

Out of ordure. Shi(f)t(s) and fluidity in expelling (e)motion.

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1. Introduction

The first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed a surge of what I would like to label "Brown Humour" as a phrase to describe the presence of lexis pertaining to faecal matter in a varied array of comic interaction. Undoubtedly, so-called toilet humour that was once mainly limited to the schoolyard has recently become à la mode in a wide range of discourse aimed at adults, in both old and new media. Amongst what appears to be a general lowering of register in culture, suffice it to consider the present acceptability of certain words that were once forbidden on mainstream media, a schoolyard mentality now seems to be allowed in adults. I have chosen the epithet "brown" simply because it best describes the colour of healthy faeces that, preceding the umbrella term "humour", creates an appropriate label for the presence of poop-based joking that many of us enjoyed in the playground in mainstream environments. What may have traditionally been considered a childish form of humour has now become ubiquitous in contemporary culture where it seems to be most evident within the political arena

satire to ridicule major actors on the world political scene.

Following a brief overview of faeces-related taboo words, I will provide an outline of Brown Humour in diverse cultural artefacts in British culture, providing examples from literature, film and the arts. Significantly, a daily bodily function that in Goffman's terms would be classed as a backstage activity, has always been quietly present in the arts yet today, it has jumped into the limelight within

humorous political discourse like never before and has occupied a front stage position. The core of this paper will focus both on the humorous side of the substance adopted as a satirical weapon, as well as on the word “shit” itself, especially when used to comic effect with particular emphasis of its occurrence in humour aimed at criticising politicians. In order to back up my argument, I will supply a number of Brexit-based cartoons and satirical depictions and descriptions of President of the United States of America, Donald Trump.

This examination does not stop short at cartoons, but will also examine the presence of the term “shit” and related images of the substance in a variety of politically oriented internet memes too. Although I make no claim at scientific rigour in my choice of examples, as I have not collected a corpus; my examples have been picked quite randomly in a “quick and dirty” manner. I believe, however, that many speakers of English in the UK will be aware that sample reflects a trend of a general lowering of linguistic and social standards.

2. The last taboo?

When and where we perform our bowel movements complies with Goffman’s (1959) well-known dramaturgic front and backstage metaphor. The emptying of our bowels is something we do in private and do not discuss with others. Defecation, as aptly put in a poem by Craig Raine, takes place backstage.

Only the young are allowed to suffer
openly. Adults go to a punishment room
with water but nothing to eat.
They lock the door and suffer the noises
alone. No one is exempt
and everyone’s pain has a different smell¹.

¹ *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* (1979).

In terms of language, expressions to describe the substance that we excrete are abundant, with words such as dirt, doo-doo, dropping, dung, excrement, excreta, ordure, poop, scat, slops, soil, waste, to illustrate just a few of the names associated with what is, I would argue, one of the last taboos in western society. Compared to matters of the sexual domain that were once considered off limits in media and conversation yet are now becoming widely acceptable in both reserved discourse and the public sphere, matters pertaining to what is discharged from our guts still remain a no-go area. Evidence of this can be found by simply searching Google for “tips for pooping in public”. Such a search produces 3,440,000 hits, suggesting that for millions of people, emptying one’s bowels in an unfamiliar or public place is a problem. However, a search that adds “...without making a noise” to the same string, yields almost three times as many hits –12,300,000². Therefore, given that this everyday occurrence is a social taboo, it follows that the use of words associated with it are also taboo. Should we need to discuss our motions with a doctor or a nurse we would use the term “faeces” or “stools”. Yet, when we need to express anger, disappointment, surprise or a number of other strong emotions, in English, we are likely to prefer the term “shit”. When it comes to expressing emotion, politeness may not always be an option.

Excreta emerge from our anuses, an intimate part of human anatomy that we do not put on public display. Terms connected to bodily functions and parts of our bodies surrounding our anuses have traditionally been used as curses and oaths. The anus itself and the fatty tissue around it have generated words like “bottom”, “bum” and the more genteel Frenchified “derrière” as well as the discreet euphemisms “behind” and “sit-upon”. However, British English also has the stronger terms “arse” and, the even stronger, “arsehole”. Another human, albeit backstage activity connected to the anus is the expelling of flatulence that has produced the term “fart” which, as an insult (e.g. “old fart”) dates, back to 1937

² Numbers refer to a search carried out February 13th, 2020. See also Esther Crain “How to Poop Politely at Work, on Planes, and at a Guy’s Place. Your ultimate guide to number two etiquette”, *Women’s Health* March 27th, 2015. Available at <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/health/a19907348/pooping-in-public/> (accessed February 13th, 2020).

(Silverton 2010: 119). As we shall see in section 4, many cartoonists have picked up both this terminology and the imagery it triggers to deride political actors involved in Brexit as well as the 45th President of the United States of America.

In English, the word “shit” is a common swearword, which, like all swearwords refers to something that is stigmatized in the speaker’s culture, that is not to be taken literally and that can be used to express strong emotions or attitudes (see Anderson and Trudgill 1990). However, when the term is used to mock politicians, the taboo is often, but not always, destabilised and the word recovers its denotative meaning.

In everyday language, according to Hughes (2006), speakers regularly use the word “shit” as both a noun and a verb (i.e. “you shit” and verb “to take a shit”) as well as in its adjectival form, “shitty”. Although it would be grammatically correct, unlike the word “fuck”, you cannot tell someone to “shit off” and neither can you say, “shit it”. Furthermore, the term also complies with Bergen’s (2016) “holy, fucking, nigger, shit” principle that asserts that swearwords always pertain to religion, sex, race or bodily functions. While this is correct, it is also true that nowadays there has been a shift in what people consider offensive. According to Ofcom, the BBC regulator, the British public consider religious curses the least offensive while slurs regarding race and sexuality are the most offensive³. Furthermore, according to Silverton (2010:121–122), there is a “fantastic ubiquity to shit” with constructions such as “No shit!”, “What a shitty day!”, “Get your shit together!” as well as idioms such as to be “shat upon from high”, to be “in deep shit” or “up shit’s creek (without a paddle)”. Furthermore, we have expressions like “not giving a shit” and “shit hitting the fan” – the list of shit-based idioms seems endless (see Hughes 2006; Silverton 2010). “Shit” is a particularly interesting taboo word as, unlike other English swearwords, such as “fuck”, according to a study carried out by Byrne and Corney (2014) it generally expresses something negative. Their study concerned football fans who exclusively used the term negatively whereas their use of “fuck” appeared to be a sign of either good or

³ “Ofcom explores latest attitudes to offensive language” Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2016/attitudes-to-offensive-language> (accessed March 1st, 2020).

bad. However, having said that, this strictly negative use of the word may well be restricted to football fans because it is quite complimentary to describe someone who is extremely attractive as being “shit hot”.

3. From the playground to the arts

Let us now consider the pervasiveness of Brown Humour across diverse aspects of British culture. A cabaret duo from the 1950s called Flanders and Swann were popular in Britain for their satirical ditties on a variety of topical subjects. Among their routines was a song that opened with the line “Mum’s out, Pa’s out, let’s talk rude” that climaxed with the line: “Pee, po, belly, bum, drawers”⁴. The song peaked at a moment in time when huge cultural change was sweeping across the western world, especially concerning sexuality. The 1960s were a time of profound societal change in which, among other things, thanks to the contraceptive pill, young people shifted away from traditional values related to sex and sexuality towards newly found sexual liberation. The sexually explicit writings of the Beat Generation in the USA coincided with the appearance of the unexpurgated version of the erotic novel *Fanny Hill* in the UK⁵. Suddenly, there was a lot of nudity in film and on stage in productions such as *Hair* and *Oh Calcutta!* In response to the sexual revolution, Flanders and Swann couched their ‘rude’ song in the language of childhood. Their underlying message was, if we can talk freely about sex and display our naked bodies at liberty, we should also be able to talk openly about other matters that belong to our nether regions. The duo made their point with a double whammy that satirized the new sexual mores of the sixties yet did so avoiding words that may have been offensive to some. Nevertheless, it is not by chance that they adopt childish terms for urine (“pee”),

⁴ A performance of the song by the duo is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSrXqOI9988> (accessed March 5th, 2020).

⁵ A racy 18th-century novel by John Cleland about a woman of pleasure, *Fanny Hill* is considered the first example in Britain of pornographic writing.

excreta (“po”), the tummy (“belly”), the buttocks (“bum”) and even knickers (“drawers”).

In the rich findings of folklorists Opie and Opie (1959), an academic couple who recorded the language of children at play across the British Isles for over thirty years from the fifties to the seventies, ample toilet talk emerged. In their collections, there are numerous examples of what the couple label “impropriety” in the form of rhymes and poems about bowel movements and urinating. Although some of the materials they collected appear to have been blue-pencilled, as they may have been considered rather spicy at the time, today, the actual (and uncensored) recordings are available for consultation in the British Library archives⁶. I would like to focus on the children’s giggling as they recite their rude rhymes, even when they may not be sure why they are laughing. In the recording of the rhyme featuring Donald Duck, the boy reciting the rhyme comes across as being very excited as he giggles nervously while he performs for the researchers. He knows that he is talking about something he shouldn’t be talking about:

Donald Duck
Done some muck
Behind the kitchen door
Mrs Duck licked it up
And did a whole lot more⁷

At the same time, the boy knows and yet he doesn’t know what he is saying. He illustrates Sontag’s (2004) concept of “partial knowing” which precisely acknowledges what humour involves – simultaneously knowing yet not knowing.

⁶ See Andrew Burn 2016 “Humour, jokes and rude rhymes” from the British Library Archives with original recordings at <https://www.bl.uk/playtimes/articles/humour-jokes-and-rude-rhymes>. See also The Iona and Peter Opie Archive, available at <https://www.opiearchive.org/> (accessed February 15th, 2020).

⁷ The recordings are from the National Sound Archive website available at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/childrens-jokes> (accessed February 15th, 2020).

The child knows that we empty our bowels in private, but is unlikely to have come across coprophagia, yet he instinctively seems to know that he is crossing a line. He knows that faeces are not to be eaten or “licked up” and that talking about coprophagia is something daring for a child. He knows that he is being bold and that he is talking about something inappropriate. He is laughing, not only because the rhyme itself is funny, but he knows he is breaking a rule and is almost trying to stifle his laughter. In fact, children challenge, threaten and diffuse adult power by exploring topics such as sex and faeces. This can be unsettling to adults as very often children’s humour is crude, sexist and homophobic and flouts our moral codes. The child in the recording is silently saying, “I know I shouldn’t be saying this, but I’m going to anyway. Aren’t I clever, Aren’t I daring”.

Let us now fast forward from the playground to adulthood. British humour is notorious for its obsession with humour involving lavatories. Orwell (1941) highlights the British obsession with this kind of “low” humour and “W.C. jokes”. Yet low as it may be, Brown Humour is no stranger to satire. English literature is heavily smeared dozens of literary works through the years where it has been used as a mechanism of social critique and as a reminder that the lofty aspirations of human beings are often full of excreta. There are dozens of examples of this in English literature. Johnathan Swift was a writer who seems especially obsessed with faeces. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Lilliputians have to run for shelter when Gulliver pees and poops, in Brobdingnag there is a reversal of roles as Gulliver becomes the victim of showers and storms of urine and faecal matter; the Yahoos are sort of monkeys who throw excreta around and the Houyhnhnms smudge walls with their faeces in what seems to be writing. Most famously however, is Swift’s poem *The Lady’s Dressing Room* (1732), in which, upon entering the dressing room of the lady of his dreams, Strephon comes across clothes that smell of sweat, handkerchiefs containing snot, and above all a chamber pot enclosing her excreta to which he cries out “Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!” Significantly, Lady Mary Wortley Montague, wife to the British ambassador to Turkey well known for her letters in which she writes of her travels to the Ottoman Empire, covered the seat of her chamber pot with pages ripped out of books by Swift and Pope. As recounted by Mack (1985: 555), she said, “They

were the greatest Rascals, but she had the satisfaction of shitting on them every day”.

Beyond literature with a capital ‘L’ in Britain, Brown Humour extends to traditions such as that of the saucy seaside postcard. Donald McGill was the most famous artist of the genre that depicted, among other racy subjects, people suffering from diarrhoea and/or constipation, unable to control their flatulence and men and women with oversized bottoms⁸. According to Orwell (1941):

Chamber pots are ipso facto funny, and so are public lavatories. A typical post card captioned ‘A Friend in Need’, shows a man’s hat blown off his head and disappearing down the steps of a ladies’ lavatory [...] A comic post card is simply an illustration to a joke, invariably a ‘low’ joke, and it stands or falls by its ability to raise a laugh.

Apart from the tradition of cheeky seaside postcards that are packed with rude and titillating double entendres, the 31 “Carry On” films (1958–78) also mark this tradition of bawdy humour. The script of each film is crammed with jokes and innuendo about lavatories, constipation, diarrhoea, suppositories and other bottom-related humour. The 1959 film, *Carry on Nurse* ends with an iconic scene for UK audiences. Instead of taking the rectal temperature of a particularly troublesome patient, two nurses insert a daffodil between his buttocks instead. When Matron arrives she looks shocked, the patient says, “Come, come, Matron. Surely, you’ve seen a temperature taken like this before?” to which she responds “Yes Colonel. But never with a daffodil!”⁹ This scene well exemplifies the kind of ‘low’ humour described by Orwell.

The poster for *Carry on at your Convenience* (1971) – a film with an unlikely plot that links a trade union dispute with toilets and bidets – depicts the actors emerging from a cistern and reads “flushed with success the carry on team carry

⁸ Examples of the work of Donald McGill can be found at the website of the museum dedicated to the artist <https://saucyseasidepostcards.com/>

⁹ Scene available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfKE7I-UtIA> (accessed February 17th 2020).

on round the bend”¹⁰. Characters include W.C. Boggs, the owner of a lavatory factory and Vic Spanner, the union representative. All puns intended. And not even Monty Python were able to resist Brown Humour, with for instance the notorious example from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, (1975, UK, directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones): “I fart in your general direction” that has become an internet meme¹¹.

Today, Brown Humour is especially pervasive in digital spaces. Apart from its occurrence on social media, it is also present in the “below the line” (BTL) sections of many UK on-line newspapers. *The Guardian* will typically publish a serious article, such as an editorial, that may have a CiF section (comment is free) in which readers may publish their opinions on the piece above¹². What is of interest to my argument is that in the throes of serious political debate, it seems to have become the norm for readers to pepper discourse with jocular references pertaining to gastrointestinal matter. This begs the following question, why do we joke about and, why are we amused by something that appals us.

4. Excremental Politics

I will now examine the presence of images of faecal matter in newspaper cartoons that satirize political leaders involved in the issue of Brexit and those that lampoon the figure of US President Donald Trump. What is the link between poop and those who govern us?

Cartoons principally consist of pictures, and may, or may not, also contain verbal content. Although a theoretical discussion of multimodal texts is beyond the scope of this article, cartoons are polysemiotic texts in which images, sounds and

¹⁰ See <https://letterboxd.com/film/carry-on-at-your-convenience/> (accessed February 17th 2020).

¹¹ Clip available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWBUI7oT9sA> (accessed February 17th 2020).

¹² The line “Comment is free but facts are sacred” is attributed to C.P. Scott, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* (now *The Guardian*) from 1872 until 1929 and its owner from 1907 until his death.

words, whether verbal or non-verbal, will tend to be inextricably linked to convey meaning (for a recent overview of multimodality see Boria *et al.* 2019). Although the term “shit” itself does not always necessarily occur in the verbal content of the cartoons examined, images denote not only the term but also, and above all, they allude to idioms in which the word does occur. Furthermore, while also beyond the scope of the present discussion, significantly, the examples I provide, despite their scantiness of verbal content, often remain untranslatable owing to the lack of a link between visual content and “shit-based” idioms in languages other than English. It is typical for multimodal humour to be fashioned within a nonverbal mode such as sound or image with a total absence of verbal language within the text as a whole (Chiaro forthcoming). Politically based cartoons are comparable to crosswords, which in turn are comparable to complex instances of verbally expressed humour (Chiaro 1992) in which the reader/recipient has to work out the verbal meaning to which the cartoonist aspires, often via imagery alone.

The sheer quantity of instances in which numerous cartoonists choose to include excreta in their illustrations regarding both British politicians and Donald Trump can be easily checked via a Google search¹³. Although use of the word “shit” in everyday interaction and in the media has become more acceptable since the 1960s (McEnery 2006) there are still numerous domains in which it is still deemed improper, but humorous discourse is not one of them. When we joke, we are playing with language and are entering Bateson’s “play frame” (1953) that allows for the suspension of a variety of social, and I would argue, moral norms. It would seem that within this play frame, the idea of taboo may also be suspended. Yet, although the context of play frame is paramount, what the joker implies through a combination of fun and disgust can be serious, as in the case of politics and ideology. Thus, political humour tout court is both seriously funny and funny seriously¹⁴.

¹³ On March 5th, 2020, a Google search of the string “Brexit + Shit” produced 5.790.000 hits; adding “cartoon” to the string produced 759.000 hits. The string “Donald Trump + shit” produced 27.200.000 hits.

¹⁴ I would like to acknowledge the concept of “seriously funny and funny seriously” to Debra Arons.

4.1 Brexit or Brexshit?

In real life conversation, jokes about politics have always existed. And jokes about politics have traditionally been created by the people, for the people (Davies 1998). Joking about those who govern us is a way to let off steam, to display our malaise and, above all to criticise them seriously, even though we are only joking. Paradoxically, we can be seriously funny about serious issues. Political cartoons have a long tradition in the UK, but what is new today, is the fact that technology has first allowed newspapers and their cartoonists to appear online and second, thanks to Web 2.0 for readers to interact with the newspaper and with each other. We have an ongoing conversation, in which the public, despite the seriously political content of the cartoon, has fun and can engage in verbal play with others. Users are often vulgar – but then so are the cartoonists. Nevertheless, the people have a place, moderated by the newspaper, where they can have their say. They have their say jokingly, but that does not mean that they are not being serious. The presence of the word “shit” and its surrounding idioms conveys the public’s disgust at political issues and the incompetence of governance. According to Davies, political jokes are a sort of thermometer of a nation’s feelings towards those who govern them (personal communication) in the sense that they simply registered feelings but never actually changed anything. Perhaps they are a safety valve for the hoi polloi, a means to criticise safely (after all, they are only joking) and one thing is certain, and that is that joking about political malaise does not change a thing. Yet, those in power may see this humour as dangerous. During the Soviet regime, for example, political jokes were suppressed and were a punishable form of dissent.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term Brexit, that was first included as an entry in 2016, was coined by the blogger Peter Wilding in 2012. However, the contending term ‘Brexshit’ adopted by so-called Remainers, appeared in the *Urban Dictionary*, an online parodic version of traditional lexicons, in July 2016, in the wake of the referendum of June 26th of the same year. The *Urban Dictionary* definition is purely farcical with its display of puns like “Arsical 50” and its metaphorical explanations of the “economic diarrhoea” that will follow when

“Britain’s ass explode[s]” (Fig.1a). The *Dictionary* also presents a parodic definition of the term, explaining that the word “Brexit” refers to a total disaster. In line with what appears to be the *Dictionary’s* policy, the definition of Brexit itself also contains taboo terminology, namely “fuck up totally” (Fig.1b).

Although whoever came up with the term “Brexit” remains a mystery, for a number of reasons it is an appropriate word. Metaphorically speaking, many Tories and many of the people who are in favour of Brexit want to empty Britain’s bowels of the EU. Many, in fact, see the EU as matter out of place. If we look at the situation from the EU point of view, much ordure will be expelled when the UK leaves the union and will need to be flushed away. At the same time, the UK will never be entirely liberated from foul matter, namely the result of Brexit. Soon after the 2016 referendum, there began to be talk about a “soft” or a “hard Brexit”, two expressions that are much in line with the consistency of stools, with diarrhoea and constipation. In the event of a hard Brexit, the UK would not have to sign up to free movement of EU nationals, or be subject to the European Court of Justice. It would probably not have to contribute to the EU budget. The concept of hardness and softness and its facile link to faeces paves the way for Brown Brexit Humour.

TOP DEFINITION



Brexshit

Economic diarrhoea for when your [bank](#) balance bowels want out. [Swallow](#) the laxative of £350m a day for the NHS, and watch Britain's [ass](#) explode. Use Sun Newspaper front page scare stories about Europe to wipe away the mess.

"You'd better call the doctor. [Better out than in](#), you said, but your #Brexit has [gone](#) [Arsical 50!](#)"

#brexit #tories #rupert murdoch #conservatives #conservative #sun newspaper #sun #lies #ukip #edl #far right #nhs #doctor #britain #europe #eu #media #diarrhoea #bowels #shit #shite # poo #poop #the runs #loose stools #daily express #daily mail #the times #guardian #lib dems #labour #stupid #crap #banks #jobs #unemployment #xenophobia #migrant s #immigration #scare stories #skint #daft #moronic #broke

by [bredbasket](#) July 17, 2016

Fig. 1a. The *Urban Dictionary* entry for “Brexit”



Fig. 1b. The *Urban Dictionary* “Top Definition” for “Brexshit”

This “hard/soft” discourse became manna for UK political cartoonists who regularly began to feature instances of Brown Humour in their cartoons. On September 29th, 2016, *The Guardian* published a cartoon by Steve Bell beneath the caption “Britons: The choice is yours (not)...” The cartoon consists of two sketches each within its own separate frame. One frame contains a cartoon featuring Liam Fox, then President of the Board of Trade, seated on a toilet holding a biscuit covered with the Union Jack from which he has taken a bite. The caption above the frame reads, “Hard Brexit”. The second frame portrays a dog that bears a remarkable likeness to Boris Johnson, sitting in a toilet wrapped in Union Jack patterned toilet tissue; the caption above it, that follows on from the one above the previous frame reads “... or, soft, strong and surprisingly long Brexit”¹⁵. The cartoon is followed by 721 comments from readers in the so-called BTL area in which both the word “shit” and reference to the subject matter itself feature pervasively.

The first comment BTL, “Love the cartoon. Britain shitting on the EU and then flushing it down the pan where it belongs” triggers 30 responses alone. The first response, “I think it refers to Brexshit, but you already knew that”, gains 263 “likes”

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2016/sep/29/steve-bell-on-the-possible-outcomes-of-brexit-cartoon>

from other readers. The interaction that follows is a tapestry of banter in and around the word “shit”. “The thing in the pan is Britain”, “Maybe the toilet paper represents the UK flag, and Boris is wiping the turd off his hole with it”; “Think the thing in the pan is whatever brilliant idea Liam Fox has just pulled out of his arse and polished as policy” are just three shit-centred retorts to the first post. Among the other comments BTL, the term “turd” emerges to create the homophonic pun “turd world country” and to the more complex reference to Johnson, “going round the bend” likening him both to faecal matter going round the toilet bend and metaphorically to a lunatic (Fig.2). We also find play such as “flushed with success” (Liam Fox) together with several denotative uses of the word too.

Fig. 2. Comments BTL Steve Bell, *The Guardian* September 29th, 2016.



Bell also regularly depicts Johnson with the politician’s naked bottom in place of his face, i.e. a naked bottom wearing a blonde mop of hair, thus making a clear reference to someone who talks “through their arse”. During the Brexit debate, several caricaturists depicted politicians who were in favour of Brexit bent over double with their heads inserted in their derrières. The English language has the

word “arsehole” since 1400 but only since 1968 has the term been used to indicate a fool (Silverton 2010: 111). As for the expression to be “up one’s own arse”, it refers to someone who is extremely self-opinionated and arrogant. Ben Jennings’s portrayal of Theresa May in *The i* newspaper (Fig. 3) illustrates this concept. The Prime Minister is seated on a plane preparing for an emergency landing – the verbal/visual metaphor is patently clear – she is bracing herself for Brexit. First, she braces as the plane/Brexit heads towards disaster and then, her head disappears into her behind.



Fig.3. Ben Jennings *the i* June 22nd, 2018.


Martin Rowson, another regular cartoonist in *The Guardian*, uses excreta to make fun of Brexit in a much darker and less playful way. In a cartoon entitled “Law and Ordure” (Fig.4) a journalist is carrying a bucketful of steaming human dung¹⁶. The bucket is labelled “Finest steaming anti-elite British Brexit ... Produce of more than one country of residence, our proprietor”. The cartoon clearly references


¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2017/feb/16/martin-rowson-on-brexit-and-the-supreme-court-cartoon> (accessed March 1st, 2020).


Rowson’s opinion of the British press who supported the anti-European policy of the Conservative government. BTL comments emulate the artist’s same line of thought with witty banter that includes references to excreta (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Martin Rowson the Supreme Court cartoon *The Guardian* February 16th, 2017.

 **Tom Carter** 16 Feb 2017 21:54 2 ↑
Well, if the shit fits the judges better wear it.
< [Share](#) [Report](#)

 **AlManac408** → **Tom Carter** 16 Feb 2017 22:13 51 ↑
No, you're thinking of the word "shoe", Tommy dear. The shit is what your favourite tabloids are shovelling.
< [Share](#) [Report](#)

 **ethelfrida** → **AlManac408** 16 Feb 2017 23:42 2 ↑
And it's about to hit the fan.
< [Share](#) [Report](#)


 **Flumpalicious** → **Tom Carter** 17 Feb 2017 0:15 26 ↑
Because this is taking back control eh Tom? Supporting tax dodging foreign press barons in shitting on the judiciary? Moronic doesn't quite cut it tbh.
< [Share](#) [Report](#)

Fig. 5. *The Guardian* BLT Martin Rowson’s “Law and Ordure” cartoon.

Users BTL enjoy engaging in word play in a similar way to conversational “ping-pong-punning” (Chiaro 1992) except that online interactional banter is more similar to a game of chess as players have more time to prepare their moves

(Chiaro 2018). In the sequence reported in Fig.5 the first (pro-Brexit) poster either deliberately manipulates the idiom “if the shoe fits wear it”, replacing “shoe” with “shirt” to then accidentally but on purpose create the taboo item “shit”, or, perhaps, he really got the idiom wrong in the first place. Either way, a Remainer who accuses the tabloid press of “shovelling the shit” soon corrects him. The next poster refers to another shit-based idiom, by simply posting “...it’s about to hit the fan”. There is no need to insert the missing word, “shit” in such a well-known and widely used idiom. The exchange closes with a serious remark that includes the phrasal verb to “shit upon.” This type of wordplay woven with words pertaining to a single semantic field is typical of BLT exchanges (Chiaro 2018). Our online comedians create a tapestry, albeit of words alluding to unsavoury matter.

4. 2 Donald Trump – a comic trope

The figure of Donald Trump has become a comic trope. Like Silvio Berlusconi before him, the mere mention of his name in certain circles raises a laugh. A google search (see note 9) produces thousands of images of the President that co-occur with images of faeces and, of course, the word “shit”¹⁷. Among the images, we find the “Pile of Poo” emoji topped with Trump’s iconic hair; countless memes in which he is described as being “full of shit”; a “piece of shit” and someone who “makes shit up”. The imagery is strong – images of real stools are photo shopped onto his hair, onto an x-ray image of his brain and coming out of his mouth. These insulting images are endless. If so many people are comparing President Trump to excreta, it is likely that they feel aversion towards him and are disgusted by his actions. Are they really only joking? Moral disgust for his politics is turned into verbal and physical disgust portrayed in visual semblances of an unpleasantly smelly substance we flush away and prefer not to speak about.

¹⁷ See:

https://www.google.it/search?q=Donald+Trump+shit&hl=it&sxsrf=ALeKk00milXHEynnoTWMdM1RvIaEW7NiPQ:1583395016737&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiJy4uM7oLoAhULbcAKHY1wA5gQ_AUoAXoECAsQAw&biw=1600&bih=685 (accessed March 5th, 2020).

The Guardian's Steve Bell typically depicts Trump with a golden lavatory seat cover in place of his hair. On December 7th 2016, he published a cartoon lampooning the cover of *Time* – it featured an image of Trump seated, depicted with his golden toilet seat in place of his notorious blonde hair, entitled “Porcelain of the Year – Donald Dump – president of the Turd Reich”¹⁸. Bell is not alone in linking excreta with the 45th POTUS. On January 21st, 2017, the day of the Presidential inauguration, Martin Rowson, in *The Guardian*, portrays Trump standing in a swamp of excreta wearing soiled diapers as he takes his oath. A clear reference to the US idiom “draining the swamp” (of corruption), large turds are floating alongside various “secretaries” of state, e.g. secretary for fish, for dinner etc. in a sea of liquid diarrhoea (Fig.6). Trump’s hand is placed on the bible, but the reader sees the letters B-U-Y-B-U followed what seems to be a letter L (Buy bull /Bible) on the spine of the book, which together with the dollar sign on its cover, could read “bullshit”.



Fig.6. Martin Rowson *The Guardian* January 21st, 2017.

The cover of the album the *Original Donald Trump Sound Bath* (Fig.7) is a more extreme example of humour and disgust. A machine creates a circuit that feeds faecal matter directly into Trump’s brain and back out through his mouth then up again into his head. The caption reads “Donald Trump is a piece of @#%\$”.

However, this relationship between humour and disgust is not restricted to Brexit politicians and Donald Trump. The trope appears to be universal when describing

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/picture/2016/dec/07/steve-bell-time-magazine-person-of-the-year-donald-trump-cartoon> (accessed March 1st, 2020).

politicians. The internet buzzes with photo-shopped images not only of Trump, but also of Italy's Matteo Renzi with an anus in place of their mouths. There are viral images online of Matteo Salvini, with his buttocks superimposed over half his face. The images of Salvini connote the expression "*faccia da culo*" / "arse face"¹⁹. Despite no verbal content, these images are semiotically universal. They are punching down at those above us, they may hold positions of power, but like us, they have anuses too. They have anuses from which disgusting material emanates on a daily level. They are like us and this is funny. Funny, disgusting and taboo breaking at the same time.

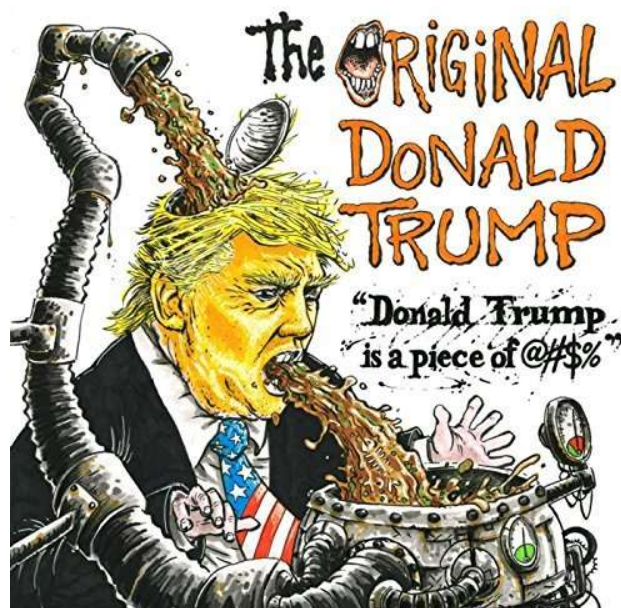


Fig. 7. The Donald Trump Sound Bath cover

¹⁹ For the image of Matteo Renzi see "Cosa si prova ad avere la faccia come il culo?" *Il Contagio* November 9th 2015, Available at: <https://ilcontagio.wordpress.com/2015/11/09/cosa-si-prova-ad-avere-la-faccia-come-il-culo/>.

For image of Salvini see "Matteo Salvini, di gonfiato ha solo la pancia, di gonfiabile il culo, e il cervello... zero assoluto!" Available at: <http://www.dongiorgio.it/26/07/2016/matteo-salvini-di-gonfiato-ha-solo-la-pancia-di-gonfiabile-il-culo-e-il-cervello-zero-assoluto/>.

For Trump see numerous images on Google: Available at: https://www.google.com/search?q=Trump+anus&client=firefox-b-d&sxsrf=ALeKk00kC9KII8VjLCtH3Fk1M5SssBtzvw:1583224290288&source=Inms&tbm=isch&a=X&ved=2ahUKEwiv-q-L8v3nAhWRyaQKHZbJDkQQ_AUoAXoECAsQAw&biw=1600&bih=722#imgrc=jp7FhKdiCW_kFM (all accessed March 3rd, 2020).

If we are unhappy with those that govern us, we are unlikely to be amused. We may be disgusted by their behaviour and lifestyle that we may deem inappropriate for someone responsible for a nation. Feelings of anger and disgust may well be vocalised with taboo language. In 2017, academic and political commentator Seth Abramson asked his followers on Twitter to describe the first 100 days of the Trump administration in two words. On the one hand, the numerous responses made references to faecal matter and therefore conveying the feeling of disgust that respondents felt about him, but on the other, answers were undoubtedly humorous.

Impeach him! Promises broken. Ugh, why? Apocalypse Now. **Shit sandwich**. Triple bogey. The fuck? **Shit poodle**. Bigly disaster. Global embarrassment. Too long. (Unintelligible) (unintelligible). Tremendously flaccid. Epic fail! You're fired. **Total shitgibbonry**. Dystopian horror. Monetizing treason. Russian idiot. Hillary won. National embarrassment. High treason. Kleptocracy agenda. Overdue impeachment. President Nightmare. Must impeach. Malicious incompetence. Russia, mostly. **Uncontrollable shitnado**. American kleptocracy. Utterly clueless. **Pee tape**. International embarrassment. Fourth Reich. **Volcano diarrhoea**. Grifter dynasty. **Hate-filled squatter**. Malignant mass. Waking nightmare. Embarrassing, terrifying. 100% failure. Daily insanity. As expected. Sleepless nights. Increased Xanax. Completely insane. Uniquely unqualified. Unprecedented failure. Total disaster. Orange plague. Deeply terrifying. Breathtaking incompetence. Trumptonian disaster. Epic failure. Malevolent incompetence. **Diarrhoea typhoon**. Obamacare won. Putin's puppet. Bigly inept. **Snifflegrabapuss dipshittery**²⁰.

Most of the responses are humorous in intent, and those that are not, are at the very least ironic. However, the creativity that emerges is significant, for example "Shit sandwich", "Shit poodle"; "volcano diarrhoea" and diarrhoea typhoon". The resourcefulness of respondents is evident, going as far as inventing portmanteaux like "shitnado", "shitgibbonry" and "dipshittery". They are funny and once again unite humour with disgust through a number of creative and original uses of the term "shit".

²⁰ Seth Abramson "This Is How 2,000+ Americans Described the Trump Administration (in Two Words)" April 29th, 2016, Available at: https://medium.com/@Seth_Abramson/this-is-how-2-000-americans-described-the-trump-administration-in-two-words-5b6805ad9bc6 (accessed March 3rd, 2020).

On January 11th, 2018, Trump allegedly used a “shit” based term himself when he declared, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here? ...Why do we need more Haitians?”²¹ He apparently also added, “We should have more people from places like Norway.” Over and above issues of political correctness, something regularly flouted by Trump (also by Johnson, Salvini and other populist politicians who cultivate outrageousness) this statement generated numerous internet memes that went viral across a variety of digital spaces. Internet memes, discussed in depth by Shifman (2014) represent a new way of spreading, via humour, morsels of culture in digital spaces. As expounded in the work of Christie Davies (1998) and developed by other humour scholars too (Oring, 1992; Kuipers 2006), any significant negative occurrence in society has traditionally generated jokes. At time of writing, the Coronavirus is creating havoc worldwide, yet jokes, parodies, internet memes and gifs on the subject abound. During the Spanish flu outbreak and even after 9/11, jokes were spread by word of mouth. Today they are spread by swiping our smart phones. Traditional conversational jokes, as well as specific disaster jokes, appear to have been replaced by memes (Chiaro 2018) especially in younger generations, but not only.

Memes are based on templates and they are regularly manipulated to fit a certain occasion (Shifman 2014). Among the countless memes generated by Trump’s “shithole countries” statement, we find a version of the “Distracted Boyfriend” meme. According to *Know your meme*, a sort of Wikipedia dedicated to memes, the “Distracted Boyfriend [meme], also known as ‘Man Looking at Other Woman’, is an object labelling stock photo series in which a man looks at the backside of a woman walking by while another woman, presumably his romantic partner, looks on disapprovingly”²². In the Haiti incident version of this meme, Trump is the distracted boyfriend, his girlfriend a “shithole country” and the other woman, is, of course, Norway (Fig.8).

²¹ Lauren Gambino “Trump pans immigration proposal as bringing people from ‘shithole countries’” January 12th, 2018. *The Guardian* (accessed March 3rd, 2020).

²² See <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend>



Fig. 8. "Shithole countries" Distracted Boyfriend meme

However, not all internet memes parodied Trump's statement. Many were clearly in his defence, such as one depicting an unkempt, derelict Haitian beach, with the ironic caption "How can Trump look at this beautiful Haitian beach and call it a sh***ole?" (Fig. 9).

What we see here is the emergence of two factions, one group attacks Trump through memes that take a moral stance i.e. why be so disgusted in the face of poverty? The other group uses irony to defend the President's attitude. Both sides use humour. Both sides play on disgust, but only one side is disgusted by Trump.

How can Trump look at this beautiful
Haitian beach and call it a sh ole?



Fig. 9. Ironic defence of Trump's alleged statement on Haiti.

There is a version of the “woman yelling at a cat meme” that places the two factions side by side (Fig.10)²³. In the first frame of the meme, the yelling woman attacks Trump, “How dare you call those wonderful countries ‘Sh*tholes’ you bigot” and in the second frame Trump responds “Why don’t you emigrate to those ‘wonderful countries’?” In the third frame the woman replies: “Because they’re fu**king sh*tholes!” What is happening here is that Trump supporters are attacking what they consider to be the hypocrisy of the moral high ground on

²³ According to *Knowyourmeme*: “Woman Yelling at a Cat refers to a meme format featuring a screen cap of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* cast members Taylor Armstrong and Kyle Richards followed by a picture of a confused-looking cat sitting behind a dinner plate. The format gained significant popularity across the web in mid-June 2019 and the cat was later identified as Smudge the Cat. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/woman-yelling-at-a-cat> (accessed March 3rd, 2020).

which his antagonists stand when they would be unlikely to want to live in third world conditions themselves.



**DON'T YOU DARE
CALL THOSE
WONDERFUL
COUNTRIES "SH·THOLES"
YOU BIGOT!**

**WHY DON'T YOU
EMIGRATE TO THOSE
"WONDERFUL"
COUNTRIES?**

**BECAUSE THEY'RE
FU··KING SH·THOLES**

Optimized by www.ImageOptimizer.net

Fig. 10. "Woman screaming at a cat meme" adapted for the Trump/Haiti issue

However, living in a globalised context, the "shithole" incident did not remain confined to either Trump or Haiti, as exemplified in a cartoon by Martin Rowson entitled "Well, if you know a better shithole..." that appeared in *The Guardian* on January 12th, 2018 (Fig.11)²⁴. The cartoon features former Prime Minister, Theresa May, wearing a necklace made of toilet cakes, wading knee deep in a sea of

²⁴ Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2018/jan/12/martin-rowson-shithole-countries-donald-trump-theresa-may-cartoon> (accessed March 3rd, 2020).

excreta trying to follow Donald Trump who is portrayed as a huge orange monster. Nigel Farage, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson follow her into the swamp. However, once more the 1133 comments following the cartoon BTL display a similar pattern that we saw previously, namely a rich tapestry of faeces-based, disgust+playful interaction (fig.12).



Fig.11. Martin Rowson on 'shithole' countries cartoon



Fig.12. BLT Martin Rowson on 'shithole' countries cartoon

BLT readers play, for instance, with the term “cloaca” (the orifice that some mammals have to excrete both urine and faeces) displaying their knowledge of classical Latin. They manipulate the expression *Sic itur ad astra* / “Such is the way to the stars/to immortality” and appropriate it to the Tory Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg, notorious for his use of Latin terms in his speeches. One respondent opens the thread by transforming the Latin expression into the more vulgar version *Sic itur ad cloaca*, which another respondent manipulates to *iTurd a cloaca* knowingly, or unknowingly, creating a translation based target language pun (Chiaro 2017), either way we have two references to excreta in a single expression. Once more, we find references to the “Turd World”, to Teresa May “running through fields of shit” – she had famously said in an interview how as a child she liked to run through fields of wheat. Another poster refers to “Gove’s head enveloped by Johnson’s rectum. Standing in the arseholes of pygmies!” as opposed to “on the shoulders of giants”.

By 2018, the term “shitshow” to refer to a (political) situation or event marked by chaos or controversy had become quite popular in the media. However, in September 2019, Boris Johnson used the term in Parliament. Although many British politicians are known for their witty rhetorical repertoire, taboo words are

quite inappropriate in such a context. What Johnson said, causing a stir and stifled laughter was, “The shadow education secretary says that their economic policy is, and I quote, Mr Speaker, by your leave, shit or bust”²⁵. Now Johnson is certainly a politician who makes uses of unsuitable humour and outrageous turns of phrase. This might lead us to think that the insertion of the taboo word was a deliberate ploy to gather consensus that, at the same time would lead to the creation of an opposing group of people who abhor this kind of language in a politician – and a Prime Minister.

5. Misanthropic or Carnavalesque?

There are two distinct attitudes to scatology. One is the self-disgust and misanthropy that we find in writers like Swift, the other is the merry, carnivalesque attitude we find in writers like Chaucer and Dante and Joyce. Bakhtin (1965) examines the social system of the Renaissance looking at language that was permitted and language that was not. Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque develops concepts of the social and the literary, as well as the importance of the body and what goes on in our guts and below. Furthermore, Bakhtin sees laughter as a liberating force that degrades power and is epitomised by the carnival that subverts the high with the low and ridicules both. Contemporary philosopher Simon Critchley argues that,

The comedy of the body is most obviously and crudely exemplified in scatological humour, where the distinction between the metaphysical and the physical is explored in the gap between our *souls* and our *arseholes*... (2002: 45)

Critchley christens his line of thought as “post colonial theory” of which, as Bakhtin before him had posited, Rabelais was a champion, as seen in this example of Gargantua’s free association in his discussion of the best possible way to wipe one’s bum concluding that the best toilet tissue is a goose’s neck

²⁵ A video clip is available at: <https://news.sky.com/video/pm-labours-economic-policy-is-shit-or-bust-11802072>

Shittard

Aqittard

Crackard

Turduous

Thy bung

Has flung

Some dung

On us.

Filthard

Crackard

Stinkard

May you burn with St. Anthony's fire

If all

Your fine

Arseholes

Are not well wiped when you retire²⁶.

When Martin Luther, for example, writes: "I resist the devil and often it is with a fart that I chase him away" (Tomlin 2017: 141), he is being funny, as is Dante and his farting devil who "trumpets with his arse" in the closing line of *Inferno* 21 "*ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta*". Significantly, Dante and Virgil are in the pit in which corrupt politicians are punished. How modern was Dante to use toilet humour – or rather, how traditional are modern day political satirists?

We are ridiculous, we have bodies, we are thinking beings yet defecating is beyond our control. We all defecate, but we never know when we are going to do

²⁶ Rabelais. 1927. *Gargantua*, translated by T. Urquhart and P. Motteux . London: Bodley Head, Volume 1, p.51.

so. Our leaders also defecate. They are no different from us. Because of this, they are diminished when we look at them in this way. We, the hoi polloi can laugh at our leaders because they too have to defecate. The concept of power is ludicrous and if we did not joke about people in power, we would be in a constant state of existential terror (Rowson 2009). We have bodies that age, we suffer from diseases, disability and we eventually die. People who are not always to our liking and often seem inefficacious govern us. On top of all that, we have disgusting, smelly matter that comes out of our bodies on a daily basis. Suffice it to think that, that same matter comes out of the bodies of those who govern us and our joking about this shortens the gap between us and them.

6. Conclusions

We laugh at what is disgusting. We may not want to, we may cover our mouths in shock and horror, or simply because we know that poop belongs backstage and should not be openly referenced, but we do laugh – or perhaps restrain our laughter, but far be it from me to suggest that this is a phenomenon restricted to English speaking countries. A quick digression to Italy and we find that on the occasion of Silvio Berlusconi's 80th birthday, cartoonist Vauro published a cartoon featuring a large turd in place of a birthday cake on his Facebook account (Fig.13).

This imagery triggered digital activity that is identical to that of *Guardian* readers, in which a verbal battle ensued between left and right wing FB users. One poster calls the cartoonist "*un uomo di merda*" -- "a man full of shit" and references to how Berlusconi's party "*vi ha mandato a cagare*" –how literally they had "sent you [the left wing party] to go have a shit" abound in a long excreta related thread²⁷. Vauro is a fan of using excreta in his cartoons.

²⁷ The entire cartoon and BLT diatribe between left and right is available at <https://www.facebook.com/vaurosenedi/photos/a.219696121403274/1241871829185693/?type=1&theater> (accessed March 3rd, 2020).



Fig. 13. Vauro's Facebook greetings on Silvio Berlusconi's 80th birthday in 2016.

When Matteo Salvini wanted to destroy all the ROMA encampments in Italy, Vauro published a cartoon captioned “*Radere a suolo tutti i campi ROM’ Salvini ne ha sparato un’altra*” – “Raze all Roma encampments to the ground’ Salvini shoots his mouth off again”. The cartoon portrays a journalist holding a microphone to the politician’s backside because in Italian the verb *sparare* (to shoot) refers to both saying something outrageous and to passing wind (Fig. 14)²⁸. The imagery speaks for itself.

²⁸ <https://vaurosenesi.it/2015/04/09/salvini-radere-al-suolo-i-campi-rom/>

TRADERE AL SUOLO I CAMPI ROM...
SALVINI NE HA SPARATA UN'ALTRA

SEPOLIZIOPUBBLICO.it



Fig.14. Vauro's take on Matteo Salvini's opinion on destroying ROMA encampments in Italy.

Still in Italy, art-critic-cum-politician Vittorio Sgarbi, notorious for his extreme attitude and use of taboo language in the public sphere, posted several videos throughout 2018 in which he rants about political issues while he is seated on his lavatory, trousers down, defecating. For example, in February 2018, he suggested that those suffering from constipation should not use a laxative but adopt Di Maio, leader of the Five Star movement as a purge instead. Holding a mobile phone that displays an image of Di Maio's face, Sgarbi declares from his toilet "...il lassativo che non vi abbandona [...] volete cagare bene? Usate Di Maio"—"...the laxative that will not leave you [...] if you want to shit well, adopt Di Maio" (my translation)²⁹. Sgarbi uses the verb *cagare* – "to shit" several times repeating that Di Maio *fa cagare* – literally "makes you shit" – however, "is a piece of shit" is a more functional translation. Is this funny? Is it disgusting? Or is it a mixture of both? According to De Montaigne, "On the highest throne in the world,

²⁹ Vittorio Sgarbi, post sul gabinetto: "Problemi a ca***e? Usa Di Maio lassativo", *Leggo* February 23rd, 2018. Available at: https://www.leggo.it/politica/news/vittorio_sgarbi_di_maio_gabinetto_video_23_febbraio_2018-3567212.html (accessed March 3rd, 2020).

we are seated, still, upon our arses.” Lest we forget: “Kings and philosophers shit, and so do ladies.”

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