Linguæ &
Rivista di lingue e culture moderne

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https://doi.org/10.14276/l.v26i2.4779

2 / 2024

ISSN 1724-8698

Urbino University Press
Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Bloody Banquet* (c. 1609) as a radical interrogation of transgression, abjection, and power dynamics in Jacobean drama. The play's staging of taboo violations – tyranny, sexual desire, and cannibalism – reflects a broader crisis of order and meaning in early modern English culture. Through a close reading of key scenes, particularly the grotesque bloody banquet, this article details how the central characters (the transgressive Queen Thetis and the tyrannical Armatrites) paradoxically embody dynamics of excess and restraint, subversion and containment. The play's portrayal of the erosion of social, political, and ontological boundaries challenges the early modern ideal of moderation, exposing the fragility of the self and the body politic amidst the radical destabilisation of stereotyped categories of identity and difference.

KEYWORDS: *The Bloody Banquet*; taboo; cannibalism; body politic; death drive.

1. The Paradox of Transgression

In early modern England, boundaries – between the licit and illicit, holy and secular, self and other – were being constantly reimagined. These boundaries, however, despite their ostensible rigidity, fostered a degree of fascination with

transgression, seen as both a source of anxiety and a site of subversive pleasure[1]. Amidst religious upheaval, political instability, and emerging capitalism, traditional hierarchies and moral certainties began to break down, providing new spaces for questions about what it meant to cross such boundaries.

Central to my analysis is the contradictory nature of transgression itself. As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, transgression is "the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin". However, as theorists like Georges Bataille[2] and Michel Foucault[3] have pointed out, the relationship between transgression and the boundaries it violates is intrinsically paradoxical. On the one hand, transgression draws its power from the limits it seeks to disrupt, feeding off their authority even as it challenges them. On the other hand, it promises a form of freedom, a temporary release from the normative constraints these limits impose – what Bataille sees as a momentary collapse of the autonomous, rational self, and of the boundaries between subject and object, self and other, thus granting access to a deeper connection with the cosmos.

The classical concept of moderation, captured in the Aristotelian/Horatian ideal of the 'golden mean'[4], began to buckle under increasing pressure from the "new Philosophy" that "call[ed] all in doubt". The Reformation's attack on the Catholic Church, with its rejection of clerical authority and focus on personal conscience, sparked waves of iconoclasm and anti-ritualism that overturned a centuries-old religious orthodoxy. Meanwhile, the rise of commerce and of the

[1] "What is forbidden […] carries with it a propulsion to desire in equal measure" (Jenks 2003, 45).

[2] In *L'Erotisme*, Bataille argues that "La transgression n'est pas la négation de l'interdit, mais elle le dépasse et le complete" (1987, 10).

[3] Foucault, in *A Preface to Transgression*, asserts: "Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations; it does not transform the other side of the mirror, beyond an invisible and uncrossable line, into a glittering expanse" (1977, 35).

[4] The Aristotelian concept of moderation posits virtue as an ethical midpoint calibrated by practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and aimed at achieving *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. Hence, "moderation, both produced and was the product of the mean between extremes" (Shagan 2011, 253).

market economy eroded the time-honoured social bonds and moral obligations of feudal society, offering opportunities for mobility and self-fashioning as well as new forms of social dislocation. These forces, in response, prompted renewed efforts by Church and State to re-impose discipline and control in an attempt to contain the centrifugal energies unleashed by the collapse of the old order. The Elizabethan Settlement, aiming to impose a *via media* between the Catholic and Protestant extremes, is one example; likewise, sumptuary laws and moral regulations sought to preserve class distinctions and gender roles in the face of growing social and economic instability.

These religious, economic, and social transformations coincided with a political struggle over the nature of sovereignty, as the Crown and Parliament contended over their respective powers and prerogatives. Famously, the Stuart monarchs claimed theological legitimacy by asserting an absolutist view of monarchy grounded in the divine rights of kings. By contrast, Parliament and its allies espoused a competing vision of contractual and limited monarchy, based on the principle of King-in-Parliament and the subordination of the monarch to law and the collective will of the nation.

In this context of uncertainty and change, the humanist ideal of the rational, self-controlled individual began to disintegrate. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue, the early modern period was characterised by a "mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 5). Without constant vigilance, the moderate self was always at risk of being overwhelmed by unruly passions (Shepard 2003, 30; Bryson 1998)[5].

This climate of anxiety and tension led to a new fascination with transgression and boundary violations. On stage, scenes and characters that violated all moral and social norms offered insight into the cultural contradictions of that period and a critical reflection on the fragile foundations of legitimacy and order. Taboo, in particular, emerged as a means to question and dismantle the norms and hierarchies that structured civil coexistence,

[5] For instance, Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) presented the moderate, well-regulated individual as a model for imitation. Additionally, there was a proliferation of conduct manuals and courtesy books, with detailed prescriptions for proper behaviour.

opening up spaces of ambiguity and experimentation in which roles and identities could be refashioned and renegotiated.

Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Bloody Banquet* (c. 1609)[6] captures this fascination with boundary-crossing through its disturbing examination of desire, power, and human limits. In what follows, I argue that the play's staging of taboo violations – from adultery to tyranny and cannibalism – reflects and refracts the broader crisis of order and meaning that gripped early modern English culture. By pushing the conventions of revenge tragedy to their limits, the two Jacobean playwrights[7] question the extent to which the classical ideal of moderation has abruptly vanished, revealing the fragility of social, political, and ontological categories.

Moderation, I suggest, is an illusion of order and balance, always on the verge of being shattered by the excess it seeks to contain. In *The Bloody Banquet*, we witness this paradox of excess in its full complexity and ambiguity; although the playwrights indulge in the transgressive pleasures of their characters, they also acknowledge that such pleasures risk being constrained and co-opted. In doing so, *The Bloody Banquet* challenges the belief itself that "in medio stat virtus", forcing us to confront the instability of the order we cling to and inviting us to question whether, ultimately, we too are guests at the titular banquet.

[6] The exact date of *The Bloody Banquet*'s first performance is uncertain, although the play was published in 1639. Scholars have advanced various hypotheses on the history of its composition and staging. Chris Meads suggests that the play may have been written in the late 1630s, calling it "a splendid summation of the trends and tropes of all banquet scenes up to that point" (Meads 2001, 154). This argument emphasises the play's engagement with the theatrical tradition of depicting courtly excess and transgression. However, Gary Taylor makes a more convincing case for an earlier date. Through close analysis of contemporary references in the play's parodic clowning scene, Taylor dates the original performance to around 1609, in the immediate aftermath of the Midland Rising. Nonetheless, he does acknowledge that the text likely underwent revisions before its publication in 1639 (Taylor 2001).

[7] Although the play was co-written with Dekker, whose hand is evident in the subplot, Middleton is generally credited with its more subversive elements, particularly in the handling of tyranny and transgression.

2. Consuming the Other: Staging the Cannibalistic Spectacle

In *The Bloody Banquet*, the climactic scene of cannibalism encapsulates the play's intertwined themes of power, gender, vengeance, and identity. In Act 5, Scene 1, the tyrant Armatrites forces his adulterous wife, Queen Thetis, to publicly consume the dismembered body of her dead lover, Tymethes. The banquet, conventionally a site of conviviality, becomes an arena of horror. This unspeakable act assaults the audience with a vision of abjection that subverts the expectations of hospitality and social order while breaching the boundaries between self and other, civilisation and savagery, the Symbolic and the Real.

The punishment inflicted on Thetis culminates in her forced ingestion of the object of her forbidden desire. Armatrites mocking words – "Here's venison for thy own tooth. Thou know'st the relish: / A dearer place hath been thy taster" (4.3.215-17)[8] – cruelly conflate the Queen's previous enjoyment of Tymethes's body with mere consumption; the innuendo of the "dearer place" equates her sexuality with a voracious, all-devouring mouth, drawing on the patriarchal fear of the female body as a consuming, destructive force. This imagery, of course, recalls the patriarchal fantasy of the *vagina dentata* – where female sexuality is imagined to be dangerous and castrating; within such a framework, Thetis's passion becomes a monstrous appetite to be controlled and punished.

This act merges sexual and alimentary appetites[9], crudely reflecting the Tyrant's belief that cuckoldry is akin to being metaphorically 'eaten' by a rival's desire. He turns this idea of erotic cannibalism against the Young Queen, forcing her to devour her "desirèd paramour" (4.3.275), thus reenacting her transgression as a grotesque self-violation and turning the lovers into symbols of patriarchal retribution. This brutal travesty of romantic communion

[8] All references to the text are from *The Bloody Banquet* edited by Julia Gasper and Gary Taylor, included in *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, edited by Gary Taylor, John Lavagnino, *et al.*, published by Oxford University Press in 2007. Henceforth, act, scene, and line numbers will be given in parentheses after each quotation.

[9] On the many implications of the link between food and sex in early modern England, see especially Khamphommala 2008, Lennartz 2012, Nunn 2013, and Williamson 2021.

perverts the language of lovers 'feeding' upon each other's bodies, reducing them to mere objects of total abjection and domination.

The dynamic of forced consumption is further amplified by the scene's insistent blurring of literal and metaphorical cannibalism. The Tyrant's remarks that Tymethes's "flesh is sweet; it melts, and goes down merrily" (5.1.205) fuse the languages of erotic pleasure and physical digestion, reducing the lovers to meat to be savoured. And again, his declaration that "[t]he lecher must be swallowed rib by rib" (5.1.204) conflates moral condemnation with physical incorporation, as though Tymethes's transgression could be cleansed through this act of carnal communion. In this sense, cannibalism becomes a metaphor for the Hobbesian 'war of all against all', where the weak are swallowed up by the strong. This imagery, which permeates *The Bloody Banquet*, is summed up in the Clown's satirical account of the kingdom's different types of "wolves" (2.1.36 ff). In the banquet scene, these visions of social cannibalism are brought to life, coalescing into a single, overwhelming signifier of a self-devouring world – a communion in which all bonds of duty and community have dissolved.

The ceremonial staging of this banquet intensifies its sacrilegious overtones, as Armatrites mockingly imitates Christian ritual – especially the Eucharist, where spiritual nourishment through Christ's body is made grotesquely to materialise into a vision of damnation through flesh. He invites his guests to partake in a twisted communion: "Sit, pray sit, religious men, right welcome / Unto our cates" (5.1.144-45), mimicking Eucharistic language, with the pilgrims acting as unwilling witnesses. Tymethes's mutilated limbs, displayed before the Queen "with a skull all bloody" (5.1.SD), parallel the imagery of the cross, making this violent act a sacrilegious inversion of communion, devoid of redemption. This perverse Eucharist turns the Queen into an unholy altar of self-consuming transgression, her body becoming a grotesque site where forbidden desires are devoured, not absolved.

The sacrilegious blurring of the erotic and the Eucharistic reflects early modern anxieties about religious rituals and their counter-discourses. In the reformist Protestant imaginary, Catholic transubstantiation was often attacked as a form of cannibalism, since Catholics were said to 'consume' the literal body and blood of Christ. *The Bloody Banquet* plays on this discourse by likening

Thetis's adultery to a sort of pagan rite, as Armatrites observes: "The hour, the banquet, and the bawdy tapers, / All stick in mine eye together" (4.3.207-08). Here, "bawdy tapers" link the Queen's sexual 'feast' to the accusations of Catholic idolatry, with its elaborate rituals of ingestion.

Moreover, the language of feeding and consumption engages with early modern medical discourses rooted in Galenic humoralism. As is known, Galenic models, which conceived of the body as a hydraulic system of fluid humours, fostered pervasive cultural anxieties about the dangers of excess or imbalance in the regulation of appetites. The recurrent images of hunger and indulgence in *The Bloody Banquet*, often laced with pointed eroticism, confirm that the body is constantly at risk of being overpowered by its own desires. This dynamic is most vividly expressed in the perfidious courtier Mazeres's voyeuristic description of spying on the Queen's tryst with Tymethes: "I abusèd my eyes in the true survey on't, / Tainted my hearing with lascivious sounds" (4.3.45-46). His language of sensory abuse and contamination implies a form of self-poisoning through erotic excess, with consequences akin to an autoimmune disorder within the body politic. Armatrites himself, consumed by rage at his loss of control and said to be driven by "distractions" and "furies" (5.1.31), shows that unchecked passions ultimately destroy even those in power. Unable to emotionally digest the blow to his patriarchal authority, he is figuratively eaten up by his own burning anger.

Beyond its religious and medical connotations, the cannibalistic act also echoes the "cannibal encounter" (Lestringant 1997, 5) in early modern colonial discourse, a trope that defined European identity in contrast to the 'savage' Other. As Europeans encountered the New World, cannibalism became symbolic of otherness, reflecting fears of cultural devouring. Middleton and Dekker blur the boundaries between foreign and domestic threats, as the Clown's ethnographic satire on the "wolfes" that prowl the kingdom – from courtly to bourgeois to maritime – collapses the distinctions between the civilised court and the barbaric, colonial frontier: "The last is your sea-wolf, a horrible ravener too: / He has a belly as big as a ship" (2.1.68-69). These images insinuate that the same predation feared abroad also thrives at home, personified by the Court's very own tyrants. Moreover, Tymethes's reduction to flesh further breaks down the boundaries between eater and eaten, symbolising

mutual annihilation. As Kilgour notes, incorporation "assumes an absolute distinction between inside and outside, eater and eaten, which, however, breaks down" (1990, 7). The cannibal feast in *The Bloody Banquet* enacts a confusion between self and other. For the Young Queen, to eat Tymethes is in a sense to become him by absorbing his substance, with all its implicit erotic undertones of possession. In this respect, her cannibalism compels her to internalise her illicit desire, resulting in a self-violation, as the Tyrant chillingly reminds her: "[t]ill in thy bowels those corpse find a grave" (4.3.279). This collapse of bodily and personal boundaries evokes what Kristeva describes as the ultimate dissolution of meaning and identity in the face of the abject[10]. The Queen's forced, conscious moment of cannibalism, an act that more than any other sets *The Bloody Banquet* apart from its intertexts[11], marks a surrender to the abject; that act of psychic self-destruction collapses the boundaries of her subjectivity and leaves her consumed by the desire which once empowered her. Seen through this lens, Thetis's fate echoes the famous saying "quod me nutrit, me destruit": while her passion for Tymethes had allowed her to oppose the tyranny of Armatrites, that same passion becomes her undoing in the face of violent repercussions for her transgression. Thetis thus embodies the paradox of transgression itself, where the pursuit of freedom and self-realisation is one with the risk of annihilation and loss.

The ceremonial framing of the banquet as a twisted, profane Mass implicates both the onstage spectators and, by extension, the audience in witnessing the cannibalistic ritual. Like the pilgrims who watch the scene unfold, the audience is compelled to confront this "horrid and inhuman spectacle" (5.1.127), contemplating "with wonder" the "object" of the Tyrant's vengeance (5.1.SD). At this moment, the scene metatheatrically reflects the audience's own consumption of the play's transgressive spectacle, equating our scopophilic eye with the Tyrant's sadistic intent. Just as Armatrites forces the Queen to internalise her abjection by consuming her lover's flesh, so the play

[10] "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. […] It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (Kristeva 1982, 4).

[11] Unlike Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, Thyestes in Seneca's titular play and Tereus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who are unwittingly served their own children.

confronts us with its obscene vision, drawing us into its logic. Besides, by making this gruesome act a public spectacle, the play compels the audience to share in the violation it portrays and blurs the line between observer and participant. The Old King – Tymethes's father –, disguised as a pilgrim, watches in silent horror while Armatrites actively manipulates the scene:

> I perceive strangers more desire to see
> An object than the fare before them set.
> But since your eyes are serious suitors grown,
> I will discourse; what's seen shall now be known. (5.1.156-59)

At this moment, Armatrites forces the audience to confront the cannibalistic spectacle, making them complicit in what should be left unseen. Like the Queen, we are inveigled into this abomination, seduced into a symbolic act of consumption of the horror in front of us. Our eyes, now "serious suitors", implicate us in an uncomfortable communion with the obscene.

Thus, by the end of the play, the cannibal-tyrant himself is metaphorically eaten alive, devoured by his excessive thirst for power and revenge. His final lines, "'Tis more revenge to me / Than all your aims: I have killed my jealousy" (5.1.211-12), seem to proclaim a release from his inner turmoil, the certainty that killing the Queen has freed him from his obsessive hunger. Yet this declaration merely highlights the tragic irony: his insatiable drive for power and control has totally consumed him instead.

In *The Bloody Banquet*, the cycle of consumption turns inward: those who devour others are themselves devoured by their own uncontrollable desires. Montaigne has shown that the distinction between the 'cannibal' and the 'civilised man' is an illusion. In the end, the cannibal is truly "the thing of darkness" in all of us.

3. "None dares do more for sin": The Young Queen's Transgression

If the banquet scene stages transgression taken to its most disturbing extreme, the character of the young Queen Thetis embodies the gendered dynamics of desire and control, testifying to the dire consequences of asserting erotic agency in a system where female desire is both feared and condemned.

From her first appearance, Thetis is driven by an all-consuming passion for Tymethes that oversteps the legitimate bounds of marital propriety and political duty. Torn between this fierce – and illicit – desire and the danger it entails, she confesses:

> I never knew the force of a desire
> Until this minute struck within my blood.
> I fear one look was destined to undo me (1.4.42-44)

Her transgressive sexuality is portrayed as a self-destructive, insatiable hunger that threatens to consume her if left unsatisfied. This longing for Tymethes, and her attempt to fulfil her "accomplished wish" (1.4.136), thus becomes a physical rebellion against patriarchal control over her body.

Though aware of the "misery" that love would bring her (4.3.75), Thetis's illicit desire is framed in terms of appetite, an "aspiring force" (1.4.130) whose "sparks fly not downward" (1.4.131). This language of hunger and excess echoes early modern views of the female body as unruly, often "leaky", and in need of strict containment (Paster 1993, 24). Her bold declaration that "[n]one dares do more for sin than woman can" (1.4.138) claims the status of arch-transgressor, embracing forbidden desires as an act of defiance against the "pale jealousy" (1.4.184) of her marriage. The near reckless bravado of her rhetoric and the cosmic imagery she employs – "Yet were't thrice narrower I should venture on" (1.4.137) – possess a Faustian audacity, a willingness to risk everything for the sake of an impossible passion.

But the Young Queen's agency is constrained by the secrecy and the intermediaries required to pursue her desire[12]. The clandestine nature of the affair is insisted upon in the highly ritualised seduction scene in 3.3[13], as Tymethes is brought blindfolded to her chamber. The theatricality of the moment, with masked servants and a sumptuous banquet[14], underlines the

[12] Thetis's struggle to reconcile desire and duty reflects what Dympna Callaghan describes as the "fractured subjectivity" of women in Jacobean tragedy, caught between assertive agency and the constraints of patriarchal ideology (Callaghan 1989, 75).

[13] The meal served to Tymethes by the Young Queen's servants, while ostensibly a hospitable gesture, is actually a precursor to the sexual encounter that follows. See Pannen 2012.

[14] Taylor argues that this banquet scene is the "visual correlative" (2001, 15) of offstage adultery, with the onstage eating mirroring the offstage sexual act.

artifice required for female desire to flourish within the constraints of Jacobean court culture. This staged seduction reflects the tensions between the eroticised female body, shaped by male fantasy, and the forces that suppress female autonomy. Thetis's declaration, "You cannot see me under death" (3.3.112), casts her as a figure of supernatural allure, yet her paranoia and fear of exposure – "if he know me— […] I am undone" (1.4.178-79) – underscore the danger and stigma attached to female sexuality. Her transgression is thus presented as a rebellious energy that must be violently suppressed in order to uphold male authority. Thetis, embodying what Kristeva terms the "improper" or "unclean" desires of the abject female body, stands as a threat to the social order, challenging the boundaries that patriarchal culture seeks to impose.

Indeed, as the love affair unfolds, it becomes clear that Thetis's sexual agency undermines Armatrites's fragile sovereignty. Even at its tenderest moments, her transgressive sexuality is always overshadowed by male violence and dominance. In one of the play's most disturbing scenes, Thetis is forced to shoot Tymethes dead to protect herself from her husband's wrath – an act of self-preservation which exposes her limited choices as both woman and queen. Mourning over Tymethes's body, she laments:

> Rash, unadvisèd youth, whom my soul weeps for,
> How oft I told thee this attempt was death!
> Yet would'st thou venture on, fond man, and knew?
> But what destruction will not youth pursue? (4.3.108-11)

Caught between her own desire and Armatrites's rage, Thetis is trapped in a cycle of transgression and violent retribution, highlighting the constrained agency of women within patriarchal systems. Her lament poignantly encapsulates her tragic predicament, rooted in the pathologisation of female desire by patriarchal society.

On the one hand, Thetis's killing of Tymethes can be read as a distorted attempt to reconcile her sexual agency with the expectations of wifely virtue: by making her lover pray before she shoots him[15], she frames his death as a religious and moral necessity – a just punishment for his presumption in

[15] The echo of Hamlet and his inability to kill Claudius while he is praying is apparent here. See Gasper 2007, 640.

"offend[ing]" (4.3.68) against her inviolability. On the other hand, the scene's twisted logic also betrays the psychological pressure exerted by her attempt to negotiate the conflicting imperatives of her position: namely, the "horrors" stirred by her "desire" (1.4.187) and the "misery of love" (4.3.75) occasioned by her struggle to maintain a coherent self in an exotic Lydia that denies her full humanity. As such, Tymethes's murder mirrors the Tyrant's own brutal assertion of patriarchal dominance. Even as Tymethes "betrayed" (4.3.46) the Queen by uncovering her identity, so she betrayed him in turn, reinforcing the play's themes of false appearances and misguided desires. The erotic language and imagery of the moment – the phallic overtones of the Young Queen's pistols – further intertwine violence and sexuality, creating a cycle in which Eros and Thanatos ensnare both victim and perpetrator.

The tragic irony is even deeper since the murder is followed by the arrival of the Tyrant. Thetis's desperate attempt to cover up her crime by accusing Tymethes of rape highlights the limited options available to women in this society, as her false accusation invokes and reinforces the misogynistic stereotypes of female deceit. The Tyrant's response – "O, let me embrace thee for a brave, unmatchable, / Precious, unvalued, admirable – whore" (4.3.149-50) – obliterates any distinction between virtuous wife and sexual transgressor. In Armatrites's eyes, and by extension those of patriarchal society, the Young Queen's sexuality itself is a crime, no matter how it is expressed or constrained.

As *The Bloody Banquet* demonstrates, Thetis's transgression earns her the ultimate degradation. Her infidelity, once discovered[16], provokes Armatrites's "insufferable" (5.1.35) revenge, a brutal regime of torture meant to reinscribe her body with marks of shame and submission. At first, her body signifies royal authority and marital fidelity; however, through her affair with Tymethes, she rewrites this body-text with the signs of illicit desire and rebellion against social norms. This horrific reassertion of control over her rebellious body-text culminates in the titular banquet: the moment of forced consumption, as discussed above, seems to enact both a reverse childbirth – in which the Queen is made to "find a grave" for her lover in her own "bowels" (4.3.279) – and a

[16] Armatrites once gifted a jewel to Thetis, who passed it to Tymethes. Amphridote, Armatrites's daughter and Tymethes's fiancée, asked Tymethes to give it to her. When her father asked her to show him the jewel, he discovered his wife's infidelity.

somewhat twisted form of writing, as Armatrites seeks to inscribe shame and submission onto her. Here, as elsewhere in the play, the female body becomes a site of monstrous excess and horror that needs to be violently controlled. In light of Kristeva's theory of the abject, the Young Queen's fate reflects the patriarchy's urge to expel whatever threatens its symbolic order. As a desiring subject pursuing her own pleasures and 'feeding' her own sin, Thetis embodies the pre-Oedipal space of polymorphous drives that constantly threatens to disrupt meaning and identity.

Nevertheless, even in her final subjugation, Thetis retains disturbing agency. Her silence during Armatrites's interrogation, her refusal to offer more than a terse "I do confess" (4.3.199), deliberately conceals her inner life from the devouring male gaze. If her body is made a site of atrocity, her mind remains her own, resisting patriarchy's full consumption and preserving a private space that "lust keeps in all" (4.3.179). Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Thetis embodies a gendered discourse of excess, resisting male power while enduring its force.

Though she is ultimately destroyed by Armatrites's revenge, Thetis's transgressive desire opens up a space of ontological possibility that the play cannot fully close. In her sin, she highlights the violence embedded in the patriarchal order and the instability of the norms it seeks to enforce. Yet, through her persistence and refusal to be fully consumed or defined by the patriarchal narrative, she gestures towards a potential subjectivity beyond the binaries of Madonna and whore, "fair Thetis" (1.4.110) and "mystical strumpet" (4.3.175). Her presence is unruly, uncontainable, resisting reduction to a symbol.

4. "Insufferable vengeance": The Excesses of Armatrites's Masculine Power

While the Young Queen's transgressive desire underscores the subversive potential of female agency, the tyrant Armatrites embodies the destructive excesses of unchecked male power. From his violent usurpation of the Lydian throne at the start of the play to the sadistic dismemberment of his wife's lover, Armatrites's reign is driven by a brutal, insatiable hunger for domination and control. His compulsive subjugation of others shows the dangerous instability

of a social order grounded in absolute authority. As Alexandra Shepard (2003) points out, early modern masculine identity was closely tied to self-control and moderation: the ideal man was expected to master his passions and appetites through reason and self-discipline, and any failure to do so was seen as a threat to personal honour and the broader social order. I argue that in *The Bloody Banquet* Armatrites's theatrical display of power proves fragile, constantly on the verge of collapse under the weight of its own excess.

From the outset, the play emphasises the precarious nature of political authority and its susceptibility to brute force and Machiavellian cunning. Armatrites's coup against the Lydian throne is a shocking display of raw power as he physically ousts the rightful king and seizes the crown amid a flurry of drawn swords. His declaration, "Who wins the day, the brightness is his due" (1.1.7), claims that victory alone justifies his rule. Furthermore, his cry of "Speranza" (1.1.1) as he seizes the crown overflows with bitter irony, offering false hopes while crushing those of the ousted monarch and his loyal subjects. Nevertheless, much like Macbeth, Armatrites understands that he must cloak his deeds in the rhetoric of legitimacy and the common good, blending military valour with kingly virtue to justify his usurpation:

> Why, doting Lydia, is it of no virtue
> To bring our army hither, and put in venture
> Our person and their lives upon your foes?
> Wasting our courage, weak'ning our best forces,
> Impoverishing the heart of our munition,
> And having won the honour of the battle
> To throw our glory on unworthy spirits,
> And so unload victory's honey thighs
> To let drones feed? (1.1.19-27)

Here, Armatrites reframes his ruthless action as a noble sacrifice for Lydia's greater good, presenting himself as the defender of the kingdom. His use of the royal 'we' and his derision of the rightful king as weak and unworthy subtly echo King James I's theories of divine right, suggesting that sovereignty is a matter of kingly virtue rather than lineage. Yet, his strained metaphors reveal a discordance between his lofty rhetoric and the brutal realities of his rule, with

the abrupt shift to "victory's honey thighs" hinting at the dissonance between his idealised language and his violent methods.

By contrast, the deposed King of Lydia's response exposes the moral vacuity of the Tyrant's actions, condemning them as violations of "[r]eligion, loyalty, heaven or nature's laws" (1.1.12). For the Old King, Armatrites is a "tyrant" (1.1.13) because he has broken the social contract between ruler and ruled, betraying the "honesty and honour" (1.1.14) that should define true kingship. His appeal to friendship and lawful rule points to an alternative model of kingship based on mutual obligation rather than brute force. This tension between absolutist and consensual theories of rule forms the political core of *The Bloody Banquet*'s critique.

Armatrites's tyrannical appetite is often couched in predatory terms, evoking an insatiable drive to consume everything in his path. He vows to take absolute possession of the kingdom (1.1.30) and dismisses the deposed king's pleas for mercy with the chilling declaration: "Flies are not eagles' preys, nor thanks our food" (1.1.31). To Armatrites, sovereignty is a boundless act of devouring, where nothing is beyond his grasp. In a dark parallel to the archetypal Saturnine father who devours his children, Armatrites's insatiable lust for control becomes self-destructive, revealing that tyranny consumes itself. The patriarchal fantasy of absolute control over the female body – figured by the Young Queen's forced ingestion of Tymethes's remains – turns inward here, descending into a monstrous, self-consuming body politic.

Armatrites's fixation on control also extends to his obsessive surveillance of Thetis's sexuality, his desire to dominate her body mirroring his drive for political supremacy. His remark, "Women have of themselves no entire sway; / Like dial needles they wave every way" (1.4.103-04), expresses the idea that female agency destabilises the social order and, as such, must be forcefully suppressed. Thetis's transgressive desire becomes, in his eyes, a metonym for all that challenges his power – from the deposed king to Lydia's restless subjects.

However, while *The Bloody Banquet* stages the nightmare of unchecked power, it also discloses the instability within Armatrites's tyrannical ambitions. Despite his cruelty and cunning, Armatrites is a pathetic figure undone by his own paranoia. His murder of Thetis proves self-defeating, depriving him of the very prize he sought to possess. As he admits with his dying breath, "'Tis more

revenge to me / Than all your aims: I have killed my jealousy" (5.1.211-12). With no-one left to dominate or abuse, the Tyrant is consumed by the same violence he meted out to others. Unlike Macbeth, whose downfall comes through guilt and a restoration of order, Armatrites's demise is purely circumstantial, driven by brute force rather than moral or political justice. The futility of his demise is captured in the Old King's bitter reflection on the arbitrary nature of destiny: "No storm of fate so fierce but time destroys, / And beats back misery with a peal of joys" (5.1.247-48).

In the end, the play would seem to suggest, the only force that checks tyranny is the turning of the wheel, a cyclical pattern of violence and counter-violence in which one form of oppression replaces another. *The Bloody Banquet* thus proves that crossing the boundaries set by taboos on the flesh – on the level of sex, food, or the body politic – leads to a fleeting freedom and an unconscious death drive. Following Thetis's murder, Armatrites's final bitter laugh – "ha, ha, ha!" (5.1.57)[17] – rhymes with the Duke's last gasp – "O" – in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Unlike the Duke or Thetis, however, Armatrites speaks two final lines after being shot: "My lust was ne'er more pleasing than my death" (5.1.218). A fitting epitaph for his personal and political parable that is also a reflection on the fundamental instability of early modern Jacobean culture.

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[17] For an analysis of "ha, ha, ha" as a scripted laughter instruction and its multiple implications in early modern plays, see Steggle 2007, 26-30.

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