceptible to other forms of sociability, which can intensify and take on less desirable aspects, including negative affects such as anger, disgust, and violence.

Often, though, the desire to hold and touch Betty's body manifested in displays of concern for Betty's health and physical well-being. Before the actor's first move from Covent Garden to Drury Lane, manager Richard Sheridan announced: "Master BETTY shall not perform more than three times a week, and that he shall not be brought forward even so often, if it shall appear to be in the slightest degree inconvenient to his health or feelings" ("We are happy" 73). Carefully timed, this announcement positioned Sheridan as a benevolent, fatherly manager anxious about jeopardizing his star's health, while emphasizing the exclusivity of a Betty performance. When Betty became ill and had to withdraw from a scheduled performance, audiences were so overcome with worry that the Drury Lane management published a notice with letters from Betty's father and doctor verifying the young boy's illness, complete with vivid details of "bilious vomiting" and "cold and hoarseness" that rendered his voice barely "audible in his room" ("The Young Roscius," 19 Dec. 1804, 76). In the days that followed, London papers published regular updates on Betty's progress with graphic accounts of the specific treatments administered (e.g., enemas, bloodletting). For their part, Betty's family posted notices outside their door to address the "numerous and incessant enquiries of the Nobility and Gentry" ("The Young Roscius," 22 Dec. 1804, 76).

Such extreme reactions to Betty's ill health highlight the role of vulnerability, weakness, and distance in accentuating cuteness. Although, as Merish asserts, "[w]hat the cute stages is, in part, a need for adult care" (187), the cute also invites feelings that are less about caring than about possession and domination. When Betty became sick, his already-attractive body became the focus of intense public scrutiny and heightened desire, a desire aroused in part by his sudden inaccessibility. Hidden in the inner sanctum of his bedroom, Betty was literally untouchable, even by members of the nobility and gentry, which only made him seem more fascinating, more defenseless, and in need of greater care. In other words, Betty's forced withdrawal from the stage made him cuter through his association with "the diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate" (Ngai 53). At the same

time, the public's intense interest in Betty—their demand to know *everything* that was happening to his body behind closed doors—highlights the distressing flipside of maternal longing—longing to the point of obsession. Here, Emmanuel Levinas's reflections on need, desire, and the consumption of others seem particularly relevant. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas distinguishes between need and desire, asserting that with need, "I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one's teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me" (117). Betty's fans consumed pamphlets, objects, and information about the boy in their urge to get closer to him. But this consumption only fueled desire as they failed to sink their teeth into his being.

### Picturing Master Betty

The sociability released through Betty's circulation extended to the work of London's caricaturists, many of whom created satirical images of the young boy, his father, and the managers who competed for his talent. As one might expect, most of these images accentuate Betty's vulnerability, size, and cuteness, showing him in close physical contact with the adults who surround him. For example, in William Holland's caricature from December 1804 (fig. 3), Betty as Young Norval (Douglas) sits on the lap of the actress Mrs. Harriet Litchfield as Lady Randolph, Young Norval's mother. Holland's exaggerated use of scale, with a miniaturized Betty and a round, fleshy Litchfield, enhances the tenderness of this scene, a reunion of a mother with her long-lost adult son. Betty looks like a small, delicate child in his mother's arms, hardly the brave warrior of Home's play; indeed, the juxtaposition of Litchfield's ample bosom with Betty's small head seems to be a play on typical Madonna-and-Child tropes. The poetic caption in the upper-right corner of the page hails Betty as "Nature's own sweet little fellow," emphasizing his "genius," "charm," and delightful cuteness. And certainly Litchfield's tender glance at the child and her soft touch on his waist and arms amplifies his apparent need for adult care.



Figure 3. TCS 61 Lady Randolph and Douglas, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Yet the caricaturists also hint at longing that falls well outside the realm of maternal care. In figure 4, published on 30 November 1804, four days before Betty's debut, the caricaturist R. Ackermann imagines the frustration of adult managers and actors forced to contend with Betty's celebrity status and his childish whims. Dressed in turquoise with a yellow sash waving, the young actor playfully leaps over the grumbling Covent Garden theater manager

John Philip Kemble, costumed as Hamlet. Paraphrasing Ophelia's lines, Kemble bemoans his fate: "woe is me / Seeing what I have seen / Seeing what I see!! / Oh Roscius!" Again, Betty appears much younger than his thirteen years, while Kemble seems dismayed that the rambunctious child has reduced him to a glorified governess, a mere shadow of his authoritative male self. Indeed, whereas "Lady Randolph and Douglas" associates caretaking with women, Ackermann's "Theatrical Leap Frog" alludes to the dangers of cuteness for men who come into contact with it. Through touch, Betty transforms all adults into his playthings—he cutifies others through his cuteness, thereby destabilizing hierarchies of gender and releasing feelings of anxiety and frustration alongside tenderness and love. In fact, the caricaturist's depiction of "leap frog" may have been a sly reference to



Figure 4. TCS 61 Theatrical Leap Frog, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

same-sex desire and sexual congress; in 1772, a slanderous poem published in the *Public Ledger* accused the celebrated actor-manager David Garrick of “play[ing] at length that hateful game *leap frog*” (qtd. in Thomson 128). This reading of the caricature’s sexual undertone gains credence considering the accounts of the many men who admired Betty, sought his company, and purchased goods bearing his image.

Other caricatures point more explicitly to cuteness’s ugly underbelly, especially where subjectivity is concerned. In the caricature titled “The Young Roscius Weighing the Manager’s Gold” (fig. 5), Betty’s status as a desirable commodity is made explicit. Bound by gold chains to Sheridan, manager of Drury Lane, and Thomas Harris, representing Covent Garden, Betty questions the value of the gold on offer, observing that it “appears to be sterling on both sides.” Sheridan, on the right, promises that his offering is “true Pizarro gold brought by my slaves from the mines of Peru” (an allusion to the play *Pizarro*), while Harris assures him that his gold is pure. Although Betty appears to have the upper hand in these negotiations, his enchained body implies that the child actor has more in common with Sheridan’s Peruvian slaves than his lucrative contracts would suggest. As the two managers grasp the gold chains, they look as though they might tear the



Figure 5. TCS 61 Manager's Gold, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

boy apart in their efforts to possess him. Through its alignment of cuteness with Betty's commodity status, the image not only "aestheticizes powerlessness," in Merish's terms (187), but also aestheticizes the violence (or the threat thereof) arising from efforts to dominate the supposedly powerless commodity. The result of such aestheticization, Ngai claims, is enhanced cuteness: "If aestheticization is always, at the bottom line, objectification [...] the latter in turn seems epitomized by cutification" (65). In other words, objects become cuter and therefore more desirable through the symbiotic processes of objectification and commodification.

### Consuming Betty

Within days of Betty's London debut, entrepreneurs flooded the market with medals, fans, paper dolls, cups, "Norval caps," "Achmet turbans," and snuffboxes commemorating the young boy's performances.<sup>11</sup> Collectively, these commodities anticipated the full flowering of a "culture of commemoration," Asa Briggs's

11 See various clippings in *Collectanea*, especially those on 75.



Figure 6. Master Betty “paper dolls.” Courtesy: Folger Shakespeare Library.

term to describe the British desire to celebrate all manner of battles, coronations, births, lectures, and celebrated individuals through the production and consumption of an array of material goods, from high art to cheap. Not surprisingly, these objects invited and endorsed diverse social behaviors. For example, some commodities, like a set of paper dolls now housed in the Folger Shakespeare Library (fig. 6), encouraged Betty fans — presumably

but not necessarily children — to put themselves in the role of the young actor and of his many adult male characters simultaneously (“Young Albert,” Ziegler), to identify with the cute boy as they held and manipulated his effigy. Here, as with most Betty commodities, the miniaturization of the boy actor is critical to the promotion of his cuteness. Indeed, these paper dolls highlight the importance of toys for the promotion of cuteness as a privileged aesthetic category. As Harris observes, children are taught to be cute by “recogniz[ing] and enjoy[ing] cuteness in others” (13). By playing with cute toys, the child learns “the dual roles of actor and audience, cootchyng as much as he is cootchy-cooed” and comes to appreciate “the nature and value of cuteness” (13, 14). Not all Betty objects were intended for children, however. Other objects, like the “Roscius Dance Fan,” appealed directly to women, encouraging them to perform their



femininity through the mediation of the young Roscius, whose image they presumably carried in their hands as they moved across the dance floor (“The Young Roscius — New Fans”). But of all the Betty memorabilia produced at the height of the boy’s popularity, snuffboxes invited the most personal, even intimate, encounter with the actor, or at least his image.

Snuff is ground-up and distilled tobacco, often scented with jasmine, rose, bergamot, lemon, or other strong scents, and is inhaled directly through the nostrils. Snuff takers carried their snuff around with them in small boxes from which they removed small pinches at a time, sometimes as frequently as every ten minutes. In the early eighteenth century, one observer described entering a London coffeehouse where a “Fluttering Assembly of Snuffing Peripatetiks” had gathered. “[T]he Clashing of their Snush-Box lids, in opening and shutting made more noise than their Tongues,” he remarked snidely (qtd. in Hughes 15).

Snuff’s enduring popularity among the social elite and emergent middle class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries expanded the market for lavish snuffboxes, including ones ornamented with miniature portraits that were painted onto vellum and then ivory with watercolors. Many gentlemen turned to collecting snuffboxes as a hobby, as well as a means through which to perform class and gender identity. Both Lord Byron and Beau Brummel were known for their extensive snuffbox collections and the Earl of Harrington was rumored to possess enough snuffboxes for every day of the year, with specific boxes designated for morning, afternoon, and evening use (Hughes 17). Portrait subjects included famous individuals, loved ones, and even family pets — treasured subjects that, in the process of miniaturization, became cuter and more portable, and therefore easier to possess and display.

The symbiotic relationship between miniaturization, cutification, and commodification becomes immediately apparent when looking at the Folger snuffboxes of Master Betty (Harmon 133–34; Stewart 37–69). These snuffboxes vary in size and design, and their miniature portraits provide different glimpses of the boy actor, offering evidence of the number of men who

made up Betty's fan base.<sup>12</sup> Some highlight Betty's attractive facial features and curly mane of hair, while others show him in character. Interestingly, the thick lace ruff on Betty's shirt in figure 7 connotes softness and delicacy; the lace leads the eye where we might expect to see some décolletage if Betty had been a woman. By contrast, the snuffbox in figure 8 places less emphasis on the child's physical features (though the artist depicts a very active body) than on his skill and talent as an actor. Another pair of finely detailed snuffboxes represents Betty in the role of Romeo (a lover) and Douglas (a warrior) (figs. 1 and 2). Their similar designs indicate that they may have been part of a set produced to appeal to fans' collecting instincts. In some cases, the snuffbox illustrations are reproductions of frontispieces or other artists' portraits of the actor, a practice not uncommon at the time.<sup>13</sup>

As objects of devotion and affiliation, these snuffboxes offer insight into the collectors' desires, their intimate, embodied relationship—imagined or otherwise—with the “Young Roscius,” and their distinct performances of masculinity. Size is an important factor in this: as small, transportable objects, snuffboxes were typically “carried in the left hand waistcoat pocket from which [they were] withdrawn with the right hand and passed to the left hand” (Hughes 16). In other words, a snuffbox was an everyday accessory for most gentlemen, a crucial part of the wardrobe. Held in the hands or worn in the waistcoat pocket, it was concealed between the outside world and the snuff user's body. In this respect, the snuffbox invited a form of “pocket intimacy” between the male user, the snuffbox, and the cute, miniaturized body represented on its cover (Allison 45), a distinctly masculine form of intimacy amplified by the snuff taker's habitual touching and opening of the box. This intimacy took on a public dimension whenever the male owner took

12 Some boxes in the Folger collection may have been used for other purposes, such as holding jewelry or other small tokens. Women did consume snuff, but the practice was typically gendered male.

13 Compare the illustration on the snuffbox in figure 8 with the frontispiece to *Authentic Memoirs of the Young Roscius*.



Figure 7. Box with Master William Henry West Betty as “Young Roscius”, mauve base. Courtesy: Folger Shakespeare Library. Figure 8. Box depicting Master Betty as “Selim” in *Barbarosso*, pink base. Courtesy: Folger Shakespeare Library.

snuff in public, as many did at coffeehouses and theaters. Amid the noisy clatter of opening and closing lids, the flash of a box lid identified the snuff taker as a Betty fan and alluded to other, unarticulated queer desires.

But more than this, the snuffbox carried material (snuff) that its owner ingested into the body through the nasal passages—an action, following Levinas, of consuming or “transmuting” the other into the self (111). One can imagine, then, a tangled web of erotic associations that male theatergoers may have felt as they paused for a pinch of snuff (meeting a need), glanced at a miniaturized image of Betty on the snuffbox lid (stoking desire), and then looked up from their snuff-taking to watch the child actor playing miniaturized heroes onstage (consuming without satiation). By this I’m not suggesting that taking snuff was an inherently sexual act or that it prompted same-sex desire. Nevertheless, one can imagine that there was something decidedly queer about the sensual combination of the cute boy,

the cute snuffbox, and the delicious rush that apparently followed the act of taking snuff. Through the act of ingesting snuff, audiences consumed cuteness and breathed the other into their bodies.

This reading of Betty's cuteness complicates Merish's observations about the "erotics of maternal longing" and the way that "[c]uteness performs the de-sexualization of the child's body, redefining that body from an object of lust (either sexual or economic) to an object of 'disinterested' affection" (188). Far from desexualizing Betty, the miniature snuffbox and the material it held accentuated the boy's cuteness *and* his erotic appeal, releasing a form of sociality that was anything but disinterested or maternal. Rather, the sociality freed through the consumption of cute objects and the cute child was closely bound up with public performances of masculinity and male consumption.

My interpretation of the complex, queer, and sensual — if not sexual — dynamic between Betty and his male fans is supported by accounts of the number of men who attended the young boy's performances and swarmed the pits to get close to him.<sup>14</sup> At Betty's first appearance at Covent Garden, for example, the crush in the pits was so intense and the air so stale that several men passed out and had to be lifted to the boxes to safety. "We have not heard of any fatal accident," commented the *Morning Herald*, "but the fainting, bruises, and minor contingencies are beyond all enumeration ("Theatre" 72). This account challenges assumptions about the link between cuteness and benevolent care, demonstrating how the sociality released by cuteness can also provoke violent, self-destructive acts. Theatergoers' desire to gain access to Betty and inhale the air around him resulted in physical injury and fainting. No softness and cuddles here, but bumps, bruises, and enumerable aches.

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14 Early nineteenth-century British audiences were quite diverse with respect to class and gender. The feminization of theater audiences that Merish and others describe was a later development.

## Conclusion

Despite all the hype that surrounded his first performances, Master Betty's career was short-lived. Audience desire for the child prodigy, while intense for a season, waned the following year as the limitations of his vocal and physical range became apparent. After performing for several more seasons, Betty officially retired in 1808 at the age of seventeen (Kahan 129).<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, something of Betty and his cuteness lives on in the many Betty commodities that reside in archives today. These pamphlets, caricatures, paper dolls, cups, and snuffboxes continue to "mak[e] surprisingly powerful demands" on those who encounter them (Ngai 64). "Touch me, hold me, want me," they seem to say. And the willing historian yields: the cute is irresistible.

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<sup>15</sup> Betty attempted to return to the stage in 1812, 1815, and 1818, but he would never regain the critical and popular approval he enjoyed earlier in his career (Kahan 134–37).

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# Embracing the Gremlin: Judas Iscariot and the (Anti-)Cuteness of Despair

*Mariah Junglan Min*

Nakamura Hikaru's manga *Saint Young Men* (*SYM*; 聖☆おにいさん) is a slice-of-life comedy that has just entered its eleventh year of serialization. Word is that there are no future plans for an official English translation, due to the volatile religious climate in the US (Thompson); this is sad news for anyone who might enjoy seeing the Apostles Peter and Andrew show up at Jesus's door for an annual Easter prank, wearing bald caps and *kasaya* robes and informing him that they've decided to convert to Buddhism (Nakamura 5:101). The previous sentence might sound at first like a bewildering combination of words, but the situation makes reasonable sense within the context of the series, which takes as its premise that Jesus and Buddha are roommates on a long-overdue vacation in modern-day Japan. A rotating cast of characters from both religions (as well as from the Greco-Roman and Norse pantheons) makes guest appearances in their daily low-key adventures, and Judas Iscariot formally joins the list as well in the same Easter prank chapter.

Drawing from *SYM* and medieval literary output, I examine the figure of Judas in his medieval and modern incarnations, specifically as he relates to the concept of *cuteness*. Working primarily with the theorizations of Sianne Ngai and Daniel Harris as basis, I suggest that a theological understanding of cuteness

can be applied to medieval representations of Judas. This definition of cuteness engages with the darker valences of cuteness in its modern guises as identified by Ngai and Harris: a failure to attain perfection that is paradoxically appreciated for its shortcomings, and a subjugation that results from power imbalances between the object and the viewer. I then explore how these operations remain current in the secularized world of *SYM*, how they have been transformed, and how the capacity of art to elicit empathy joins the medieval and the modern across time, especially when Judas is viewed through the theorizations of wholeness that disability studies offers.

### Cute for the Middle Ages

Nearly two decades after *De Pulchra et Apto*—his lost Manichean work on “the beautiful and the fitting”—Augustine relates his evolved position on beauty in these terms: “The eyes delight in beautiful shapes of different sorts and bright and attractive colours. I would not have these things take possession of my soul. Let God possess it, he who made them all. He made them all very good, but it is he who is my Good, not they” (239). From the Neoplatonism of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius to the Aristotelian scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, the medieval conception of beauty varied in its details from thinker to thinker; nonetheless, it retained a moral and theological core that extolled God as the ultimate source and manifestation of beauty.<sup>1</sup> To be beautiful was to be good, and to be good was to be the image of God.

In contrast, Ngai theorizes cuteness as an example of an aesthetic category that is “fundamentally non-theological, unable to foster religious awe and uncoupling the experience of art from the discourse of spiritual transcendence” (22), as opposed to the sublime. Unlike cuteness, sublimity was a notion current to the Middle Ages, closely related to the attributes of

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1 For further discussion of medieval theology and aesthetics, see Tatarkiewicz and Garfagnini.

God. Augustine links the force and effectiveness of the sublime style to its “source in divinity” (Jaeger 159), and Cistercian doctrine ties the sublime to divine grace in particular. “Grace is, in a certain sense, something sublime and grandiose, because it is the manifestation of divine grace: It is the sensible transpiring of the beautiful soul and of the divine image, and ultimately, of God himself” (Monti 28). Ngai’s point that the sublime is inherently theological is, therefore, well borne out in medieval usage. However, I would like to suggest that when we move metonymically through the chain of associations between the beautiful, the sublime, and the divine, it is possible to develop a concept of the cute that is not categorically alien to theology but rather lies within it. That is, we can begin to trace the outline of a medieval cuteness that permits itself to be talked about in theological terms.

It is tricky business to pinpoint what physical features might be associated with cuteness, medieval or modern. Ngai calls cuteness “an exact cross between the dainty and dumpy” (53). Daniel Harris writes that “[c]uteness [...] is closely linked to the grotesque, the malformed” (3), which seems unobjectionable enough at first glance; but it is difficult to square this with his ensuing description of *The Simpsons* as a type of the anti-cute, “a direct subversion of the insipidity of cuteness, with its cartoon characters’ harshly contoured shapes, gaping, lipless mouths, and enormous boiled-egg eyes” (19). If “[t]he aesthetic of cuteness creates a class of outcasts and mutations” (Harris 4) to begin with, then the physical disparity between the cute and the anti-cute cannot be significant enough to demand their seclusion into mutually exclusive categories. The lines are blurred even further when we observe the ubiquity of the same set of supposedly anti-cute characters in merchandising directly designed to appeal to consumers through cuteness, from Funko Pop! figures to Band-Aids to Marge Simpson’s face and blue beehive on a line of products released by MAC Cosmetics.

What specific features any individual identifies as cute may ultimately be a case of variable mileage, but on the whole, cuteness is understood as something carefully quarantined away

from beauty. Cuteness is the verdict we resort to when we find ourselves unable to quite call something beautiful, the province of things that have failed to be beautiful — things that have come to lack “fairness, symmetry, or proportion” (Ngai 54) — in one way or another. At the same time, this failure still holds value because the cute is always already valued. Ngai stresses that the emotions elicited by cuteness are “mixed or equivocal feelings” (236); backhanded as the compliment may at times be, it is a compliment nonetheless. This is the first facet of cuteness that I want to keep in mind when developing a medieval notion of the cute. Cuteness is an odd and awkward aesthetic category, populated by things that we so often define and appreciate according to how they diverge from the perfection of beauty.

The second facet is “the asymmetry of power on which cuteness depends” (Ngai 11). Harris and Ngai are keenly attuned to the power relations constructed between the object of cuteness and its beholder, with Harris describing the cuteness of child-like things as “exaggerating the vast discrepancies of power between the sturdy adult and the enfeebled and susceptible child” (11), and Ngai interpreting cuteness as a concept to be “explicitly about the appeal of powerlessness as opposed to power” (58). When these first and second facets are taken in conjunction, they begin to highlight how cuteness is formulated by the twin processes of appreciation and subjugation. Cuteness is the realm of imperfect things that lack power over the beholder, things the beholder imperiously judges to be imperfect and yet holds close to themselves, things to whom we say, like a stern aunt in a Regency novel: *You are not beautiful, but you have a certain charm about you.*

In retroactively projecting cuteness onto the Middle Ages, my aim is not to argue that there was a medieval notion of cuteness per se that predates the term, nor that Judas Iscariot would have been readily designated as a site for cuteness by any medieval theologian. In addition, at least in the medieval leg of this paper, it matters little whether Judas is verifiably cute like a small baby animal or a bright-eyed cartoon mascot; medieval theorizations of beauty are more concerned with its broad moral dimensions

than with what specific characteristics make something beautiful, and as we have seen above, it is nearly impossible to codify the physical qualities of cuteness. Rather, the medieval definition of cuteness I wish to develop draws from the darker valences of cuteness as a concept-at-large, the recesses in which lurk failure and powerlessness.

### Judas Iscariot as a Medieval Limit Case

Since the medieval notion of the aesthetic can be comprehended in theological terms through the figure of God, what then is the corresponding space in which cuteness might reside? How do we fill in the following blank in this analogy?

BEAUTIFUL : DIVINE GOODNESS :: CUTE : \_\_\_\_\_

What would it mean for something, or someone, to be recognized as located far from the divine, to be *defined* for the distance of their remove from the divine, and yet for that shortcoming to hold some value? How might someone's moral failures be the very thing that renders them meaningful? Enter the medieval Judas.

In his extensive study of the motif, Paull Franklin Baum designates as “the mediæval legend of Judas Iscariot” (571) a phenomenon found throughout texts produced in late medieval Europe. In these works—dramatic scripts, hagiographies in prose and poetry, in Latin and the vernacular—Judas is given a sordid backstory that reads in part like a direct copy of the story of Oedipus.<sup>2</sup> According to the legend, Ciborea, wife of Reuben, is pregnant with a child who (as is told to her in a prophetic dream) will cause the ruin of the Jewish people. The couple sets the infant adrift on the sea in a basket. He washes ashore on the coastline of Scarioth (hence Iscariot), where he is discovered by its childless queen. Trouble begins to brew when the queen gives birth to a son, as Judas resents his adoptive younger brother,

2 Whether it is a linear descendant of the Oedipus myth or simply the result of homoplasy is debatable. For a defense of the latter possibility, see Edmunds.

torments him endlessly, and finally murders him. Having fled to Jerusalem to escape punishment, he joins the court of Pilate and becomes his trusted right-hand man. One day, Pilate comes across a garden with magnificent apple trees and is consumed with desire for the fruit. In the course of breaking, entering, and stealing, Judas kills the owner of the garden and eventually marries his widow. When she relates all the hardships she has suffered in her life, Judas realizes that he is the baby she relegated to the sea, and that he has killed his father and married his mother. In an attempt to right his wrongs as best as he can, he seeks out Jesus and becomes a member of the inner apostolic circle. However, he does not last long in this position before he lapses back into his old reprehensible ways, betraying Christ for thirty pieces of silver and hanging himself when he is overcome with regret.

The Oedipal addition to what is already a miserable character arc in its biblical form has the effect of doubling and thus emphasizing several salient features present in the story of Judas. Lee Patterson sees despair as the most important link between Judas and Oedipus: “As the son is called back to the mother, so is Judas called back to his original nature; and the paternal injunction of penance — ‘you can be saved if you will worthily repent’ — must be rejected both now and forever. Despair is, after all, the inability to repent — the inability, that is, to change” (414). The recursive cycle of sin and suffering, as embodied by Oedipus in particular and by the Thebes of the *Thebaid* in general, is understood here to be playing out — in the form of a sexual drama — the same compulsion towards stagnancy that leads Judas to suicide. There are other possible ways of knitting Judas and Oedipus together,<sup>3</sup> and of these, I want to turn our attention to what Baum calls “a wish to show that no matter how great the sin, true repentance brings full pardon” (483).

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3 For instance, one of the primary horrors of the myth of Oedipus is the accidental nature of his crimes. What are the repercussions that a severing of sinner and sin might have on the exegetical role of Judas? If God in his omniscience and unassailable authority allows a thing to happen, how much responsibility does an involved individual bear for the outcome?

By supplying Judas's life before his apostolic career with a series of appalling crimes spanning the gamut from fratricide to thievery to patricide to incest, the Oedipal backstory represents him as a man whose sins are more numerous, and perhaps more visceral, than the betrayal for which he is so infamous. But medieval exegetical tradition is surprisingly lenient towards Judas's betrayal of Christ; the unforgiveable sin that damns him to hell is not the selling of the Messiah but despair. Judas is wrong to assume that divine mercy would never be able to absolve him for the betrayal, and his choice to deny the efficacy of penance and the possibility of grace is the most sinful act of all.<sup>4</sup> Comparing the accounts of Judas's death in Jacobus de Voragine's Latin *Legenda* and William Caxton's English translation makes this soteriological assertion visible on the narrative level. According to the *Legenda*:

However, he was sorry for what he had done, threw back the money, and hanged himself in a halter, and, as the gospel tells us, "burst asunder in the middle and all his bowels gushed out." [...] It also was fitting that the bowels which had conceived the betrayal should burst and spill out, and that the throat from which had emerged the voice of the traitor should be strangled by a rope. (de Voragine 168)

In contrast, the corresponding section in Caxton's translation reads: "and nevertheless at the last he brought them again to the temple, and after hung himself in despair, and his body opened and cleft asunder and his bowels fell out" (Caxton). There is no mention in the English of Judas's treacherous bowels and throat. Caxton's Englishing of the Judas legend takes conscious care to highlight despair, even at the cost of eliminating outright references to betrayal at this crucial final moment.<sup>5</sup>

4 See also Snyder.

5 A textual case countering this majority trend would be the *South English Legendary*, which holds an extremely punitive view of justice and lists all of Judas's sins — thievery, murder, suicide — as rightful reasons he deserves death by hanging.



Heaping a host of additional sins on top of what Judas is held accountable for in scripture prods at the outer boundaries of the doctrine that repentance will make up for virtually any sin. If a traitor like Judas could be redeemed through divine mercy, would the same hold true when he is also guilty of several murders and incest to boot? When is the grace of God incapable of reaching someone? Within this theological framework, at least, the correct answer is never. The atonement of the eponymous protagonist in the morality play *Mankind* can be read as an alternate history in which the what-if scenario of Judas's repentance is explored. Ashamed of the prodigal life he has led, *Mankind* seeks to hang himself from a tree rather than face Mercy again. "I am not worthy to have mercy be no possibilite [...] The egall justyse of God wyll not permytte sych a synfull wrech / To be revyvyd and restoryd ageyn; that were impossibyll" (822–32), he says. Mercy replies, "Aryse and aske mercy, Mankend, and be associat to me [...] Thy obstinacy wyll exclude the[e] fro the glorius perpetuité" (827–29), the final line a dire warning against the one unforgiveable sin. The medieval Judas is a kind of limit case for salvation, in that he holds theological value because he — as someone who is identified primarily as a sinner, doubly so in the Oedipal legends — helps explicate the extent of the sweeping embrace of divine grace. Even sins like Judas's do not lie beyond God's capacity to forgive. Judas's sinfulness can be read as a form of theological cuteness because his sins — much like qualities associated with cuteness, such as deformity or exaggeration — are considered valuable at the same time that they are recognized as a failure to be perfect, divine, or beautiful.

On the other hand, despite all this talk of the possibility of recuperating him, Judas never attains salvation.<sup>6</sup> He slips into despair, hangs himself, and is consequently damned. In Arnoul Gréban's *Le mystère de la passion*, Judas is carried off to hell by Despair herself to be swallowed whole by Lucifer, then gnawed by a horde of swamp serpents for all eternity (Gréban 22025–134). It is curiously apposite that out of all the sins in the

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6 Except in a lost sermon of St. Vincent Ferrer. See Daileader 29.

world, *despair* is the one that brings him to this point. Despair, at heart, is a mistrust and denial of the salvific power of God. Judas's resorting to despair is his refusal to acknowledge God's sovereignty and to shy away from the long arm of the divine. It's worth asking the question again: when is the grace of God incapable of reaching someone? Never — unless, that is, the man willingly withdraws himself from God's grasp. By rejecting the offer of salvation, Judas stages his own form of rebellion against divine might, effectively asserting that he is not subject to this hierarchy of power.

Or he would, if only such a thing were feasible at all. As it stands, Judas exists within the Christian context of medieval cultural output, and his gestures prove to be ultimately ineffectual. When the entire sequence of the Passion and Crucifixion is understood as part of the divine plan, the betrayal is nothing that God did not anticipate or engineer, which prevents it from becoming a successful act of defiance. Even when Judas seems to make choices of his own — as Irina Dumitrescu argues is the case in the Middle English ballad “Judas” — he is beset by external obstacles and internal weaknesses, unwillingly forced to sell Christ as a consequence of his own sexual susceptibility to a quick-fingered lover. This is hardly the picture of a master insurgent. In the end, Judas remains thoroughly subject to the rules of the game set out by divine authority. Cuteness may valorize a certain deviation from perfection, but it also requires that the object be placed in a position of powerlessness. The sort of deviation that carries the danger of overturning this hierarchy — established between Judas and God, and by virtue of the approval of orthodoxy, between Judas and the medieval audience — is strictly forbidden, or rather, functionally impossible. As someone who occupies a niche consonant to cuteness in medieval theology, Judas is unable to cut himself free from the constraints of the role. If “adorable things are often most adorable in the middle of a pratfall or a blunder” (Harris 6), admittedly the man whose whole life is one long mistake (as in Matthew 26:24, “It had been better for him if he had not been born.”) seems to have been crafted for the part.

But that life ends with Judas suspended between heaven and earth, his intestines tumbling from the broken ruin of his body. As mentioned earlier, the physical properties of the anti-cute as set out by Harris are often coterminous with those of the cute; however, only the anti-cute seems to be capable of evoking feelings of disgust, caused by the witnessing of ruptured bodies. Harris writes of the anti-cute Gremlins (in pointed contrast to Gizmo, who is pronounced cute): “[they] are constantly being squished and disemboweled, their entrails spilling out into the open” (20). In addition to the power to disgust, the anti-cute also possesses violent intent, often housed in the form of a “corrupt, possessed, even satanic” child (17). And as the Oedipal tradition has it, years before his entrails spilled out into the open, Judas was spending his childhood on Scarioth beating his adoptive brother to death. Even as he functions as the model for a theological understanding of cuteness, elements of the anti-cute flicker like a shadow across the figure of Judas. To the last, while unable to destroy the structures that contain him, Judas makes the borders of those structures strain under the effort it takes to keep him subsumed — a limit case for salvation, and in his past and future roles as demon-child and ruptured body, a limit case for cuteness as well.

### The Melancholy of Judas Iscariot

In the Easter prank chapter of *Saint Young Men*, Peter and Andrew lead Jesus to believe that they’ve accidentally made Judas wait outside in the cold for hours on account of having forgotten he was there. “No... Never mind me... I’m sorry that I’m Judas...” he trails off when they open the door. “Haha... It’s actually better that I stayed out of it. If someone like me were to be around on a good day like this... Since I wasn’t even there for the surprise resurrection show... Ah, but still. When Jesus said, ‘It had been better if he (Judas) had not been born,’ it did give me that sinking feeling” (Nakamura 5:108). After a panel of silence, the three disciples enthusiastically reveal that this morose entrance by Judas was also part of the prank. “But how much

of this just now was a prank, exactly?" Jesus asks in equal parts relief and consternation (108).

Harris writes of cuteness that "pity is the primary emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic that arouses our sympathies" (4), and specifies that products intended to be cute project "an aura of motherlessness, ostracism, and melancholy [...] [Cuteness] aestheticizes unhappiness" (5). Along similar lines, Ngai describes the cute object in terms of "helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency" (65). *SYM*'s Judas is introduced to the reader as a pitiful loner with a hesitant speech pattern and a peek-a-bangs haircut ("Peek-a-Bangs"), whose dialogue primarily consists of berating himself for his former betrayal of Christ: "Of course I should eat on the floor, since I'm Judas" (Nakamura 5:109); "Strike me down [...] I deserve to be cut in half" (9:14); and, while expertly tying a hangman's noose, "I'm quite used to getting rid of myself" (15). His despair is played for both laughs and sympathy, intended to draw from the reader a reaction akin to the desperate compassion that Jesus displays in response to Judas's offer to eat on the floor: "Sit at my right hand, Judas!'" (5:109). Instead of being the unforgiveable cardinal sin, despair has now become a toothless source of cuteness.<sup>7</sup>

In the secular world order of contemporary manga, even Judas's attempt to venture outside of cuteness is figured in radically different terms. "Let us be grateful for the miracle of another day of life spent with friends!" (11:3) he shouts at Peter and Andrew by way of greeting when they show up to work at the pearly gates one day, alarming them with his newfound enthusiasm. He has embarked on a path of affirmation and positivity, adorning his desk with hand-painted postcards emblazoned with motivational quotes and attending lectures by lifestyle

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7 One caveat is that *SYM*'s popularity has been driven primarily by the inherent cuteness of Jesus the character, portrayed as a wide-eyed blogger who is fascinated by Japanese culture and fancies himself a Johnny Depp look-alike. This requires exploring a vastly different notion of cuteness that eliminates much of the darker valences that Ngai and Harris point out. There are alternate manifestations of cuteness that do not involve the denigration of the object.

coaches. “How does it look to you? Is this dangerously verging on religious conversion?” (5) Peter asks Andrew, staring at Judas’s shelf full of self-help books. Judas pins his bangs out of his face and goes shopping for new clothes, trying to define himself as a faithful and repentant follower of Christ with a completely transformed attitude.

By the end of the chapter, Judas is paying Jesus a visit to share his bright outlook on life. “With this new mindset... I won’t let ‘Judas’ remain the byword for betrayal,” he vows. “And until 13 becomes a lucky number... until yellow becomes a popular color... until this Judas cross [in the shape of a noose] adorns churches all across the world, I will keep visiting the earthly realm!” (13). But just as he is in the middle of pledging on his knees that he will never make the same mistake again, Jesus cuts him off in a burst of eager agape: “You sold me for thirty pieces of silver, so sell me again for thirty coins... or thirty pieces of gold... no, even gift certificates or smart cards are fine... No matter how many times you betray me, I’ll forgive you...! I’m fine with you selling me over and over again!” (14). With the wind abruptly taken out of his sails at the implication that Jesus neither wishes for him to change nor believes that he can, Judas lets his hair fall back into his face even heavier than before, muttering, “Once a traitor...”

Despair may have a different function within the *SYM* universe, but the discrepancy in power that pigeonholed Judas into the niche of the theologically “cute” and bound him there is still as active and dominant as ever. Cuteness, even when secularized into its aesthetic dimensions, retains the same interplay of appreciation and subjugation that was present in the medieval configuring of Judas as a limit case for salvation. There may be something quite insidious lurking beneath the surface of Jesus’s unconditional acceptance at the prospect of being exchanged for a sheaf of gift cards. Once again, divinity takes control of the narrative; the defiance of betrayal is rendered insignificant if the betrayal has been unequivocally sanctioned by the party to be betrayed. Jesus gently returns Judas to his accustomed place

as the aestheticized embodiment of despair, and Judas has no choice but to play his role.<sup>8</sup>

The operations at work in appreciating and subjugating Judas thus mirror each other in their medieval and modern incarnations, but the affective surge of protectiveness or fondness a reader is meant to feel for *SYM*'s Judas appears to be a different beast from the slightly begrudging theological acceptance of Judas in medieval output. Or is it? Are there medieval texts that cast Judas as a target of compassion rather than acknowledgement, that encourage the reader to weep for him instead of theorizing how the extent of his sins necessitates radical reaches of divine mercy? Can we be moved for Judas as a person through our encounters with medieval texts, and not merely moved by the mystery of salvation? The field of disability studies, I believe, offers a valuable framework with which to approach this question.

Tobin Siebers writes that aesthetic representation has always been influenced by a distinct lack of “harmony, integrity, and beauty” (64), that “beauty always maintains an underlying sense of disability” (65). Because medieval theorizations of the aesthetic were inclined to conceive of beauty in terms of religious morality, deviations from perfection were more readily considered necessary evils rather than the *sine qua non* of the larger picture of all creation. But in the *Suspensio Iude*, a contentious pageant appended in a later hand to the Towneley Plays, the literary creates a space for readers to develop an empathetic response to imperfection instead, encouraging a radical identification with those who diverge from wholeness.<sup>9</sup> With its first-person speaking voice (Judas) and its theme of lamentation (for

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8 Regarding the influence of manga-as-genre on the inertness required of Judas: Judas's character type is closer to *moé* (萌え) rather than straightforwardly cute, and the inherent “itself-ness” that drives *moé* is what makes his transformation away from it all the more undesirable. The Japanese *moé* is a rough analogue to Roland Barthes's *punctum* — something intensely personal, irregular, and painfully affecting in its itself-ness — but applicable to the physical and personality traits of fictional characters.

9 On the question of whether the *Suspensio Iude* is a dramatic text at all, see Stevens and Cawley 14; Meredith; and Epp.

his Oedipal and Christian sins), the *Suspencio* most resembles the *planctus* in its form; this was a genre performed out loud as part of church ritual, which possesses emotive and perspective-taking qualities that render it performative in nature. When encountering the *Suspencio* on the page, the reader is meant to take on the role of Judas in his grief.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in describing the activist Harriet McBryde Johnson, admiringly calls her “charismatic rather than cute, ironic rather than pathetic, self-assured rather than suffering” (193). Underlying Garland-Thomson’s rhetorical move to explicitly distance Johnson from the adjective *cute* are the darker valences of cuteness explored in this essay; to describe Johnson as cute would be to call her flawed, and to subjugate her to the judgmental gaze of the beholder. On the other hand, Judas in the *Suspencio* is absolutely pathetic, vocal about his suffering, and — after our fashion — a certain kind of cute. The reader is never given the possibility of identifying with him in the same affirmative way that Johnson’s gawkers are invited to identify with her “full humanity” (192), since this Judas is portrayed as a broken figure with a noose around his neck, murder in his past and disembowelment in his near future, someone more Gremlin than human.

Instead, the vector of empathy flows in the reverse direction in the case of the *Suspencio*, and readers find themselves identifying with Judas’s brokenness. The specificity of Judas Iscariot as a character involved in the narrative of the Passion is only heightened by providing him with a detailed Oedipal past, and his sins become more distinct as his story accumulates elaborations, as his silhouette acquires a defined outline different from that of the reader or audience member. After all, very few of us can claim to have been thrown into the ocean in response to the prophetic dreams of our parents. But when the specifics of Judas’s story have been discarded, what is left for us to empathize with is only his despair. All we can do is mourn with his mourning. What we recognize in him is not that he is as whole as we are, but that we are as broken as he is; this is the compassion that makes it possible, five centuries later, for a character like *SYM*’s

Judas to be let in from the cold. When we take on Judas's voice in the Suspensio, we see ourselves bound to him in the sin of despair, every one of us a Gremlin.



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# Cute, Charming, Dangerous: Child Avatars in Second Life

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What should a society do when a child's performance isn't that of a child? In the physical world, society rarely faces that question, needing only to reconcile the difference between performance and appearance when faced with a situation such as a celebrity who has undergone plastic surgery or a child who suffers from progeria. A person's appearance quickly establishes their age because the image of the body acts as a symbol of temporal status in the presentation of self, allowing others to define appropriateness in future interactions (Goffman 4–5). The child's biological body signals others to interact with him or her in ways that are appropriate to his or her developmental level. As the child grows taller and more mature with time, the temporal signs he or she displays change and signal to society that the child is ready for different levels of interaction. Society, in other words, uses the symbol of the temporal body as a way of binding a child to a specific set of acceptable performances. The focus of this chapter is a world in which the body is no longer held by the temporality of biology, making what appears to be a child's performance unstable. Virtual worlds mask the biological body of the user behind the digital body of the avatar. While an avatar might look like a child, the user behind the screen is a verified adult, creating temporal dissonance. Using Brian Massumi's notion of the *positional grid* and Pierre Bourdieu's definition of *habitus*, I want to investigate how this temporal dissonance played out in



*Figure 1.* Author's Avatar as a Child in Second Life. Screenshot by author.

the early days of one particular virtual world, Second Life, and how that particular virtual society utilized cuteness to regulate performance.

Established in 2003, Second Life is a persistent virtual world, an environment “implemented by a computer (or network of computers) that simulates an environment” in a way that allows users to share information within a persistent space (Bartle 1). This world looks like a video game, but there are no game rules and no overarching narrative. The computer user isn't a player, but a resident of a world where he or she builds a life, a “second life,” of his or her choosing. Users in the physical world craft a highly detailed digital body called an avatar. By performing through that avatar, the user grows into a resident of the world who understands how society functions in its virtual space. Millions of people have created an avatar in Second Life, and

several thousand residents are online at any given moment. Residents have complete control over the environment and their own performances, and users are free to craft lives inside the virtual space that explore a variety of identities denied to them in the physical world. The choices residents make inside the virtual world can bleed over to the physical world; Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson suggest that even small decisions such as changing an avatar's hair color can make a difference in a user's behavior both on- and offline (272–74). Rather than being separate, the virtual and the physical intertwine to alter behaviors in both worlds, challenging while also reifying social norms carried into the virtual performance space from the physical world. Residents make choices within Second Life based both on the habitus of that virtual world as well as the carried-over social norms of the physical world.

While there is an interdependence of the physical and virtual worlds, some differences in the technical aspects of the Second Life platform allow for specific freedoms that are impossible in the physical world. Since the user can leave behind the restraints of his or her biological body, for example, his or her avatar can reflect a desired identity that transcends the temporal signs of his or her biology in the physical world, such as age and physical limitation. Child avatars represent one type of identity that was much discussed in the pioneering days of Second Life. Every Second Life user has the ability to craft her avatar's look within the program, from the shape of her nose, to the length of her torso, to how fat the avatar will appear. Second Life requires age verification for all users, and the programmers behind the world designed the basic avatar shape to give the impression of an adult body. Given the user's ability to manipulate this body, however, some residents played with the avatar configuration menu to present a far more childlike look. With the addition of children's clothing, these residents began calling themselves child or kiddie avatars. "Stellar Sunshine," the world's very first resident, started the first group for "big kids that just refuse to grow up. =o)" in early 2003. Today, these child avatars perform carefully orchestrated, static behaviors that society designates as

cute, carefully avoiding the temporal dissonance caused by an adult user appearing as a child avatar. Virtual society mitigates the danger of the adult user by carefully regulating the child's behavior in terms of something akin to *aegyo*, a common South Korean performance style. Koreans perform *aegyo* as a means of confining sexuality with linguistic and nonverbal "charming, cute behavior" (Strong 29). Not all cute performances, however, necessarily fall under *aegyo*. *Aegyo* is "cuteness made visible," a performance that is learned and circulated with the intention of codifying specific behaviors, namely how women behave toward men (30–31). Rather than simply allowing women to perform their attraction to men in any way they choose, *aegyo* requires women to act specifically in accordance with the strictures of culturally accepted practice. If a woman wants to indicate an attraction to a man, for example, she might extend the vowel sound in the last word of each sentence, use a specific hand gesture in the shape of a heart as the man approaches, or add extra consonants to the end of words (Korean *Aegyo*: The Seven Levels). While some women end up with an extremely child-like performance, the most acceptable versions of *aegyo* involve naturalized performances that appear "cute and sweet" without giving the impression that the performer is trying to attract a man (Stawski). By regulating flirtation in terms of cute performance, society controls femininity by requiring specific, codified types of performance that are easily recognizable to other members of society. In addition, *aegyo* reinforces masculinity through appearances of helplessness that stand in contrast to conventionally manly performances, such as when a man opens a door for a woman, helps her into a car, or otherwise performs in a way that suggests protection (Manietta 3–7).

Second Life society formed similarly bounded behaviors in response to the entrance of child avatars into the virtual performance space and to the temporal dissonance that their appearance and behavior caused within it. At first, residents performed childhood for short periods, reverting to adult avatars for the majority of their activities. The performances were playful and were labeled as such by the participants themselves: They made

no suggestion that they intended to continue the performances in the long term. Residents played with cute behaviors during these intervals as short-term, non-permanent behavior that used the abilities of the Second Life program to alter the temporal nature of the avatar but only within the behavioral limits set for children in the physical world.

The practice of adult users switching freely to child avatars for short periods changed as this virtual world matured and grew, and many of these residents gave up their adult alter-egos in favor of performing as children full-time. The temporal avatar bodies indicated childhood: talking like children, adding animations to skip around like children, and interacting with adult avatars as a child in the physical world might do. Today, these behaviors include many of the characteristics of *aegyo*, such as “pounding of feet [...] pouting, bloated cheeks, distorted child-like voice and decontextualized linguistic elements implying helplessness or confusion” (Puzar 99). As an example of *aegyo* in Second Life, I offer the story of my excursion to an adoption agency where child avatars look for parents to role-play with them. One little girl skipped over to me and told me my dress was very pretty, and she wanted to be pretty like me one day. She then spoke to me through the text-based chat feature of Second Life: “I’m Mery! I’m 3! I like PINK! Alls I wears is pink. my stuffie am-i-nals are pink and I am da pink princess. \*smiles brightly\*.”<sup>1</sup> Despite Mery’s *aegyo* performance, I was immediately faced with temporal dissonance. A person with a three-year-old body, as she presented herself, would not be able to type as smoothly and quickly. Her statement would lead one to assume either that she was a prodigy who learned to write at the age of

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1 Second Life uses text-based chat as the primary means of communication. There is a feature that allows a user to speak and be heard by other residents while in the world, but most child avatars avoid using this voice feature to keep a consistent performance. Throughout this chapter, I present text from Second Life and the Second Life forums as presented by the residents. Spelling and grammar are often cast aside in favor of typing faster. In order to maintain the performance as it was offered, I do not note errors that appeared in the original text.



three or that an adult user behind the screen wrote this statement as a declaration of intention: "I am performing as a child."

My interaction with Mery was consistent. She performed as a child throughout our interaction, adding giggles, pouts, and childish antics throughout. Yet despite the performance, I know that Mery's user behind the screen must have been at least eighteen years old to be using Second Life, since she would have had to be age verified when she signed up for the program. My own experience exemplifies temporal dissonance, since I had to come to grips with the fact that the sign I saw in front of me didn't match the perceived biology of the person controlling the digital body. With this dissonance comes the question: What should I expect from such a digital image of a child? A child's behavior? Or will this body act as an adult? These questions result not just from the virtual performance but from the physical world's social norms: Adults playing at being children may be transgressing what the physical world considers correct performance.

Second Life residents wrestled with this temporal dissonance, and they looked for ways to define child avatar identity in a way that would stabilize the temporality of the performance. This virtual society started by designating child avatars as a form of role-play, a specific cultural category within the world. As residents first arrived in Second Life, they quickly set up specific areas with the characteristics of an environment, like a Wild West town. Residents occupying that space would clothe themselves and behave in roles suited to that environment, such as a saloonkeeper or gunslinger. Role-play is still confined to a single area in today's Second Life, like a game, never leaving the bounds of that area. Role-players are free to go to other, more general areas of the virtual space, but while in those spaces, their performance is confined to widely acceptable social behavior. Other residents don't wish to be involved in role-play; they see it as impinging on their own Second Life experience. Gunslinging, for example, is discouraged in general areas because guns symbolize physical world violence. If a role-player arrived at a dance with a gun in a holster, other residents would send him a private

message — the equivalent of taking him aside and speaking to him privately — to ask him to remove his weapons if he wished to remain in the area. If he refused, the owner of the land could click a button and transport that role-player away instantly, the Second Life equivalent of kicking him out. Guns themselves don't pose a threat to the lives of avatars. No one can kill another avatar in Second Life, even by shooting a gun directly at another resident. But though there is no way to murder an avatar, guns symbolize role-play, and residents in non-role-playing environments either ban avatars with guns outright or ask offenders to remove the weapons. When role-playing avatars enter these spaces outside of their designated play areas, the symbols used in the role-playing are no longer viewed as part of specific role-playing, but instead, residents see the symbols as identity-based. The gun symbol does not represent danger in the virtual world, since the avatar body is immune to weapons. The gun does show the propensity of the avatar toward violence, and that identity is rejected based on the symbol of the role-play.

In the same way, child avatars are a form of role-play that must be tightly controlled and defined for both the physical and virtual worlds, since Second Life residents have decided the symbols of child avatar bodies represent dangerous identity play. While the initial intent behind them was innocent, some residents began exploring new potential with these avatars. Age-play involves child avatars going into the adult-rated sexual areas of Second Life and participating in sexual situations with other avatars while role-playing children. Second Life allows residents to create and upload animations, and one of the earliest and most popular uses of this ability was and is fashioning sexual positions that two avatars could enjoy. Some enterprising residents developed animations for sex acts between a child and an adult, resulting in the practice of age-play. When the practice was uncovered by the physical-world media in 2007, the press headlined one example of a child avatar who claimed to be a ten-year-old girl offering blowjobs to any adult male avatar in her vicinity (Dobson). In that case, both the user portraying the child and the one representing the adult would choose to use the

animation and watch as the avatars engaged in underage sexual play. Even before the media storm that engulfed the practice, residents struggled with whether to allow age-play, especially since the sexual activity occurred between avatars controlled by consenting legal adults. In other words, the temporal symbol of the avatar body suggested the interaction was inappropriate and caused a visceral reaction of disgust for the physical-world user, yet the user's biological body in the physical world, that of an adult, would make the sexual interaction appropriate. As one Second Life user stated on a forum post about Linden Lab allowing child avatars:

Can you please just explain to us why or why is Linden Lab giving child avatars so many rights over common sense? I also still do not understand why any adult would ever want to RP as a child in an adult environment. I hate to keep repeating myself but why allow them that? Am I the only one that finds this sick? Please help us to understand this madness, Jack. (Vryl Valkyrie)

Getting to the root of how Second Life dealt with this temporal dissonance requires digging into the history of the world itself. The earliest reference to child avatars and sexual play in the Second Life forums, the discussion area outside of the world where residents often continue pertinent discussions, occurred in early 2006, three years after the opening of the world. Residents didn't immediately associate age-play with deviant behavior. In fact, it was first considered a protected form of play within the world, and residents who spoke against it found themselves facing a backlash of virtual opinion based on an earlier component of Second Life society: the belief in each resident's freedom to create. Linden Lab, the company that runs Second Life, sent an employee to openly admonish "bella Ophelia," the first user to post about age-play in the forums, for violating Second Life's community standard for personal disputes. The admonishment suggests that the very act of asking if avatars can engage in age-play is an example of intolerance, since bringing

up its appropriateness puts those practicing age-play in a negative light (Linden). Age-play forum posts show, however, that the issue became buzzed about by the end of 2006, with most residents expressing significant “negative emotional responses” over the practice (Adams 56–57). Other residents tried to fight that growing societal mistrust by repeating that child avatars are consenting adults pretending to be children in sexual situations. One such resident, “Taco Rubio,” an active age-play proponent, started an entire gallery of age-play pictures in a little-used area of the forums to attempt to make it “one of the few places where we [don’t] have to deal with constant negativity [...] let’s keep it that way!”

Taco Rubio was reacting to the burgeoning habitus surrounding age-play in-world. *Habitus*, in its most basic definition, is a system that regulates social norms. In Pierre Bourdieu’s definition, habitus represents “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures, that is, a principle of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules” (72). Habitus acts as an invisible web guiding residents of Second Life through paths of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, masking its own existence through the belief that the regulations are “natural.” Despite his pushback against habitus, Taco Rubio and others in the age-play community felt the constant pressure from the larger Second Life society, the result of habitus placing age-play at a lower level of taste and class than other activities. After seeing performances of age-play and wrestling with the temporal dissonance that child avatars presented, society rejected this type of performance, deemed it inappropriate, and reacted to child avatars by avoiding them and reacting negatively to discussions of age-play in the forums. Older residents passed on their disregard for child avatars to newer residents as they arrived, assigning deviant status to child avatars through the transmission of habitus, regardless of the intentions behind each child avatar’s performance.

While society within Second Life reacted to child avatars with specific repercussions, the company behind Second Life

was forced to deal with the issues around temporal dissonance on a more formal level. Once mass media uncovered the practice of age-play, Linden Lab was confronted by German and UK pornography laws that prohibit images of child sexual behavior from being transmitted via the Internet, even in the form of animation. Faced with having the program banned in those countries, the company relented on its previous position of allowing the practice and banned age-play completely. The official Second Life wiki states that residents may use child avatars for fun and play, such as swinging on a playground or going to school. But sexual behavior of any kind, including baring the “genital or chest regions,” is strictly prohibited and can result in a permanent ban (Second Life Wiki Contributors). Without the need to confront child avatars engaged in age-play, residents ceased their vocal opposition to the practice, but remnants of the habitus remain. Residents still view child avatars with suspicion, despite the fact that age-play has nearly disappeared from the grid. Even when child avatars are participating in the fun and games that Steller Sunshine first proposed, residents consider them deviant and suspicious. These perceptions of deviance rest in the knowledge that behind the temporal sign of the child’s body lurks an adult user who is capable of performances that step outside the appropriateness of the virtual body they present.

Society’s general mistrust of child avatar performance manifests itself in the way these avatars are forced to remain on the Second Life mainland. Linden Lab controls the area known as the mainland, and all activity there is to be generally acceptable to the community, meaning no sexual activity or other behavior that is deemed appropriate only for adults. Child avatars cannot be banned from this area unless they step outside the written rules for their behavior, such as any discussion or overt acts of age-play. Owners of private areas off of the mainland are free to enact rules that allow for mature or adult behavior, and even at benign events like a sailing competition or a fashion show, child avatars are instantly banned. No explanation is required. Landowners regularly kick out and permanently ban child ava-

tars simply for their appearance. In 2013, “kiskoshka Resident” took to the forum to complain about the treatment he received as a child avatar:

I can't even begin to express the tremendous hurt and frustration I feel over the discrimination and prejudice against child avatars that is absolutely rampant in SL. It happens a dozen times a week; I was recently told that a woman wouldn't sell me a prefab house because my child avatar offended her. Just today, I was ordered to leave an arcade on a moderate sim. The place was abandoned, there was no adult content whatsoever, but the sim manager approached me and told me to change my shape or get out.

In response, many residents mentioned their discomfort with child avatars, with “Porky Gorky” stating:

The world is full of sick bastards who either abuse and hurt children or fantasize about such things. SL is an ideal environment for these perverts to role play their sick urges and desires [...]. I am not saying that this is your motivation for being a child Av. However, based on what I have seen in SL in the past, I view every child avatar with suspicion.

Notice that Porky Gorky states that he doesn't know the reasons behind a resident's decision to play with a child identity, but that discomfort comes not from the virtual space, where performance isn't limited by the biological body, but from the physical-world norms that dictate children should not be sexualized. His overwhelming assumption is that the motivation for the performance rests in “sick urges and desires,” a negative opinion passed on through habitus from both the physical and virtual worlds. Age-play has mostly disappeared from the virtual environment because of Linden Lab's written rules, but Porky Gorky's first thought remains based in the beliefs formed before those rules were put in place. Even in 2012, five years after age-play was banned and basically eliminated, residents still react



*Figure 2.* Author's Avatar as a Child in Second Life. Screenshot by author.

with unease when child avatars arrive. Since deeply held beliefs are critical pieces of habitus, society's conviction about child avatars marginalizes and casts suspicions on their activity, tightly regulating when, where, and how they can behave. Linden Lab's rules dictate that child avatars can't engage in sexual activity, but habitus perpetuates the belief that child avatars are suspicious to ensure that the virtual society determines what will and will not be considered appropriate childhood performance.

Habitus works with the overt rules of society to bind a resident to the positional grid, a notion developed by Brian Masumi. In his work, a virtual space such as Second Life is an event space, a world where potentials unavailable in the physical world suddenly reappear. He uses the example of a field turning into a game of soccer. At first, the field is empty, with no boundaries, players, or rules for how it should be used. A single

person enters the field and begins kicking a ball, then another person enters to kick the ball back and forth with them. Soon, many people are kicking the ball wildly around the field, which turns into chaos. In order to turn chaos into order, the group gives players positions to play and a host of rules to follow. A referee stands in the field to make sure the players follow the rules of the game. What was once simply an open field turns into a soccer field, a bounded area of performance with specific rules and expectations. Players are defined in relationship to the field, occupying a specific role within the space. The potential still exists for a player to run off, kicking the ball out of bounds and ruining the game, but he is held in position with the expectations surrounding the space (79–80).

In *Second Life*, residents enter the open event space, which is filled with potential for creating bodies and identities that include choices beyond those that exist in the physical world. As residents interact with the potential to mask their biological bodies, they determine which types of performances are socially acceptable, often bringing physical-world norms and habitus into these decisions. Only residents who choose potential appearances and behaviors that are within accepted societal parameters can continue to enjoy the social and creative aspects of *Second Life*. By coming into contact with each other, these actors shift the potential of the space. When one resident tries out a potential identity, the way other residents react determines how the field of potentialities will look in the future. When animal avatars first appeared, for example, society was faced with *Second Life* users performing outside of biologically human bodies. Society then had to examine the potential of these performances and agree on whether they would be accepted or not. Just as with Massumi's soccer example, residents still hold the potential to perform outside of these boundaries, but habitus keeps them reperforming within the same socially acceptable expectations.

The number of potential performances in this virtual world far exceeds those of the already habitus-bound physical world, and early residents could and did play with the potentials avail-



able to them. As residents interact with specific potentials, they approve and disapprove them. Society whittles down the acceptable potentials to set boundaries for behavior, a framework called the *positional grid* that governs future resident behavior. Massumi explains that all actors within a society are placed on a framework that classifies their bodies in terms of sets of binaries: child/adult, male/female, gay/straight (Massumi 2–4). The grid eventually becomes so engrained in the participants that its positions seem fixed and set, and movement between points, the no-man’s land where transgression can occur, is obscured so that the grid seems immovable. Second Life had the barest minimum of a positional grid when it began, and even as bodies became defined, movement between grid positions kept the available categories of identity fluid.

Child avatars serve as an example of both dynamic interactions and the limiting of potential as well as the way bodies are defined within a positional grid through habitus and overt rules. The culture remained open to the potential of child avatars until residents had a chance to interact with the potential and determine its reasonable place within the world. Most important, society had to determine how virtual child bodies would be categorized on the positional grid, most critically in terms of the binary of child/adult. Children should not engage in sexual activity, and since the adult position on the grid included sexual behavior, child avatars needed to have a grid position defined in opposition to that. Residents came across child avatars, observed their sexual behavior, and expressed their disapproval. This disapproval stemmed mainly from the blurring of the positional grid points: a performance could not involve both child/avatar and adult/user, for such a performance causes constant movement between two grid points — child and adult — that results in a blurred, chaotic performance. When a resident interacts with a child avatar like Mery from the above example, he or she sees the digital body of a child and a performance that matches that image. Because *aegyo* cuteness is noted for its “static set of expressions” (Puzar 99), bringing *aegyo* into Second Life means that the performances of child avatars are controlled, under-

stood, and bound. Only the static, approved set of expressions is allowed. If Mery were to say to other residents that she needed to log off for a time to smoke a cigarette, she would break the rigid set of behaviors acceptable for child avatars. Nonconformity with *aegyo* jolts other residents into an awareness of the adult body on the other side of the screen.

In Second Life, *aegyo* is used as a positional grid point in opposition to the adult avatars on the grid. Within grid positions, speech and movement is tightly restricted to a specific set of poses (Massumi 48–49). Parents in the physical world, for example, might allow a child to play for hours. The playing pose works for a child grid position, but if an adult were to play for hours on end, society might declare that person lazy or incompetent. The adult grid position does not allow for play in the same way that the opposite position does for a child. *Aegyo* stands in stark contrast to adult performances. As a grid position, *aegyo* stands in contrast to the adult, sexual behaviors within the world. Participants are carefully guided to the baby talk, the appropriate animations for displaying cuteness, and the areas in Second Life where such performances are welcome. By tightly controlling avatar poses, Second Life society ensures that anyone choosing to appear as a child avatar remains far from the sexual behavior child avatars were permitted to exhibit in the past.

Child avatars in today's Second Life rarely step outside of this cute boundary. Consider Mery: she skipped, giggled, snuggled with her mother, and used the expected vocabulary of a toddler for most of the conversation. Such a performance demonstrates the necessary *aegyo*, the childlike cuteness that essentially presents innocence. At one point, Mery asked permission from her “mother” to join the adult conversation. Mery was essentially asking for the ability to shift away from the cute performance she was maintaining. When released, Mery didn't use baby talk or smaller vocabulary words. Her pose shifted, rather like a marionette that suddenly came free of its strings. Parts of the earlier *aegyo* remained, such as her look and the fact that she remained seated in her mother's arms. The conversation topic and her ability to engage in the adult conversation, however, was

outside of what society would deem acceptable for a child. She swore, talked of sexual behaviors, and laughed at crude jokes. The shift was startling; as a spectator, I found myself wondering why I felt such discomfort when watching this performance. When Mery was finished with her story, she giggled, signaling a return to her original cute performance, and told her mother she wanted to be put to bed for a nap. In other words, Mery went back into her grid position, the one that matched the temporal image of her avatar body. My discomfort immediately eased. The temporal dissonance of the adult user making an appearance made it difficult for me to view the child avatar without suspicion, but the cute behavior, the *aegyo*, reinforced and settled my concerns.

Second Life society looks at child avatars as potentially dangerous performers because of the potential for age-play. In sexual situations, the child avatar is no longer in a pose society can approve, even though that avatar is in a child's grid position and exploring a potential available to that position. To keep that potential at bay, society presses specific limits of cuteness onto child avatars, tightly watching and controlling how they are allowed to appear to adult residents. Mery exhibits these poses: the giggling, the baby talk, the feigned innocence, and the animations designed to allow her avatar body to skip and play combine to restrict residents with child and adult avatars to specific behavior. In fact, the animations available for child avatars ensure that even their bodily movements are limited to a cycle of distinct images. Mery started by swaying from side to side, then stooped to wiggle her shoelace, then threw up her hands in the air with joy. These three animations cycled over and over again, giving the illusion that the child continually and perpetually performed *aegyo*. Just as her visual appearance remained the same, Mery's words and conversation style remained consistent. Her childlike posing included all aspects of her performance: the conversation, the motions, the style of dress, even the choice of her name. She returned again and again to those same poses to reinforce her cute performance. Given the nature and history of child avatars in Second Life, this performance also reinforces

what Ngai describes as cuteness's "way of sexualizing beings and simultaneously rendering them unthreatening" (72). Second Life society has moved these avatars, who could once engage in sexual behavior, toward a specific grid position, rendering them unthreatening with the cycle of poses available in that specific grid position.

To return to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter, when a virtual performance of childhood is not enacted by a physical-world child, society steps in to bind the performer's avatar to the grid position that requires appropriately cute behavior so that the symbolism of the avatar can only be read as "child." While this chapter uses Second Life as an example, I suggest that other virtual spaces similarly rely on aegyo-type behaviors to control the temporal dissonance surrounding adult users who take on the appearance of children. In graphic virtual worlds — such as IMVU, Kiteley, and the Open Grid — that allow users to mold the avatar body, child avatars remain potentials that must be regulated. Frameworks of cuteness, in these cases, give these communities a way to overcome the temporal dissonance between the adult user and the child avatar, confining the possible danger of the performance. Physical world habitus, while challenged by the virtual space, seeps into the virtual to smooth the temporal dissonance, leaving child avatars with but one way to perform: as cute, charming, and, always, potentially dangerous.

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# What's Cute Got To Do With It? Early Modern Proto-Cuteness in *King Lear*

James M. Cochran

In the past twenty years, the field of cute studies has grown extensively.<sup>1</sup> Cuteness, as we conceive of it, has its origins in the nineteenth century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *cute*, defined as “attractive, pretty, charming,” comes from “U.S. colloquial and Schoolboy slang,” with its earliest recorded usage in 1834. Despite the origins of cuteness in the nineteenth century, this chapter searches for earlier traces of cuteness — an early

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1 For example, much of cute scholarship has focused on Japanese culture and the concept of *kawaii* or cool, and particularly on the relationship among cuteness, animation, and sexuality. For example, in her 1999 chapter “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” Kanako Shiokawa uses a feminist lens to examine the gendered qualities of cuteness and the ways in which cuteness changes as gender stereotypes develop. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein’s 2011 book considers the similarities and intersections between Japanese *kawaii* and African American cool. Botz-Bornstein’s work is particularly useful because of his cross-cultural analysis of cuteness, which helps move the study of cute aesthetics beyond a Japanese context. Beyond cross-cultural treatments of cute aesthetics, some studies center more on the cute’s relation to power dynamics. For example, in her 1996 chapter “Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics,” Lori Merish argues that cuteness has a racial and class-based component and that cute aesthetics provides a means for subsuming the Other.



modern protocuteness — asking if earlier structures, systems, and concepts anticipate our contemporary definition of cuteness. Do Shakespeare's works, particularly *King Lear*, offer insight into a seventeenth-century ancestor of cuteness? Can Shakespeare speak to our contemporary cute age? Is Shakespeare ever cute? Drawing largely from Daniel Harris's 2000 book on aesthetics and consumerism, this chapter seeks to answer these questions by offering a critical investigation of the intersection between early modern culture and contemporary aesthetics.

For some early modern scholars, the notion of a cute *King Lear* might be troubling, and some critics might wonder what Shakespeare could possibly have to do with cuteness. Many critics, in fact, would quickly reject any "cute" approach to Shakespeare because his plays are tragic, fantastic, and sublime — but far from cute. As Doug Lanier observes, "*King Lear* is the Mount Everest of Shakespeare — often forbiddingly bleak and challenging, but for those who scale it, it offers an unparalleled vista on man's condition and its own form of rough beauty. More than any other Shakespeare play, *Lear* exemplifies what Immanuel Kant labeled the 'sublime,' by which he meant those objects that inspire an awe that simply dwarves us rather than charms." For many, an investigation of cuteness in the early modern period is too anachronistic. Shakespeare's world is full of bearbaiting, brothels, and beer; surely, this is a world devoid of cute objects. Initially, cuteness seems to have neither a place nor a predecessor in the early modern age. A critical investigation of cuteness takes a leap of faith, but once we start looking for it, we find glimpses of cuteness throughout the age.

Before transitioning to the central parts of this chapter, I will briefly offer one example of how the cute aesthetic lurks beneath the surface of Shakespeare's works. Let us consider dogs, creatures that are often contemporary cute figures.<sup>2</sup> Initially, Shakespeare's dogs seem far from cute: as an insult, *Lear* calls Oswald,

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2 For some contemporary cute depictions of dogs, see, for example, Chie Hayano's 2009 *Cute Dogs: Craft Your Own Pooches* and J.H. Lee's 2011 *Boo: The Life of the World's Cutest Dog*.

“you whoreson dog, you slave, you cur!” (4.75–76).<sup>3</sup> Lear cruelly casts Oswald as a worthless and contemptuous dog. Upon further investigation, however, we discover that dogs function beyond cruel insults, and perhaps, they demonstrate a distant link to contemporary cuteness.

One dog that offers a glimpse of cuteness is “Sweetheart.” Lear exclaims, “The little dogs and all, / Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart — see, they bark at me” (13.56–57). Marjorie Garber explains that Troy, Blanch, Sweetheart are likely “lapdogs or toy spaniels, then very much in fashion” (189). Lapdogs, Joyce Salisbury, explains, have their origins in the medieval period, continuing through the early modern period to today:

The original medieval pets in the purest sense — as non-working animals — were small dogs, lapdogs, for noble ladies [...]. What characteristics marked these lapdogs? As we have seen, the main characteristic of all domestic animals is pedomorphosis, that is, the retention of juvenile characteristics, both in body shape and in personality characteristics, such as whining and submissiveness. The most extreme example of the retention of juvenile traits comes in toy dogs: in addition to their small size, they have disproportionately broad heads, small limbs, large eyes, and smaller noses and mouths. All these are characteristics of human infants and thus evoke what the Nobel Prize-winning ethologist Konrad Lorenz defined as the “cute response.” Thus, toy dogs are not just juvenile; they are almost neonatal in appearance. In fact, people frequently see the small dogs as substitutes for children. (116)

Beginning in the late medieval period, noblewomen began to own what we now call “lapdogs.” Continuing into the early modern age, noblewomen owned lapdogs as pets. By linking the dogs, as neonatal figures (or what we would now call cute objects), to the feminine, we find earlier strands of the femininity

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3 All quotations from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* come from the *Oxford Shakespeare*.

often associated with cuteness.<sup>4</sup> The link between the neonatal and the feminine continues today with the alignment of cuteness and femininity. In Shakespeare's play, Lear shows affection toward Sweetheart, a dog that is small and serves as an object for Lear to possess. As a lapdog with an endearing name, Lear's Sweetheart demonstrates one historical predecessor to contemporary cuteness.<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare's Sweetheart is one example in which cuteness is not initially obvious and only becomes more evident after a close reading. However, the rest of this chapter considers the way that cuteness — or at least early modern protocuteness — plays out within the relationship between Lear and his daughters. Lear's desire to control his daughters correlates with what later, in the twentieth century, becomes the desire to control the cute object. From a cute perspective, then, Lear's desire to control his daughters — and consequently project cuteness onto them — stems from his own fears about his old age and his potential to become, himself, a cute object. This chapter identifies and traces two particular types of cuteness: one associated with infantilization and one associated with senility.

### Cuteness and Controlling Children

Because cuteness deals primarily with the childlike and the feminine, this chapter focuses most of its attention on Lear's treatment and conception of his daughters. Describing cuteness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lori Merish argues, "Cuteness stages a problematic of identification that centers on the child's body. This problematic involved anxieties

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4 I do not want to exaggerate the relationship between cuteness and early modern dogs. Certainly, lapdogs with their neonatal qualities and their relation to noblewomen speak to the contemporary alignment between dogs and cuteness, as well as cuteness and femininity. Yet, most dogs did not fare so well. Early modern authorities slaughtered dogs during plague outbreaks. See Mark S.R. Jenner.

5 Many have warned me that there is nothing cute about Shakespeare and especially not Lear. I thank my colleague Aaron Hatrick for pointing out that Shakespeare has a "Sweetheart" among his curs and mongrels.

about the cultural 'ownership' of the child [...] cuteness represents lines of interpersonal, intergenerational identification, promoting affective bonds of social affiliation and cohesion" (187–88). In her discussion about cuteness, cultural anxiety, and control over children's bodies, Merish explores mass immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Merish, the cute aesthetic provides an avenue through which white Anglo-Americans come to understand and integrate the "Other" into their society: "Specifically, cuteness engenders an affectional dynamic through which the Other is domesticated and (re)contextualized within the human 'family'" (188). Cuteness allows for and encourages the assimilation of the Other by integrating the child, as both cute object and possessed object, into the social and familial system. We cannot carry over these precise concerns and anxieties — about mass immigration — to our reading of protocuteness in *Lear* because of early modern England's very different circumstances and concerns, but we can still use Merish's observation about cute aesthetics and children's bodies to inform the following discussion about intergenerational control and stability.

Even beyond Merish's specific context, the cute aesthetic is concerned with the control of children. While Lear's daughters are not the age that children are when they are most often associated with cuteness, Shakespeare's *Lear* still deals with "lines of interpersonal, intergenerational identification" as well as "bonds of social affiliation and cohesion" (Merish 187). The majority of Lear's speeches look forward to the future of the kingdom, through his daughters' marriages and inheritance of the divided land. Lear recognizes the future marriage of Cordelia to one of the "two great princes, France and Burgundy — / Great rivals in [Cordelia's] love" (1.41–42). The intergenerational focus even exceeds Lear's immediate children; he looks forward to a continuing family legacy. Lear gives land not only to Gonoril<sup>6</sup> but also to her descendants:

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6 Following the *Oxford Shakespeare* edition of *King Lear*, I adopt the spelling "Gonoril." Some whom I quote use "Goneril"; I have retained their spelling.

Of all these bounds even from this line to this,  
 With shady forests and wide-skirted meads,  
 We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issue  
 Be this perpetual. (1.57–60)

The land becomes synonymous with Lear's legacy and the future descendants who will eventually, in Lear's vision, rule over the land. His gift of the land is a "perpetual" gift that will continue his family line. An interest in familial lineage is not necessarily part of the cute aesthetic, but it is this same concern about controlling children out of which the cute aesthetic later emerges.

Another way that Lear's opening speeches reinforce the emphasis on social cohesion is through his insistence that his daughters declare their love for him. In one sense, as we shall see, the need for his daughters' declarations of love is ridiculous, unnecessary, and unwise. Yet in another sense, such declarations of love serve to establish and reinforce the bonds between fathers and daughters, creating stability for the family and arguably even the nation. Lear demands order, and he specifically wants his daughters to submit to his commands and explicitly express their loyalty to him. Lear declares, "Tell me, my daughters, / Which of you shall say we doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where merit doth most challenge it?" (1.44–47). Later, Lear casts familial loyalty as an ethical duty: "Thou better know'st / The offices of nature, bond of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude" (7.334–36). Lear's daughters must profess their love for their father and submit to his commands. Lear's concerns about ownership and control over his daughters are different than the nineteenth- and twentieth-century social and racial concerns about owning and integrating immigrant bodies; even so, Lear's interest in controlling his daughters parallels the later impulse to control migrant children because, in both occurrences, conceiving of children as submissive and passive ensures familial stability and, consequently, social or national stability. Thus, relationships between Lear and his daughters serve as a starting point for this cute reading because, ultimately, the family is the unit that deploys

the cute aesthetic as a means of controlling and continuing the familial lineage.

Along with cuteness's interest in intergenerational and social bonds, a central force behind constructing cuteness is the desire for control and the construction of the ridiculous. Daniel Harris writes, "The process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are" (6). Often, the person in power subjects the cute object to a ridiculous situation, heightening the cute object's disempowered state. Harris offers the comical situation of Winnie the Pooh struggling to reach honey and getting stuck in a honey pot. While this modern situation is foreign to Shakespeare's world, the power relation between the subject and the cute object is not. At no point in the play does Lear get his head stuck in a honey pot, but his actions, such as his cruel treatment of his daughters, stand outside of rational behavior. Lear's actions are not ridiculous or ignorant in the same way as Pooh's, but as Lear acts cruelly and alienates those around him, his actions demonstrate his ignorance and, ultimately, his loss of power.

Even as Lear acts as the ridiculous, Pooh-like character, he forces others into disempowered situations. For example, Lear's demand that his daughters quantify their love for him demonstrates the tendency of individuals to force cute objects into ridiculous situations — though not into "honey pot" situations. Lear's love-test is unwise and unnecessary. G. Wilson Knight critiques Lear's demands: "The incident is profoundly comic and profoundly pathetic. [...] Lear is selfish, self-centered. The images he creates of his three daughters' love are quite false, sentimentalized: he understands the nature of none of his children, and demand[s] an impossible love from all three" (117). Similarly, Noel Hess recognizes the scene's ridiculousness: "Regan, Goneril and Cordelia are subjected to a ritual public humiliation whereby, in order to gain their inheritance, they must openly compete with each other for their father's love and state that their devotion to him is unlimited and unequalled" (210). Whether we adopt Knight's description of "profoundly pathetic"

or Hess's description of "public humiliation," the ritual is, at its core, ridiculous.

### Anti-Cute Daughters

Lear wants to be able to control his daughters and have them submit to his authority. Yet he finds that they exist beyond his control. For Lear, his daughters move from the realm of control, or what we might now call the realm of the cute, to what Harris terms the anti-cute, an aesthetic closely tied to the perverse and monstrous. This perverse cuteness represents the child as the "vehicle of diabolical powers from the Great Beyond, which have appropriated the tiny, disobedient bodies of our elfish changelings as instruments for their assaults on the stability of family life" (Harris 17). Similarly, Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska describes the fragility of the boundary between cute and anti-cute: "The fascinating metamorphosis of cute into anti-cute reflects the above-mentioned circularity of the cute concept — for when cute acquires wicked features it in fact goes to the excess of cuteness, exploiting and parodying the sweetness to its very limits, poisoning itself while retaining the artificially lovable texture. Cute becomes grotesque" (219–20). In this manner, the cute is gentle, inviting the viewer's sympathy, but the cute object's gentleness easily transforms into the monstrous, threatening the viewer.

Unable to control his daughters, Lear constructs them as anti-cute offspring who threaten stability and order. The cute easily gives way to the perverse and monstrous. The first to upset Lear is Cordelia, and Lear casts her away and disinherits her because he sees her actions as, in the words of the King of France, "so monstrous" (1.207). Later in the play, Lear casts Gonoril as a "marble-hearted fiend, / More hideous when thou show'st thee in in a child / Than the sea-monster — detested kite, thou liest" (4.251–53). Not only does Lear consider Gonoril a "sea-monster," he exclaims that she is "serpent-like," aligning her with the devil and, more broadly, evil (7.317).

Additionally, the anti-cute body is one that rejects normative reproduction. In her queer reading of Chucky, a contemporary

anti-cute figure, Judith Halberstam writes that the *Child's Play* movie series that features him “offers a critique of the human, exposes the relations between human and normative gendering and reproduction, and offers an alternative formulation of embodiment, desire, and identity” (147). Expanding on Halberstam’s analysis of Chucky, I suggest that the anti-cute rejects normative modes of reproduction, even “altering” reproduction into something that is unrecognizable as reproduction. For example, in Shakespeare’s play, Lear envisions a normative reproductive line, one in which his daughters marry, inherit his land, and eventually give that land to their children. Yet Lear’s normative vision quickly dissolves after he discovers that he does not have power and control over his daughters. Instead, in Lear’s view, his daughters have a dangerous and monstrous procreative power. Criticizing Gonoril, he announces:

Thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter —  
Or rather a disease that lies within my flesh,  
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,  
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle  
In my corrupted blood. (7.378–82)

Gonoril is no longer Lear’s daughter but a disease or infection in his “corrupted blood.” As Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard argue, “Goneril is figured not as Lear’s offspring but his ‘inspring’: like a disease, the bad daughter is presented as flesh that has mutinied from within. She is both one with the subject (‘And yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter’) and an invasive foreign body (‘Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh’)” (159). Gonoril, as the anti-cute object, becomes a diseased body, potentially infecting Lear, corrupting rather than continuing his bloodline. The anti-cute dissolves the procreative line, transforming it into a disease.

What is significant about the shift in Lear’s daughters from loving to monstrous is that the sudden change reinforces the flexible boundary between the contemporary cute and anti-cute. The body that seems cute might actually harbor the mon-



strous, anti-cute body. The contemporary cute body, with its often big eyes and stubby limbs, also carries the threat of breaking into the anti-cute. Many of the insults directed toward the daughters disrupt any stable boundaries that separate cute and anti-cute, loving and hateful, and feminine and monstrous. For example, Albany critiques and condemns Gonoril's false appearance: "See thyself, devil. / Proper deformity shows not in the fiend / So horrid as in woman" (16.57–59). He continues, "Thou changed and self-covered thing, for shame / Bemonster not thy feature" and "Thou art a fiend, / A woman's shape doth shield thee" (16.61–62, 16.65–66). On the surface, Gonoril has "a woman's shape," but Albany accuses her of being a "self-covered thing," who hides a sinister, even demonic, interiority. Similarly, Lear sees his daughters as "women all above" but "down from the waist / [...] centaurs" (20.119–20). In the same way that the boundary between the cute and anti-cute is fragile and shifting, the boundary between "women" and "centaurs" is ambiguous.

With the fluid and fragile boundary between cute and anti-cute, it is not surprising that, in the opening scene, Lear sees Cordelia as monstrous but, in the final scene, wants to remain with Cordelia and "laugh / At gilded butterflies" (24.13). Throughout the play, Cordelia asserts her own authority, acting outside of Lear's control; she is arguably far from cute. Yet in comparison to her sisters, Cordelia is a better representation of a cute figure. In fact, in his 1888 artistic representation of Cordelia, William Frederick Yeames seems to pick up on Cordelia's charm. Yeames presents Cordelia with rounded features and big eyes, a rendering that, while not as extreme, almost anticipates contemporary cute objects whose eyes seem to overrun their faces.

Perhaps our perception of Cordelia as the cute daughter stems from the play's tragedy. The cute object is one that is controlled and contained, and by the play's ending, Cordelia is contained and "controlled" by death. Even Lear's lamentation about Cordelia's death constructs her as a cute object as he relies on a conception of the feminine as gentle, quiet, and passive. As Cordelia dies, her father reflects, "Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and

low, an excellent thing in women” (24.268–69). Although Lear’s lamentation predates the emergence of a cultural concept of the cute, the feminine ideals of softness and gentleness point to later cute aesthetics’ celebration of docility and gentleness, features that I will later discuss when examining Lear’s old age.

### The Cuteness of Old Age

Lear conceives of his daughters as cute objects primarily because he attempts to contain them, but control is not the only motive. Generally, children are the targets of cuteness, but the elderly, too, have become cute objects. Lear’s projection of cuteness, then, stems from anxieties about old age. Before turning to the relation between Lear’s old age and our reading of him as a cute object, we should briefly examine how critics and the play itself conceive of Lear’s old age. One such critic is Hess, who, in his 1987 study, reads Lear — and contemporary elderly people — as having anxiety regarding helplessness and abandonment:

Through the character of King Lear, therefore, Shakespeare has allowed us valuable insight into some of the crucial unconscious processes of ageing: not only that ageing is experienced as a narcissistic injury but that it contains the threat of helplessness, dependency, and loneliness, which is often defended against by a tyrannical control of the elderly person’s world and his objects. (211)

Hess argues that *Lear* accurately depicts the emotional difficulties of aging in which elderly patients act tyrannically in an attempt to maintain power and control. More recently, in his 2012 book on old age in the early modern period, Christopher Martin argues that *Lear* navigates fears about dependency and the public “performance” of old age. According to Martin, “Lear’s fateful resignation of power marks neither the old king’s self-destructive vanity nor his senile dotage, but a radical (though abortive) effort to synthesize constitutional self-perception with the generationally conditioned designs of youth” (27). In this

view, the younger generation expects Lear to perform his old age through his resignation, ensuring the legitimate transfer of power to that generation. As I will show, Hess's claim about power and anxiety about ageing and Martin's claim about the performance of old age inform a "cute" reading of Lear because cuteness is both performed and projected as a means for control over the cute object.

Critics are not the only ones who point to the play's emphasis on Lear's age; within the play, several characters draw attention to Lear's aging mind and body. Gonoril and Regan often discuss Lear's age and the problems that have emerged as a result of it. For example, Gonoril announces, "You see how full of changes his age is [...] with what poor judgment he / hath now cast her [Cordelia] off appears too gross" (1.278, 1.280–81). Regan responds, "Tis the infirmity of his age" and expects frequent "unconstant starts" (1.283, 1.289). Lear's old age becomes a central cause of his actions and a key feature of the identity he and others create.

From a cute perspective, Lear's anxiety about old age, and his performance of it, anticipates the contemporary construction of the elderly as cute. Lear's projection of cuteness onto others is the result of fear about his own potential to be regarded as a cute object — and perhaps, his fear speaks to a reality in which his daughters infantilize him, similar to the contemporary construction of the elderly as cute objects. In her recent analysis of elderly care, Karen Hitchcock reflects,

At every morning handover in every hospital in Australia, a registrar will report admitting an elderly patient — perhaps a 92-year-old who fell taking out the garbage — and say, "He's so cute" or "She's so adorable." As if the patient were a baby or a kitten. This doesn't seem so terrible. It is not meant to be cruel or disparaging. But what does it tell us about the way we view the elderly?

If you are old and in the hospital, you can be one of three things: cute, difficult, or mute. If you want people to be nice to you, I'd recommend cute. It's easy to be cute: just say some-

thing any normal human might say. Because you are ancient, it will be interpreted as cute.

Throughout the play, Lear is the “difficult” elderly person, one who is emotionally unstable and even mad at times, but toward the play’s closing he becomes Hitchcock’s “cute” figure. Like Hitchcock’s ninety-two-year-old patient who is cute and childlike when he or she falls, Lear is described as if he were a baby. Cordelia laments that her father is now “child-changed” (21.14). Earlier in the play, Gonoril voices the proverb, “Old fool are babes again” (4.19). Vincent F. Petronella observes a similar inverse relationship between old age and infantile behavior. According to Petronella, Lear, the ideal image of an aged monarch is one who maintains a stable and secure family, but Lear’s infantile actions cause him to fall short of this ideal. Lear loses political, social, and familial power by regressing to “childhood games (bo-peep and handy-dandy), and [...] *Jack the Giant Killer*, invoked in Poor Tom’s ‘Child Rowland to the dark tower came’ (3.4.182). Lear returns to the nursery, so to speak” (44). Shakespeare, without access to the contemporary concept of cuteness, infantilizes Lear as a result of his old age.

What we might now read as Lear’s fear of being constructed as a cute object is rooted in an anxiety about power, specifically his fear of losing control and power. While his actions and speeches often demonstrate cruelty, his fears about control stem from a legitimate concern. Throughout the play, Lear’s daughters, the Fool, and others connect Lear’s old age to his declining stability. As I previously mentioned, in the first scene, Regan reflects, “’Tis the infirmity of his old age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself” (1.282–83). Gonoril responds that Lear had been rash before old age, and she predicts that his elderly state will worsen his rashness: “The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then we must look to receive from his age but alone the imperfection of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them” (1.284–88). In his daughters’ view Lear had already been mentally instable, both

“rash” and “wayward,” and his old age will only hasten his condition.

Not only do characters comment on Lear’s old age and his declining mental and emotional stability, they also reflect on Lear’s potential and actual loss of power. Regan declares,

O sir, you are old  
 Nature in you stands on the very verge  
 Of her confine. You should be ruled and led  
 By some discretion that discerns your state  
 Better than you yourself. (7.303–7)

At this point, Regan has little patience for Lear and his rowdy army. According to Regan, Lear’s old age suggests his inability to make sound and smart political decisions; he needs someone else to take care of and decide what is best for him.

Similarly, the Fool often comments on Lear’s increasing lack of actual power. Responding to Lear’s question about the Fool’s sudden singing, the Fool comments, “I have used it, nuncle, ever since thou madest thy daughters thy mother; for when thou gavest them the rod and puttdest down thine own breeches” (4.163–65). Scott F. Crider describes the reversal of power in terms of sin and redemption, but his observation still illuminates a cute reading of *Lear*: “Goneril and Regan treat their father like a child, then even like an animal. The violated bond in the family leads to psychological and political tyranny, which itself leads to self-consuming savagery” (139). In both their speeches and their actions, Lear’s daughters and the Fool reinforce Lear’s new position as one who should be controlled and led rather than one who should rule and command. In public perception and arguably in reality, Lear, as elderly and thus potential cute object, shifts from a position of power and control to one of powerlessness in which he becomes “like a child” or “even [...] an animal.”

Toward the end of the play, Lear’s docile state reinforces his potential as a cute object. Harris argues that “cuteness is [...] the aesthetic of sleep[,...] the pose we find cutest of all is not that of a rambunctious infant screaming at the top of his lungs but that of

the docile sleepyhead [...]. The world of cute things is transfixed by the spell of the sandman, full of napping lotus eaters whose chief attraction lies in their dormant and languorous postures, their defenseless immobility" (7). We find children especially cute when they are sleeping rather than running around. Similarly, in the play, Lear's docile state of sleep corresponds with his general powerlessness. Before falling asleep in the storm, Lear predicts the loss of power that coincides with his sleeping state, questioning his self-identity and power. He wonders,

Doth any here know me? Why, this is not Lear.  
 Doth Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?  
 Either his notion weakens, or his discernings  
 Are lethargied. Sleeping or waking, ha?  
 Sure, 'tis not so.  
 Who is it that can tell me who I am? (4.217–22).

Lear's confusion regarding his state of "sleeping or waking" foreshadows the later moment when he falls asleep during the storm. Even these six lines demonstrate how power and knowledge are connected to each other. In his lethargic state, anticipating his later sleep, Lear loses the power to discern between reality and illusion. He is unable to determine whether he is sleeping or awake, whether he is known by others or unknown, whether he is Lear or not Lear. He lacks the power to fulfill his role as king because he is not even certain that he is King Lear. The image of the docile and confused Lear reinforces our conception of him as a monarch who lacks control and power.

Lear's confused and docile state echoes the inversion of power that the Fool describes earlier. Asleep, Lear has become a child: Lear is "child-changed" (21.14). No longer a powerful father figure, Lear becomes a child dependent on the help of others. Lear, asleep, is carried offstage to Dover. Shortly after this moment, the first gentleman explains, "In the heaviness of his sleep / We put fresh garments on him" (21.19–20). Lear becomes like a child who is dependent on others for "fresh garments."

Foppery, too, is a likely predecessor of cuteness. Today, cute humans and animals are often those that stumble or move in a way that demonstrates a lack of bodily control or balance. We might think of the clumsy Bambi, stumbling on ice. The central difference between stumbling babies or Bambi and the foolish Lear is one of bodily action versus mental state. Lear's problem is not necessarily balance or bodily control but a foolish intellectual life. Yet stumbling actions and foolish thoughts both suggest a lack of control — whether bodily or mental — that is common to children. In addition to Lear's loss of bodily control, he demonstrates a loss of mental control as he falls asleep and becomes childlike. He cries, "Pray do not mock. I am a very foolish, fond old man" (21.57–58). Shortly after, Lear asks Cordelia to "forget and forgive" because, he says, "I am old / And foolish" (21.82–83). Lear's foolishness draws attention to his lack of "sense or judgement" ("Fool," def. 1). By his own admission, Lear is like the contemporary cute object who is a bodily being with a lack of intellectual life.

Moreover, Lear's self-recognition as a "foolish, fond old man" establishes himself as one who is to be pitied. As a "foolish, fond old man," Lear recognizes and asserts his own insignificance as someone in a powerless position. Additionally, Cordelia refers to Lear as "poor," whether as a "poor *perdu*" or a "poor father" (21.33, 21.36). "Poor" literally describes Lear's loss of control — his state of near-complete destitution and dependence on others — but "poor" also describes "that [which] provokes sympathy, or compassion; that [which] is to be pitied; unfortunate, wretched, hapless." ("Fool," def. 5). Thus, Lear becomes the cute object he had feared as he comes to recognize his own foolishness and insignificance by the end of the play.

From a cute perspective, the play's closing is the moment at which Cordelia's cuteness and Lear's cuteness collide: death ultimately marks both the young, feminine Cordelia and the old, masculine Lear as docile or contained. As mentioned previously, docility and containment are central to the cute aesthetic; death, then, is the ultimate instantiation of the features common to the cute aesthetic. As the play ends, Cordelia and Lear are docile,

contained and controlled by death. Part of *King Lear's* tragedy is that no matter how we construct others or ourselves, death will contain and consume us all.

### Cute Conclusions and Contemporary Cute *King Lear*

What does a cute reading of *King Lear* mean for the future of early modern studies? My intention throughout this chapter has been clear: to consider the early modern structures and relationships that speak to our contemporary understanding of cuteness, but not to force cuteness onto *King Lear*. I want to reiterate that cuteness as we know it did not exist in the early modern period, and thus Shakespeare's works are, in a strict sense, far from cute. Yet early modern literature offers us structures, systems, and moments that speak to the contemporary cute aesthetic. Exploring the intersection of cuteness and early modern studies can mean searching for ancestors of contemporary cuteness in early modern studies or examining the similarities between early modern concepts and structures and contemporary cuteness.

Thinking through Shakespeare's play from a cute lens draws attention to the politics of containment at play throughout the tragedy. Lear constantly attempts to control and contain his daughters, even as they burst outside of his constructions of them. Additionally, a cute reading notices how Lear desperately attempts to control others in response to his own loss of power. Finally, the tragedy of *King Lear*, that of Cordelia and Lear dying, offers a new way for us to conceive of death. As we attempt to contain and control others — through cute aesthetics or other political and cultural means — death stands as a constant threat because it will ultimately contain us. The cute aesthetic is one of many ways in which we fleetingly grasp and maintain power.

A cute approach to *King Lear* speaks to contemporary performances of the play as well. As has been stated throughout this chapter, early modern audiences did not walk away from *King Lear* thinking about how cute the characters were, how some characters resisted cuteness, or how some became cute while desperately projecting cuteness on others. But more recent



performances have been fairly cute. For example, in 2015, the Courtyard Theatre in London performed *King Lear with Sheep*, a play with one human actor and a cast of nine sheep. Surely this play was cute but also, at times, chaotic, when the sheep did not perform with the discipline of human actors. How might we make sense of a cute, sheep-filled adaptation of *King Lear*? One answer is that Shakespeare's play is cuter than we have realized. Shakespeare's play contains the very structures and systems upon which the aesthetics of cuteness later forms. Given the early modern play's interest in the family unit, gender relations, control, and power, we should not be surprised by performances of *King Lear with Sheep* because the adaptation, with its sheep as both cute animals and actors, makes explicit the play's concerns about power and control that I have here teased out as concerns related to the cute aesthetic.

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# *Hamlet, Hesperides, and the Discursivity of Cuteness*

Kara Watts

Using aesthetics alongside affect theory and queer philology, this chapter interrogates the ability of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1604) and Robert Herrick's *Hesperides* (1648) to endure and broaden the scope of what Sianne Ngai, Lori Merish, Daniel Harris, and others have theorized as the cute. Ngai, in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), explains the cute as a contemporary and commodity-driven category, an aesthetic that discloses a "surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities" (1). To consider the cute, then, is to consider our documented fascination with the private, the relations of subjects and objects, and the power dynamics between the appreciator and the appreciated, adorer and adored. Even so, I suggest we think otherwise. What if we think about the cute less as an aesthetic response to commodity, per se, than a discursivity? Cuteness is an aesthetic category that relies on a spectrum of appreciation, from disinterested nonreaction (think, for example, of the inundation of "cute" things to respond to on websites like BuzzFeed or Reddit) to a heightened affective experience of an object or artwork, one more closely related to classic Kantian or Burkean experiences of beauty. But aesthetic experience demands a commodity-driven, consumptive closeness that Theodor W. Adorno finds goes beyond object relations to fuel our relationships to texts.

In “Lyric Poetry and Society,” Adorno purposefully points to poems that depart from the genre’s more common “delight in things close at hand” in order to resist the bourgeois subject’s desire to “reduce [these texts] to objects of fondling” (51). Aesthetic experience becomes, then, not only a sensuous or haptic relationship to objects, but to texts, discourse, or language. We may then say that the cute is a puzzling aesthetic state, based in “an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for ‘small things’” (Ngai 3). Cuteness’s willingness to be provoked, fondled, entertained — its “tenderness” — suggests to me its openness to theory. Cuteness can open an intricate dialogue that destabilizes the basic dichotomies of power and disempowerment, subject and object, and simplicity and complexity. To examine early modern texts’ rhetorics of cuteness, then, will provocatively encourage reflection on our current obsessions with the cute and other contemporary aesthetic categories.

When we reorient the cute from its commodity drives and instead toward discourse itself, we may find key texts from the English Renaissance and early Restoration to be rich theoretical exercises in what we think we recognize as cuteness. I’d argue that in the English Renaissance, a tone or mode of preciousness appears in texts that historically predate our twentieth- and twenty-first-century thing-centered notion of the cute. Shakespeare’s title figure, Hamlet, voices a “manic cuteness,” and Herrick’s manipulative authorial persona in *Hesperides* indicates the cutely cunning ways in which the reader can have an aesthetic experience with the book at hand. Drawing on the possibilities opened by minor or alternative affective and aesthetic categories, and renewed interest in subjects and objects in Renaissance culture, I’d like to examine how the cute is productively deployed in *Hamlet* and *Hesperides* through these texts’ discourses of the little and the cherished, exposing early modern obsessions with disempowerment, language as object, and audiences’ relationships to text itself. To begin here, then, is to begin on a wide-

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1 It is anachronistic to investigate the “cute” in a seventeenth-century context when the term had not yet been coined in its modern sense and did not en-

ranging scale beyond commodity relations: What does it mean to rely on language's preciousness, to depend on an evacuation of profundity or power? Can we consider cuteness a particular discursive disorder, when it is released from historicist etymology and into a broader philological genealogy of aesthetic engagement?

With these questions in mind, I first examine the cute's appearance within the pinnacle of revenge tragedy, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, through a reading of Hamlet's "antic" discursive practice of self belittling, exchanges that are undercut with eroticism and violence. The play invests its interest in childishness, femininity, and ultimately power, as discourse objects. Hamlet's feigned madness, or "antic disposition," is the most apparent spectacle of cuteness. As Hamlet assigns himself the role of dominated object, he places himself physically and semantically into powerless positions. Take, for instance, his first noted appearance in the play after putting "an antic disposition on" (1.5.192). Ophelia

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ter popular use until the early twentieth century. While, of course, we ought not to abandon historicization entirely, we ought to "historicize differently" when it comes to aesthetics and, specifically, categories of aesthetic experience. As Ngai explains, "To restrict the analysis of [aesthetic categories] to a single artifact, or even to a cluster of artifacts produced in a thin slice of time, would be to immediately cut off a proper analysis of their meaning as aesthetic categories, which is to say objects widely distributed across what most literary and cultural scholars would consider culturally heterogeneous areas of time and space" (17). To examine vernacular styles "not only permits but in a certain sense requires relating artifacts that prevailing, period-based methods of doing cultural history discourage us from considering together" (17). Moreover, doing so in this context permits a wider reading and theoretical focus than a strictly historical study would allow, an approach that picks up on recent interest in time's anachronisms, as iterated by Jonathan Gil Harris. Harris explains that the "vice-like grip that a certain kind of historicism continues to have on scholarship in the field" is challenged by revised impulses to separate "now" from "then," a new embrace of anachronism's "temporal distance and difference." Harris reads Frederic Jameson's famous imperative to "always historicize" as also suggesting that "historicism needs to do more than simply read synchronically or diachronically; it also needs to consider how its objects are anachronistic assemblages that are temporally out of joint with themselves and their moment," a timely "out-of-timeness" that resonates deeply with *Hamlet*'s own disjointedness.

tells her father of an odd encounter, when Hamlet appears to her:

...with his doublet all unbraced,  
 No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,  
 Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,  
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,  
 And with a look so piteous in purport... (2.1.87–92)

Hamlet has clearly put work into his disordered appearance — his clothes are askew or missing, much like a child attempting to clothe himself. Ophelia seems therefore to be observing Hamlet as cutely childish in his disarray. Grounding the pathetic helplessness in this description are Hamlet's "fouled" stockings, a possibly scatological detail about which Will Stockton wonders, "Has Hamlet dragged his stockings on the ground, or just perhaps, has Hamlet soiled himself?" (x).<sup>2</sup> With such echoes of infantilism, Hamlet seems to be a diminutive and powerless object. But the cute, as we know, cannot sustain such stable relations. Ophelia — whose innocent girlishness should, we assume, render *her* the cute party in this exchange — calls Hamlet "piteous," and repeats the sentiment as she recounts that Hamlet "raised a sigh so piteous and profound" (2.1.106). The play's logic of "know[ing] not 'seems'" (1.2.77) allows us to read Hamlet's apparently pathetic display of disorder as a disruptive display of power. Ophelia explains that as the unkempt Hamlet departed, he kept his eyes set on her, going "out o' doors he went without their helps," while his gaze "to the last bended their light on me" (2.1.111–12). This final gesture overturns the expectation that Hamlet is indeed piteous — while he appears pathetically disheveled, his intense final gaze places him as the active mem-

2 Hamlet's "regression" to the anal stage of development — a stage that, according to Freud, is associated with disciplines of organization, cleanliness, and self-control — seems feasible if the line is read within the discourse of psychoanalysis. While the soiled stockings will prove critical later in my analysis, my reading of the scene for now will move away from psychoanalysis to better examine its most immediate dynamics of "cute" power.

ber of the exchange, asking to be looked upon. Ophelia quickly turns from the observer/adorer to the observed/adored — a reminder both that Hamlet's disorder (and Ophelia as love object) remains under his control, and that cuteness tends to upend and dishevel expected subject/object relationships.

The cute in *Hamlet* gains further complexity as Hamlet's childlike antics, particularly with Ophelia, are clearly not all as innocent as childish soiled stockings and gazes. Cuteness closely abuts the erotic. During the staging of "The Murder of Gonzago," Hamlet slings sexual taunts at Ophelia, including asking, "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?" (3.2.119). Hamlet's cute childishness makes visible the erotic charge of the lap, one that lies between maternal and sexual affections. Merish explores a similar collusion in child star Shirley Temple's films, as her construction as innocent required "not so much the absence of sexuality as its active disavowal" (195).<sup>3</sup> The sexuality of the cute meets the innocence of the cute in a highly charged scene. Merish argues that "staging cuteness as a mini-seduction met not by sexual violence or assault, but by protective care [...] reinforce[s] a primary mythology of patriarchal 'civilization'" (195). Moreover, Hamlet chooses to sit with Ophelia after a direct invitation to sit with his mother: "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me," Gertrude implores (3.2.115). Hamlet refuses as he takes up a place near Ophelia. Replacing a childlike cuddle in his mother's lap with the sexual request to "lie in [Ophelia's] lap" (3.2.119), Hamlet disavows an incestuous desire for the mother figure while simultaneously posing Ophelia as a maternal counterpoint to his "inert" cute childishness. Again, his madness skews childish, as he refers to "merry-making," "hobby horses," and

3 Films such as *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1936) and *Dimples* (1936) skirt the ideas of incest and pedophilia, particularly with Shirley's characters and their fathers. A scene in *Poor Little Rich Girl* finds Shirley singing of her desire to marry her fictional father as she cuddles in his lap, courting spectators' desires by charming and disarming the adult men in her films. This scene, of course, is inverted in *Hamlet* — a cutely antic Hamlet ends up staging a potentially threatening sexual advance in front of Ophelia's father, assaulting the purity that has been a frequent subject within the play.



puppetry, all with erotic overtones. Hamlet's cunning cuteness often relies on imagery of cutting or keenness—literalizing *cute's* etymological base in *acute*, a wit or intelligence. Consider this exchange from the same scene:

HAMLET: I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying.

OPHELIA: You are keen, my lord, you are keen.

HAMLET: It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge.

OPHELIA: Still better and worse. (3.2.270–75)

Hamlet's reliance on the figures of "keenness" and "edge," and Ophelia's equivocal response "better and worse," indicates a gradient of sharpness. In obvious sexual innuendo, Hamlet invites Ophelia to take his discursive "edge." This echoes the language of sharpness begun with Hamlet's first lines in the play, spoken in response to Claudius's reference to Hamlet as his son. Hamlet responds with a volumetric and punning "little more" and "little less": "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.67).

Hamlet, I argue, can therefore be established as a cutely antic figure as he puts on cuteness for purposes of power. Yet to what extent does cuteness put him on? I'd like to press this further, to examine what a cute Hamlet changes about our theoretical understanding of cuteness as a distinct aesthetic. In a realm reliant on the machination of subject and object, activity and passivity, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cuteness begins to erode binary categories in a mode that echoes Lee Edelman's urgings to review binarisms that place in opposition "a valued activity and a derogated passivity, in a way that is ultimately tied to the formation and articulation of the subject in culture" (Masten, "Fundament" 135). Jeffrey Masten explains the "modern regime" as one in which the "civic authority of subject status" is "purchased through the projective refusal of the luxurious 'passivity,' [...] that signifies the erotic indulgence of the self that always threatens to undo the 'self'" (135). If we accept Hamlet "being cute," we may entertain the modern gloss on "being cute" as being a smart-ass. The term *smart-ass*, likely unknown to the Renais-

sance, nonetheless opens the discourse of the cute in *Hamlet* by returning us to Hamlet's soiled stockings in Act II.<sup>4</sup> Rather than connecting them to a Freudian or Lacanian anal stage, Masten returns to the anal in Renaissance culture to the foundation or fundament, a rhetoric that "may participate in the rhetoric of the low," yet is a "lowliness with a positive valence — the foundational is hardly a negative rhetoric in this culture" but is rather connected to a depth, grounding, or profundity (134). John Florio's translation of the Italian *fondatamente*, Masten notes, takes its meaning from this constellation of terms, thereby aiding a rethinking of what we call the anus and its connections to seats of power and seats of "privately owned subjectivity" (135). Resisting binarism of high and low then lies in "a strangely active-passive position: It is the ground but also the groundwork; the seat but also the offspring; the founding and the foundation" (135). This becomes an ascribed "queer cuteness," of sorts, which continually jeopardizes active/passive binaries.

This kind of cuteness opens us to queer philology. Masten explains this philology as an etymological mode that releases us from backward-looking history, as it "forces us to develop ever-expanding lexicons of erotic and affective terms and their relations" ("Toward" 374). Queer philology "considers vocabularies of sexuality, desire, affect, and kinship as points of contact that draw surprising connections between past and present and defamiliarize seemingly transhistorical affective lexicons" (Nicolazzo 206). Instead of focusing temporally on when certain terms

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4 While this exact phrase was not known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is not unconscionable that the idea of it was present. James M. Bromley, writing on anilingus in "Rimming the Renaissance," a chapter in the collection *Sex before Sex*, explains that Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) suggests Subtle directing Face to the backside of his body, "with the command to lick," a "barb akin to the modern 'kiss my ass.'" Bromley's chapter therefore supports the ahistoricizing I suggest here, with the purpose of asking what work these sexualized references do in "gesturing toward alternate organizations of bodies, pleasures, and subjectivities even in contexts that load them with negative affect." His anachronism is "productive in linking early modern and modern interruptions in the abstraction of sexual identities from sexual practices" (171).

appear or develop, queer philology asks about relationships of terms and their networks. This stresses some of Ngai's registers of the cute, and opens some intriguing avenues. To speak of the cute draws attention not only to the cute in itself, but to the way in which we speak about the cute. Those who are judging objects or persons as cute are often "cute" themselves, and echo the coos and babble of the cute object — putting on a passivity that the speech means to recognize passivity in an other. As Ngai observes, cuteness then calls attention to the "centrality of discourse (its compulsive use by aesthetic subjects to publicize or share their feelings) to aesthetic judgment in general" (60). Cuteness productively and uniquely embeds the kind of philological kinship between speaker and spoken, subject and object, that philology itself theorizes. Drawing on philological kinship systems further in theorizing the cute, I return to Masten's reference to Florio. Florio's work is especially useful in inquiring about the queer philology of the cute, since the multiple ways in which he translates the Italian *acuto* marks a revealing range of the term's meanings. Synonyms that echo contemporary senses of the term appear — "sharpe pointed, keene, subtill, wittie, politike, wilie, warie, ingenious" — but then Florio adds, "Also a pin or peg of wood" (33). Not only does this corroborate the keenness, wiliness, and political edge of acute that surfaces in my reading of cuteness and Hamlet's wit, but also the secondary, physical meaning of *acuto* — a pin or peg.

A much-discussed passage of *Hamlet* of course revolves around a particular peg, the "bunghole" that gathers up the play's dynamic attentions to bodily waste, dirt, and erotics and has clear resonance with penetrative erotic acts.<sup>5</sup> In the grave-digging scene, Hamlet contemplates the mortality of Yorick, his childhood jester, and then remarks to Horatio:

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5 I use the term *erotic acts* here rather than intercourse largely to accommodate the historical differences between our concept of intercourse and that of the Renaissance. A product of discourse, as Foucault has noted, sex could refer to any number of acts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from chin chucking to anilingus to sex with trees or plants. For a full examination of this subject, see *Sex before Sex*, as mentioned in note 4.

To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander til he find it stopping a bunghole? [...] and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel? (5.1.209–19)

The bunghole is, in fact, literally dirty, being made of “dust” or “loam.” Yet more figuratively, the act of plugging or “stopping” holes makes the act of vaginal or anal intercourse both “dirty” acts, conflating the licit and illicit as the era’s definitions of permissible erotic acts were in continual flux. Confusions continue in the very etymology of *bunghole*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains its etymology from Dutch (*bonghe*) and German (*punt*, *punte*), with similar adoption in French as *bonde*. All of these terms, however, have been theorized to stem from the Latin *puncta*, or hole, a word that shifts its referent between both the hole of the barrel and its stopper. As early as the sixteenth century, its meaning transfers to the slang usage of *bunghole* as anus. As discourses of the vaginal and anal begin to conflate in the active/passive binaries of the cute or acute, shifting both literal and figural positions of parties involved in the erotic act, so too do the referents begin to lose their precision in the etymology of the word *bunghole* itself. Richard Halpern’s explanation of sodomy as something that cannot be represented, constituting “a kind of empty hole in discourse, about which nothing directly *can* be said,” dredges up an image of holes and emptiness that echoes the physical imagery of Hamlet’s “peg” and “bunghole” in this erotic-yet-also-discursive sense (Halpern). A hole in discourse, empty and unspeakable, is precisely what the cute relies on, as cuteness evacuates language’s profundity and reduces it to coos.

Consider Hamlet’s discourse, which “speak[s] daggers” (3.2.429), yet also speaks passive softness. Hamlet’s soliloquies frequently utilize languages of sleep, melting, and immobility that paint Hamlet himself as disabled and innocuous. Feigning insanity, Hamlet manages a conversation with Polonius that is equally soft and acute in Act III, when Polonius appears to beckon Hamlet to speak with his mother, Gertrude. Ham-

let, however, will have none of Polonius's manipulative duplicity, and makes his own demands in turn. "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?" (3.2.406), Hamlet asks, only to then declare, "Methinks it is a weasel," and finally, "like a whale" (3.2.409, 411). Not only does he wrest control of the conversation by redirecting Polonius's attention to cloud gazing, Hamlet also controls what Polonius finds he is seeing as he appeases Hamlet's caprice. The soft and innocuous clouds become a tool for Hamlet's manipulations. Hamlet does not only achieve this manipulation with others onstage but with us as well, as images of his body and will accumulate as injured, melted, or malformed. In his first soliloquy, he muses, "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew" (1.2.133–34). The images of the line bring in proximity the image of melting flesh — a grotesque thought — and the "cuteness" of the malleable, liquefiable, vulnerable body. Later, in 2.2, another soliloquy places Hamlet and his own body again as vulnerable: "what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (2.2.577), he cries, a "dull and muddy-mettled rascal" (2.2.594) who is beardless, feminine, childlike, and "pigeon-livered" (2.2.604). And, in 3.1, his soliloquy invites "sleep," a sleep "to say we end / The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to — 'tis a consummation / devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep — / To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub" (3.1.69–73). Since these lines of soft bodies and sleepy muteness are not spoken to other characters, Hamlet deftly begins cooing to us, too, of his powerlessness.

This also resembles Hamlet's antic muteness as he sharply refuses to speak or wrests control of conversation in the play, a characteristic of the cute's general antidiscursivity. After recalling Alexander, Hamlet shifts back to verse to muse on "imperious Caesar," who, like Alexander, once "dead and turned to clay / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.220–21). Hamlet here seems to worry less about the processes of degeneration and decomposition of the body than he does about the uses of the body's remnants after this process as a stopping of discourse, or "wind," as it reads here. A connection of spirit, breath, and

speech, Carla Mazzio explains in “The History of Air: *Hamlet* and the Trouble with Instruments,” wind is connected to a sense of rhetorical self in its roots in the Greek *pneuma*. What becomes of this self when it is connected to the “seat of subjectivity”? Is Hamlet saying more than he thinks in declaring, “what an ass am I!” (2.2.611)? If we believe what Masten argues — that the rhetoric of baseness and anality in the Renaissance was actually a rhetoric of productive subjectivity — then Hamlet’s concern over the malleable softness of the body, which he dramatizes in his antic cuteness, is actually a rehearsal for the subjectivity that seems only to be evident after death, when one does stop the barrel. Stephen Greenblatt’s reading of Hamlet’s first soliloquy on “too solid flesh” arrives here, too, at an encounter with the grave (and at Masten’s “other grave”) that voices Hamlet’s anxiety over the materiality of human remains. Once kings, Julius Caesar, Alexander, and, in some senses, King Hamlet are all now reduced to basal bunghole stoppers, something both common and royal, active and passive, powerful and powerless, all alchemized through the “matter” of being.

The play encourages such attentions to the animating and deadening powers of language, as well as the empty seat of subjectivity of the speaking body. The play’s metatheatricality — with the staging of “The Murder of Gonzago” the most obvious evidence — brings to light “puppetry.” Puppets, obviously, are child’s toys or are designed for children’s entertainment, empty and soundless save for performed manipulations. Though seemingly childish and minor, “puppet moments,” as Kenneth Gross calls them, ask us to inquire about the actor’s gestures, or gestures that are the actor, and they further physicalize and remind us of the actor’s body onstage, something as important to contemporary drama as it was to Shakespeare’s theater. These moments call attention to multiple competing “theaters” of ambiguous mastery on psychological, political, and metaphysical registers (276). The idea of puppets, in material and immaterial modes, evokes patterns of mastery and manipulation, the very workings behind Hamlet’s antic cuteness and deployment of passivity and activity. Gross points to the scene

in Act III where Hamlet asks Guildenstern to play a wooden recorder, though Guildenstern insists he cannot play it. “Do you think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe?” Hamlet asks. “Call me what instrument you will, you cannot play upon me” (3.2.360–63). Hamlet’s response “gives vent to his rage, complaining that he himself is not a pipe to be played on by such an incompetent musician of guile, such a crude interpreter of his absolute mysteries” (279). Hamlet’s anxiety over becoming puppet himself is apparent here, even as he childishly puts on the puppet show of antics for others. Mazzio observes of this scene that while Hamlet’s body “may be interpellated as an ‘instrument,’” it is an instrument “that cannot, he stresses, simply be breathed into by another in order to produce ‘discourse,’ sweet airs, not more to the point, recordable knowledge” (158). Cuteness and plays of cuteness, then, become all the more duplicitous as distinctions blur between object and subject, player and played, and manipulator and manipulated.

Hamlet’s “being cute,” in conjunction with what is already transpiring in the play (and within recent Shakespeare scholarship) on Hamlet’s assery and excrement, solidifies the cute’s curious work through Renaissance rhetoric. This work extends to other Shakespearean texts. Take Nick Bottom’s literal transformation into an ass in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, after which he tells the story of his dream that “hath no bottom” (4.1.209). While it is unclear whether *bottom* and *ass* were understood as synonymous in the Renaissance, it is worth noting that Bottom’s depths of imagination have no foundations, or are “‘antifundamentalist’ in the sense that the locus of textual, interpretive authority is persistently elusive” (Stockton 354). And certainly, this elusiveness is of equal import in *Hamlet*.

That Hamlet chooses a “cute,” linguistically-driven insanity allows him to brush against his own threatening nature—he speaks openly of the erotic with Ophelia, speaking the danger that Polonius feared for his daughter’s innocence, and speaks so openly to Claudius that he gives away his sadistic hand, gaining effusive pleasure at the potential discomfort he causes Claudius during what he childishly names “The Mousetrap” (a term that

itself discloses the pleasure at catching and torturing cute, soft things). The cute easily occludes the threat it contains, or becomes threatening—from Hamlet’s language of childishness, disempowerment, and play, we arrive at the question of looking, of observers and the observed. When the players voice concern over the “little eyases” that are, indeed, the literal threat of child’s play—children’s theater groups that encroached upon Shakespeare’s and other acting companies in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—we are reminded that the cute also occludes what we may think is certain about foundations of authority, meaning, and where the “seat” of discursivity lies.

To further entertain the ways in which the cute can inform our contemporary understandings of aesthetics and discourse, subject and object, I turn to Herrick’s supposedly simple poetry in *Hesperides*, a work that has taken long to recover from frequent critical admonishments of its “cuteness.” His minute attention to objects, his considerations moving “piece by piece,” makes not only his poetic subjects small, but also his poetry itself slight. “Upon his Departure Hence,” for instance, consists of twenty-nine words over fifteen lines, a frustratingly “thin” poem that depends on single, singsong iambs:

Thus I  
 Pass by,  
 And die:  
 As one  
 Unknown  
 And gone:  
 I’m made  
 A shade,  
 And laid  
 I’ th’ grave:  
 There have  
 My cave,  
 Where tell  
 I dwell.  
 Farewell. (H-475)



It is perhaps because of this smallness of focus that “for many of the poet’s early twentieth-century critics, Herrick’s seductive poetic surfaces bespoke a lack of depth, a shallowness of thought that excluded him from being categorized among the great ‘metaphysical’ poets of his age” (Johnson 149). But, I ask, what exactly in Herrick’s works has been misread so as to cutely hobble his already adorable poetics?

As the collection’s introductory poem, “The Argument of his Book,” indicates, the poems within evaluate the world in parts as the poems “sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers,” taking their subjects “piece by piece,” as small as the “court of Mab, and of the fairy king” (H-1). The work’s delight in its own small verses belies the length of the volume itself— comprised of 1,402 brief poems, it necessarily “exhausts the attention, both of reader and of writer [...] one is always starting over again, only to go not very far” (qtd. in Dobranski 153). In modern criticism, Herrick’s trivial subjects receive an eviscerating condemnation— apparently, something “major and male is absent” (Kerrigan 155). For all of Herrick’s delight in details of his beloved’s body or small objects, or in the pastoral fantasies of *May Day*, Gordon Braden brazenly declares:

The emphasis on foreplay and nongenital, especially oral, gratifications, the fixation on affects (smells, textures) and details (Julia’s leg), and general voyeuristic preference of perception to action [...] are all intelligible as a wide diffusion of erotic energy denied specifically orgasmic focus and release. What is missing in *Hesperides* is an aggressive, genital, in other words, “adult” sexuality. (223)

While this necessarily must be understood as a dated criticism, I find Braden’s assumption of knowing Herrick’s aesthetics results in a troubling misreading, particularly in light of the cute. While Leah S. Marcus and others have noted Herrick’s “trusting, childlike faith,” this makes his works no less erotic, and it reveals Braden as highly susceptible to the lure of the cute’s supposedly

innocent tease.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this opens a new line of much-needed inquiry into Herrick's alternative modes of talking about "political seriousness, allow[ing] [his poems] to be what they seem to be [...] and also to be major achievements" (Kerrigan 157). I argue that Braden's "something missing" is a productive emptiness or absence, which I'd connect to the bung-hole discussion in *Hamlet* in "queering" what we consider significant sexualities or political motivations. William Kerrigan finds that Herrick "does not, like Sidney, Shakespeare, and Donne, negotiate with female honor [...] [H]is relative disinterest in intercourse [at least, that which is explicitly named and not shied away from] is part and parcel of an aura of innocence [...] [and] his regressive and sexual imaginings, though full of retreats and expurgations, also make contact with a primal intercourse" (157). I'd agree that Herrick refuses to engage in debates over the conduct of women, and the cycles of self-hatred or loathing undergone in *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, are not present in Herrick's work. Yet what Braden and others miss is Herrick's readiness to engage in erotic relationships that are not sexual in our modern sense of the discourse, his troubling of that which seems political and serious inquiry within seventeenth-century poetics, and

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6 Marcus specifically makes this point in *Childhood and Cultural Despair* (138). Childhood, Marcus writes, was an enduring and powerful symbol of nationhood and the nation's future, "a symbol so compelling that the most extreme among [conservative Anglicans], quixotically abandoning their church's orthodoxy out of devotion to an image of her past, denied or diluted her teachings on original sin and even went a considerable distance toward undoing the English Reformation" (*Childhood* 44). I have two central thoughts about this. First, it cannot go unnoticed that in the same year as Braden, Marcus manages in this text to take a far more encompassing and nuanced view to Herrick's works. And secondly, Marcus additionally has managed to use the seventeenth century to preview Lee Edelman's later (and very twentieth- and twenty-first-century) work on the child as face of the future in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman outlines a vision of queer theory that overturns the pervasive figure of the child, which has become the face of heteronormative reproductive privilege. His "no future" is an anti-negativist view, one that serves as a polemical call to overturn conventional ideas of futurism and forward thinking in light of queer theory.

his ventures into other erotic desires, including the pressing and increasingly erotic need for textual consumption, or consummation of the reader and text.

The cute in Herrick's poetry reveals the body as bawdy and inseparable from the text itself. The Julia poem, "Upon her Feet," dotes on Julia's detailed body parts:

Her pretty feet  
 Like snailes did creep  
 A little out, and then,  
 As if they played at Bo-peep,  
 Did soon draw in agen. (H-525)

The erotic feet, peeking out presumably from a woman's skirt, play childishly at peek-a-boo, and the speaker himself mentions Bo Peep, a child's nursery rhyme. A blazon, Herrick's eroticization of parts (and notably, *childlike* parts) was not unusual in his era. Cutting to pieces or cutifying the body — whether socially or symbolically — proliferated in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and Europe.<sup>7</sup> All of these phenomena have given rise to recent criticism on the logic of fragmentation in early modern scholarship (Hillman and Mazzio xi). This piecing or parting of the body, however, was not always in fragment but a body that "is 'in' parts, that is constituted by a multiplicity of individuated organs" (xi). A critical "part" of this interest in parts was the fashion of blazons, poems devoted often to anatomical parts of a love interest that were then collected and itemized into a woman's body (only one poet managed to write a full body). These poems were therefore an extension or exaggeration of the descriptive mode itself.<sup>8</sup> As Nancy Vickers explains, "Blaz-

7 This includes punitive dismemberment, pictorial isolation, poetic emblazoning, satirical biting, scientific categorizing, and medical anatomizing.

8 While this seems an admirable exercise, frequently these poems fell victim to their own stylization as they "attempted a microdescription that ultimately failed to be descriptive" and failed to establish synecdoche "as a properly operant trope by rhetorically stressing a fiction of lyric address in which the addressee was not a whole woman, but, rather, a part of a wom-

zons not only describe the body parts they praise, they serenade them; they plead with them; they urge them to respond” (4). The details of the body become a catalog of discourse, qualities in which “evocative units, like aphorisms, generally could stand alone, could assume another position without sacrificing meaning,” making them continually rearrangeable as the poems focus the reader’s eye on a single detail (4).

Mirroring the ways the blazonic textual body is in pieces, that which we may consider the aesthetic category of cutely or beautifully attractive appears already an affective response to unwholeness or incompleteness. For example, for Edmund Burke, beauty is already a response to powerlessness. He observes that beauty need not be contingent upon perfection, since in the female sex, beauty “almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason; they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness [...] Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty” (1909–14). Beauty’s connection to the sleepy, infirm, or disabled makes Burkean beauty a gloss on the cute.<sup>9</sup> The mutilated or pieced body, then, is also already a disturbingly cute body.

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an—a nose, or a tooth, or a hand” (Vickers 4). This may be a reason why blazons are poorly anthologized. An anthology from the 1950s compiled by Albert-Marie Schmidt, for example, eliminated portions of the blazons he included. Modern editors have similarly and “unfailingly truncated and imposed an order on the collection,” reordering misplaced limbs and correcting deformities to re-member the female body in a mode less unconventional, though perhaps still disturbing (Vickers 5).

- 9 Even today’s commoditized cuteness retains this aesthetic theory. Cute dolls often are disabled, weakened, or missing limbs—in fact, the popular 1980s line of Cabbage Patch Kids was parodied by the Garbage Pail Kids. These “kids” resembled the plump-cheeked Cabbage Patch Kids, but sported missing eyes, cranial ruptures, and other impediments. A Google search for “injured teddy bear” turns up a range of buyable bears plastered with tiny bandages and clinging to petite crutches. Cute language often babbles or lisps, including that which is often pasted into online meme images of talking cats. For example, the famed “I can has cheezburger?” “lolcat” meme, created by Hawaiian blogger Eric Nakagawa and his friend Kari Unebasami in 2007, has now led to lolcat generators and an internet archive of lolcats

Herrick's "argument of his book" is ultimately more than taking on small structures or small pastoral subjects, but takes a wider focus on the *book's* cuteness. Herrick ostensibly employs the cute to create a portrait of a vanishing, innocent England. The poems — innocent as they may appear — are, of course, a careful intervention in both literary and political conflict. A royalist eager to defend both the monarchy and the church against its opposition, his poetry celebrates the kinds of rural pastimes found in *The Book of Sports*, issued by James I in 1617 and then republished by Charles I in 1633. The book was designed to encourage rural activities such as dancing and Maypoles, and was "an attempt, often repeated, to link upper and lower classes against the austere, cerebral culture of the middle class through the medium of a shared popular culture" (Dimmock and Hadfield 8). Parliament would later demand the book be burned in 1643. Herrick's arguably most famous poem, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," explicitly encourages a delight in the material gifts of the world: "Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may, / Old Time is still a flying: / And this same flower that smiles to day, / To morrow will be dying" (H-208). This *carpe diem* advice echoes what his *Hesperides*, in their bevy of adored objects, argue for implicitly. Here, Herrick's navigation of the cute is particularly of interest in its relation to how one is to physically treat, digest, and understand a book as object. Cuteness, as it often does, seems to render things inert — a particular critique of poetry's "uselessness." Rather than acting as cutting commentary on England's political surround, poetry's cuteness insulates it from making an impact, a phenomenon the *Hesperides* interrogates.

Herrick's awareness of the materiality of his texts makes his *Hesperides* particularly concerned with the reader's treatment of the book itself. Worried about his book's treatment by print-

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([www.icanhas.cheezburger.com](http://www.icanhas.cheezburger.com)). The popularity of lolcat and other memes showcases the continued aesthetic appeal of an animal, a toddler, or a young woman "putting on" the cute display of weak vulnerability through mis-speaking and impediment.

ers, and in turn his readers' evaluation of the text because of this, Herrick asks in "To Sir George Parrie, Doctor of the Civill Law," that the reader engage in a particular relationship to the book. With Parrie as surrogate for the reader, Herrick asks Parrie to read his works "first as *Doctor*," to diagnose and assess, "and the last as *Knight*" to defend the verses (H-1062). He asks that perhaps "But one" poem is "hug'd and cherished" (H-1062). This language of hugging, cherishing, and valuing a piece or part to a whole invites a reader response, as one does to the cute. As the reader is asked to squish, to savor, to engage in a haptic relationship with the text, so does the cute invite (and, occasionally, demand) touch — the romantic fantasy to grasp or cuddle the object. As Ngai notes, the distinction between the cute's relation to objects and that of other more accepted aesthetic categories is precisely in this relationship to touch and sensuous feeling. While the beautiful feels coldly distant, cute "homey objects [are] imagined as unusually responsive to the subject's desire for an ever more intimate, sensuous relation to them," she observes (54). Moreover, "cuteness contains none of beauty's oft-noted references to novelty, singularity, or what [Theodor] Adorno calls 'a sphere of untouchability'" (54). Beauty's removal from the realm of haptics further distinguishes the cute as an intimate, physical closeness, making Herrick's *Hesperides* encourage a closeness to physical text as aesthetic object, not merely a poetic beauty.

Herrick's ideal reader, then, may choose to engage in this cute relationship through the recording of his verses in the reader's *sententiae* or commonplace book, a common practice among educated classes in the seventeenth century. As print culture rose, readers increasingly began placing together small, "irrelevant" pieces of text into their "tables." The practice of "chopping" and "piecing" aphorisms, adages, and proverbs "made cute" and collectible the lengthier rhetoric of the day's literature — cutifying the work. The subject's relation to language and text then became more easily able or invited to be copied, consumed, and digested. These "cute" lines evidence an "almost universal taste for such things as proverbs, maxims, apothegms, aphorisms,

and *sententiae*—literary forms that were felt to encapsulate, briefly and pithily, universal perceptions and wisdom about human experience, both public and private” (Beal 135). Yet Herrick worries that readers will tear or cut up his book’s pages for less lofty purposes than such cherishing. One poem frets, “I see thee lie / Torn for the use of pasterie: / Or see thy injur’d leaves serve well, / To make loose gownes for mackarell” (H-844). His concern over the collection’s physicality (and potential for mistreatment) points to the risk of printing his “starry verse” into mere vessel for gustatory consumptions. For all of his poems’ delight in the simple pastoral life, or in a lover, or the nature of heaven and immortality, Herrick is equally vengeful upon the reader’s interpretive or physical violence to the book. If readers do physical damage to his book, Herrick hopes that “every ill, that bites, or smarts, / Perplexe him in his hinder parts” (H-5). If readers fail to find any enjoyment in his poetry, finding it “All disgustfull be,” Herrick wishes literal ill upon them: “The extreame scabbe take thee, and thine, for me” (H-6), or that the reader’s hand will develop painful swelling, “for to unslate, or to untile that thumb!” (H-173). The charm of his poems becomes a weapon to strike the readers’ cut-up, fragmented body parts, from “hinder parts,” to skin, to thumbs — all parts necessary to physically peruse the book and figuratively digest it. This turn echoes ironically the blazoning that the poetry performs on Julia and others. While Herrick may cut his love object to pieces, the reader dares not do the same to Herrick’s poetry itself.

The solid “objectness” of Herrick’s attentions to his physical “booke” and his readers’ bodily materiality may seem antithetical to this chapter’s interest in working with and against Ngai’s theorization of the cute as necessarily coincident with capitalist consumption. However, I argue that in doing so, Herrick turns language into object, which itself may be consumed as a destabilization of precisely what may be consumed in the reading process. Ngai implies in her work that the cute arises in conjunction with the onslaught of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century consumer culture — that the cute is necessarily consumptive. However, throughout this chapter, I set out the

idea that there is an ahistorical cuteness of text and of language in the Renaissance and early Restoration, one that exists beyond the realms of modern and postmodern consumption, jeopardizes the easy association of cute with consumability, and returns the cute to the problems of language and discourse. Perhaps this is the cute's greatest, most unassuming threat — that an aesthetic did, and may continue to be able to, exist outside consumer culture.

Herrick's cute verses become erotic, threatening, and powerful in their demands on the subject, much as Hamlet's cute antics — meant to soften and diffuse his ostensible political power — end up being the most acute threat throughout the play and, arguably, the most acute threat to the play. Herrick's poems engage the cute in edged modes similar to *Hamlet* — ones that alter our ideas of power, bodies, discourse objects, and texts themselves. In destabilizing and threatening the typical structures of normativity and subjectivity, the discursivity of cuteness enables us to disassemble and broaden the ideas embedded within it.



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# Cute Lacerations in *Doctor Faustus* and *Omkara*

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Bollywood's sexy "item songs" and Christopher Marlowe's scenes of bodily, erotic exchange are violently cute for similar reasons. They each "create or facilitate kinds of 'betweenness' — relays, conduits, associations — that in turn facilitate the circulation of texts, objects, and signs" (Ngai 115). Bubbling confluences of cuteness and violence, the songs and scenes complicate narratives of futurity by dismantling them from their core purpose and position of power, positing nothing concrete in their place — neither in terms of narrative directionality nor in the sense of purposefulness. So often associated with futility and fragility, cuteness erupts as a violent instrument of organizational breakdown in Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* and Vishal Bhardwaj's film *Omkara* (2006). In this chapter I attempt to make explicit the lacerating action within these texts that renders dangerous the invasive potentiality of cute substance. Specifically, I offer readings of two instances of cute laceration — a scene from *Doctor Faustus* and a song from *Omkara* — to highlight the affective irreverence and aggression of cuteness when it collides with normative narratives of biological, reproductive futurity. While Marlowe's text focuses on the development of cuteness as surreptitious manipulation of normative reproduction, Bhardwaj's film bursts with "sinthomosexual" cuteness as the usurpation of symbolic meaning in narratives of futurity. In each instance, cuteness "item"-izes itself as violence in scenes

and gestures that, while seemingly insubstantial in their smallness, lacerate the central narrative's spatial and temporal thesis.

### Mapping the Violence of Cuteness

The implicit violence of cuteness may be diagrammed in the etymological action of cutting the word *cute* out of *acute*. *Acute* has various uses and related meanings, with the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) tracing its earliest usage to 1398, in the medical context of sickness or disease. Acuteness retains its sense of sharpness throughout its development in the English language: as painful, pointed, penetrating, keen or intense, pungent, severe or critical, and urgent. In its early use the word *cute* alludes to keenness or sharpness. But somewhere along its history it makes a violent break from *acuteness* and relocates its meaning within the context of ineptitude. Daniel Harris reminds us that, in the context of modernity, “[s]omething becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone, as if it were an indigent starveling, lonely and rejected because of a hideousness we find more touching than unsightly” (4).

Although its most commonly recognized and desired quality is its ubiquity of appeal, cute substance is placed paradoxically within “a class of outcasts and mutations” (Harris 4), along with other socially maligned affective categories like horror and pornography (Ngai 3). The hideousness and violence associated with these other mutant aesthetics must not be overlooked in the case of the cute. For if cuteness typically elicits in modern humans what Hannah Arendt condemns as their petty quest for “being happy [...] between dog and cat and flowerpot,” it also harbors a brutal potential for dislodging the foundations upon which these materials stand as objects capable of producing and representing commonplace happiness (qtd. in Ngai 3).

It does so by coercing an environment of violent mutuality. For instance, cute objects elicit a certain violence of emotion from the uncute that defines their mutual relations. In its careful avoidance of sharpness, cute substance manages to present itself

immediately to the human as harmless, as matter and affect that require protection from acute states of being and feeling, including human being and feeling. In other words, the protective impulse that cuteness mobilizes in us thrives on our knowledge of our own ability to crush and destroy the thing we feel compelled to cuddle almost to the point of permanent damage or destruction.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, cuteness thrives on the affective energy produced by its imitation of its Other. Cute objects become cuter when they choose to imitate uncute objects functioning within uncute environs. As Harris explains, toddlers are considered especially cute when they embrace precociousness as opposed to helplessness and play the role of violent parents, “thrashing disobedient teddy bears” (12–13). The problematic cuteness of imitation hinges in part on the actors’ ability to lay bare actions most of us agree are best kept private: it is the toddlers’ exposure of parental violence that makes their role-playing both cute and disturbing. Similarly, children’s mimicry of the nuclear family setup is often interpreted as cute when they simulate erotic action (kissing) and other motions that focus on the vulnerable body (bathing, urinating, defecating), just as their imitation of nondomestic cultures of adult professionalism is deemed cute when they mimic social environments that openly propagate unequal power relations (classrooms, doctors’ offices). While the adult actions they imitate aren’t violent in the strictest sense, children’s cute imitations of adult activity draw attention to the simultaneous pleasure and shame we experience in controlling, or failing to control, our own or others’ bodies. As Harris’s example of “toddlers thrashing disobedient teddy bears” suggests, cute imitations of the uncute hint at the secret relationship to power that we otherwise strive to conceal.

Thus, as Sianne Ngai notes, unlike the more stable aesthetic category of beauty, which can idealize both its subject and its

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1 In an important sense, our love affair with cuteness hinges on the paradoxical resilience of cute substance that we expect will always bounce back each time, reshaping itself into a cuddly or fuzzy helpless mass, ready to be abused repeatedly by us while perpetuating our investment in its symbolic appeal as our Other.

object, the “equivocal nature” of cuteness “clarifies [...] that to aestheticize something is not necessarily to idealize or even revere it” (23). Moreover, the equivocation of cuteness prompts in us anxiety regarding its manipulative capacity: “the aesthetic experience of cuteness is a pleasure routinely overridden by secondary feelings of suspicion,” claims Ngai (25). The suspicion, which science writer Natalie Angier suggests is a product of our angry recognition of “being exploited or deceived” or exposed by an object that we assume can easily be destroyed by us (qtd. in Ngai 24), undermines our initial sense of empowerment. Our suspicion also leads us to enact violence upon ourselves: we restrict our own actions, depriving ourselves of the predictable sensory and affective pleasures to be had from cuddling, touching, or helping cute substance. Fooled by the deceptive object, we punish ourselves for having fallen for cuteness. Our violence takes shape as repression cast as a lesson to be remembered by us for all our future encounters with cuteness.

I will focus on the agential violence of cuteness, or what I refer to as the lacerating force of the cute, and discuss some of the ways in which cuteness engages violence unsystematically and purposelessly. The violence of cuteness is unsystematic in *Faustus* and *Omkara* because it has no particular end other than the dismantlement of organized bodies of power that construct the cute as a more or less forgettable aesthetic of failure. Also unsystematic are the paradoxical and unpredictable means by which cuteness asserts its violent force in each of the texts. Cute substance fools us repeatedly because its irresolvable contradictions baffle us continually. Recasting itself each time as a familiar thing or recognizable feeling, cuteness manages to surprise us each time. Like a petulant child, its stubbornness or refusal to be reasoned with gives it a sharpness that lacerates the critical and aesthetic hierarchies constructed by human organization. In other words, despite its slippages in locations and temporalities, the brutally cute retains its connections to the radically acute. In so doing, cuteness erodes the sustainable means by which it might be consumed and fetishized by the human.

The term *laceration* is crucial to my reading of violent cuteness in *Faustus* and *Omkara*. For Ngai, cuteness is transgressive precisely because it disguises itself as powerlessness. Though its effects can be felt powerfully—according to Angier, they are comparable in intensity of experience to “sex, a good meal, or psychoactive drugs like cocaine” (qtd. in Ngai 25)—for Ngai cuteness mobilizes itself in the mundane realm of everyday taste. That is, cuteness makes itself available to us unremarkably, as “the continuousness and everydayness of our aesthetic relation to the [...] merchandise that surrounds us in our homes, in our workplaces, and on the street” (58). But cuteness is also capable of producing spectacle in spectacular fashion. Specifically, cute substance is spectacular when it violently degrades and excoriates established structures of power, such as the family and other state-supported institutions. As Arendt argues, the instrumentality of violent action signals the demise of power: “[v]iolence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance” (56). Furthermore, although “[v]iolence can destroy power[,] it is utterly *incapable* of creating it” (58; emphasis added). Certainly, all violence is at least partially futile owing to its peculiar incapability to create power. But insofar as cuteness is an aesthetic that employs both violent action and violent emotion to entrap power within its opposite (powerlessness), it is a lacerating force of becoming that attacks the very foundations and institutions that systematize power relations. In a Deleuzian sense, owing to its erosive capability, the violence of cuteness is magical—an “unnatural participation” not based in closed systems of filiation or identification but rather in contagion and contamination (Deleuze and Guattari 239–42).

Magic, a contentious category of power and knowledge in the Renaissance, is portrayed as cute substance throughout *Doctor Faustus*, capable not only of providing cheap thrills but also of making sharp incisions into the temporal and spatial fabric of the tragedy. Where Faustus literally turns to magic and uses it to cutely violate biological reproduction, in *Omkara* cuteness is *sinthomosexual* sorcery operating as laceration: as an “alli-



ance inspiring illicit unions or abominable loves” that in turn “prevent procreation” (246). As I hope to make clear through my readings, there is great variety in the resistant aesthetics and lacerating praxes of cuteness that disrupt the normative formation of bodies and structures that depend on reproduction to propagate their power.

### Violating Futurity: Lacerating Pregnancy in *Doctor Faustus*

*The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus* is a notable exception to Marlovian standards of violence. Surprisingly scant in its spilling of blood and guts, it focuses instead on Faustus’s tragic mental transformation. But even as the text consumes its protagonist with self-doubt and despair about the future of his body and soul, the play is riddled with cute substance that vehiculates multiple states of exception. *Doctor Faustus* comprises various scenes of “anomic feasts” or confluences of law and life, as Giorgio Agamben might put it, where the violence of the law is anticipated and matched by the rhythmic cuteness or musicality of resistance (*State of Exception* 72–73). In one sense, *all* the characters in *Doctor Faustus* could be called cute. The good and bad angels, for example, are potentially cute because they nip-nip-nip at Faustus’s conscience. The matter of the soul, which is otherwise in the domain of the sublime and seemingly immune to the minor manipulations of cuteness, is in the end dragged away by cute carriers that, terrier-like, lacerate Faustus. For T.S. Eliot, Marlowe’s dominant aesthetic in *Doctor Faustus* is “always hesitating on the edge of caricature at the right moment” (54). Eliot may not have used the term cute to describe Marlowe’s style. But what is cuteness if not a well-timed hesitation “on the edge of caricature” — a caricature of all things serious: the law, the gods, the state, desire, the future? Hesitation lacerates these systems and contaminates them with the energy of cuteness. As a result, the state, the law, desire, and even the gods and devils become cute for an instant before they reterritorialize onto the plane of serious power in the play.

*Doctor Faustus* begins with cute hesitation. John Faustus is a man discontented with the molarity of his present condition and who obsesses over his future as he strives to escape the limits of temporality by aestheticizing his experiences through non-normative means. Weighing the benefits of established forms of knowledge and self-empowerment, he dismisses them hastily, announcing that the fields of “Oeconomy,” “Physic,” and even “Divinity” are limited in their scope, since they cannot help him “be eternalized” or furnish him with wisdom that could “make men [...] live eternally” (1.1.14, 1.1.22). Faustus’s denunciation of the branches of institutionalized knowledge has to do with the fact that they cannot stretch to other zones of pleasure. Consequently, he abandons these pursuits and promises instead to glut himself with magic — a medium through which he hopes to find pleasures of “omnipotence” (1.1.54). Magic, as Faustus imagines it, offers him the possibility of experiencing limitless movement between spaces and forms. Even before he trades his soul with the devil, Faustus prophesizes his magical capabilities and claims boldly that he will have his “spirits fetch (him) what (he) please[s]” (1.1.78), be it “secrets” pertaining to “foreign kings” or rarities from India and the new world — pearls or fruits, cute objects whose physical qualities are pleasurable to touch and taste (1.1.86).

But Faustus’s plans for experiencing transcendent power outside of time are promptly shattered by Mephistopheles. Receiving equivocation from Mephistopheles in place of guidance regarding the location and condition of hell, Faustus reverts to thinking more structurally about his material future: he demands to have a wife who would satiate his “wanton and lascivious” desire to procreate (2.1.141). But Mephistopheles refuses to fulfill this normative drive, proclaiming it to be “but a ceremonial toy,” a tiresome institution that would detract from Faustus’s quest for alternative aesthetic pleasures (2.1.146). He distracts the new recruit from seeking the sociolegal, Christian, and contractual means of procreation and futurity, promising him in its place innocuous encounters with cuteness — sexually gratifying

experiences with courtesans that would necessarily be more immediate, and less Christian or contractual, in nature.

Important to note here are the differences in aesthetic judgment that inform Faustus's shifting desires. His initial quest for omnipotence and unbounded knowledge is unschematized, shattering the organization of epistemology, power, and the sublime. When Mephistopheles denies him the pleasure of unorganized being, insisting on upholding Lucifer's contract with the scholar that mandates the latter's systematic codes of being, Faustus is forced to reduce himself to seeking futurity within earthly realms; thus his wish to be married. But even this desire is refused him because its institutionalized constituents conflict with those of Satan's contract. With marriage taken out of the dynamic, Faustus is offered what seems to be a viable option for sexual gratification, perhaps even reproduction: countless encounters with diverse courtesans. However, the apparent freedom from the marital sexual economy is undercut by the twofold limit of the "courtesans": being products of Mephistopheles's conjuration, even if they are capable of bearing children, surely they would be servile to their devilish maker and reproduce his ideology, not Faustus's. Moreover, as courtesans and not wives, their wombs would be refused recognition as legally valid spaces that generate proper bloodlines.

Recognizing fully the precariousness of his offer, Mephistopheles is careful to throw in by way of additional recompense a cute tool to keep the Good Angel at bay and Faustus in check: a magic book that will instruct the scholar in ways of manufacturing gold, "thunder, whirlwinds, storm, and lightning" (2.1.157). However appealing these shiny toys may be to Faustus, he recognizes them to be impotent in their generative capabilities and, in keeping with his acuteness of intellect (Prologue 16), he quickly sees the ineptitude of necromancy: it is a fickle pursuit that might provide him with cheap thrills but not with more sustainable sources of proliferation. Having given up, perhaps prematurely, the possibility of experiencing aesthetic becomings, Faustus reverts to lacerating the patriarchal ideology of secured biological futurity. The cuteness of the magic book enables Faus-

tus to violently invade the body of the Other. From this point on, he combines his existent knowledge of the conventional arts and sciences (for instance, the Andromeda effect) with the petty privileges of magic to attempt to insert himself into the future. That is, he finds ways in which to make the cuteness of magic count toward a violent transformation of the organized spaces within which he must function. Since magic cordons off the experience of unearthly eternity and distances Faustus from marriage and its accompanying promise of legitimized continuity, he perverts his approach to futurity: he focuses on his monstrous potential to infect the female body with (his) desire, to disrupt the process of “natural,” biological reproduction and inject himself — as an object of “unnatural” female desire — into the pregnant woman’s body. He fuses magic and science to create a cute substance that, consumed by others, would be capable simultaneously of lacerating their realms of being and of dismantling the sublime affects of eternal damnation.

The most striking instance of cute laceration in *Doctor Faustus* is the scene involving the Duchess of Vanholt, whose body offers the protagonist the possibility of escaping the complete extermination and deterministic fatalism to which he has been bound contractually. Grape craving and pregnant, the Duchess of Vanholt seems at first glance to be irrelevant not only to the grand scheme of the play, but also to the majority of critical conversations about the role of women or gender in the text. For example, Sara Deats’s *Sex, Gender, and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, which offers a “feminist reading” of the play, manages only once to mention the duchess (217). Indeed, the duchess is an oft-rejected figure in Marlovian criticism.<sup>2</sup> Yet

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2 Even more recent critical studies of the play, such as Andrew Duxfield’s, mention the duchess merely in passing, concentrating instead on Faustus’s “stupidity” and ambiguity of intent in his turn to magic as a source of empowerment (68). As Robert Logan notes in his study of persistent patterns in the scholarship on *Doctor Faustus*, “[i]t is probably no surprise that traditional topics predominate: characterization, genre, religious attitudes, ethical values, the concern with magic and philosophical conflicts” (74). Even in cases of less conventional approaches to the play, the critical focus remains

she is one of two female human subjects in the play, and the only woman to escape omission from both “A” and “B” texts.<sup>3</sup> I suggest that the duchess survives these textual cuts because she is crucial to the play’s overarching investment in violent cuteness as potentiality and in pregnancy as cute medium for disruptive futurity.

No doubt because of its overt connection to reproduction and the production of cute substance, the pregnant woman’s body itself is considered cute in popular culture. In its appearance a pregnant woman’s belly might be likened to other cute objects, like overblown balloons or bubbles—round and smooth, stretched almost to the point of bursting. At the same time, the clumsiness of a pregnant woman’s gait likens her body to Shy Sherri, a doll so obviously “malformed” that it represents “anatomical disaster,” everything that opposes adult human investment in normative ability, functionality, symmetry, and proportion (Harris 3). Just as the body and actions of the child or baby are aestheticized as cute to “blur the profound drudgery of child-rearing with soft-focused sentimentality” (15), so the mundane yet destabilizing transformations of the pregnant body—the physical discomfort and hormonal fluctuations, for instance—are reorganized in the popular imagination as cuteness, an aesthetic made available by nature that situates the woman in a future of maternity while serving to occlude her own and others’ vision of pain, mortality, and laborious domesticity.

The early modern investment in cutesy pregnancy may not have shared modernity’s aesthetic claims on the pregnant body, but the dominant narratives of the Renaissance were similarly keen to separate the female’s experience of bodily transforma-

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on the protagonist’s self-doubt. In any event, none of the scholarship on the play dwells on the significance of the Duchess of Vanholt.

- 3 While the *dramatis personae* of the B-text include “A Woman Devil,” Alexander’s “Paramour” (a spirit), “A Hostess,” “The Duchess of Vanholt,” and “Helen of Troy, a spirit,” only the hostess and the duchess qualify as human. The A-text’s list of characters makes no mention of the hostess, listing the duchess as the sole female human in the play.

tion by aestheticizing the imagination of pregnancy. The material horror of pregnancy was not only linked to the horrors of mortality but to the pregnant body's substantive potential to mark and impress other beings with her aberrant and secret desires. Thomas Underdowne's *Æthiopian History* (1569) is the first known English translation of Heliodorus's *Aithiopika*, a popular tale of a dark-skinned queen, Persina, who, during conception, is affected by an image of the white-skinned Andromeda. Moved by the image to transform her own desire as well as the product of her sexual duty, Persina gives birth to a child, Chariclea, who is marked by the whiteness of the mythical princess and not by the blackness of her biological parents.

While Sujata Iyengar suggests that the Andromeda effect made available the notion of racial passing and allowed for the benevolent reception of racial and biological difference, the tale's popularity simultaneously betrays contemporary anxiety regarding the dangerous cuteness of unclean bloodlines, corrupt lineages, and of the violent participation of nonbiological agents in the conception or manipulation of the human fetus. M.D. Reeve suggests that many Renaissance scholars and scientists offered the notion of the maternal impression or the Andromeda effect to account for a child's physical attributes: the child might be shaped in the womb by its mother's perception of an image or by her secret desire for sources of pleasure. Marie-Hélène Huet states that in the Renaissance "a remarkably persistent line of thought argued that monstrous progeny resulted from the disorder of the maternal imagination" and desire. Consequently, "[i]nstead of reproducing the father's image, as nature commands, the monstrous child bore witness to the violent desires that moved the mother at the time of conception or during pregnancy" and was scarred by her perverse desires instead of by the markings of its "legitimate genitor" (Huet 1). The effects of a pregnant woman's fantasies could be as innocuous as to produce in the offspring "blemishes and birthmarks," but they could also lead to "the creation of monsters" (Reynolds 436).

Early modern scientists and philosophers were not only cautious of fetal corruption caused by the Andromeda effect, they

also warned against female acts of transgressive desire, such as “sex with devils or animals,” that could lead to monstrous births (Huet 6). But even more innocent female fantasies were damaging. According to fifteenth-century philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi, it was commonly accepted that “[i]f a pregnant woman greatly desire[d] a chickpea, she [would] deliver a child bearing the image of a chickpea,” or “[i]f, during pregnancy, she desire[d] a pomegranate, she [would mark] her child with a pomegranate or something that resemble[d] it” (qtd. in Huet 17–18). Clearly, in the early modern mind cute monstrosity resulted from an intervention that “literally imprinted on progeny a deformed, misshapen resemblance to an object that had not participated in their creation” (Huet 5). While in rare instances the monster may have reflected the glory of God, as in the case of Chariclea, who bore the markings of white royalty, the most common assumption was that it was a horrible aberration that “shamelessly reveal(ed) its shameful origins” (31).

Reading *Faustus* in light of the sinister implications of the Andromeda effect reveals the monstrous potentiality of the cute “little wart or mole” that marks the neck of Alexander’s otherwise “fair” paramour, whom Faustus conjures in the play (4.1.110–11). His conjuration anticipates a later scene when Faustus relies on common knowledge regarding “great-bellied” women’s desire “for things [...] rare and dainty” to extract successfully from the Duchess of Vanholt her craving for “a dish of ripe grapes” (4.6.10–15). The cute violence of Faustus’s “sweetest grapes” is undeniable (4.6.30). A culinary concoction conjured by the Devil’s advocate for consumption by a pregnant woman, the grapes become Faustus’s arch tool of laceration. Through the cute substance, the scholar makes a singular attempt “to shun the snares of death” by securing the shape of his future within the duchess’s body (5.1.67). In the process, he perversely fulfills his earliest prophesy of conjuring “pleasant fruits” from the orient (1.1.81–84). More acutely, he uses magic and earthly knowledge to transform the Duchess’ body into “a vessel for reproducing [...] [his] bloodlines” — into a cute space wherein his violent affects may be felt on the “products

of her body” as well as on the compromised power of the state (Jankowski 228).

Faustus’s attempt to defy molar or high aesthetics and leave behind the cute monster-child of his desire finds echoes in Gilles Deleuze, who announces that when studying the ideas of a philosopher he imagines himself “taking (the) author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous,” a product of “buggery or [...] immaculate conception” that is a violent mix of “all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions” (6). The philosopher’s fantasy, like Faustus’s devious productivity, emphasizes the violence of cuteness that, through appropriation and penetration, mobilizes simultaneously its own break from and the breakdown of organized modalities of power.

### Refusing Futurity: *Sinthomosexual* Lacerations in *Omkara*

The cuteness of violence that is implicit in the contradictory energies of “buggery” and “immaculate conception” forms the bedrock of Bollywood cinema and is made explicit in the films’ item songs. In this chapter I will concentrate on the song “Bee-di” from *Omkara*. Not connected in any obvious sense to *Faustus*, the film is a Bollywood adaptation of another Renaissance play marked by anxious futurity: *Othello*. But in its toying with the stylistic and generic — in a word, aesthetic — compositions of Bollywood films, *Omkara* mobilizes a lacerating cuteness that parallels the violent potentiality of *Faustus*.

The word *Bollywood*, which came to be listed in the *OED* in 2005, dates back to 1976. As its dating suggests, in one sense Bollywood, or the “[h]umorous blend of [...] Bombay and Hollywood” that is the mainstream Indian film industry, is rooted in modernity (“Bollywood”). Vijay Mishra notes that it “is nothing less than a floating signifier which [...] has come close to acquiring a transnational or pan-Indian meaning” suggestive of a cosmopolitan aesthetic (439). He explains that “there is no real cultural capital required to read or enact Bollywood”: “Bollywood’ as a name, a fashion, a style, a way of doing things, has



no real location beyond its simulacral, ‘techno-realist’ image which is why it can be so readily packaged and re-packaged for consumption by almost anyone” (440). Owing to its cultural porosity, Bollywood is understood as being quintessentially cute: an “innocuous” product “readily transmitted as the signifier of a non-threatening Indian modernity, [...] the function of cultural accommodation so that no one feels excluded” (440). But this Bollywood has a monstrous history concealed within the colorful kitschiness that defines its present aesthetic. For lurking beneath the gestural practices that the cinema typically absorbs in its easy-to-mimic, globally recognizable dance moves are the ancient aesthetic theories of *rasa*, which is Sanskrit for “taste.” The nine key *rasas* that inform the dynamic of art, particularly the dramatic and performance arts, are: *shringara* (love, eroticism), *hasya* (mirth), *adbhuta* (wonderment), *shanta* (peace), *raudra* (anger, irritation), *veera* (courage, pride), *karuna* (sorrow, pity, compassion), *bhayanaka* (fear, anxiety), and *vibhatsa* (disgust, loathing). Together the *rasas* comprise the aesthetics of the body. The gesturing or performance of each *rasa* mobilizes its respective *bhava* or mood, thus creating a template of affects easily recognizable to those familiar with traditional Indian performance art forms like *bharatanatyam* and *kathakali*.<sup>4</sup>

Mishra focuses on the *rasa* of *karuna* and claims an inextricable relationship between it and the sentimentality that is the cornerstone of all Bollywood cinema. His point is well noted for, while Bollywood cinema draws in global audiences with its increasing popularity, its sentimental streak grows in strength and elasticity. Sentimentality stretched as violent, gestural cuteness is at the center of the item song in Bollywood. Amita Nijhawan’s definition of the Bollywood item song captures its essential function in the economy of the cinema: “[i]tem songs are big-budget song-and-dance numbers that [...] work as snappy advertisements for a film and original music score with their

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4 See Prakruti Prativadi’s *Rasas in Bharatanatyam* for a basic and helpful guide to understanding the function of *rasas* in classical Indian dance forms.

quick cuts and sexy imagery” (100). Besides their crucial role in boosting the popularity of the films in which they feature, they also have a dense association with the performance of sexual desire, particularly heteronormative desire. As Jenny Sharpe notes in her essay on the role of gender in Bollywood productions, the song-and-dance routine that comprises an item song, “which generally serves as a fantasy space [...] provides an occasion for staging female desire, even if in the last instance this desire is contained” (67). Over decades the permissibility and limits of itemizing sexual desire through the songs has undergone several transformations. Where the item song was once in the purview of the vamp, or the male villain’s female sexual servitor, by the mid-1990s it came to be embraced as a routine that enabled the female protagonist to reveal her sexual energy. Its most recent iterations are still looser in scope. Now, for example, as Jim Yardley notes in his article on Bollywood’s recent fetishization of the chiseled male torso, male characters can occupy the central space of item songs as performers whose buff and well-oiled bodies are intended to draw out female sexual desire within the films. Despite variations, the central theme of the item song remains the articulation and mobilization of sexual desire, specifically heterosexual desire.

At the same time, the song-and-dance routines enable cute manipulations of spatial and temporal realms within the films, reconfiguring the possibilities of envisioning nonnormative sexual energies. Punctuating the scenes featuring the “real” experiences (mostly struggles) of the central characters, they simultaneously “provoke [...] fascination and anxiety”—for, while designated “as a ‘fantasy’ space,” the item song “is often denied ‘realness,’ [...] yet it is a space with potential for production of emerging cultural and gender ideals,” as Nijhawan notes of the recent item songs that have come out of Bollywood (100). Indeed, located on the cusp of reality and fantasy, the item song is Bollywood’s primary medium of acuteness. Through it, Bollywood cinema narrativizes transversal sexual possibilities of pleasure that, in rubbing against the fabric of the central forces of the story, often lacerate the structures that the main,

heteronormative plot strives to uphold or protect. As elaborate productions of cute pleasure, item songs also bear within them the potential to defy the molar structures of reproduction, biological or epistemological. Their potentiality emerges not so much through lingual or lyrical force as through their physical gestures or *rasas*, which enable the articulation of nonnormative pleasures that remain on lockdown within the confines of language.

Physical gestures in *Omkara*'s song "Beedi" unlock the film's cute reproaches of heteronormativity, specifically of marriage and heterosexual union, while working throughout with the aesthetics of the item number. Bhardwaj, the film's director as well as music producer, is an acclaimed composer and director whose recent adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*, 2003), *Othello* (*Omkara*), and *Hamlet* (*Haider*, 2014) have earned him a central place in early twenty-first century Bollywood aesthetics. In an interview with Felicity Kendal, featured in the documentary film *Shakespeare, India, & Me*, Bhardwaj speaks of his investment in mainstream Bollywood culture that necessitates the inclusion of songs in his films. But where most songs in the cinema are hiatuses in the overarching scheme of storytelling insofar as they stop the progress of the central narrative to spin their own fantasy tales of sexual desire, Bhardwaj declares of his songs that they are "justified" as organic parts of the main plot that carry forward the central story, which "keeps moving" in and through them.

Bhardwaj suggests that pausing a film's central narrative is itself an act of violence, a cute cutting apart of the primary meaning of the story. He claims, moreover, that he has eliminated non sequiturs from his films while managing to include cute item songs. But violence is an act of seepage, and in *Omkara* it invades the item song as gestural cuteness. The organic structure of the main plot, a violent retelling of *Othello* set in rural north India, is lacerated by another kind of violence: a cacophonous musicality that accompanies the demise of heterofuturity. Despite Bhardwaj's insistence that the item song featuring Billo (Bianca) and the inebriated characters of Kesu (Cassio), Langda

(Iago), and Rajju (Roderigo) is both central to the main plot and truthful to the generic hybridity of his source text — which, as he notes, includes a drinking song (2.3.64–68) — “Beedi” ceases to be about the main characters or even about the related incidents among the ancillary characters that thrust the chief drama — the marriage plot — into tragedy. Instead it concentrates on the gestural development of a homoerotic *shringara rasa*, on the physical movements of sexual pleasure that are transplanted from the meaningful heteronormative space (occupied in the song primarily by Billo and Kesu and, symbolically, by Dolly [Desdemona] and Omkara [Othello], whose impending coital union is included in the song’s narrative as pregnant pause and montage) and relocated onto men’s cutely violent bodily play with one another. The violent pleasure of gesture in “Beedi” is that it gestures cutely “toward the death drive that lives within reproductive futurism” (Edelman 132). The gestures embedded in the song scorn at “domestication in the form of romance” and playfully expose “the misconception on which its reality rests: the misconception that conception itself can assure the endurance, by enacting the truth, of the Symbolic order of meaning and preserve, in the form of the future, the prospect of someday redeeming the primal loss that makes sexual rapport impossible and precludes the signifying system from ever arriving at any closure” (132, 134).

The *OED* defines *gesture* as a “manner of carrying the body, bearing.” In the narrower sense, it is also a “posture” or an “attitude,” a “movement of the body or limbs as an expression of feeling.” “Gesture,” Elizabeth Cowie states, “is the performing of the body as a living being in specific time and space and social context” (83). It is, besides, “a kind of event, crystallising meaning at a moment, while opening up to something *next* (83). Therefore, “[t]o consider gesture in film is to be brought to think about the performance of an action as a movement that introduces a change,” as a paradoxical moment of hanging, a cutely violent push forward and back (82). For Agamben gesture is crucial to cinema because it reveals the failure of language by setting it in time and enacting it in or through motion: “what is at issue in

gesture is not so much a prelinguistic content as [...] the other side of language, its speechless dwelling in language” that is always also a “gesture of being at a loss in language” (*Potentialities* 78). In the context of violent cuteness, gesture is pure laceration — it lacerates the time within which it is located, lacerating also language that fails as medium. Gesture enacts its violence by mobilizing an exaggerated cuteness that dismantles normative modes of articulation. Its violence toward language is especially potent when gesture simultaneously dislocates itself from contributing to a semiotics of symbolic meaningfulness, offering pleasure instead of directions toward continuity or the future.

The lyrics of the song “Beedi” are steeped in sexual innuendo, just as the scene in which it is performed is a familiar tableau of cute seduction. Billo, Kesu’s lover and a professional singer and performer, bursts into song at the behest of her male audience, who wish to hear her sing “Beedi.” Prompted chiefly by Kesu, who initiates the song, Billo performs the song in true *femme-fatale* fashion — as the jewel of the item number, in keeping with the expectations of the genre. There is no denying that the music is catchy, its rhythm pulsating and inviting, its lyrics repetitive enough to be memorable even if the dialect is unfamiliar. Moreover, the song’s thesis and accompanying symbolism are simple: Billo and the others sing about cigarettes and sex, the cigarette-as-phallus the barely veiled if familiar metaphor propelling the song’s agenda. Billo asks her lover to light his cigarette with the fire he has kindled within her. The refrain “*beedi jalai le jigar se piya, jigar ma badi aag hai*” (light your cigarette with the fire raging passionately within me) punctuates verses saturated with double meaning: there’s much made of snatching blankets in the cold; stealing fires from the neighbor’s kitchen; bite marks from a lover that are deeper and sharper than those that might be made by a farmer’s sickle; and so on. The performance is also awash with hip thrusting, chest jiggling, and other jerky movements that draw attention to the rhythm of the human sexual anatomy in the acts of foreplay and sex. Overall, the song cutely stands in for and means to give meaning to the mobilization of sexual desire.

But it is in its *meaningless* gestures that the song becomes a tool of laceration and prompts a becoming. It erupts simultaneously from the predictable rhythm of the narrative and the language of desire to become a cute signifier of the instability that is pleasure without meaning or purpose, of what Lee Edelman calls “*sinthomosexuality*.” He stresses that in “denying the appeal of fantasy, refusing the promise of futurity that mends each tear, however mean, in reality’s dress with threads of meaning (attached as they are to the eye-catching lure we might see as the sequins of sequence, which dazzle our vision by producing the constant illusion of *consequence*),” *sinthomosexuality* “offers us fantasy turned inside out, the seams of its costume exposing reality’s seamlessness as mere seeming, the fraying knots that hold each sequin in place now usurping that place” (35). As Edelman’s use of the term *tear* makes clear, *sinthomosexuality* is a violent and lacerating force of resistance. While the song itself works as cute *sinthome*, a “template” or “knot that holds the subject together, that ties or binds the subject to its constitutive libidinal career,” particular gestures within it refuse participation in the cohesive harmony of signification (35–36). In other words, the pleasure of these gestures is acutely enacted in *sinthomosexuality*, in their cute refusal to be meaningful or symbolically relevant to the central scheme of the narrative.

I will focus on those *sinthomosexual* gestures in the song that involve the physical object of the cigarette. In the context of the song, the cigarette is an object steeped in contradiction. The song’s title itself means “cigarette,” a *beedi* being a cheap cigarette made of unprocessed tobacco wrapped in leaves. As a signifier, the cigarette can hardly be called cute. In most social contexts, it symbolizes either a jaded adulthood or else a diseased precociousness, its most recent aura immersed in narratives of dangerous medical and social unhealthiness. At the same time, in the song the *beedi* transforms into cute substance, a thing that squishes together highly adult practices (sex, smoking) with childlike forgetfulness and repetition. For, while in the performance Billo asks her lover to light his cigarette using the fire within her, notably she first claims to have forgotten the

lyrics and needs to be reminded of the words. Also, Billo's actions toward the end of the song make clear that she despises cigarettes and seems to have an allergic response to them. (In fact, the fight that breaks out between Kesu and others is occasioned by Rajju's insistence on igniting another cigarette in Billo's presence after Kesu puts out his first one.) Yet once it gets going and before it is forced to its conclusion, the song functions like a catchy pro-smoking jingle that associates smoking with sexy bodies enacting heterosexual fantasies. Surprisingly, in a song that connects the *beedi* to the phallus, none of the men gyrating around Billo smokes. Pitted against the men who fantasize about Billo as their *beedi* are Langda and Rajju, who revel in the thingness of the object that is the unlit cigarette and take pleasure in the violently cute gesture that it makes available to them. (In the song, after a few seconds of taking aim Langda successfully pops an unlit cigarette into Rajju's mouth.<sup>5</sup> Rajju is never seen lighting up this cigarette, but later in the song he carries an ignited cigarette in his mouth, presumably the same one Langda offered him.)

By itself the cigarette carries no relevance in the story other than becoming the occasion for Kesu to perform his drunken rage at Rajju for the seeming offense given to his lover. But as something exchanged between two men, it also refuses to bear the song's overarching heteronormative, metaphorical weight. Important to note in this context is the moment at which Langda pops the cigarette into Rajju's mouth. For a brief but crucial moment in the song, the camera shifts away once from Billo and the dancing men to a scene indoors that reveals the intimate lovemaking of Omkara and Dolly. Omkara gifts Dolly his family's most prized heirloom, a kamarband or waistband that, in previous generations, adorned the bellies of all the wives of his household, and commands her to keep it safe at all times, for it symbolizes both the dignity of his ancestors and the high

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5 Later in the chapter, I refer to Langda's gesture—which resembles the action of one preparing to throw a paper airplane across a room or aiming a dart at a dartboard—as the “cigarette pop.”

place in which he holds marital fidelity. Before handing over the heirloom, Omkara also tells Dolly that his birth broke a generations-long drought of offspring in his family. Having laid on her its symbolic weight of reproductive futurity and heterofidelity, he asks to see Dolly wear the kamarband. Obediently, Dolly returns to their bedchamber with the kamarband around her waist. Omkara gently pulls her to him, presumably to initiate their coy sex act — coy insofar as the violence of their sex is legitimated by monogamy and heteronormativity. At this critical moment, the scene cuts back to the raunchy festivity of the song “Beedi.” Only, the scene’s return to raunchiness is marked by a nonheteronormative gesture, for the camera focuses on Langda and Rajju’s pleasure of and through the cigarette. If the sexual encounter between Omkara and Dolly is meaningful in its potentiality and optimism regarding the promise of reproductive fruitfulness (biological futurity), Langda and Rajju’s enjoyment of the cigarette, even if it is locked into the narrative of the song and twisted to occupy a metaphorical space within it, is remarkable for its *acute* fruitlessness: its lacerating cuteness is disruptive because it leads nowhere — the cigarette is unlit for the most part, after all. Counter to the heteronormative tropes of futurity that inundate the song, the lacerating gesture of the “cigarette pop” exchanged between Langda and Rajju in “Beedi” celebrates petulantly *sinthomosexual* pleasure as cute violence, pleasure *as* the death drive, and cuteness *as* the unhealthy means by which to extinguish meaning-making narratives of heterofuturity.

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Where Faustus manipulates matter purposefully to lacerate the otherwise powerful grip of the earthly and divine forces of organization, Langda and Rajju lacerate purposefulness itself, rendering powerless the semantic force of systems and narratives that promote heterofunctionality. Varied in its approaches to its own invasive potentiality, cuteness in these texts commits violent action, at each turn cutting into the narratives and aesthetics of maturity. Inserting itself into the lacerations it makes, it



stretches almost beyond recognition the spaces it invades and from which it erupts as paradoxical resistance — as blunt-force energy that is capable of violence precisely because it severs itself playfully from the predictable and unified aesthetics of acuteness, desire, and usefulness. Cuteness winks at us secretly or uselessly, refusing to offer us directives toward futures of resolution and cohesion.

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# Katie Sokoler, Your Construction Paper Tears Can't Hide Your Yayoi Kusama-Neurotic Underbelly

*Kelly Lloyd*

A power struggle is inherent to cuteness, to the extent that this struggle, if unacknowledged and undirected, will manifest itself at the cute object's expense. I examine this phenomenon through a close analysis of Katie Sokoler's 2012 Tampax Radiant tampon print advertisement and television commercial, and through a comparison of Sokoler to the works of Yayoi Kusama. I work from the colloquial definition of *cuteness* as "applied to people as well as things, with the sense 'attractive, pretty, charming'; also, 'attractive in a mannered way'" ("Cute"). Identified by infantile physical characteristics and behavior, associated with the feminine and deemed powerless, cuteness is an aesthetic, an affect, and a strategy. My understanding of cuteness comes from personal experience and is influenced by the work of Sianne Ngai, who argues that

[t]here is no judgment or experience of an object as cute that does not call up one's sense of power over it as something less powerful. But the fact that the cute object seems capable of making demands on us regardless, as Lori Merish underscores — a demand for care that women in particular often



Figure 1. A photograph by Katie Sokoler with her incredible number of balloons. “About Me,” *Color Me Katie*, 13 Sept. 2012.

feel addressed or interpellated by— suggests that “cute” designates not just the site of a static power differential but also the site of a surprisingly complex power struggle. (11)

Like many cute objects, tampon advertisements are so easily dismissible that even tampon companies, such as U by Kotex in their “Reality Check” advertisement, have chosen to sell tampons through parodies of tampon commercials’ normalized absurdity. Associative logic, like cute objects and tampon commercials, is similarly dismissed.

In *Style in Costume* James Laver pairs images of architecture, clothing, and furniture, one on either side of the page. Laver, the Keeper of Prints, Drawings and Paintings for the Victoria and Albert Museum between 1938 and 1959, demonstrates that connections can be made through seemingly superficial formal qualities like color and shape. As Elizabeth Grosz explains in *Chaos, Territory, Art*:

The capacity that all artworks have to be located within a milieu of other artworks—even as upheaval and innovation—means that they are constituted not through intentionality but through the work itself, through its capacity to be connected to, or severed from, other works. (70–71)

Since mainstream culture tends to dismiss cute objects, menstrual products, and at times associative logic as employed by Laver, I seek to use associative logic in examining Sokoler's Tampax Radiant campaign as a site of the power struggle inherent to cuteness. My study is not a critique of Ms. Sokoler but an exploration of the power struggle inherent in the aesthetic and affect Sokoler had chosen.

### Katie Sokoler

“Hi there!” Sokoler greets readers of her blog (fig. 1). A self-described “freelance artist and photographer living in Brooklyn” who creates, builds, styles, designs, performs, directs, and shoots, Sokoler studied photography at the Fashion Institute of Technology and has worked as a photographer for *Gothamist*, a New York City events and news website, and Improv Everywhere, a New York City–based prank collective. On her blog, Sokoler cheerfully announced her project with Tampax:

Super fun news! [Katie Sokoler] was contacted by Tampax to be a part of their new campaign about stand out girls. They wanted to feature three creative, unique, real women with their art. A street artist, yarn bomber, and balloon artist. It's the first time they've ever used real women in their ads instead of models!

Sokoler's Tampax Radiant print advertisement features her shielding herself from a purple, magenta, turquoise, and canary yellow construction paper rainstorm with a matching canary yellow umbrella. Cloud cut-outs and open paint cans, remnants of Sokoler's artistic process, lie beside her bubblegum pink



Figure 2. Katie Sokoler's Tampax® Radiant tampon print advertisement. "Tampax Ad," *Color Me Katie*, 9 July 2012.

rain boots as a gust of wind innocently lifts up the skirt of her blue-and-white polka-dot dress. The text superimposed on the photograph reads: "NEW TAMPAX RADIANT HELPS KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE. HOW YOU CHOOSE TO STAND OUT IS UP TO YOU" (fig. 2).

Sokoler's Tampax Radiant television commercial opens with Sokoler scooting across the screen with paper clouds tucked under her arm. We see Sokoler climb a ladder in her polka-dot dress, polka-dot socks, and heels and tape construction-paper clouds and raindrops to the side of a white brick building. Pedestrians walk by, framed by the camera so that they are caught under Sokoler's rainstorm (fig. 3). Sokoler's Tampax activities are spliced with shots of her smiling through a piece of torn purple construction paper, and overlaid with audio from an interview with the artist:

My name is Katie Sokoler and I am a fun maker. I am a photographer. I am an actress. I am a blogger and a street artist. I wanted to try to try something new with photography. Instead of shooting models, I wanted to shoot real people. I thought of this idea of making interactive street art where I create a piece on the wall, and use my camera to photograph people walking under it. I like doing street art because I love making art, and I love putting art in public places so other people can enjoy them. Making street art helps me express myself. It all comes together when someone walks under it and I sort of almost think of it like they're falling into this little trap. I have a few times had the cops called on me, and the cops come and they're like, "Oh! This is just paper!" I think I stand out because I really like doing things that make other people happy. ("Tampax")

Sokoler's accessories are deliberately cute, as polka dots are a brightly colored graphic pattern most often used on children's clothing, toys, and furniture; and her choice of artistic materials—brightly colored construction paper, scissors, and tape—are reminiscent of elementary craft projects. Wide-eyed and constantly smiling, Sokoler presents herself through a cute affect that reads as carefree, exuberant, pleasing, and genuine. Since her art exists in the public sphere, Sokoler deploys cuteness as an effective strategy to delight rather than upset her audience when they are caught in her trap-like installations and





Figure 3. Screenshot of Katie Sokoler's Tampax® Radiant tampon television commercial. "Tampax® and Always™" *Business Wire*. YouTube, 8 May 2012.

to soothe the fears of police officers who are concerned about maintaining the neutrality, however false, of public space.

### Language

Power struggle is evident in Sokoler's introduction of her Tampax Radiant tampon campaign. On her blog, *Color Me Katie*, Sokoler writes: "It's the first time they've ever used *real women* in their ads instead of models!" (emphasis added). By identifying herself, Jessie Hemmons (Tampax Radiant's yarn bomber), and Jihan Zencirli (Tampax Radiant's balloon artist) as real women, Sokoler implicitly argues that models are not real women. Although it might be useful to take Sokoler's words, her art, and her choice of wardrobe and affect as her own rather than products of an artistic director, the distinction between real and nonreal women is problematic, as Sokoler gains leverage and authenticates her message by taking humanity away from professional models.

Katie Mellor, artistic director of Tampax, saw the fact that she “had to talk about something no one wants to talk about in an interesting way” as a challenge and envisioned the solution as a campaign that “used young girls who are doing visually creative things in the world and who don’t let their periods get in the way of standing out.” When Sokoler filmed her advertisement, she was twenty-five years old. Therefore, to speak of Sokoler, Hemmons, and Zencirli as “young girls” effectively infantilizes and disempowers them. Furthermore, to suggest that what keeps women who are doing visually creative work from standing out is anything other than gender inequality in the contemporary art world is dangerously misdirected. According to Gallery Tally’s October 2014 report, of the “over 4,000 artists represented in L.A. and New York [...] 32.3 percent were women” (Reilly).

Why did Mellor choose to establish herself and her project by referring to the women who starred in her campaign as “young girls,” characterizing their subject matter as something “no one wants to talk about,” and identifying menstruation as what keeps women “who are doing visually creative things in the world” from standing out? Perhaps it is the same reason Tampax Radiant crafted products featuring “designer packaging and wrappers that compliment [sic] any girl’s unique style, making these products must-have accessories any time of the month” that are meant to help “KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE” (“Tampax®”). I’m getting mixed messages here. As a person who menstruates, I too can stand out with these accessories designed both to complement my style and to help me to keep invisible something no one wants to talk about.

Tampax’s “KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE” is a mandate because if “you” failed to do so, you would be censored. On March 24, 2015, Toronto-based poet and artist Rupi Kaur posted a photograph of her fully clothed sister on Instagram (fig. 4). Within twenty-four hours, Instagram took down the photograph and claimed it had violated the platform’s community guidelines. Instagram eventually restored the photograph, but only after Kaur penned an open letter on Facebook that garnered a significant amount of attention and support. As Kaur told the *Washington*



Figure 4. "Period." Photography by Rupī Kaur. *Rupīkaur*, 23 March 2015.

*Post*, "They allow porn on Instagram, but not periods? How dare they tell me my clothed body, the way I wake up at least once every month, is 'violating' and 'unsafe?'" (Dewey).

Reading Aristotle's *Politics* in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt discusses the notion of who can exist in the public realm and who must be resigned to the private realm:

The distinction between the private and public realms, seen from the viewpoint of privacy rather than of the body politic, equals the distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden. [...] Hidden away were the laborers who "with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life," and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else's property but because their life was "laborious," devoted to bodily functions. (72)



Figure 5. Screenshot of Katie Sokoler's interview during her Tampax® Radiant tampon commercial. "Tampax® and Always™" *Business Wire*. YouTube, 8 May 2012.

Tampax's dictate to "KEEP YOUR PERIOD INVISIBLE" falls within the tradition of relegating women and their bodily functions to the private realm. Before I can champion the exposure of two street artists who use feminized aesthetics, materials, and artistic processes to alter public space, I find that Tampax contextualizes their campaign by claiming to sell a product meant to help continue relegating women's labor to the private realm. As two powerful means of cutification, infantilization, and feminization work to evoke cuteness as what Ngai terms "an eroticization of powerlessness" that evokes "tenderness for 'small things' but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further" (4). While attempting to empower people who menstruate to stand out, Sokoler and Mellor leverage their power by publicly belittling models — their chosen standout girls "who are doing visually creative things in the world" — as well as customers who menstruate visibly.

## Violence

It is important to acknowledge and direct the power struggle inherent in cuteness; otherwise, this power struggle, which in-



Figure 6. Jessie Hemmons' Tampax® Radiant tampon print advertisement. "Tampax Radiant Print Advertising Campaign." *ishknits*, 9 July 2012.

cludes elements of psychological abuse, such as the desire to belittle or diminish objects assumed to be powerless, will make itself visible. It is clear from Sokoler's interview for her Tampax Radiant television commercial that something not entirely sac-

charine is transpiring. Sokoler claims: “I wanted to try to try something new with photography. Instead of shooting models, I wanted to shoot real people [...]. It all comes together when someone walks under it and I sort of almost think of it like they’re falling into a little trap” (“Tampax”; fig. 5).

In her analysis of the power of photography, Susan Sontag argues that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power” (4). For Sontag, photography bestows upon its viewer an imaginary possession of an unreal past and “of a space in which they are insecure” (9). To “load” film, “aim” a camera, “shoot” a subject, and “capture” an image are all common action verbs used to describe photographic processes that link cameras and guns, images and bodies, and representation and warfare. Distinguishing once more between real people and models, Sokoler deploys photographic idioms to describe her artistic process. Her language directs us toward an understanding of her street art as an act of aggression meant to claim a position of power and to gain control over public space, where she might normally feel insecure.

Hemmons, the yarn bomber, joins Sokoler as a standout girl who makes art that articulates itself through violent terminology (fig. 6). In “Craft, Gender and Politics,” Amy Gilligan questions the term *yarn bombing* because the contemporary craft deliberately does not distance itself from its “maternal” gestures and instead consciously acknowledges and validates an arena where, historically, women artists could “stand out.” Gilligan contends that “even if the identification of craft in protest with women isn’t shouted about, the ‘feminine’ nature of craft is still there below the surface, and used as a contrast to the ‘masculinity’ of war” (Gilligan). The contrast, Gilligan argues, reinforces gender binarism that locates women as soft and caring and men as aggressive.

Neither the print advertisements nor the television commercials that Sokoler and Hemmons designed for Tampax Radiant speak directly of their choice of feminized aesthetics—the



*Figure 7.* White on black infinity net painting. Yayoi Kusama, *No. F* (959). The Museum of Modern Art.

materials and artistic processes with which they challenged the archetypal masculinity of warfare and the public realm. I wonder who exactly made the artistic and ideological decisions here. I am tempted to redirect the power I had previously seen in Sokoler and Hemmons because of the authenticity of their message and the politically relevant nature of their work, and to hand it over to anyone who can explain more clearly the participation of the two street artists in this Tampax campaign. But why am I so quick to dismiss Sokoler and Hemmons? Would I be so quick to question their knowledge of their own artwork if they had worked within another aesthetic framework? This could explain how two visually creative women seemed like the right “standout girls” to sell products and push a message that, in actuality, contradicts directly the value of their feminized aesthetics, materials, and artistic processes in gaining possession of the public realm.

I began this chapter by dismissing tampon commercials. I also acknowledged and examined the power struggle inherent in cuteness through Sokoler's 2012 Tampax Radiant advertising campaign. But in trying to prove my argument, I too belittle Sokoler, Mellor, and Hemmons, women who I assumed were powerless in the first place. Have I joined them in being manipulated by the very aesthetic that I'm trying to deconstruct?

### Yayoi Kusama

When I saw Sokoler's television commercial, I immediately thought of Yayoi Kusama and her all-encompassing polka-dot installations. What solidified the connection was the fact that Sokoler wears a polka-dot dress in her advertising materials, which alludes to Kusama's propensity to dress in the same type of pattern. Moreover, Sokoler's project is sponsored by a corporation, a sponsorship only slightly less glamorous than that of Louis Vuitton, with which Kusama has a business partnership. Kusama functions as a valuable comparison to the lack of clarity surrounding Sokoler's tampon project. (There I go belittling Sokoler again; this is a particularly nasty strain of cuteness...) Kusama's early articulation of the power struggle and violence inherent to her polka-dot installations allows her to use, rather than be used by, cuteness to belittle others, only to remain ultimately disempowered.

Yayoi Kusama had her first solo exhibition at Brata Gallery in New York City in October 1959. The exhibition consisted of several white-on-black infinity-net paintings (fig. 7).

In her autobiography, *Infinity Net*, Kusama writes:

I often suffered episodes of severe neurosis. I would cover a canvas with nets, then continue painting them on the table, on the floor, and finally on my own body. As I repeated this process over and over again, the nets began to expand to infinity. I forgot about myself as they enveloped me, clinging to my arms and legs and clothes and filling the entire room. (20)



Already existing off the canvas, Kusama's infinity nets took spatial form when she converted the nets' negative space into polka dots. Kusama reflects on her intentions in using polka dots and on their connection to the infinity net:

My desire was to predict and measure the infinity of the unbounded universe, from my own position in it, with dots—an accumulation of particles forming the negative spaces in the net. How deep was the mystery? Did infinite infinities exist beyond our universe? In exploring these questions I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life. One polka dot: a single particle among billions. I issued a manifesto stating that everything — myself, others, the entire universe — would be obliterated by white nets of nothingness connecting astronomical accumulations of dots. White nets enveloping the black dots of silent death against a pitch-dark background of nothingness. (23)

The first adventures of Kusama's polka dots off the canvas took place in her solo exhibition, *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field*, at R. Castellane Gallery in November 1965. According to Kusama,

The walls of the room were mirrors, and sprouting from the floor were thousands of white canvas phallic forms covered with red polka dots. The mirrors reflected them infinitely, summoning up a sublime, miraculous field of phalluses. People could walk barefoot through the phallus meadow, becoming one with the work and experiencing their own figures and movements as part of the sculpture. Wandering into this infinite wonderland, where a grandiose aggregation of human sexual symbols had been transformed into a humorous, polka-dotted field, viewers found themselves spell-bound by the imagination as it exorcised sexual sickness in the naked light of day. (48–51)

Although Kusama arrived at the cute form of the polka dot, which delivers her ideas with humor, the polka dot developed out of the negative space of infinity nets that Kusama saw, experienced, and painted during episodes of severe neurosis. Kusama has spoken about the origin of her forms and their impact on the development of her ideas. Instead of her polka dots being used to possess space in the public sphere or to trap innocent bystanders, Kusama points out that the bystanders are already trapped, along with her, in a white net of nothingness that connects the accumulation of dots that are our lives.

## Publics

As Michael Warner theorizes in *Publics and Counterpublics*, a public is a space organized by discourse. It is autotelic and exists only “by virtue of being addressed” (67). Not only do Sokoler and Kusama sell us tampons, handbags, and artwork through cuteness, they also create publics in which you and I participate. How is it that, regardless of their similarities, Sokoler and Kusama are creating different publics because of the differences in their manners of address? Looking at what kinds of spaces of discourse Sokoler and Kusama create is important because of the infectious nature of cuteness. This infectiousness, I argue, gives the artists the short-term power of constituting a public, which, in turn, makes cuteness seem like a suitable strategy. On the infectiousness of the cute, Ngai draws attention to the fact that “the admirer of the cute puppy or baby often ends up unconsciously emulating that object’s infantile qualities in the language of her aesthetic appraisal” (3), not unlike the automatic mimesis experienced by viewers of horror films, melodrama, and pornography.<sup>1</sup>

A similar kind of mimicry is evident in the space of discourse that Sokoler has created on her blog, *Color Me Katie*. Of the 109 comments Sokoler received on her blog post introducing her Tampax ad (fig. 8), “cute” comes in first place in the adjective

1 See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” (1991).



Figure 8. Adjectives used by commenters on Katie Sokoler's *Color Me Katie* "Tampax Ad" blog post. "Tampax Ad," *Color Me Katie*, 9 July 2012.

race, with a total of eighteen mentions. "Cool," "awesome," and "fun" are not even close seconds, with thirteen mentions each. Adjectives used in the comment section, in order of their frequency, include: "cute" (including its variations of "super cute," "very cute," and "cutest"), "cool" ("so cool," "really cool"), "awesome" ("beyond awesome"), "fun" ("super fun"), "great," "adorable," "amazing" ("pretty amazing"), "lovely," "real," "sweet," "beautiful," "fantastic," "wonderful," "creative," "brilliant," "addictive," "funny," "perfect," "nice," "phenomenal," "fabulous," and "pretty." Furthermore, bloggers mirrored Sokoler's enthusiasm in their choice of punctuation with no less than 182 exclamation points and twenty-five smiley-face emoticons: :), :-).

On July 9, 2012, at 1:05 p.m., Anna L. Roeder posted, "How amazing! probably the best tampon ad ever made. Actually makes it kind of cute. Love your art and radiance!" By "it" Roeder appears to refer to the menstrual cycle. This means that the

- Cute (Super Cute, Very Cute, Cutest)
- Cool (So Cool, Really Cool)
- Awesome (Beyond Awesome)
- Fun (Super Fun)
- Great
- Adorable
- Amazing (Pretty Amazing)
- Lovely
- Real
- Sweet
- Beautiful
- Fantastic
- Wonderful
- Creative
- Brilliant
- Addictive
- Funny
- Perfect
- Nice

infectiousness of cuteness has infected not only Sokoler's audience, as articulated in the public space of discourse of a blog, but also her chosen subject matter.

In comparison, Kusama has used cuteness to ease adults into conversation around art, anxiety, infinity, nothingness, obliteration, death, sexuality, and sickness "in the naked light of day." Kusama addresses her public with her severe neurosis clearly by her side, seeking a shared obliteration.

## Conclusion

Although we have no choice as to what publics we participate in, we can choose what brand of cuteness we will deploy to address others, which will create other publics and infect other spaces of discourse. Not being trapped, shot, infantilized, rendered invisible, bombed, or obliterated seem like ideal options. But if I had a choice in my space of discourse, I would go with the kind of public that is created by an artist who speaks to me as an adult and invites me into a conversation about power through the aesthetic of cuteness, rather than a public created by an artist or an artistic director, that seems to control their chosen aesthetic only to belittle the power of its participants, yet not enough to avoid ultimately being disempowered by it in turn.

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