

images of the period. "A Backside Compliment," from *The Academy of Compliments* (1650), praised an unhappy but colorful flaw with a delicate "*O felix caro!*":

Pure saffron teeth—happy the meat  
That such pretty millstones eat!

"In Praise of His Mistress's Beauty," from *Wit and Drollery, Joviall Poems* (1656), appealed to (or tried not to appeal to) several senses:

Her oven-mouth wide open stands,  
And teeth like rotten peas.

Paradoxical encomia prospered into the eighteenth century, as did false teeth, black teeth, poorly spaced teeth, and breath foul to the point of rotting teeth from the gums.

In some ways the inversion of pearly, Petrarchan tooth imagery found in seventeenth-century English poetry is "psychodontic," for the impulse against Petrarchanism is partly an impulse against necessary ties of physical and moral beauty. Thus poets said that even though their mistresses are deformed (having, in this case, ugly or rotten teeth), they can attract lovers, make love, or be true. Of course teeth were not specifically the concern of these poets; they were concerned with imagery, humor, and ugliness. But their insistent and often striking inclusion of teeth shows the importance teeth had as an aspect of beauty, even if that importance became more evident with negative emphasis. That negative emphasis is nowhere more evident than in John Collop's "On Dentipicta; A Lady with Enamell'd Teeth, Black, White and Yellow. *F.W.*," perhaps the prize tooth poem of the seventeenth century, and surely all that need be said to show the century's delight in dental disorder:

The Wiseman Teeth call'd flocks of sheep:  
Sure *Jacobs* speckled flocks here keep.  
Where teeth are checker'd black and white,  
Nay gilt too to enrich delight:  
Her mouth ope, you at Chesse may play,  
With teeth resembling night and day.  
Each fondling reach will praise what's white:  
Is there in Choak such strange delight?  
Give me the mouth like th' Temple floor,  
With speckled Marble paved o're.  
Or oh more rich in gold thus set,  
A row of pearl then one of jet.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> I owe this and other references to John M. Sullivan's unpublished paper "Age Cannot Wither Her": Some Versions of the Deformed Mistress."

To the Editor:

I should like to point out an error in the interesting essay on teeth by Theodore Ziolkowski. In footnote 1 he says, "In *War and Peace* Tolstoy implies that the French suffered such heavy losses in the battle of Borodino because Napoleon had a cold. And Voltaire once quipped that the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day occurred because Charles ix had an upset stomach."

Tolstoy's point was diametrically the opposite. In Book x (Maude trans.), Chapter xxviii, entitled "Napoleon's cold. Why the Battle had to be fought," is devoted to devastating the idea that Napoleon's cold, which he did in fact have on the day of the battle, had impaired his strategic and tactical genius, an idea that had been advanced by French apologists and/or historians. Tolstoy believed, and argued with his usual ferocity, not only that Napoleon's cold had nothing whatsoever to do with the outcome of Borodino but that Napoleon himself, ill or well, had nothing whatsoever to do with either choosing the site of the battle or dictating its outcome. From Tolstoy's point of view Napoleon could have been a corpse on 26 August (Old Style), 7 September (New Style), 1812, and the outcome of the battle would still have been the same. Tolstoy subjects "the cold" theory to a characteristic *reductio ad absurdum*:

If it had depended on Napoleon's will to fight or not to fight the battle of Borodino, and if this or that other arrangement depended on his will, then evidently a cold affecting the manifestation of his will might have saved Russia, and consequently the valet who omitted to bring Napoleon his waterproof boots on the twenty-fourth would have been the savior of Russia.

It is also *Tolstoy*, as Ziolkowski does not make clear but as my quotation above does, who cites Voltaire's jest about Charles ix's stomach and the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day.

However, it is appropriate to bring in both Tolstoy and Voltaire in any discussion of teeth. Tolstoy had lost all of his by the age of thirty, and Voltaire also lost all of his although I am not sure at what age. In any event, when Boswell visited him at Ferney, the venerable sage, then 70, dictated that the conversation should be carried on in French rather than English for reasons of orthodonture:

On 24 December 1764 the conversation was in French, Voltaire explaining that one could not talk English without putting the tongue between the teeth and that he had lost his teeth.<sup>1</sup>

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (New York: McGraw-Hill, n.d.), p. 3, n. 2.