

**“RECEPTACLES OF FILTH”:
A SENSORY HISTORY OF
EARLY AMERICAN BEDPANS,
1750 TO 1830**

by

Jamie Clifford

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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ABSTRACT

Bedpans made and used in the early United States appear in historic house museums and other cultural heritage institutions throughout the country. More often than not, however, these objects are hidden in plain sight. Informed by object-centered approaches to material culture studies as well as disability history and sensory studies scholarship, this thesis asks what these oft-ignored “receptacles of filth” might reveal about the early American sick-chamber and the twentieth-century house museum. Specifically, it examines histories of medicine, caregiving labor, and illness or infirmity in the home. This thesis begins with a case study of a late eighteenth-century pewter bedpan on display at Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, which took on new meaning as a relic of the early American past in the midst of the twentieth-century Colonial Revival. While its seemingly pristine pewter surface might dazzle the eye, the history of the bedpan is also that of the nose, the hands, the digestive organs, and (of course) the rear end. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century receipt books, housekeeping manuals, medical journals, and satirical cartoons that make reference to bedpans or chamber pots attest to the ongoing battle doctors, nurses, domestic servants, and other caregivers waged against “dirt” in the sick-chamber. Dirty substances such as urine and excrement were more than just what anthropologist Mary Douglas has called “matter out of place.” The sight, smell, and feel of these substances were a source of great anxiety in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Anglo-American subjects. Finally, this thesis considers the bedpan as commercial good, examining both highly decorative bedpans used in early America as well as the wide

array of antique bedpans available for purchase in secondhand stores and e-sellers such as Etsy and e-Bay. Such objects attest to bedpans as a source not just of revulsion but, in certain cases, of aesthetic pleasure. While bedpans may be out of sight and out of mind for most twenty-first century Americans, these objects remain not just literal receptacles of filth but symbolic receptacles of meaning. The study of bedpans is the study of the complex relationships between people, their bodies, and their waste.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1961, Henry Francis du Pont purchased a rare work of craftsmanship by renowned Philadelphia pewterer William Will for his collection of early American antiques. This past year, I encountered this object in the back of a cupboard in the Fraktur Room, one of Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library's over 175 museum rooms (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). At first glance, I assumed that this unfamiliar device, hidden behind an assortment of pewter cups and dishes, was a piece of early American dinnerware. As is evident to anyone who has read the title of this thesis, however, I was looking at a late eighteenth-century pewter bedpan.

When one begins looking for bedpans, as I have discovered, one finds them nearly everywhere. Though not as common as the ubiquitous chamber pot, bedpans made their way into many a museum collection. Apparently, du Pont was not the only collector who saw value in this unusual form. This is not to say, however, that bedpans are given a place of prominence in many cultural heritage sites today. At the National Museum of American History (NMAH), for example, bedpans can be found in both the "Home and Community Life" and "Medicine and Science" collections. However, none are on display, but instead reside in storage, at the time of writing. Historic New England (HNE) is another repository of historic bedpans. Cogswell's Grant, the eighteenth-century home of twentieth-century folk art collectors Bertram K. and Nina Spencer Little, houses two remarkably decorative bedpans. One resides on the floor under a late eighteenth-century tavern table, while the other is consigned to a dimly-lit

attic (figure 1.3 and 1.4). They are visible, and yet unseen—a paradox that recalls historian of disability Douglas C. Baynton’s observation that “Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write.”¹ When displayed in a museum of decorative arts, bedpans are yet another aesthetically appealing object in an assemblage. When placed beneath the buttocks of an eighteenth or nineteenth-century patient, however, or emptied of filth by a domestic servant, these objects took on radically different meanings. This thesis asks how we might animate these objects and reveal the many meanings attributed to them in the past (as well as the meanings they take on today).

My efforts to uncover the history of the Fraktur Room bedpan were only partly successful. Charles F. Montgomery and the Pewter Collector’s Club of America included bedpans in their surveys of early American pewter in the early to mid-twentieth century.² A handful of twentieth-century publications by scholars of history and medicine or collectors with an interest in “medical antiques” make mention of bedpans, but there is not an especially rich body of work on these objects. As J. K. Crellin noted in his *Medical Ceramics* (1969), “Although the early history of the bed pan does not appear to have been studied it seems unlikely that there was much departure from the flat, circular style bed pan until the 19th century when many new

¹ Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, 33-57 (New York University Press, 2011), 52.

² See Charles F. Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter* (E. P. Dutton, 1978), 19 and *Pewter in American Life* (Pewter Collectors Club of America, 1984), 13.

shapes were introduced.”³ A few years later, in 1979, Elisabeth Bennion added that bedpans likely appeared in the seventeenth century, pointing to an early extant example from the Wellcome Collection in England as evidence.⁴ That said, Crellin’s brief but helpful introduction to the history of bedpans does not appear to have been surpassed in the half-century since its publication. The reason for these absences might be explained by what a memo left by one Winterthur employee referred to as the “unappealing overtones of the form.”⁵ Perhaps this apparent disinclination to studying, much less displaying or interpreting, bedpans can be ascribed to a culturally held aversion to their disgusting contents. Or maybe they are simply too mundane to be of interest. According to Mrs. Elizabeth Hanbury’s 1828 handbook, *The Good Nurse*, “The Bed Pan is so well known that little is requisite to be said upon it.”⁶ After all, what is there to say about bedpans?

1.1 When, Where, and What Bedpans?

There is more to be said about bedpans than I (or Mrs. Hanbury) could ever have imagined. As a result, I have limited the chronological, geographical, and

³ J. K. Crellin, *Medical Ceramics: A Catalogue of the English and Dutch Collections in the Museum of the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine* (Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1969), 252.

⁴ Elisabeth Bennion, *Antique Medical Instruments* (University of California Press, 1979), 291.

⁵ “Pewter Bedpan,” Object Records (1961.0103), Registration, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE.

⁶ Elizabeth Bell Hanbury, *The Good Nurse; or, Hints on the Management of the Sick and Lying-In Chamber, and the Nursery*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1828), 370.

thematic scope of this thesis. To begin, the term “early America” requires explanation.⁷ For the purposes of this thesis, I define “early” as about 1750 to 1830, beginning in the colonial era and ending around the conclusion of the Early Republic era. As for “America,” the majority of the bedpans I have examined were made in, or at the very least used in, North America—specifically in what is now the eastern United States. That said, any discussion of early American history must acknowledge that people, practices, and knowledge systems from Western Europe, North and South America, and Africa all co-existed (and often commingled) within this region.⁸ In particular, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the exchange of objects and ideas between the United Kingdom and North America, including but not limited to satirical prints, medical texts, housekeeping manuals, and bedpans themselves. Accordingly, my study considers objects, images, and texts made in Western Europe that are either known to have circulated in (or that convey ideas likewise expressed in primary sources produced in) the British colonies or early United States. The influence of healing or hygiene practices derived from African

⁷ See Karin Wulf, “Vast Early America,” *Humanities* 40, no. 1 (2019), <https://www.neh.gov/article/vast-early-america> for a history of the use of “early America” and an introduction to the framework of “vast early America.”

⁸ See for example Andrew Kettler, “‘Delightful a Fragrance’: Native American Olfactory Aesthetics within the Eighteenth-Century Anglo-American Botanical Community,” in *Empire of the Senses: Sensory Practices of Colonialism in Early America*, ed. Daniel Hacke and Paul Musselwhite (Brill, 2018) and Kelley Fanto Deetz, *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia’s Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2017).

Diasporic or North American Indigenous cultures deserves further study.⁹ However, this thesis is primarily a study of settler society in early America.

In researching and writing this thesis, I found that limiting myself to the years from 1750 to 1830 does my topic an injustice. In a thoughtful meditation on what he calls the “constructivist museum,” public historian Benjamin Filene argues that the collections museum professionals create today will allow our descendants the opportunity “to learn as much about the collectors as about the times the objects represent.”¹⁰ For the historian and material culture scholar, this means that studying objects in museum collections can allow for the study not just of the historical context in which they were made and used but the historical context in which they were collected. Accordingly, my thesis considers bedpans made between 1750 and 1830 in their early American context as well as their continued use into the twenty-first century, where applicable. In the fourth chapter of this thesis, “‘Most Unusual’ Items: Bedpans as Consumer Goods and Collectibles, circa 1750 to Present,” I briefly address changes in bedpan design after the mid-nineteenth century to contextualize the twentieth and twenty-first century practices of collecting “antique” bedpans.

⁹ *Every Man His Own Physician* (1842) is a particularly interesting example of the Influence of Indigenous knowledge on settler healing practices in North America. This guide to home medicine urges the reader to embrace the use of plants indigenous to North America as well as remedies used by American Indians, rather than relying on pharmaceuticals from “foreign countries” (i.e. England). Samuel Emmons Bullfinch, *Every Man His Own Physician: The Vegetable Family Physician* (Boston: Published by Benjamin Adams, 1842), iv.

¹⁰ Benjamin Filene, “Things in Flux: Collecting in the Constructivist Museum,” in *Active Collections*, ed. Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Trevor Jones (Routledge, 2018), 134.

Finally, while my interest is primarily in making sense of the display in historic house museums such as the Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library and Cogswell’s Grant, these are of course not the only historic heritage institutions where bedpans can be found. Many bedpans can be found in collections relating to the histories of science and medicine. I have already mentioned the NMAH as one example. Another is the National Collections Centre in Swindon, UK, which houses the collections of the Science Museum Group—including over seven dozen bedpans.¹¹ While the stories of these bedpans, their collectors, and their present-day display in museums are no doubt fascinating, they are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Accordingly, my focus is on the use of bedpans in early American domestic spaces, as opposed to in early American hospitals.¹² It is admittedly difficult to distinguish between bedpans intended for home use and those made for hospitals, as the majority of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century bedpans lack provenance.¹³ However, we should note that it was not until the mid-nineteenth

¹¹ The Science Museum Group consists of five British museums: the Science Museum, the Science and Industry Museum, the National Railway Museum, the Locomotion museum, and the Science and Industry Museum. Collections not currently on display at their respective institutions are generally housed in the National Collections Centre at Science and Innovation Park. “About Us,” Science Museum Group, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/about-us/>.

¹² For example, an 1778 letter written by a doctor at Lititz Hospital in Lancaster County, PA requested “1 doz. Bed Pans for the use of very weak Pts. that cannot set up” alongside other necessities such as mortars and pestles, apothecaries’ weights and scales, and delftware tiles for mixing boluses. George L. Heiges, “Letters Relating to Colonial Military Hospitals in Lancaster County,” *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 52, no. 4 (1948): 80.

¹³ For example, the “Perfection” bedpan discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis was advertised for use in both the home and hospital. While it is unlikely that bedpans with

century that many Americans gained access to institutional care options. Hospitals were largely reserved for the poor or otherwise socially marginalized until the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The more decorative (and likely more expensive) examples from Winterthur and Cogswell's Grant that are my primary case studies were probably intended for use in the upper or middle-class home.

1.2 Methodology

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study of early American bedpans in both their past and present contexts. The object-centered material culture methodologies pioneered by Montgomery and Jules Prown inspired my approach of analyzing bedpans through the lens of materials, making, and meaning.¹⁵ Also vital is the work of collectors of historic medical objects, including but not limited to J. K. Crellin and Elisabeth Bennion, whose work is foundational for my own.¹⁶ While I originally conceived this project as an object-centered exploration of bedpans, it soon became clear that bedpans were only one of the categories of objects at play in the history I

more highly decorative surfaces were used in homes, more plain-looking examples were not necessarily reserved for use in hospitals.

¹⁴ See Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (John Hopkins University Press, 1987) and Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (Basic Books, 1982).

¹⁵ See especially Charles F. Montgomery, "The Connoisseurship of Artifacts," in *Material Culture Studies in America: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Schlereth (American Association for State and Local History, 1982) and Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1-19.

¹⁶ See especially T. G. H. Drake, "Antique Pewter of Medical Interest II," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 29, no. 5 (1955): 420-428.

was uncovering. For the histories of bodies and bodily substances, then, I turned to literature on health and hygiene in early America, which in turn pulls from the histories of science, medicine, gender, race, and labor.¹⁷ Disability history and sensory studies, however, have proven the most influential to my approach.

Historian Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy describes disability history as “both a topic and an analytic.” It is both “the study of disabled people as historical actors” and “a perspective through which we look at the past.”¹⁸ As will be discussed further in Chapter 3, “‘Receptacles of Filth’: Disability, Labor, and the Senses in Early American Domestic Medicine,” many individuals who used bedpans experienced physical or cognitive impairments that rendered them disabled.¹⁹ This thesis is therefore a study of disabled people. In a recent essay on disability in design museums, Liz Jackson and Bess Williamson note a tendency to present disability-related objects as “new” and “innovative.”²⁰ This ignores the fact that disability

¹⁷ For histories of health and hygiene, see especially Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (Yale University Press, 2009); Suellen M. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Lawrence Wright, *Clean and Decent: The Fascinating History of the Bathroom and the Water-Closet* (University of Toronto Press, 1960).

¹⁸ Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, “Disability History in Slavery’s Archive,” in *Early Modern Medicine*, ed. Olivia Weisser (Routledge, 2024), 259.

¹⁹ Susan Wendell defines impairment as “the medically defined condition of a person’s body/mind” and disability as “the socially constructed disadvantage based upon impairment.” These two categories, as Wendell notes, almost invariably overlap. See Susan Wendell, “Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities,” *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001): 22.

²⁰ Liz Jackson and Bess Williamson, “On Brand: When Design Museums Discover Disability,” in *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation*, ed. Amanda Cachia (Routledge, 2023): 146-47.

design has been around as long as disability itself. In discussing bedpans as the material culture of disability, I add my voice to this conversation. However, disability primarily functions in this thesis as a thematic lens through which I examine these objects. Scholars agree that “disability is not fixed, natural, nor stable, but rather socially constructed and particular to time and place.”²¹ As I will discuss, bedpans take on new uses and meanings “particular to time and place,” moving into and out of the category of disability “thing.”²² Through my analysis of these objects, I aim to illuminate the instability of the categories “disabled” and “abled” both in early America and today.

Also crucial to the story of bedpans are the substances they contained. Urine and feces are, as one might suspect, difficult to investigate through conventional approaches to object analysis. I have turned to sensory historians such as William Tullett and Barbara E. Mundy, whose work concerns often ephemeral objects and the

²¹ Hunt-Kennedy, “Disability History in Slavery’s Archive,” 2. See for example eighteenth and nineteenth-century scholar Teresa Michals’ scholarship on Admiral Horatio Nelson. Michals argues that although Nelson was an amputee, his peers did not view him as disabled. In the eyes of the British Navy, one-armed admiral like Nelson could fulfil his duties; an Able-Bodied or Ordinary seaman with a similar impairment might not be. Michals, “Invisible Amputation and Heroic Masculinity,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 44, no. 1 (2015): 17-39.

²² According to historian Katherine Ott, disability “things” include “architecture, assistive devices, media, clothing, food, technology, and all other objects” through which experiences of disabilities—which are “grounded in the body”—are mediated. Ott, “Disability Things: Material Culture and American Disability History, 1700-2010,” in *Disability Histories*, ed. Susan Burch and Michael Rembis (University of Illinois Press, 2014), 119.

odors they once produced.²³ Anthropologist Mary Douglas and geographer J. Douglas Porteous are likewise crucial figures in the history of smell. Douglas's writing on the cultural construction of the category of "dirt (or "matter out of place") and Porteous's essay on "smellscapes" (or the practice of mapping odors onto a landscape) undergird much of my thinking about the symbolic and affective power of smell.²⁴ Finally, literature in the field of museum studies has proved useful in making sense of the present-day display of the Fraktur Room bedpan and other case studies discussed in this thesis. Of particular note is the work of Hsuan L. Hsu, Fiona Candlin, and others who have explored the intersections of sensory studies and museum studies.²⁵ Through this interdisciplinary approach, I have endeavored to bring into conversation literature from across a wide array of disciplines pertinent to the study of bedpans,

²³ See William Tullett, *Smell and the Past: Noses, Archives, Narratives* (Bloomsbury, 2023); Barbara E. Mundy, "No Longer Home: The Smellscape of Mexico City, 1500-1600," *Ethnohistory* 68, no. 1 (2021): 77-101.

²⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966; Routledge, 2007). Citations refer to the 2007 edition; J. Douglas Porteous, "Smellscape," *Progress in Physical Geography: Earth and Environment* 9, no. 3 (1985): 356-78.

²⁵ See Hsuan L. Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (NYU Press, 2020); Fiona Candlin, "Don't Touch! Hands Off! Art, Blindness, and the Conservation of Expertise," *Body and Society* 10, no. 1 (2004): 71-90; Fiona Candlin, "Touch, and the Limits of the Rational Museum or Can Matter Think," *The Senses and Society* 3, no. 3 (2008): 277-92. See also Mark Clintberg, "Where Publics May Touch: Stimulating Sensory Access at the National Gallery of Canada," *The Senses and Society* 9, no. 3 (2014): 310-322 and Melanie A. Kiechle, "Preserving the Unpleasant: Sources, Methodology, and Conjectures for Odors at Historic Sites," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation History, Theory, and Criticism* 13, no. 2 (2016): 23-31.

bodies, and bodily substances to provide a multifaceted cultural analysis of early American bedpans in both their past and present contexts.

1.3 Overview of Contents

This first chapter has introduced the Fraktur Room bedpan, provided a brief literature review, defined the scope of the thesis, and provided a discussion of methodology. The second chapter, “‘Unappealing Overtones’: Pewter and the Colonial Revival at the Winterthur Museum,” serves as a case study on the Fraktur Room bedpan. It is a study of materials, making, and meaning that seeks to understand where this object fits into a broader history of pewter bedpan manufacture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, it also situates Winterthur’s display of this object in the context of connoisseurship and the Colonial Revival. In the third chapter, “‘Receptacles of Filth’: Disability, Labor, and the Senses in Early American Domestic Medicine,” I endeavor to put the filth back in the bedpan (so to speak). This chapter looks to receipt books, housekeeping manuals, satirical cartoons, medical texts, diaries, and other sources from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that disrupt the Fraktur Room bedpan’s current display as a pristine, static object. The fourth chapter, titled “‘Most Unusual’ Items: Bedpans as Consumer Goods and Collectibles, circa 1750 to Present,” looks to Cogswell’s Grant as a case study and considers early American bedpans as commodities. It asks how bedpans—and our relationship to them—transformed between the eighteenth century and today. The fifth and final chapter concludes with a brief discussion of bedpans in popular culture in the twenty-first century United States. Contemporary bedpans, closely associated with nursing assistants, home healthcare workers, and nonprofessional caregivers, continue to inspire a mix of emotions and responses ranging from humor to scorn from users, as

well as the caregivers who “serve” them up to their charges. If we are to continue relegating bedpans to the margins, it asks, what—and who—else do we marginalize?

Chapter 2

“UNAPPEALING OVERTONES:” PEWTER AND THE COLONIAL REVIVAL AT THE WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

I must have passed through the Fraktur Room at least a dozen times before I discovered there was an early American bedpan in my midst. It was only after I found the Fraktur Room bedpan in the Winterthur Museum’s database that I was able to locate it, hidden in plain sight among an assortment of gleaming pewter objects in a corner cupboard. The bedpan is one of about three dozen objects attributed to German-born pewterer William Will (active 1764-1796) in this Pennsylvania German themed room. It is tempting to dismiss the curious case of the bedpan in the cupboard as an example of du Pont’s occasionally idiosyncratic curatorial practices. However, I argue that the bedpan’s display among mugs, plates, tankards, and other more “appealing” pewter objects is in fact a purposeful attempt to reconcile its resonance with Colonial Revival narratives of fine American craftsmanship with its equally potent “unappealing overtones.”

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the making and selling of pewter bedpans in colonial America and the early United States from about 1750 to 1830. To make sense of the transformation of the Fraktur Room bedpan from utilitarian object to early American antique, we must explain how the phenomenon of connoisseurship and the Colonial Revival contributed to the curatorial choices made by du Pont and Montgomery regarding its acquisition and display. I also consider how meaning-making occurred through the integration of the Fraktur Room bedpan into narratives of the early American past in the Winterthur Museum.

2.1 Making and Selling Early American Bedpans

William Will, the fourth son of a German pewterer, arrived in New York with his family in 1752. By 1764, after completing an apprenticeship with his older brother, he began making and selling pewter wares in Philadelphia.²⁶ Although Will is by no means the only early American pewterer known to have made and sold bedpans, he is among the most celebrated.²⁷ In 1940, Ledlie I. Laughlin estimated that there were only about three dozen surviving pewter objects by Will, rendering his work extremely rare and therefore valuable.²⁸ The number of pieces attributed to Will reached 197 by 1972, testament to the enthusiasm for his pewter among twentieth-century collectors and dealers.²⁹ Interest in his works, apparently characterized by “a distinction and an originality not found thus far in the pewter of any other American maker,” led to a proliferation of scholarship on objects by Will.³⁰ Even before it entered the Winterthur collection, the bedpan that would come to reside in the Fraktur Room made the pages

²⁶ Suzanne Hamilton, “The Pewter of William Will: A Checklist,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 7 (1972): 129.

²⁷ Other extant pewter bedpans include a circa 1770 to 1800 bedpan at Mount Vernon attributed by Frederick Bassett and a circa 1810 to 1820 bedpan, also at Winterthur, attributed to Thomas Danforth III and Sherman Boardman.

²⁸ Ledlie I. Laughlin, *Pewter in America: Its Makers and Their Marks* (American Legacy Press, 1981), 54. All citations in this thesis relate to the 1981 edition. However, Volume II of *Pewter in America*, in which Laughlin’s discussion of Will appears, was originally published in 1940.

²⁹ Hamilton, “The Pewter of William Will,” 129-30.

³⁰ Laughlin, *Pewter in America*, 54.

of *The Magazine Antiques* in 1951, where it was celebrated as a “most unusual item” of “considerable interest.”³¹

For the most rigorous scholarship to date on Will’s lauded bedpan, we can consult Charles F. Montgomery’s *A History of American Pewter* (1973). Montgomery found that bedpans were among the most expensive objects Will sold, valued at \$3.50 each upon his death. By comparison, his coffee pots were priced at two dollars each. Bedpans were consistently among the most expensive objects offered by pewterers in the late eighteenth century. These objects were not just large in size but challenging to construct. “Most pewterers,” according to Montgomery, “made them by soldering together two brimless dishes and then cutting the bottom out of them. The edges of the hole were pushed down in the skimming process. The handle, which was fitted to a threaded pewter pipe, could be unscrewed and removed.”³²

A survey of extant pewter bedpans from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals that although many pewter bedpans do look similar to the Fraktur Room bedpan, there are notable variations in size and shape. From a survey of six standard, circular pewter bedpans in the Wellcome Collection in the UK, I found that seats ranged in diameter from about 8 to 13 inches.³³ My survey did not include any examples of the many nonstandard bedpan forms created in the eighteenth and

³¹ “The Editors’ Attic,” *The Magazine Antiques* (1951). Object Records (1961.0103), Registration, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE.

³² Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter*, 193.

³³ See objects A43153, A43157, A637064, A637062, A38789, and A71848 in Sir Henry Wellcome’s Museum Collection, accessible through the Science Museum Group digital collections: <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/> for the objects included in this survey.

nineteenth centuries. Fracture bedpans, used as early as the eighteenth century, are a flatter variation on the form best suited for users with a broken hip or leg.³⁴ Bennion found that wedge-shaped “slipper” bedpans first appeared in the late eighteenth century, designed to “slip” under a user who may be unable to lift their hips.³⁵ My research also uncovered at least four infant bedpans.³⁶

Other variations can be found in the size and shape of handles and the construction of the seat, which might be made from two brimless dishes (as discussed by Montgomery) or from a flat disk soldered onto a bowl or pan-shaped base. Prior to 1807, all pewterers cast their wares using molds, which were typically made of brass. Although some early American pewterers in the mid-nineteenth century made their own molds, most either purchased them from England, or in the case of immigrant pewterers, brought them to North America from their country of origin. However, molds could be prohibitively expensive.³⁷ Pewterers often opted to create new forms through the innovative recombination of preexisting molds rather than making or

³⁴ A reference to the use of a “flat Bed Pan” for a patient with a compound fracture appears in a 1762 English translation of Joseph Guichard Duverney’s (1648-1730) posthumously published work *The Diseases of the Bones* (1751). Joseph Guichard Duverney, *The Diseases of the Bones*, trans. Samuel Ingham (London: Printed for Tho. Osborne, 1762), 55.

³⁵ Bennion, *Antique Medical Instruments*, 292.

³⁶ See objects A637083, A637091, A67069, and A637082 in Sir Henry Wellcome’s Museum Collection, accessible through the Science Museum Group digital collections: <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/>.

³⁷ Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter*, 29-37.

buying new ones.³⁸ They may therefore have combined molds from their personal repertoire to create a bedpan that suited the unique needs of their client, yielding the wide variety of early American pewter bedpans seen today.

Further evidence for this ad hoc approach to bedpan construction comes from pewterer's ledgers and merchant's account books from late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America. While chamber pots and close stool pans sold regularly, bedpans make far fewer appearances in the pages of these documents. For example, Henry Will—brother to William Will—sold a dozen chamber pots to Asher Myers in 1766 for three pounds, three close stool pans to Gilbert Ash in 1769 for one pound and 19 pence, and six close stool pans to Gary De Wind in 1770 for a little over 3 pounds.³⁹ Thomas Danforth III sold 25 chamber pots to fellow pewterer Blakeslee Barns in August 1813, followed by another 108 chamber pots in December of that year.⁴⁰ Dry goods merchant Preserved Peirce made a sizeable purchase from one of his suppliers in 1760 that included three dozen milk pans, two and a half dozen porringers, three dozen quart pans, and four and a half dozen chamber pots.⁴¹ By

³⁸ See for example a pewter warming pan by William Will currently at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which Hamilton suggests may have been created using the same mold used to cast the aforementioned Fraktur Room bedpan and a mold for an 8-inch plate. Hamilton, "The Pewter of William Will," 130, 182.

³⁹ Henry Will's ledger, 1762-1800, Manuscripts, Fol. 267, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE.

⁴⁰ Thomas Danforth III's account book, 1809 to 1835, Manuscripts, Col. 287, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE.

⁴¹ Preserved Peirce's account book, 1757-1766, Manuscripts, Doc. 717, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE.

contrast, bedpans were almost invariably sold individually. It seems that chamber pots and close stools were household necessities. Several might be found in a given household, and a pewterer might be expected to keep them in stock.

Based on these findings, I propose that pewter bedpans were most often made to order. These were fairly pricey items that fulfilled a specific need and may or may not have been part of a given pewterer's repertoire. Variations in size, shape, and method of construction reflect the techniques used by individual pewterers as well as the differing bodies and bodily needs of bedpan users. In this regard, I concede that Montgomery's praise of the Fraktur Room bedpan and its illustrious maker is apt. However, this analysis of bedpan manufacture also serves as a reminder of the interrelated nature of both early American pewtering and early American caregiving practices. In both the workshop and the sickroom, early Americans made do with the supplies at hand to accommodate the bodily needs of their clients or charges.

2.2 Pewter and the Senses in Early America

Since the 1980s, historians of the senses have increasingly paid attention to the ocularcentrism of conventional historical scholarship.⁴² Alain Corbin's *The Foul and the Fragrant* (1986) demonstrated that a social and cultural history of France could be told through the history of smell. "It would be futile," Corbin argues, "to analyze social tensions and conflicts without accounting for the different sensibilities that

⁴² See especially David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Berg, 2005) and Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, eds., *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (Routledge, 1994). For more recent works on this topic, see Mark M. Smith, *A Sensory History Manifesto* (Penn State University Press, 2021) and Tullett, *Smell and the Past*.

decisively influence them.”⁴³ To this point, I add that the study of decorative arts must consider what other senses, beyond sight, might influence choices in materials, making, and design. This is particularly pertinent when considering the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century significance of pewter, a commonplace but somewhat peculiar choice of material for bedpans.

It is important to note that while the Fraktur Room bedpan is pewter, as are the majority of extant bedpans made between 1750 and 1830 that I am aware of, there are also examples of earthenware and porcelain bedpans from this period. For the purposes of this chapter, however, my focus will be on pewter. Until about 1820, Montgomery writes, “most people in America ate with pewter spoons, off pewter plates, filled from pewter dishes.”⁴⁴ They also defecated in pewter bedpans, chamber pots, and close stools, regurgitated into pewter emesis basins, bled into pewter bleeding bowls, and urinated into pewter urinals.⁴⁵ Though less fussy than silver, pewter reacts to the oils in human skin, not to mention acidic substances such as urine and feces, making it a curious choice for objects that came into regular contact with bodies and bodily substances. This suggests an association between pewter and hygiene that may not be evident to the twenty-first century historian. Just as stainless steel surgical instruments or porcelain bathroom sinks and toilet seats communicate cleanliness through their visual properties, the reflective quality of pewter may have

⁴³ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Berg, 1986), 5.

⁴⁴ Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter*, 10.

⁴⁵ See Drake, “Antique Pewter of Medical Interest II,” and *Pewter in American Life* for further examples of pewter objects related to health and hygiene.

had hygienic associations to early Americans.⁴⁶ However, returning to Corbin's scholarship on the "collective hypersensitivity to odors" that emerged in late eighteenth-century Europe, I urge us to consider the role of the nose as well.

Miasma theory, which lingered well into the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, held that disease was spread through foul-smelling vapors containing particles of decomposed matter. Wood and linen were held to be particularly susceptible to impregnation by these dangerous particles. Metals were more advisable for medical equipment and sickroom furnishings, as they were less susceptible to impregnation and therefore more hygienic.⁴⁷ It may be the fear of fecal odors, then, rather than the appeal of gleaming surfaces, that explains the proliferation of pewter bedpans. However, this still does not fully explain the use of pewter as opposed to copper or iron, for example. Mary Douglas has cautioned against distinguishing between "modern" hygiene practices and what her fellow mid-twentieth century anthropologists typically dismissed as "primitive ritual." Rather than assuming that there is a "rational" or scientific basis behind the use of pewter in bedpans and other related objects, I argue that we heed Douglas's advice and consider that there may be "symbolic systems" at play in early America through which pewter was imbued with meaning.⁴⁸ We might note, for example, that the Ancient Greek

⁴⁶ See Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, for further discussion of nineteenth and twentieth-century ideas about cleanliness and whiteness. See also Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Harvard University Press, 1998) and Julie L. Horan, *The Porcelain God: A Social History of the Toilet* (Robson, 1996).

⁴⁷ Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 11-34.

⁴⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 31-32.

physician Galen recommended using glass, silver, or pewter vessels to store antidotes and other drugs.⁴⁹ Further exploration of the historical role of pewter in alchemy and other material understandings or the relationship between pewter and medicine are beyond the scope of this project, but may prove fruitful for future work. As for the “symbolic systems” operating in the twentieth century that gave pewter meaning, we must delve into the histories of connoisseurship and the Colonial Revival. These parallel histories allow us to make sense of how du Pont, Montgomery, and their contemporaries came to look at pewter bedpans in the twentieth century.

2.3 Contemplating the Chamber Pot: Connoisseurship in Eighteenth-Century England

Connoisseurship may be broadly defined as “the art of appreciating objects and images derived from long consideration and innate ability.”⁵⁰ The Western tradition of connoisseurship has long placed particular emphasis on authorship, authenticity, and provenance. By the time the word “connoisseur” came into use in the early eighteenth century, the practice of connoisseurship was already well-established among European antiquarians.⁵¹ So, too, was the tradition of criticizing such practices, as attested to by

⁴⁹ Montgomery, *A History of American Pewter*, 7.

⁵⁰ Christina M. Anderson and Peter Stewart, eds., *Connoisseurship* (Oxford University Press), 2023), 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

the astonishing array of satirical poems and cartoons produced in eighteenth-century England mocking antiquarians.⁵²

A 1788 etching by Francis Grose titled *Antiquarians, peeping into Boadicia's night urn* shows a group of well-dressed gentlemen gathered around a cracked chamber pot purported to have belonged to the ancient British queen (figure 2.1). This “numinous object” derives its value, in the eyes of the antiquarian, from its association with “some person, place, or event endowed with special sociocultural magic.”⁵³ We should note that Boudica (or Boadicia) gained popularity as a national symbol of Britian around the late eighteenth century.⁵⁴ In a similar image from 1772, an array of ancient artifacts behind a group of antiquarians, including fragments of Greek or Roman sculptures, suggest that the appeal of the chamber pot they cluster around likewise lies in its Classical associations (figure 2.2). The Classical Revival, which swept through the nation beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, saw both the emergence of Neoclassical design in architecture and the decorative arts and a preoccupation among British elites with acquiring ancient Greek and Roman artifacts

⁵² Joseph Monteyne, *From Still Life to the Screen: Print Culture, Display, and the Materiality of the Image in Eighteenth Century London* (Yale University Press, 2013), 56.

⁵³ Rachel P. Maines and James J. Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” *The Public Historian* 15, no. 1 (1993): 10.

⁵⁴ See Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin, *Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen* (Hambledon Continuum, 2006) and Carolyn D. Williams, *Boudica and Her Stories: Narrative Transformations of a Warrior Queen* (University of Delaware Press, 2009) for studies of Boudica in English literature and culture.

for their personal collections.⁵⁵ While eighteenth-century English connoisseurs like Horace Walpole or John Soane may or may not have had a particular affinity for chamber pots, these satires do indicate the role connoisseurship played in the formation of British national identity in the late eighteenth century.⁵⁶ Satirists mocked the unbounded collecting fervor and seemingly obscure curiosity of antiquarians. Unchecked, these and similar satires cheekily suggest, such instincts might lead to reverence for objects as lowly and disgusting as chamber pots—so long as they have a connection to the ancient Western world, however tangential it may be.

Art historian Joseph Monteyne observes two major themes that run throughout these eighteenth-century chamber pot caricatures. First, the connoisseur is presented as buffoonish; his preoccupation with the bedpan is symptomatic of his obsession with even the most mundane fragments of the past. Second, the connoisseur's gaze is not objective and rational but instead voyeuristic or even fetishistic.⁵⁷ Though we should of course be skeptical of these less than flattering portrayals of eighteenth-century connoisseurs, it is difficult to ignore the parallels between these satires and the very real collecting practices of du Pont and his contemporaries in the United States. Objects that are fragmentary, utilitarian, or even “unappealing” can be invested with meaning through their integration into narratives of national identity formation.

⁵⁵ See Vicky Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique: Neoclassicism in Britain, 1760-1800* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵⁶ Monteyne notes that chamber pots often served a leveling function in eighteenth-century satires—dumped over the head of a powerful politician, for example. Chamber pots in the satires of antiquarians discussed here therefore likely served a primarily symbolic function as well. See Monteyne, *From Still Life to the Screen*, 59.

⁵⁷ Monteyne, *From Still Life to the Screen*, 56-59, 71-74.

2.4 Connoisseurship, the Colonial Revival, and the Historic House Museum

According to an oft-repeated (though perhaps apocryphal) tale, du Pont made a fateful visit to the house of Electra Havemeyer Webb, collector of early American antiques and eventual founder of the Shelburn Museum, in 1923. An “enormous old cupboard” in Webb’s collection was sufficient to convince du Pont “that Americans had produced fine furniture.”⁵⁸ Regardless of the veracity of this story, the origins of Winterthur cannot be fully explained as the result of one collector’s sudden aesthetic appreciation for American decorative arts. It may instead be understood as one cultural manifestation of the Colonial Revival, a broader cultural movement in which du Pont participated alongside other white, upper-class elites of his era.

In the 1880s and 1890s, as historian Michael Wallace argues, “elites fashioned a new collective identity for themselves that had at its core the belief that there was such a thing as ‘the American’ inheritance, and that they were its legitimate custodians.”⁵⁹ The Colonial Revival, an aesthetic and ideological movement that involved “selecting aspects of the American past to venerate and use to reform modern society,” is most commonly attributed to the 1876 centennial.⁶⁰ However, Wallace points to the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and class struggles in the late nineteenth century as contributing factors to the embrace of this movement among wealthy

⁵⁸ Walter Karp, “Henry Francis Du Pont and The Invention of Winterthur,” *American Heritage* 34, no. 3 (1983).

⁵⁹ Michael Wallace, “Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States,” *Radical History Review* 25 (1981): 66.

⁶⁰ Erica Lome, “Heirlooms of Tomorrow: Crafting and Consuming Colonial Reproduction Furniture, 1890-1945” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2020), 4, ProQuest (27836999).

Anglo-American elites at the turn of the century.⁶¹ For these individuals, the colonial past represented a time in which “the order, stability, and hierarchy they associated with the past still held sway.”⁶² It was an era in which their authority went unchallenged.⁶³ However, we should note that it was not just descendants of the first English colonists who participated in the Colonial Revival. Henry Francis du Pont, for one, was the great-grandson of a French immigrant. Erica Lome, a scholar of material culture and decorative arts, argues that even those who were not of “Old Stock” brought Colonial Revival furniture into their homes, likewise laying claim to “a national heritage they were not entirely permitted to claim.”⁶⁴

Cultural manifestations of the Colonial Revival included the preservation of historic sites and buildings as well as the establishment of historic house museums by historical societies or wealthy entrepreneurs. Among the upper classes, collecting early American antiques (or authentic-looking reproductions) was a more achievable means of staking a claim to one’s heritage. These claims to ownership could be bolstered through the acquisition of connoisseursial expertise. Newly published histories of objects made and used in colonial America, including Irving Whittall Lyon’s *The Colonial Furniture of New England* (1891) and Esther Singleton’s *The*

⁶¹ Wallace, “Visiting the Past,” 66.

⁶² Stephen Nissenbaum and Dona Brown, “Changing New England: 1865-1945,” in *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory*, ed. William H. Truettner and Roger B. Stein (National Museum of American Art, 1999), 5.

⁶³ Lome, “Heirlooms of Tomorrow,” 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

Furniture of Our Forefathers (1900) taught budding connoisseurs how to identify, authenticate, and assign value to their early American antiques.⁶⁵

In 1895, there were twenty historic house museums in the United States. By 1910, there were one hundred.⁶⁶ This preoccupation with the early American past persisted through at least the first half of the twentieth century. George Sheldon's Memorial Hall museum, which opened to the public in 1880, has three dedicated period rooms representing life in colonial America. Greenfield Village encouraged visitors to participate in historical reenactment at the Wayside Inn, an eighteenth-century building purchased by Henry Ford in 1923 and restored as a colonial-era museum and dining space.⁶⁷ In the southern United States, Colonial Williamsburg, George Washington's Mount Vernon, and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello opened to the public in the 1930s. These museums operated not just as sites of collective memory but as institutions with didactic agendas and civilizing missions. How, then, did curators at these institutions determine which objects were best suited for instilling in visitors the virtues of early American culture?

In 1961, an essay by Montgomery titled "Some Remarks on the Practice and Science of Connoisseurship" (later republished as "The Connoisseurship of Artifacts")

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁶ Wallace, "Visiting the Past," 66.

⁶⁷ Abigail Carroll, "Of Kettles and Cranes: Colonial Revival Kitchens and the Performance of National Identity," *Winterthur Portfolio* 43, no. 4 (2009): 335-364.

appeared in the pages of the *American Walpole Society Notebook*.⁶⁸ Addressed to the “connoisseur,” this essay proposes a systematic method of “study and observation” that seeks to determine when and where an object was created as well as its “condition, excellence of execution, and success as a work of art.” Montgomery calls for attentiveness to the visual appearance of an object, the techniques employed in its production, and the object’s function, style, and date of creation. The final step, “appraisal or evaluation,” takes into consideration all the above factors in addition to the object’s condition and provenance.⁶⁹

What do we see if we examine the Fraktur Room bedpan using Montgomery’s approach? We may better appreciate its craftsmanship through an analysis of its visual appearance and method of construction. We can compare it to other pewter objects from the period, for example Federal teapots and soup tureens, that may be similar in style but not function.⁷⁰ However, its maker takes precedence over its users. Its rarity in the eyes of the twentieth-century collector takes precedence over its value in the eyes of early Americans. In short, connoisseurship lends itself to the production of certain narratives of life in early America at the cost of others. In doing so, it enshrines people like Will in history while leaving users and caregivers anonymous.

⁶⁸ Charles F. Montgomery, “Some Remarks on the Practice and Science of Connoisseurship,” *American Walpole Society Notebook* (1961): 7-20. Citations in this thesis refer to the 1981 republished version.

⁶⁹ Montgomery, “The Connoisseurship of Artifacts,” 145, 152.

⁷⁰ For further discussion of this idea, see Chapter 4: “‘Most Unusual’ Items: Bedpans as Collectibles and Consumer Goods, circa 1750 to Present.

2.5 Narratives of Nationalism and Nostalgia in the Fraktur Room

According to historical notes for docents at Winterthur, the name of the Fraktur Room refers to the “medieval German art of illuminated writing that lingered in Pennsylvania until the nineteenth century.”⁷¹ Baptismal and birth certificates, devotional pictures, and other examples of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Fraktur adorn the walls, representative of “the contributions of these immigrants to American culture.”⁷² This “extremely fine rural room” serves as a celebration of early American culture, including the “finest German-inspired furniture” and a collection of pewter by William Will, “a German immigrant who served with distinction in the Revolutionary War and was one of America’s most gifted pewterers.”⁷³ This mid-century interpretation encourages a Colonial Revival-inflected reading of the Fraktur Room. The guides files recall Ledlie. I. Laughlin’s discussion of Will in the second volume of *Pewter in America*, originally published in 1940: “Gifted beyond most of his fellows, he unselfishly subordinated his business to a life of service to his community and demonstrated that he was not only a superior craftsman but a splendid soldier, a capable statesman, and an executive of unusual ability ... he as a man exemplified in his life the spirit we admire, the spirit which carried an immigrant boy to the chief legislative council of his adopted state.”⁷⁴ Laughlin and the guides files emphasize both Will’s German heritage and his participation in the Revolutionary

⁷¹ “Guides File (Fraktur Room guides file),” Room Files in the Winterthur Archives, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, DE, 3.

⁷² “Guides File,” 4.

⁷³ “Guides File,” 1, 4.

⁷⁴ Laughlin, *Pewter in America*, 51, 55.

War; his German-ness and his American-ness. They at once naturalize ethnic difference and claim Will's fine craftsmanship as part of a shared white American heritage.

The inclusion of dinnerware such as mugs, ladles, tankards, and tea pots in a space filled with religious objects, including both devotional Fraktur and a number of hymnals strewn across the central joined trestle table, is curious. However, the practice of grouping objects based on perceived similarities, whether they be material, stylistic, or cultural, was well-established in early twentieth-century home design.⁷⁵ That is, the shared German American-ness of the objects may have eclipsed their differences in function. I propose that the display of pewter may also be intended to evoke the "domestic sublime," or a sense of visual overload in which individual objects serve as "vehicles of transcendence instead of practical means for the accomplishment of everyday tasks."⁷⁶ Collectively, the array of pewter objects in the room inspire wonder and aesthetic appreciation. They do not, however, provide any indication of the laboring bodies of the individuals who prepared and served food, the smells, sounds, and waste produced by the activities of eating, or the physical labor involved in maintaining such objects. Contained within the closed doors of a corner cupboard, the pewter objects' physical locations forbid closer examination that might reveal the material traces left behind by these activities.

⁷⁵ See for example Elizabeth Hutchinson's discussion of the turn-of-the-century phenomenon of the "Indian corner" in *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890-1915* (Duke University Press, 2009).

⁷⁶ Carroll, "Of Kettles and Cranes," 337, 343.

Montgomery's approach to object analysis allows the connoisseur to examine objects as different as a Philadelphia high chest and an earthenware pitcher—or a pewter bedpan and a pewter tankard—using the same criteria. However, the “unappealing overtones” of bedpans threaten to disrupt the systematic appraisal of objects called for by Montgomery. Its powerful associations with human waste render a bedpan different from “a tankard, teapot, or flagon by the same maker,” as the memo discussed in the introduction to this chapter attests. A fine pewter bedpan is an example of what interdisciplinary scholar Fernando Domínguez Rubio calls “unruly” objects, or works that “cannot be easily stabilized and transformed into timeless ‘objects’ of formal delectation.”⁷⁷ Put another way, the Fraktur Room bedpan does not fit as neatly into the category of “early American antique” as a more “appealing” William Will tankard. As Domínguez Rubio indicates, such objects can transform museum policy.⁷⁸ In eluding existing categories, they may incite the creation of new ones. However, as in the case of the Fraktur Room, this is not always the case. An equally powerful human instinct, as Mary Douglas has suggested, is to suppress that which is “dirty”—that which threatens to violate the boundaries of existing cultural categories.⁷⁹ Thus, apparently, the bedpan in the cupboard.

In the following chapter, I ask what happens if we embrace the unruliness of the Fraktur Room bedpan. Placing it in the category of early American antique may

⁷⁷ Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the Unpreservable: Docile and Unruly Objects at MoMA,” *Theory and Society* (2014).

⁷⁸ Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the Unpreservable.”

⁷⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44, 81.

make it easier to reconcile its “unappealing overtones” with the allure of its connection to the “rare” and “collectible” works of William Will. However, in acknowledging and seeking to understand our discomfort with objects that transgress cultural boundaries, we create more nuanced historical narratives. The next chapter of this thesis considers the histories of medicine, disability, domestic labor, and the senses as alternative lenses through which to study early American bedpans.

Chapter 3

“RECEPTACLES OF FILTH”: DISABILITY, LABOR, AND THE SENSES IN EARLY AMERICAN DOMESTIC MEDICINE

The first recorded literary use of the word “bedpan” (or “Bed-panne”) comes from a 1654 commentary on *Don Quixote*. Sancho, squire to the titular character, ingests a purgative on the recommendation of a “French Doctor” to eliminate the “grosse humours” from his body. His ensuing “motions” are so violent that “[no] Bed-Panne was sufficient to contain them.”⁸⁰ This scene of scatological excess, while written for humorous effect, is nevertheless a useful reminder that the historic bedpans viewed in museums and historic houses were not always the inert objects they may now appear to be. Historian of science and technology Alexi Baker has criticized the display of “pristine” eighteenth and nineteenth-century scientific instruments in museums. This choice, she argues, obscures the messy reality of their use in the field, upholding the false notion that science is perfect, precise, and infallible.⁸¹ Bedpans, too, are messier than they might appear when viewed on display. As this chapter argues, this messiness is both literal and ontological—not only did they come into regular contact with bodies and bodily substances, but these are objects that evade

⁸⁰ Edmund Gayton, *Pleasant Notes Upon Don Quixot* (London: Printed by William Hunt, 1654), 82.

⁸¹ Alexi Baker, “‘Precision,’ ‘Perfection,’ and the Reality of British Scientific Instruments on the Move During the 18th Century,” *Material Culture Review* 74-75 (2012): 14-29.

easy categorization; taking on new meaning in different locations, in different situations, and when used in conjunction with different objects.

3.1 Physicians and Patients in Early America

In 1828, English nurse Elizabeth Hanbury appended a list of “useful instruments and apparatus” to her manual on sick-chamber management. Her list includes an enema syringe, a feeding pot, a tongue scraper, a urinal, stomach and feet warmers, a disperser (for “diffusing Eau de Cologne, or any other valuable essence, through the apartment”), and a bedpan.⁸² Bedpans likewise appear in visual depictions of the sickroom created by English satirists Thomas Rowlandson and W. Hunt, for example (see figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3). They can also be found in the pages of English and American medical journals, employed in house calls as well as in medical institutions. In short, late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century bedpans are best understood as both domestic furnishings and medical devices, used in cases of acute injury and illness as well as in treating chronic or intermittent conditions that might impact mobility or continence.

Historians of disability generally agree that illness and impairment were part of everyday life in early America. Laurel Daen argues that “the experience of mild or temporary inability, which affected almost everyone at some point during their lives, as well as the practice of caring for indisposed family, friends, neighbors, masters, servants, and enslaved people” was “ubiquitous” in early America (which she defines

⁸² Hanbury, *The Good Nurse*, 367.

as “North America and the Caribbean before 1820.”)⁸³ I use the term “disabled” in this thesis to refer to a wide array of disabling conditions, including “chronic or recurrent health problems” such as malaria or severe indigestion.⁸⁴ This broad definition allows for the discussion of conditions that do not fit neatly into the categories of disease, injury, or disability, such as childbirth or advanced age, that might necessitate the use of a bedpan. Furthermore, the framework of disability is useful for investigating the claims advanced by historians of early America such as Daniel Blackie, who proposes that “foregrounding disability as an analytic category ... invites more complex understandings of care, dependency, and the family.”⁸⁵

Receipt books, many of which were assembled either by individual women or small groups of female collaborators, served as the Anglo-American woman’s “first resort when faced with common illness and injury.”⁸⁶ These texts typically contain

⁸³ Laurel Daen, “Beyond Impairment: Recent Histories of Early American Disability,” *History Compass* 17, no. 4 (2019): 2.

⁸⁴ Wendell, “Unhealthy Disabled,” 20. For references to the use of bedpans in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century medical journals, see for example B. Hague, “Remarkable Recovery from a Very Extensive Wound in the Abdomen,” *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* 5, no. 18 (1809), 130; William Cullen Brown, “Dr. Brown’s Case of Constipation,” *The Medical and Physical Journal* 21, no. 124 (1809), 483; Dennis Ryan, “Some Remarks on the Remitting Fevers of the West Indies,” *London Medical Journal* 2, no. 4 (1781): 266; E. Harrold, “Mr. Harrold, on Fractures of the Thigh,” *The Medical and Physical Journal* 15, no. 83 (1806): 11; John Morgan, “Clinical Lectures in Course of Delivery During the Present Session, at Guy’s Hospital,” *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal* 2, no. 29 (1841): 41.

⁸⁵ Daniel Blackie, “Disability, Dependency, and the Family in the Early United States,” in *Disability Histories*, ed. Susan Burch and Michael Rembis (University of Illinois Press, 2014), 30.

⁸⁶ Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 222.

sections on cookery, instructions for cleaning various household items, and in some cases topics such as budgeting and the management of domestic servants. They also regularly combine medical advice paraphrased or directly quoted from physicians and home remedies rooted in Indigenous or vernacular healing practices. *The American Receipt Book* (1844), according to its introduction, “has drawn freely upon the most distinguished and universally received Pharmacopoeias and Dictionaries of Science, including those of London and Edinburgh, as well as the most authentic works of the kind published in this country.”⁸⁷ Most receipt books of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries feature extensive sections on the treatment of common medical conditions, from cancer to cholera and burns to bedsores. Folk healing practices—such as the use of urine to treat “old and inveterate sores” or the use of an “Indian” remedy for worms in children made by steeping or brewing “the bark of spotted alder or witch-hazel”—also regularly appear in texts on domestic medicine well into the nineteenth century.⁸⁸ *Ladies’ Indispensable Assistant* (1851), boasting not only a robust section on home medicine but over a dozen pages dedicated to cataloging the medicinal properties of plants, claimed to allow “each person to become his or her

⁸⁷ A discussion on the treatment of worms in *The American Receipt Book*, for example, cites physician Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia (1746-1813), Austrian parasitologist Johann Gottfried Bremser (1767-1827), Swedish pediatrician Nils Rosén von Rosenstein (1706-1773), and Parisian physician L. Martinet. A.S. Wright, *The American Receipt Book, or, Complete Book of Reference* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1844), 3, 18-20.

⁸⁸ *Ladies’ Indispensable Assistant: Being a Companion for the Sister, Mother, and Wife* (New York: Published at 128 Nassau Street, 1851), 49; Albert E. Foote, *The House-Keeper’s Guide and Indian Doctor* (New York: American Family Publication Establishment, 1855), 58. Interestingly, Foote specifies that his remedy for worms should be prepared using a “pewter vessel,” 58.

own physician.”⁸⁹ Other works in this genre, such as *The Female Economist* (1819) positioned themselves as supplements to, rather than replacements for, a doctor. “A good Cook,” this manual advises, “often contributes very much towards rendering the prescription of the Physician efficacious.”⁹⁰ As works from this genre attest, however, the divide between home and hospital familiar to the twenty-first century reader was not so complete in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century past. Housekeeping and healing practices commingled in the early American domestic sphere.

The socioeconomic status of the reader, who may or may not have ready access to a traveling physician or a hired cook, determined who performed the labor involved in caring for disabled members of the household. Historian Kathleen M. Brown refers to these “cleaning, healing, and caring labors” as “body work.”⁹¹ Though primarily performed by wives, mothers, sisters, and female servants, we should note that body work was performed by men as well. “While the constraints of gender were powerful,” Blackie reminds us in his study of disabled Revolutionary

⁸⁹ The full title page reads: “Ladies’ Indispensable Assistant: Being a Companion for the Sister, Mother, and Wife: Containing More Information for the Price than Any Other Work Upon the Subject. Here are the very best directions for the behavior and etiquette of ladies and gentlemen, ladies’ toilette table, directions for managing canary birds; also, safe directions for the management of children; instructions for ladies under various circumstances; a great variety of valuable recipes, forming a complete system of family medicine. *Thus enabling each person to become his or her own physician*: to which is added one of the best systems of cookery ever published; many of these recipes are entirely new and should be in the possession of every person in the land” (emphasis my own). The extended title reflects the vast scope of this relatively short text, running only 136 pages.

⁹⁰ Mrs. Smith, *The Female Economist; or, A Plain System of Cookery*, 7th ed. (London: Printed for Samuel Leigh, 1819), vi.

⁹¹ Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 5.

War veterans, they were more flexible “in times of family sickness or injury.”⁹² The conditions of enslavement and servitude, for instance, could also result in non-normative care arrangements. *The Footman’s Directory* (1823), written by an English butler for use by “young men” entering the service, advises that servants “readily” offer aid to their peers who fall ill, “as we know not how soon it may be our lot to be laid in a bed of sickness ourselves.”⁹³ Likewise, Hunt-Kennedy’s scholarship on enslaved women in the British Caribbean reveals that elderly and disabled bondswomen often cared for enslaved men, women, and children on plantations.⁹⁴ Domestic medicine in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries included the participation of physicians, family members, and free or enslaved servants, who implemented scientific and vernacular medical advice sourced from acquaintances, doctors, medical texts, and receipt books alike.

3.2 Making Sense of Bodies and Bowels in Early American Medicine

A closer look at visual and textual sources in which bedpans appear reveals the close association between bedpans and technologies used to regulate the bowels. Bedpans characteristically appear alongside purgatives and enema syringes. Perhaps

⁹² Blackie, “Disability, Dependency, and the Family,” 27.

⁹³ Thomas Cosnett, *The Footman’s Directory and Butler’s Remembrancer; or, the Advice of Onesimus to his young Friends*, 3rd ed. (London: Printed for the Author, 1824), 1, 157.

⁹⁴ Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, “‘Had it not been for her’: Gender, Care Labour, and Disability in the Caribbean, 1788-1834,” *Gender & History* (2023): 1-15. See also Jay Colin Menees, “The Health and Medical Care of Enslaved African Americans at Somerset Place, 1839-1863” (PhD diss., East Carolina University, 2018), ProQuest (10970610).

the most striking example of this association comes from the second volume of *The English Dance of Death* (1816).⁹⁵ “The Chamber War,” tells the story of Sir Samuel. “Lame, weak and deaf, and almost blind,” the eighty-year-old man is “confin’d” to his armchair. His nurse, knowing “That drugs and potions would but tend / To hasten Life’s declining end,” throws out the draughts and pills prescribed by her patient’s three physicians in favor of her own “Kitchen Physic.” However, the truth soon comes to light and a brawl breaks out between the physicians, armed with “Canes and Fists,” and the nurse, who wields a bedpan and a clyster-pipe. Disturbed by this scene of “rout and riot,” Sir Samuel calls out to Death, asking for the peace of the grave.⁹⁶ The accompanying illustration by Thomas Rowlandson depicts a furious nurse entering the fray with a chamber pot raised in one hand and a clyster in the other, apparently intending to bludgeon the brawling physicians over the head with these makeshift weapons (figure 3.1). The visual association between nurses and bedpans likewise appears in an earlier satirical cartoon by Rowlandson titled *The Dying Patient or Doctor’s Last Fee* (1786), in which a nurse mourns over her dying patient, bedpan cast aside at her feet (figure 3.2). W. Hunt’s circa 1825 lithograph of a rather intimidating-looking nurse and her cowering patient also features a bedpan, in this case held under the nurse’s arm (figure 3.3). The nurse carries a bowl full of assorted medical supplies, including medicine bottles and what appears to be a small enema syringe.

⁹⁵ William Combe and Thomas Rowlandson, *The English Dance of Death: From the Designs of Thomas Rowlandson with Metrical Illustrations*, vol. 2 (London: R. Ackermann’s Repository of Arts, 1816).

⁹⁶ Combe and Rowlandson, *The English Dance of Death*, 229-31.

The eighteenth century, as contributors to the scholarly volume *Bellies, Bowels and Entrails in the Eighteenth Century* argue, was characterized by a preoccupation with the stomach and the bowels.⁹⁷ Eighteenth-century patients were keenly aware of the somatic sensations produced by their digestive organs. In the introductory chapter to this volume, the editors bring forth the striking example of Thomas Parsons, a stone carver from Bath who wrote in great detail about his experiences of indigestion in a 1769 diary entry. His “precise and colourful” description of his body’s inner workings, combined with his “medically informed analysis” of his condition, suggests “that the science of digestion was an intrinsic part of the wide cultural framework of eighteenth-century Europeans.”⁹⁸ While essays from this edited volume primarily discuss England, France, and Germany, this phenomenon was by no means exclusive to Western Europe. The writings of early Americans likewise demonstrate interest in and knowledge of digestion.

Written between 1709 and 1712, the diary of Virginia planter William Byrd contains regular discussion of the diarist’s digestive health.⁹⁹ His intermittent experiences of “looseness,” which he dutifully records in his diary, are punctuated by episodes of poor health, during which he makes careful note of his diet and bowel movements. During a particularly troubling episode of looseness accompanied by fever, he eats some watermelon to “cool” his fever. Though effective in making his

⁹⁷ Rebecca Anne Barr, Sylvie Kleiman-Lafton, and Sophie Vasset, eds., *Bellies, Bowels and Entrails in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2018).

⁹⁸ Barr et al, *Bellies, Bowels and Entrails*, 22.

⁹⁹ William Byrd, *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (The Dietz Press, 1941).

fever pass, he laments that the watermelon “increased [his] looseness so that [he] had in the whole day about 6 stools.”¹⁰⁰ Also notable is his ritual of drinking milk for breakfast nearly every day. Byrd, who recommended milk as a remedy to ailing friends and neighbors, appears to have attributed curative properties to the beverage. Yet it is not a panacea; he also makes notes on the efficacy of his regime. On one occasion, he drinks milk for supper, but reflects that, “in the night it made me a little feverish and my spirits were strangely disturbed.”¹⁰¹ On another, his breakfast of milk is the cause of “looseness.”¹⁰² He also mentions of administering purgatives either to himself or members of his household to treat a range of conditions, including distemper, the gripes, “lameness” in the foot, stomach pain, breast pain, and various unspecified illnesses.¹⁰³ While admittedly idiosyncratic in some of his practices, he is typical in his approach to regulating his digestive health. His attentiveness to his bowel movements, his careful cataloging of his meals, and frequent use of purgatives are all characteristic of the “cultural framework” discussed in *Bellies, Bowels and Entrails* in which the digestive organs were understood as central to overall health.

The use of purgatives, however, significantly predates the eighteenth century. Humoralism, a medical tradition thought to have originated in the ancient world, continued to influence healing practices in Europe and the United States well into the

¹⁰⁰ Byrd, *The Secret Diary*, 386.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 9 (distemper); 4, 187, 426 (gripes); 35, 69 (“lameness”); 119 (stomach pain); 162 (breast pain); 129, 223, 352, 507 (unspecified illness).

nineteenth century. Four humors—blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile—are thought to govern the body in humoral medicine. Good health requires a balance of all four, each of which has certain physical properties. For instance, blood is hot and wet while black bile is cold and dry.¹⁰⁴ These ideas were found not just in the university, but among both academically trained and untrained physicians. Historian Rebecca Earle’s work on humoralism in early modern Spanish America finds that “basic humoral practices such as inspecting urine to diagnose disease or using diet to maintain good health were widely shared even by ‘empirical’, illiterate practitioners and by the public who consulted them.”¹⁰⁵ The influence of humoralism on medical theory and practice persisted through the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries. For example, Irish physician James Henry’s popular *A Dialogue Between a Bilious Patient and a Physician* (1838) warned against the “habitual use of purgatives,” an “injurious” practice commonplace among his patients.¹⁰⁶ Wooster Beach, in his *An Improved System of Midwifery* (1847) took a stance against bleeding, a widespread practice to which he attributed the high rates of mortality among “civilized” American women in the lying-in room.¹⁰⁷ (He did, however, encourage the

¹⁰⁴ Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 101-106.

¹⁰⁵ Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race, and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 35.

¹⁰⁶ James Henry, *A Dialogue Between a Bilious Patient and a Physician*, 4th ed. (Dublin: George Young, 1838), i.

¹⁰⁷ Wooster Beach, *An Improved System of Midwifery Adapted to the Reformed Practice of Medicine* (New York: Jas. McAlister, 1847), 97-98.

use of cathartics prior to labor as “a measure of common cleanliness.”)¹⁰⁸ Humoralism is, therefore, best understood not just as a medical theory but as a cultural framework through which Europeans and settlers of European descent understood their bodies.

3.3 Foul and Fragrant Odors

Alain Corbin has described the years from about 1750 to 1880 as an era of “astonishing excremental vigilance.”¹⁰⁹ The smell of excrement, whether emanating from the streets, privies, cesspits, chamber pots, or bedpans, was a source of immense olfactory anxiety in the Western world. Miasma theory, previously discussed in Chapter 2, held that these and other foul odors were not just sensorially unpleasant but dangerous deliverers of disease. Eliminating these odors in the home was therefore of immense importance. However, as William Tullett has observed, odors cannot ever truly be eliminated, only diffused or masked. Any attempt at deodorization is in fact a “re-odorization,” or the replacement of an unpleasant smell with a more acceptable odor. “Deodorization,” therefore, “is best understood . . . as a technique of power that is used to create and reify boundaries between inodorous selves and the odorous others based on race, class, gender, religion, and other forms of identity.”¹¹⁰ In considering late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century deodorization technologies, then, we

¹⁰⁸ Beach, *An Improved System*, 123.

¹⁰⁹ Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 21.

¹¹⁰ Tullett, *Smell and the Past*, 84.

should be mindful of the material properties of odors, which readily cross boundaries and challenge the discrete, bounded categories of race and class, for example.¹¹¹

French pharmacist A. G. Labarraque revolutionized hygiene efforts with his 1824 treatise on the usage of chloride of lime for the deodorization of corpses in the autopsy room.¹¹² His solution was also efficacious for disinfecting water closets and fumigating apartments. English translations of this text were in circulation in the United States by at least 1829.¹¹³ To “correct the most impure and offensive atmosphere,” the *American Economical Housekeeper* (1845) recommends mixing chloride of lime with water and throwing it into the offending “receptacle of filth.”¹¹⁴ While chloride of lime was prescribed by most American housekeeping manuals and receipt books by the mid-nineteenth century, both earlier and contemporaneous texts call for balsamic vinegar solutions and other homemade aromatics to remove foul and dangerous odors. A recipe for “vinegar of the four thieves” appears in *The Virginia Housewife* (1836), for example. This mixture of lavender, rosemary, sage, wormwood, rue, mint, and “very strong” vinegar, left in the “hottest sun” for two weeks and then strained and bottled with a clove of garlic, was apparently “very refreshing ... in the

¹¹¹ See Classen et al., *Aroma*, 1, 3.

¹¹² Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 121.

¹¹³ A. G. Labarraque, *The Use of Chlorides of Soda and Lime*, trans. Jacob Potter (New Haven: Printed by Baldwin and Treadway, 1829).

¹¹⁴ E. A. Howland, *The American Economical Housekeeper and Family Receipt Book*, 2nd ed. (Worcester: Published by S. A. Howland, 1845).

apartments of the sick.”¹¹⁵ *The American Receipt Book* includes a recipe for a similar balsamic vinegar solution for use in “Sick Chambers, &c.”¹¹⁶ Although coy about the source of the odors the reader may be seeking to eliminate, housekeeping manuals from this period provide a wealth of recommendations for diffusing, neutralizing, or masking foul odors produced by the ill or invalid body.

While it is difficult to find sustained discussions of cleaning bedpans in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century sources, we do see abundant evidence of what Corbin calls the “anxiety-laden discourse” surrounding foul odors in reference to chamber pots.¹¹⁷ Written in the tradition of Jonathan Swift’s *Satirical Directions to Servants* (1745), an anonymous guide to *Domestic Management* published in 1800 instructs housekeepers to caution their chambermaids against leaving “a chamber-pot, or other unsightly thing, on the stairs of landing-places, to offend the eye, or cause persons to fall over.”¹¹⁸ As for the disposal of its contents, the chambermaid should “never presume to throw any foul water out of the window.” Yet she should also never “take any bottle, bason, or chamber-pot down stairs, not even out of the room, much less let them on the landing-place without the door, or on the stairs; for nothing is so unseemly and offensive to the eyes as this.”¹¹⁹ How the chambermaid is meant to

¹¹⁵ Mary Randolph, *The Virginia Housewife: or, Methodical Cook* (Baltimore: Published by John Plaskitt, 1836), 177.

¹¹⁶ Wright, *The American Receipt Book*, 60.

¹¹⁷ Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 25.

¹¹⁸ *Domestic Management, or the Art of Conducting an Family* (London: Printed by H. D. Symonds, 1800), 39.

¹¹⁹ *Domestic Management*, 51.

empty the chamber pot under these circumstances is left to the reader's imagination. The diatribe on chamber pots concludes with the pronouncement that the chambermaid "may as well not put the chamber-pot in the room, as put it under any part of the bed, but the place it is expected to be found in."¹²⁰

This "anxiety-laden discourse" is likewise reflected in a humorous image by Sophie Madeleine du Pont (1810-1888).¹²¹ Titled *Pernicious effects of reeding tails*, du Pont's watercolor sketch depicts a young woman—perhaps the artist herself, or one of her female family members—tripping over a chamber pot (figure 3.4). Rendered in murky browns, the semi-liquid contents of the overturned chamber pot seemingly exceed the capacity of their receptacle and extend beyond the borders of the composition. The "boundary-transgressing properties" of odor and of liquid waste, both of which threaten to overflow or expand beyond their designated place, are given visual form in this sketch.¹²² The use of bedpans and chamber pots, perhaps supplemented with aromatics, chloride of lime, and other deodorizing technologies, served to mitigate the threat posed by their foul-smelling contents. This image, however, serves as a powerful reminder of the material agency of urine and feces—its ability to spill, to stain, and to escape the boundaries of a bedpan or chamber pot.

These two satires take to the extreme the early nineteenth-century phobia of domestic dirt. Body work was integral to the maintenance of a sensorially positive

¹²⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹²¹ For more on du Pont's watercolors, see *Sophie du Pont, A Young Lady in America: Sketches, Diaries & Letters, 1823-1833* (H. N. Abrams, 1987). See pages 50-51 for her sketches of chamber pots.

¹²² Classen et al., *Aroma*, 5.

space for ill, injured, or otherwise invalid individuals to recover. Women with sufficient means hired servants to perform undesirable and dirty tasks on their behalf, placing distance between the refined upper-class body and “domestic contamination.”¹²³ The removal of visible dirt through sweeping, scouring, dusting, and scrubbing generally relied upon the appliance of elbow grease more so than the application of powerful dirt-removing chemicals. However, the early nineteenth-century housekeeper was tasked not only with ensuring that guests did not see dirt, but that they saw no trace of its removal. This included the bodies of servants as well as the traces their bodies left behind, including fingerprints and lingering odors.¹²⁴

Published in 1828, *The House Servant's Directory* recommends that servants evade visual or olfactory detection by rising early to complete their dirtiest tasks before the family rises, as the servant is otherwise “liable to interruption.”¹²⁵ When cleaning women’s shoes, one should “be very clean and careful” so as to avoid leaving stains on their linings, which are typically white.¹²⁶ Clean hands are also a prerequisite for handling wax candles.¹²⁷ In fact, author Robert Roberts’ instructions often involve removing physical traces of labor, such as lint left behind by a glass cloth used to

¹²³ Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 148.

¹²⁴ Rosie Cox, “Dishing the Dirt: Dirt in the Home,” in *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life* (Profile Books in Association with Wellcome Collection, 2011), 47-51; Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 273; Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 3.

¹²⁵ Robert Roberts, *The House Servant's Directory, or, a Monitor for Private Families*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1828), 16.

¹²⁶ Roberts, *The House Servant's Directory*, 18.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

polish cut glass.¹²⁸ The sounds made by the servant's body must also be carefully regulated. Clearing the sideboard and sidetable after serving a meal must be done "with as little noise as possible"; Roberts even recommends wearing "a pair of light pumps" while waiting on dinner or working in the parlor as opposed to "thick shoes or boots."¹²⁹ The sight of lint or sound of footsteps might pose a threat to the carefully maintained distance between the upper-class body, dirt, and the working-class bodies tasked with its elimination.

Housekeeper's Receipt-Book (1815) goes so far as to suggest that, "If dirty people cannot be removed as a common nuisance, they ought at least be avoided as infectious, and all who regard their own health, should keep a distance from their habitations."¹³⁰ Likewise, "cleanliness should be strictly regarded by those persons who are employed in preparing food ... Good house-keepers will keep a watchful eye on these things, and every person on reflection will see the necessity of cultivating general cleanliness as of great importance to the well being of society."¹³¹ The fear of bad smells and disgusting substances extended to those who were tasked with their elimination. "Abhorrence of smells produces its own form of social power," as Corbin argues in *The Foul and the Fragrant*. "Foul-smelling rubbish appears to threaten the social order, whereas the reassuring victory of the hygienic and fragrant promises to

¹²⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 62, 77.

¹³⁰ *Housekeeper's Receipt-Book*, 15.

¹³¹ Ibid., 181.

buttresses its stability.”¹³² People deemed “dirty” or “foul-smelling” were also deemed a threat by those in a position of socioeconomic power. The subaltern—the laboring classes as well as racial and ethnic minorities—were commonly ascribed a foul odor by Anglo-Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (who saw themselves as odorless by comparison).¹³³ While bedpans contained and created distance between their users and the bodily substances they produced, the domestic laborers responsible for emptying and cleaning bedpans were marked by their proximity to filthy substances and foul smells.

¹³² Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 5.

¹³³ Constance Classen, “The Odor of the Other: Symbolism and Cultural Categories,” *Ethos* 20, no. 2 (1992): 133-35.

Chapter 4

“MOST UNUSUAL” ITEMS: BEDPANS AS COLLECTIBLES AND CONSUMER GOODS, CIRCA 1750 TO PRESENT

This past summer, I made a visit to Cogswell’s Grant, an eighteenth-century farmhouse turned twentieth-century summer home in Essex, Massachusetts. Purchased in 1937 by collectors Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little, this colonial-era farmhouse is now one of the 160 historic homes under the purview of Historic New England.¹³⁴ The Littles decorated their home with “folk art portraits, painted furniture, redware, hooked rugs, weathervanes, and decoys.”¹³⁵ Their quirky sensibilities and delight in aesthetically pleasing surfaces extends even to the two bedpans in their collection (see figures 4.1 and 4.2). Finding the first of these two bedpans was relatively simple. A nineteenth-century redware bedpan, lead-glazed and decorated with dark brown splotches, resides beneath a table on the second floor. Having trained myself to search high and (especially) low in pursuit of receptacles of filth in historic house museums, it caught my eye despite its unassuming display. Uncovering the second, an English transferware bedpan dated circa 1825 to 1850, required a trek through the attic. Though technically part of the house museum, which is interpreted today as it was in

¹³⁴ “Historic New England Fact Sheet,” Historic New England, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.historicnewengland.org/helpful-links/press-media/historic-new-england-fact-sheet/>.

¹³⁵ “Cogswell’s Grant,” Historic New England, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.historicnewengland.org/property/cogswells-grant/>.

the 1980s, visitors do not typically tour this floor. They certainly do not rummage through dusty piles of crockery to extract a rather dirty bedpan (see figure 1.4).

My interest in Cogswell's Grant originated with a photograph of this object accessible through the HNE digital collections (figure 4.1). What appears to be a suspiciously fecal-colored stain on the interior caught my attention. In person, however, it became clear that the apparent stain was actually a thin layer of dirt and grime accumulated over the years. My initial disappointment gave way to intrigue. This object, like the Fraktur Room bedpan, tells a story that spans generations. In many ways, it mirrors that of its counterpart at the Winterthur Museum. What was once a tasteful nineteenth-century bedpan took on new meaning in the twentieth century when it was embraced by the Littles as a novelty good in the age of indoor plumbing and autoclaves. In the twenty-first century, interestingly, it took on yet another meaning when I invested it with value—not despite its “unappealing overtones” but *because* it was disgusting.

4.1 Home and Hospital: Disability and Design in the Domestic Sphere

In her book *Accessible America* (2019), historian of design and material culture Bess Williamson considers the aesthetics of wheelchairs, adaptive eating aids, ramps, and other disability “things.” While an A. A. Marks Adjustable Folding Chair “captures the cultures of novelty and domesticity that co-existed in the nineteenth-century home,” a sport-inspired twentieth-century wheelchair embodies “the cultural values of speed and lightness.”¹³⁶ Not only are prostheses and adaptive devices

¹³⁶ Bess Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (NYU Press, 2019), 6.

subject to the same stylistic trends that influence design in furniture, flatware, and architectural features, but they serve as material manifestations of cultural values.

The redware bedpan at Cogswell's Grant is an interesting example of this phenomenon. Redware is a red-bodied earthenware, often lead-glazed, made and used widely in early America beginning in the colonial period for both utilitarian and more decorative forms, including plates and platters, pitchers, jars, and crocks.¹³⁷ Though commonly associated with Pennsylvania German folk art, archaeologists have uncovered evidence that redware produced in Philadelphia was traded throughout the colonies and even sold overseas in England as early as the 1750s.¹³⁸ By the nineteenth century, American potters in multiple parts of the country created earthenware with red or buff or cream bodies that was shipped worldwide. Redware bedpans appear to have been uncommon, although the Cogswell's Grant bedpan is not the only example extant.¹³⁹ Interestingly, the dark splotches on the bedpan—likely manganese—may imitate the look of fashionable tortoiseshell.¹⁴⁰ This is therefore an object that operates

¹³⁷ William C. Ketchum Jr., *American Redware* (Henry Holt and Company, 1991), 15. See objects 1955.0726 A, B; 1953.0188.010; 1955.0054.002 for similar examples of New England redware at the Winterthur Museum, accessible via the Winterthur Museum digital collections: <http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/>.

¹³⁸ Carl Steen, "Pottery, Intercolonial Trade, and Revolution: Domestic Earthenwares and the Development of an American Social Identity," *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (1999): 62-72.

¹³⁹ Ketchum identifies another example of a manganese-decorated bedpan dated circa 1840 to 1890 in *American Redware* as well as two nineteenth-century chamber pots with similar decoration. "Despite this attractive glaze," he observes, "few collectors are interested in the form." Ketchum, *American Redware*, 36.

¹⁴⁰ Erica Lome (Curator of Collections at Historic New England), conversation with author, Conversation with Erica Lome, September 23, 20245.

within an existing visual language of redware crocks and containers while also appealing to an early-to-mid nineteenth century taste for visually appealing mottled surfaces. Much like the A. A. Marks Adjustable Folding Chair, this object reflects both contemporary trends in design and the dual role of the bedpan as both domestic object and assistive device.

The existing literature on the material culture of disability in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is largely concerned with prostheses—broadly defined as devices intended to substitute for a “missing” body part—including prosthetic limbs, false teeth, and wigs.¹⁴¹ Historians of disability David M. Turner and Alun Withey have argued that, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, Western Europeans adopted new “polite values of decency, decorum and control that avoid giving offence to others and optimized social success.”¹⁴² The use of a prosthetic was, in this cultural context, a means of ensuring the aesthetic comfort of others. However, as the authors demonstrate, not all prostheses were made equal. A finely crafted “cork leg” complemented the refined body of an upper-class user; an inexpensive peg leg might fulfill the same function, but was strongly associated with beggars and “poor amputees.”¹⁴³ The function of eighteenth and nineteenth-century assistive devices,

¹⁴¹ See Ryan Sweet, *Prosthetic Body Parts in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2021) and Vanessa Warne, “To Invest a Cripple with Peculiar Interest: Artificial Legs and Upper-Class Amputees at Mid-Century,” *Victorian Review* 35, no. 2 (2009): 83-100.

¹⁴² David M. Turner and Alun Withey, “Technologies of the Body: Polite Consumption and the Correction of Deformity in Eighteenth-Century England,” *History* 99, no. 338 (2014): 790.

¹⁴³ Turner and Withey, “Technologies of the Body,” 796.

then, was not just to “conceal” or “correct” bodily differences, but to serve as “[tools] for maintaining social distinction.”¹⁴⁴

For example, we might consider the previously discussed transferware bedpan at Cogswell’s Grant. The nineteenth-century bedpan closely resembles other blue-and-white transferware objects popular in England and North America at the time, themselves emulating Chinese porcelain. Similar patterns appear on objects intended to be viewed and admired by guests, including platters, soup tureens, and even an ice cream pail from the Winterthur collection.¹⁴⁵ They also appear on numerous bourdalous (i.e. female urinals), as well as feeding cups and a spittoon from the Wellcome Collection.¹⁴⁶ Bedpans and ice cream pails alike served as expressions of refined taste. As in the case of the prosthetic legs provided by Turner and Withey, not all bedpans were created equal. There was, it seems, such a thing as a “tasteful” or bedpan that conveyed the user’s socioeconomic status and indicated that they were a polite member of society. Although these objects primarily appeared in the semi-private space of the sick-chamber, they were nevertheless seen by visiting friends, family members, and physicians. Even if not in active use, visitors might still glimpse these objects in storage under a bed, perhaps, or on a shelf. A transferware bedpan

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 796. See also Jennifer Van Horn, “George Washington’s Dentures: Disability, Deception, and the Republican Body,” *Early American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2016): 2-47.

¹⁴⁵ See objects 1956.0090.007, 1996.0027.008.009, 2018.0006.001 A, B, and 19978.0173.001 A, B; accessible via the Winterthur Museum digital collections: <http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/>.

¹⁴⁶ See objects A637076, A608295, A608297, A625649, A625650, A625648, and A625651, accessible through the Science Museum Group digital collections: <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk>.

may not be mistaken for a more “polite” object in this context. However, its decorative surface might, like a fine cork leg, serve to conceal the bodily impairment evidenced by the use of a bedpan while demonstrating the user’s good taste and refinement.

4.2 The Age of the Autoclave: Whiteness, Cleanliness, and the “Normal” Body

Invented in 1879, the autoclave contributed to a transformation in the aesthetics of cleanliness set in motion by the introduction of germ theory in the 1850s.¹⁴⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, the mainstream acceptance that microscopic bacteria were to blame for the spread of disease led to an “almost obsessive attention to eliminating both invisible and visible dirt” in upper-class households. Bacteria, as gender studies scholar Rosie Cox describes, “could be neither seen nor smelled,” meaning that “housekeepers had to develop new understandings of which substances were ‘clean’ and what cleaning meant.”¹⁴⁸ Hospital workers used new technologies such as the autoclave—which used steam to kill microorganisms and sterilize objects—to sanitize bedpans, emesis basins, water cups, and other potential carriers of disease. A mid-twentieth century trade catalog from the American Sterilizer Company advertises a specialized “bedpan washer-steamer” intended to sterilize bedpans quickly and efficiently. At the literal push of the button, the nurse could begin the automatic “25-second cold water wash followed by 30-second steaming.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 168.

¹⁴⁸ Cox, “Dishing the Dirt,” 43.

¹⁴⁹ Sterilizers and Allied Equipment Catalog, Trade catalogs from American Sterilizer Co. n.d., Smithsonian Libraries Trade Literature Collections, 052843, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

However, we should not confuse the rise of germ theory and the corresponding placement of trust in germ-killing machines such as the autoclave to mean that smell and sight no longer held any sway in the hospital or sickroom. A careful reading of twentieth-century advertisements from the American Sterilizer Co. reminds us that while the use of these sterilizers supposedly required “no special skills” and could “be performed by any available personnel,” they could not be operated without the bodily labor—and sensory oversight—of a human being.¹⁵⁰ According to an advertisement for the American-Gray Diverter Valve, “Hot water increases odor problems and congeals feces to the bedpan (particularly stainless steel) and therefore the American-Gray Diverter Valve utilizes the normal cold water supply.”¹⁵¹ Authority was not fully displaced onto the machine, then; visual or olfactory evidence of lingering fecal matter could testify to the failure of sterilizing technologies.

These sterilization technologies did not typically appear in the home, but cultural values of hygiene, efficiency, and standardization certainly did. By the end of the nineteenth century, pewter and pearlware bedpans had given way to porcelain, enamels, and stainless steel.¹⁵² Patented in 1900, the “Perfection” bedpan embodies the values of “modernity” with its streamlined design (see figure 4.3). Historian Suellen Hoy has written on the conflation of whiteness with cleanliness in the United

¹⁵⁰ “American Utensil Washer-Sanitizer,” Trade catalogs from American Sterilizer Co., n.d., Smithsonian Libraries Trade Literature Collections, 052843, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵¹ “American Gray Diverter Valve,” Trade catalogs from American Sterilizer Company, n.d., Smithsonian Libraries Trade Literature Collections, 052843, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵² Bennion, *Antique Medical Instruments*, 291-92.

States by the beginning of the twentieth century. Middle and upper-class homemakers took pride in having “the whitest” laundry in the neighborhood; the gleaming white surfaces in their kitchens and bathrooms were testament to their ability to keep surfaces visually spotless (or hire domestic laborers to do so on their behalf).¹⁵³

Values of efficiency and cleanliness are made material in the “Perfection” bedpan, which disposed of the long, hollow handle of earlier models. Available in “normal” and “small” sizes, this “anatomically correct” bedpan assumes an average, standard body against which all bodies can be compared.¹⁵⁴

Bedpans appear throughout early to mid-twentieth-century catalogs, sold by suppliers such as V. Mueller & Co. (a Chicago-based manufacturer and retailer of medical devices founded in 1898), Allied Medical Supply Co. (founded in Chicago in the 1930s), and Columbia Enameling and Stamping Co. (a manufacturer of enameled cookware—and, eventually, sanitary wares—founded in 1871 in Bellaire, Ohio).¹⁵⁵ These and other manufacturers advertised bedpans in a range of colors and styles. In a 1937 trade catalog, the Columbia Enameling and Stamping Co. advertises the “glistening immaculate white finish” of its “White-Rock” line of enameled wash basins, mixing bowls, chamber pots, kettles, pitchers, and plate. “White (because it

¹⁵³ Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 151-52, 159.

¹⁵⁴ See Lundy Braun, *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Planation to Genetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) for more on medical devices and the invention of normality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States.

¹⁵⁵ Trade catalogs from V. Mueller & Co.; Trade catalogs on medical supplies: weight belts, moist heat packs...; Trade catalogs from Columbian Enameling & Stamping Co., Inc., Smithsonian Libraries Trade Literature Collections, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

suggests cleanliness) has and always will be the acceptable finish for cooking utensils,” according to this catalog.¹⁵⁶ However, they offered a wide array of products—the no. 21 bed or douche pan, no. 51 “regular” bed pan, and no. 41 “queen” bed pan were all recommended to “bolster your sales of sick room supplies”—in various colorways, including the popular “Blue Onyx” (royal blue with white stipple) and “Vitrox” (ivory with green trim).¹⁵⁷

While trade catalogs create the impression of a dazzling array of aesthetic options, they offer only a limited range of options in size and form. The flashy marketing of products like the “queen” bedpan likewise suggests a separation between the commodity and the body of the eventual user. Notably, there are few images of bodies in these catalogs save for the occasional appearance of a (young, invariably female) nurse dressed in a spotless white uniform. It is in this historical context that the Littles acquired two nineteenth-century bedpans for their folk art collection. It is easy to imagine how a decorative antique bedpan might be embraced as quirky folk art. Just as I was prepared to dismiss the Littles as yet another pair of twentieth-century collectors cowed by the unappealing overtones of receptacles of filth, however, a docent at Cogswell’s Grant asked whether I had seen Nina’s chamber pot closet. In a small closet extending off Nina Fletcher Little’s bedroom, I was met with a collection of a half dozen chamber pots neatly arranged on shelves. Here, a new

¹⁵⁶ “Columbian-Made Enameled Ware,” Trade catalogs from Columbian Enameling & Stamping Co., Inc., 1900s, SILNMAHTL_12321, Smithsonian Libraries Trade Literature Collections, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵⁷ Trade catalogs from Columbian Enameling & Stamping Co., Inc., 1900s, SILNMAHTL_12321, Smithsonian Libraries Trade Literature Collections, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

complication entered the narrative. What if these objects were collected not in spite of but because of their connection with filth? As the mass-manufacture of bedpans increased, indoor plumbing proliferated, and body work became largely automated, perhaps the conditions of the mid-twentieth century allowed collectors to embrace antique bedpans for their novelty—as quaint relics of a smellier, less sophisticated past.

4.3 Dirt on Display: Collecting Bedpans, 1950 to Present

It is here that I am forced to usher myself onto the stage as a historical actor. Returning to my initial (digital) encounter with the transferware bedpan at Cogswell's Grant, my response was one of simultaneous disgust and delight. Through my research, I have not only encountered bedpans on display in mid-century museums, but for sale in antiques shops and online marketplaces such as Etsy and eBay. My own collection includes a "Perfection" bedpan made in Stoke-on-Trent and an ironstone chamber pot of more mysterious provenance. In collecting receptacles of filth, I join the illustrious ranks of Henry Francis du Pont, Nina Fletcher Little, and Henry Wellcome. The question remains, however. Why collect antique bedpans? Why take delight in that which should be disgusting?

The literature on disgust provides a useful starting point for analyzing this phenomenon. Douglas, whose work on dirt and disgust has already been discussed in this thesis, claims that disgust has no basis in biology. Disgust is a purely sociocultural phenomenon. On the opposite side of the spectrum, anthropologist Virginia Smith proposes that "while human sweat is more or less socially acceptable, and even human urine appears to have been historically more acceptable than it is today, human faeces

are certainly not.”¹⁵⁸ The aversion to excrement, according to Smith, is innate and universal. The sight (or smell) of feces induces a biological “disgust response.”¹⁵⁹ Historian of smell William Ian Miller falls somewhere in the middle in his essay on disgust for *Empire of the Senses* (2004). While disgust is at least in part culturally and socially derived, perhaps certain substances require less “cultural work” to render disgusting than others. As Miller notes, a great number of cultures have converged upon “the slimy, oozy, sticky, squishy, wiggly, and slithery” as a source of repulsion.¹⁶⁰ In short, disgust is probably best understood as a combination of biological and cultural factors. To assume the universality of taboos across time and culture is, as Douglas asserts, shortsighted. However, Smith’s discussion of the disgust response reminds us that disgust operates powerfully on both the mind and the body.

In the concluding chapter of *Crap: A History of Cheap Stuff in America* (2020), Wendy A. Woloson meditates on whoopee cushions and fake vomit. “By ridiculing our bodily functions,” these types of objects “bring out into the open that which we most urgently try to conceal.”¹⁶¹ Alternatively, Glenn Adamson suggests that “fanciful chamber pots” might be understood as a means of “grinning and

¹⁵⁸ Virginia Smith, “Evacuation, Repair & Beautification: Dirt and the Body,” in *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life* (Profile Books in Association with Wellcome Collection, 2011), 13.

¹⁵⁹ Smith, “Evacuation, Repair & Beautification,” 13.

¹⁶⁰ William Ian Miller, “Darwin’s Disgust,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Berg, 2005), 338-39.

¹⁶¹ Wendy A. Woloson, *Crap: A History of Cheap Stuff in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 310.

bearing” the filthy reality of the pre-industrial past.¹⁶² Both theories are compelling. However, neither seems to capture the diversity of affective reactions bedpans elicit.

I, for one, would not have purchased a bedpan—or pursued this thesis topic, for that matter—if I did not find bedpans at least a little disgusting. Discussing my research with others throughout the past year has yielded an interesting array of reactions, however. The collections access facilitator who accompanied me on my bedpan pilgrimage to the National Collections Centre quipped that he didn’t go to school for six years to fetch bedpans. At an antiques store in Massachusetts, I learned that the owner was a fellow collector of receptacles of filth. She recommended using chamber pots as ice buckets when hosting. At a historic house museum in Rhode Island, a docent reflected that she regularly received questions about how and where people went to the bathroom—questions for which she couldn’t find good answers. I also had more sober conversations with those for whom bedpans brought to mind caring for ailing loved ones. Online retailers such as Etsy and eBay are another treasure trove for studying the myriad meanings attributed to bedpans. Bedpan-shaped ash trays emblazoned with “for old butts and ashes” speak to the darkly comedic potential of the form. Hot pink pop art bedpans by David Sparks, America’s self-proclaimed “pre-eminent and only bedpan art creator,” covered in images of unpopular political figures bring to mind eighteenth-century chamber pots with the

¹⁶² Glenn Adamson, “Difficult Issues: No Laughing Matter,” *The Magazine Antiques*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.themagazineantiques.com/article/critical-thinking-difficult-issues-no-laughing-matter/>.

faces of politicians.¹⁶³ Our relationships to bedpans, it seems, are at once social and deeply individual. For seemingly mundane objects, they are shockingly emotionally resonant. They evoke horror, laughter, curiosity, scorn, and sympathy. This is why bedpans, disgusting though they may be, deserve a closer look.

¹⁶³ The object description reads: “Artist David Sparks of Dayton, Ohio is America’s pre-eminent and only bedpan art creator. Sparks’ bedpan art has been featured in galleries across America. In this, a bedpan of shame, Sparks lampoons Ohio Senator Jaydee Vance.” “Jaydee Vance Bedpan of Shame, Political Pop Art,” Etsy, accessed April 18th, 2025, <https://www.etsy.com/listing/1798595104/jaydee-vance-bedpan-of-shame-political>.

For chamber pots with the faces of politicians, see Catharine McCaffey-Howarth, “Potty Propaganda? ‘King Louis’ Last Interview with his Family’ on a creamware mug, 1793-95,” in *Pots, Prints, and Politics: Ceramics with an Agenda, from the 14th to the 20th Century*, ed. Patricia Ferguson (The British Museum, 2021) and Ivor Noël Hume, “Through the Lookinge Glasse: or, the Chamber Pot as a Mirror of Its Time,” *Chipstone* (2003).

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION: “ABOUT WHICH NOTHING IS REQUISITE TO BE SAID”

As of July 2024, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that more than one in four (or 28.7%) of adults in the United States have a disability. Disability, as defined by the CDC, refers to disabling impairments in cognition, mobility, vision, or hearing, as well as “difficulty doing errands alone” (what the CDC refers to as a disability relating to “independent living”).¹⁶⁴ The refrain that almost all of us are, have been, or will be disabled at some point in our lives appears throughout disability studies literature. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, the early American world was one in which disability was not exceptional but instead commonplace. This is, arguably, the case in the twenty-first century United States as well. However, many of us are accustomed to thinking of disability as something that exists outside of or separate to the everyday. This is reflected in our use of language, in the histories we tell, and in our relationship with bedpans.

In the early stages of my research, I was struck by the difficulty of finding what I considered to be scholarly sources on bedpans. More often than not, keyword searches yielded op-eds written by healthcare professionals, humorous books for veteran and novice nurses, and the occasional memoir reflecting on individual experiences navigating chronic illness. A few obvious themes unite these recent

¹⁶⁴ “Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic,” CDC, last updated July 15, 2024, <http://cdc.gov/disability-and-health/articles-documents/disability-impacts-all-of-us-infographic.html>.

publications. First, bedpans speak to cultural assumptions about who uses bedpans: nurses (almost invariably women, when represented on the covers of books) and elderly patients. For all the cultural and temporal distance between our present day and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Euro-American world, there are striking similarities to be found among past and present representations of bedpans in popular culture. We might compare them to the satirical cartoons discussed in Chapter 2, with their depictions of broad-shouldered, stern-looking nurses and young female or frail, elderly male patients. Who comes to mind when we think of bedpans is a reflection of culturally conditioned ideas about what disability looks like, who performs caregiving tasks, and what places are spaces of healthcare and disability.

Second, bedpans are emotionally resonant objects. They have, as I have discussed, immense affective power. They disgust and amuse; repulse and compel. The use of the word “bedpan” in titles such as *View from the Bedpan: A Candid Look at Hospitalization and Healing* (2002) or *When the Bedpan Hits the Fan: Absurdities from a Nursing Career* (2019) is striking.¹⁶⁵ Such titles convey that the reader is in for an experience that is funny but frank. Humor can be a way of coping for caregivers and patients alike, as these texts suggest. When activated through use in a home, hospital, or other healthcare facility, bedpans may elicit feelings of embarrassment or shame; humor is one possible antidote. To laugh at bedpans is not the antithesis of care, but its complement.

¹⁶⁵ Beverly June Richmond, *View from the Bedpan: A Candid Look at Hospitalization and Healing* (Essence, 2002); Jordan P. Jones, *When the Bedpan Hits the Fan: Absurdities from a Nursing Career* (Word Association Publishers, 2019).

Finally, to study bedpans is to study class. In a blog for the *American Nurse*, journal of the American Nurses Association (ANA), Doctor of Nursing Practice Fidelindo Lim reflects on bedpans and his three-decade-long nursing career:

The bedpan is an anonymous and mute witness to human biological processes, suffering, and caregiving. For better or for worse, the nursing profession is somehow inextricably linked with the bedpan (and unglamorous associations), even as it tries to move away from its cold shadow. What was once considered a nursing skill that required practice to master is now a task to be delegated ... The class distinction among healthcare workers is defined by who gets to do the dirty work, literally. It is worth contemplating to ask ourselves as registered nurses, if it is beneath us to help the patient use the bedpan.¹⁶⁶

Lim's reflection on suffering, caregiving, and class resonates with similar observations made by Cox and Brown about nursing practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Powerful people hired those with less socioeconomic power to dispose of their waste, who in turn were treated as "contaminated" by the substances they cleaned and the smells they emitted. As Lim alludes to in the blog quoted above, a similar phenomenon is seen in the hierarchy of healthcare workers. Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) are often delegated the "dirty work" by college-educated Registered Nurses (RNs).¹⁶⁷ Today, as in the past, the valuable work undertaken by nursing professionals is far too often reduced to "emptying bedpans."

¹⁶⁶ Fidelindo Lim, "The Bedpan and its Significance," *American Nurse*, February 17, 2021, myamericannurse.com/bedpan-and-social-justice-during-pandemic/.

¹⁶⁷ Ishita Dey refers to this type of work, which "involves the removal of intimate bodily smells emanating from bodily fluids, such as sweat, urine, blood, waste, and stains from leftovers foods" as "intimate labor." Dey, "Smells, Intimate Labor and Domestic Work in Delhi, India," *The Senses and Society* 16, no. 3 (2021): 340.

The phenomenon of the bedpan in the cupboard is worth critiquing not just because it is strange or ridiculous. The subaltern status of the bedpan is that of the nursing assistant, home health care worker, or unpaid nonprofessional caregiver who empties, cleans, and cares for bedpans. That bedpans have historically been considered too mundane and disgusting to be worthy of discussion—and largely continue to be dismissed for these reasons—cannot be separated from the historical devaluation of body work and intimate labor. If we object to the display of a bedpan in a cupboard, however, where should this object be displayed? Bedpans are, as this thesis demonstrates, objects that take on new meanings as they are activated across different contexts. The Fraktur Room bedpan’s display at Winterthur activates the object as a work of American decorative arts. This thesis suggests how we might activate bedpans as sick-chamber necessities and commercial products, for example. The solution here is not to remove his particular bedpan from this particular cupboard, or to deny this narrative. Instead, we must continue asking questions about what we may be tempted to dismiss as objects “about which nothing is requisite to be said.”

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Appendix

FIGURES



Figure 1.1 Cupboard containing pewter wares by William Will in the Fraktur Room. by author. Courtesy Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library.



Figure 1.2 William Will, Bedpan, Philadelphia, PA, 1764-98, pewter. 1961.0103. Museum purchase. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library



Figure 1.3 Redware bedpan at Cogswell's Grant. Essex, MA. Photograph courtesy of the author.



Figure 1.4 Transferware bedpan at Cogswell's Grant. Essex, MA. Photograph courtesy of the author.



Figure 2.1 Francis Grose, *Antiquarians peeping into Boadicia's night urn*, London, circa 1770, etching. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.



Figure 2.2 A woman dying in the arms of her family, an unhappy doctor leaves the room realising that it is his final payment. Aquatint by T. Rowlandson, 1786. Wellcome Collection. Source: Wellcome Collection.



Figure 3.1 A woman dying in the arms of her family, an unhappy doctor leaves the room realising that it is his final payment. Aquatint by T. Rowlandson, 1786. Wellcome Collection. Source: Wellcome Collection.



Figure 3.2 A woman dying in the arms of her family, an unhappy doctor leaves the room realising that it is his final payment. Aquatint by T. Rowlandson, 1786. Wellcome Collection. Source: Wellcome Collection.



Figure 3.3 A dishevelled nurse with her disgruntled patient. Lithograph by W. Hunt. Wellcome Collection. Source: Wellcome Collection.



Figure 3.4 Sophie Madeleine du Pont, *Pernicious effects of reeding tails*, Wilmington, DE, 1823-33, watercolor sketch. Source: Nemours Estate Special Collections.



Figure 4.1 Redware bedpan, 1800-1899. Original to Cogswell's Grant (Essex, Mass.) Gift of Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little. 1991.1640. Source: Historic New England.



Figure 4.2 English transferware bedpan, 1825-1850. Original to Cogswell's Grant (Essex, Mass.) Gift of Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little. 1991.1046. Source: Historic New England.



Figure 4.3 Grimwades Limited, “Perfection” bedpan, Stoke-on-Trent, England, 1910-1930, earthenware. Sir Henry Wellcome’s Museum Collection. Source: Science Museum Group.