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“I WOULD NOT TASTE OF SUCH A BANQUET”: ILL-F(L)AVOURED CONSUMPTION IN *THE BLOODY BANQUET*

Imke PANNEN

In an article on The Bloody Banquet, a play probably written by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker between 1600 and 1602 and printed for the first time in a quarto in 1639, Gary Taylor calls this revenge tragedy a display of “cozy domesticity and nauseating horror”.¹ The Bloody Banquet is dominated by food and the idea of torturous feeding. In the tragedy, a young Queen is forced by her tyrant husband to eat the limbs of her lover, whom she has killed in her chamber to avoid suspicion of their illicit affair. Dominated by his jealousy, the husband orders the body to be butchered and the limbs to be hung up for public display. The Queen, confronted with the object of her former sexual appetite, “the flesh with a skull all bloody”, is then ordered to eat the remains of her lover as a cannibalistic punishment for her adultery. As the death of further characters in the play through drinking poisoned wine confirms, the tragedy presents consumption of a nauseating domesticity and perverted table manners in various forms during an ill-f(l)avoured festive menu.

Dans l'article qu'il consacre à *The Bloody Banquet*, pièce probablement écrite par Thomas Middleton et Thomas Dekker entre 1600 et 1602 et publiée pour la première fois sous forme d'*in-quarto* en 1639, Gary Taylor décrit cette tragédie de la vengeance comme un étalage de : « cozy domestic and nauseating horror ». Cette pièce est centrée sur la nourriture et son ingurgitation y devient un supplice barbare. Dans cette tragédie, un tyran oblige sa jeune femme à manger les membres de son amant, qu'elle a tué dans sa chambre pour parer à tout soupçon d'adultère. Sous l'emprise de la jalousie, le mari ordonne que le corps soit découpé et que ses membres soient exposés au public. La reine est mise en présence de l'objet de son appétit sexuel, « the flesh with a skull all bloody » et elle se voit forcée de manger les restes de son amant dans un rite cannibale censé châtier son adultère. Dans cette tragédie, où d'autres personnages meurent également après avoir bu du vin empoisonné, la nourriture est consommée jusqu'à l'écoeurement et les arts de la table sont constamment pervertis au cours d'un festin dont l'âpreté est à la fois gustative et émotionnelle.

The *Bloody Banquet*, according to Gary Taylor probably written by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton between 1600 and 1602, was first printed in a quarto in 1639. The two playwrights have collaborated on various other dramas like *The Honest Whore* or *The Roaring Girl*, the latter of which contains a banquet with an exclusive dessert course where “the formal rituals of the banquet course have been adapted for dramatic purposes” with its service and entertainment.² In *The Bloody Banquet*, too, food serves as a dramaturgical means to convey certain theatrical effects: the courtly

¹ Gary Taylor, “Gender, Hunger, Horror: The History and Significance of *The Bloody Banquet*”, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 2001), p. 1-45.

² Tracy Thong, “Performances of the Banquet Course in Early Modern Drama”, *Renaissance Food from Rabelais to Shakespeare. Culinary Readings and Culinary Histories*, ed. Joan Fitzpatrick, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, p. 107-125, here p. 109.

festivity resembles and is instrumentalised as a theatrical performance.³

However, food in this revenge tragedy is not used as means to soothe or amuse, but serves other purposes: one is that of sexual arousal, the other – as the title of the play suggests – one of violence and cannibalistic horror as found in *Medea* or *Titus Andronicus*. Chris Meads therefore calls this tragedy “full of bloody spectacle”.⁴ This essay would like to analyse the perverted presentation and transformation of the aesthetics of the table, as expected in a festive dinner, into a sexually connotated ill-favoured or rather ill-flavoured banquet and the transformation of a source of sensual pleasure into, as Julia Gasper coins it, a “transgression of certain boundaries of ‘good taste’”.⁵ A banquet is a cause for entertainment, but in drama it is often used to highlight the course of tragedy.⁶ *The Bloody Banquet* depicts power relations between genders, an incestuous relationship and the nature of revenge.⁷ It plays with the intimate relationship between food and sex.

Eating, chewing, and swallowing are very intimate displays on stage⁸ – they present human needs but can easily transgress into excess. That is exactly the function of food and food imagery in *The Bloody Banquet*. From the beginning, this is made clear, when Armatrites, the tyrant and new king of Lydia comments in an aside on the inconstant nature of women and then salutes his wife, the young Queen thus: “This night we’ll banquet in these blissful arms.” (i.iv.109),⁹ then leading her offstage with a kiss, implying pleasures of

³ See Michael Dobson, “‘His Banquet is prepared’: Onstage Food and the Permeability of Time in Shakespearean Performance”, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 145, ed. Sabine Schülting *et al.*, Bochum, Kamp, 2009, p. 62-73, here p. 63-66; Uwe Klawitter, “The Play as Banquet: Implications of a Metatheatrical Conceit in Jacobean-Caroline Drama”, *The Pleasures and Horrors of Eating. The Cultural History of Eating in Anglophone Literature*, ed. Marion Gymnich and Norbert Lennartz, Representations & Reflections 1, Goettingen, V&R Unipress / Bonn University Press, 2010, p. 125-141, here p. 125; Peter Holland, “Feasting and Starving: Staging Food in Shakespeare”, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 145, *op. cit.*, p. 11-28, here p. 13.

⁴ Chris Meads, *Banquets Set forth. Banqueting in English Renaissance Drama*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001, p. 154.

⁵ Julia Gasper, “Introduction to ‘The Bloody Banquet: A Tragedy’”, *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 637-669, here p. 641.

⁶ See Meads, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁷ See Gasper, *op. cit.*, p. 638.

⁸ Dobson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁹ This, as all quotes from the play are taken from the following edition: *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, *op. cit.*, p. 637-669.

the bed as evening entertainment. Thus, from the beginning, the new court in Lydia is associated with the sin of *luxuria*, i.e. lust or sexual desire. This can also be associated with the corrupted nature of the court from the start of the play because Lydia has been usurped by Armatrites in a plot against his former ally – a hint at his own unfaithfulness towards his vows and therefore his corruption.

Amphridote, the daughter of the tyrant, is in love with the former and true king's son Tymethes who seems to dote on her, too. However, the female inconstancy that Armatrites hinted at when seeing his wife is also reflected in the male gender in this play and thus presents a gender transgression. As soon as Tymethes sees the Queen's servant Roxano, he comments prophetically on his air of panderism and with that foreshadows the possible dishonesty of any woman: "Hunger and lust will break through flesh and stones" (I.iv.27). When finally espying the young Queen, Tymethes is fully enthralled by her and their first meeting is full of sexual innuendos – both in asides giving away their fascination and growing infatuation with each other, though not towards each other directly.

Consequently, through the help of her pandar-looking servant, the Queen boldly has Tymethes invited to a clandestine meeting to commit the sin of adultery. Roxano brings the news to Tymethes that he is "happily desired [...] of the most sweet, delicate, divine, pleasing, ravishing creature" (II.iii.66-69), terms that can justly be used when referring to feasting, though ravishing is more associated with excessive eating or feasting or rather insatiable hunger – ravishing obviously indicating here possible anonymous pleasures of the bed, transgressing the boundaries of intermarital sexuality during their planned secret meeting. Their encounter is supposed to be set in darkness with an anonymous lady: still Tymethes does not decline the amorous offer – but agrees. Led blindfold to the encounter, he is not straight away received by the queen but first presented with a banquet, and thereafter even with gifts that include a shirt, nightcap and gold to be silent about the arrangement and thus following the terms of this seduction, initiated by the Lady. This banquet not only foreshadows the bloody banquet of the final act of the tragedy but it serves as foreplay to the sexual meeting.

A banquet is commonly held for feasting and discourse, though in this case the word intercourse might be more appropriate and

“banquets were [seen as] elite occasions and highly regarded”.¹⁰ There are various studies on the nature of a banquet, dividing between a grand festive banquet or dinner, a term still in use today; and the banquet course of a longer meal, which in “The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century [...] was the early modern forerunner of our present-day dessert.”¹¹

For the Renaissance stage, the individual course – which was in reality often served in a different room and possibly for a more exclusive number of guests – was a perfect opportunity for staging a meal. Dobson calls it “a supremely convenient course of a meal for the purpose of a working dramatist. The banquet course proper [...] came after the principal, protein-and-starch hot courses of the meal; if there was to be a dance after supper, for instance, the banquet course would generally be postponed until after that.”¹² In the case of such a banquet course, or dessert, this might often consist of “fanciful confectionary and other sweet puddings [...] raw fruit [...] [, an] aphrodisiac for adults”.¹³ Raw fruit have by this time already been mentioned in *The Bloody Banquet* since the comic relief scene in the second act – before the clandestine arrangement – is furnished by a tree holding fruit, while the scene is full of references to drinking and overt female greediness, i.e. appetite. Thus the banquet might directly create an echo to the earlier scene on female want. The idea of an aphrodisiac seems especially fitting for *The Bloody Banquet* since the banquet served by the Queen’s servants for Tymethes is, though it might seem of a hospitable domesticity, indeed the preparation for the sexual encounter and here obviously served before the entertainment.

Food here serves as an intimate trigger to a different kind of sensual experience and pleasure. Tymethes is invited to dine as an individually arranged, pre-sexual activity by the wanton queen who acts like Cleopatra, the lascivious provider of food.¹⁴ This is supported

¹⁰ Thong, *op. cit.*, p. 121. See Wolfgang G. Müller, “Private Culinary Fantasies, Public Feasting, and the Cannibalization of the Body in Jacobean Drama”, *The Pleasures and Horrors of Eating. The Cultural History of Eating in Anglophone Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 109-123, here p. 109.

¹¹ Thong, *op. cit.*, p. 107; Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 15; Dobson, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹² Dobson, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁴ On the title of a lascivious provider of food, see discussions of *Antony & Cleopatra*, but also *Troilus & Cressida*, which centre on the character of the east as a source of pleasure and lust.

by further aesthetic excitement. Not only is the palate addressed but the ears as well. With “Soft music” (III.iii.o) the table and seats are first brought in, then with an obvious increase in passion, “Loud music” (III.iii.19), the banquet is set and this loud music continues during the banquet (III.iii.36). Only once the banquet is finished and the sexual temptation to be offered, i.e. when the young Queen enters masked and in a nightgown, does the music get softer again (III.iii.77) to heighten the senses for another, different and much more physical experience.

In a discussion on two Jonsonian comedies and two Jacobean tragedies, Wolfgang Müller explains that: “Whenever eating is referred to in the plays under discussion the idea of sex is, as it were, in the air. Eating seems to be erotically charged.”¹⁵ This is particularly true in *The Bloody Banquet*. Tymethes’ consumption of food precedes his consumption of the Queen during their sexual encounter – he devours the banquet as he will the unknown lady later in the play. The erotic dimension of food is evident.

The “interdependence of eating and culture” is here diminished to its purely individual and interpersonal purpose.¹⁶ Sasha Garwood writes that “[f]ood possesses a unique and highly gendered cultural significance.”¹⁷ In *The Bloody Banquet*, the woman offers the banquet as a first step towards offering herself, i.e. her body, which is, just as the banquet, to be consumed by the eater. The culinary pleasure here mirrors the erotic pleasure.¹⁸ The temptress lures her prey with a first taste, while she is, in contrast to a virtuous and chaste woman, the active part in this relationship. She invites him to the encounter and thus, in contrast to the submissive woman, she becomes transgressive, a consuming man-eater, who is crossing the boundaries of her gender.

A basic human need like eating seems unnatural in its excess and the highlight of the secret encounter is again an instinctive human behavior. But as it is transgressing human law and marriage, it is nothing more than an excessive fulfillment of pure lust. The following equation by Garwood applies to Tymethes and the Queen: “Food is sex. Eating is penetration. Appetite is lust. The symbolic fusion or

¹⁵ Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Sasha Garwood, “‘The Skull beneath the skin’: Women and Self-Starvation on the Renaissance Stage”, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 145, *op. cit.*, p. 106-133, here p. 106.

¹⁸ See Müller, *op. cit.* on Sir Epicure Mammon’s fantasies in Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*.

equivalence of the two runs right through Renaissance theatre.”¹⁹ This connection is reflected by the servant Roxano, who comments on Tymethes’ banqueting – “Lecher, now beware / Securely sit and fearless quaff and eat: / You’ll find your sauce still, after your sweet meat.” (III.iii.24-26) – thus relating directly to the terminology and sexual connotation of bodily fluids, as the invitation is meant “first to this banquet, next to pleasure’s feast” (III.iii.42), as Tymethes’ “sauce” obviously refers to his semen. The banquet mirrors the sexual encounter, which is not presented on stage. Thus the food, consumed in the ritualised banquet as presented on stage, becomes an image of it: eating is sex. The sweetness of the course is also mentioned in the above statement – Roxano comments on the sweet meats that are being served – thus the connotation of the quality of the course as sweet is supporting the argument for the exquisiteness of the banquet in its serving for – in this case – the single guest Tymethes. However, the character of the food is also determined. Sweet meat foreshadows the consumption of human flesh in two ways – one in that it precedes the sexual pleasure of the sweet lady, the other in that it also produces an indication of what is to follow at the end of the play. The servant Roxano is aware of the possible danger that Tymethes and the young Queen are in and therefore comments:

I would not taste of such a banquet to feel that which follows it for the love of an empress. ’Tis more dangerous to be a lecher than to enter upon a breach. Yet how securely he munches! His thoughts are sweeter than the very meats before him. He little dreams of his destruction, his horrid fearful ruin, which cannot be withstood. The end of venery is disease or blood.
(iii.iii.70-77)

Venery, or sexual indulgence recalls meat, venison, thus again combining the language of sexuality and the terminology of hunting and eating. However, there is a further and more immediate danger at hand that seems to be the cause for Roxano’s comment – though in retrospect, as soon becomes clear, it serves as a premonition of the final catastrophe. This further dangerous element in the scene is that of the disguised servants who bring in the banquet and witness the meeting between the Queen and her ignorant lover. One of them is the evil-meaning Mazerus, a courtier who is in love with the tyrant’s daughter Amphridote and jealous of Tymethes. He bribes Roxano to be

¹⁹ Garwood, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

present at the clandestine encounter and uses the opportunity to poison Tymethes' wine. However, his plans do not succeed. Tymethes is offered another glass by a Lady-in-waiting and he spills the poisoned wine on purpose. He prefers the former to the one served by a male servant, which is a clear indication of the sexual nature and eroticism that the whole scene is charged with. Mazeres reflects on his spoiled plans but also ponders the possible further dangers and threats that the secret meeting might pose: "Like lightning in a tempest her lust shows, / Or drinking drunk in thunder, horrible –, For on this act a thousand dangers wait." (III.iii.122-124). The future, promised by lust, is foreshadowed as all-destroying thunder and lightning because of the secret adultery.

The clandestine meeting between the Queen and Tymethes is held offstage; the masked Queen only tempts Tymethes by entering the banquet scene for a brief moment in a nightgown and then exiting again and causing him to follow her after a while when asked to do so by Roxano. Danger still dominates the scene and foretells future threats, as actively foreseen by Mazeres and feared by Roxano. They are indeed, as Meads writes, "premonitions more than borne out in the second banquet scene" which mirror the sexuality of this experience but are of a much more violent nature.²⁰ The temptation that Tymethes gives in to in this scene, and the luring character of the Queen, powerfully demanding the satisfaction of her physical desire, are the norm-transgressing factors in this tragedy. These are threatening the structure of the court, which in itself is corrupted from the start, because the country is only usurped and not ruled by the rightful heir. The tyrant's flaw at the beginning of the play seems a Machiavellian ambition but it is underlined by the, apparently failing, system of relationships. So, the real danger and thereby the reason of the reversal of fortune is caused by lust and passion.

Lust and want for more, i.e. an insatiable appetite, are thus the reasons and catalysts for this tragedy. Along such premises, Tymethes is not quite content to have met his mysterious lover in darkness and calls it "ill fortune" (IV.i.45) not to have espied the lady: "The eye is the sweet feeder of the soul; / When the taste wants, that keeps the memory whole." (IV.i.49-50). For a complete indulgence, Tymethes, almost Psyche-like, wants all his senses to experience synaesthetically

²⁰ Meads, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

and find out the gender-reversed identity of his partner in the illicit, amorous affair. This is his reason for opening a lantern and breaking the promise of secrecy when he is welcomed to the lascivious Queen's chamber for a second time – but it is also his doom because by that time, the tyrant has found out about his wife's unfaithfulness.

The tyrant Armatrites gave a jewel to his wife, the Queen, which she in turn gave to her lover Tymethes. Amphridote – the tyrant's daughter and Tymethes' fiancée – begged the latter to offer it to her. When her father requests her to show it to him, he discovers his wife's infidelity. The jewel thus serves as a silent but all too revealing witness of the adultery. It is used as a trigger to the tyrant's understandable anger: "I'm lost by violence through all my senses. I'm blind with rage." (iv.ii.62-63). Therefore, Armatrites intends to trap his Queen and her lover and therefore reports his absence from court while being ready to surprise her *in flagrante*. Indeed, as mentioned above, Tymethes is invited to spend a further night with the Queen, and finding her asleep in the chamber that he is led into, he is tempted to break the promise that he gave to his unknown lover. He "[o]pens a dark latern [and] [...] spies the Queen" (iv.iii.34 and 42). His words when shedding a ray of light on her body and face strongly recall the combination of sexuality and food: "With this I taste of that forbidden fruit" (iv.iii.38). The idea of the forbidden fruit recalls the fall from paradise and reverts the lapsarian act into one of knowing after the physical consumption of the sexual body and thus perverts the idea of innocence into one of lust.

What follows is an act of surprise even more cruel than the audience might anticipate. Audience expectations might include an idea of how the tyrant comes in, catches them in the act and executes both of them, but this is not what happens. Instead, the plot takes a different turn: the Queen first makes her lover Tymethes beg for forgiveness for deliberately finding out her identity, an act that he beforehand promised not to undertake. He fulfills this demand for an apology, again with a terminology taken from the realm of food: "May I eat and ne'er be nourishèd" (iv.iii.62), thus indicating pain and punishment as unsatisfactory and therefore unpleasant eating, or rather the failures of eating.²¹ Seemingly she does forgive him and leaves him for a while to let him pray, again seemingly to reappear for new bedtime pleasures. However, she comes back with a vengeance –

²¹ The failures of eating are addressed in other papers in this volume.

and two pistols: the young Queen shoots her lover because he has betrayed her in finding out her identity and thus she is convinced he might betray her again in making known with whom he had lain:

Here long mightst thou have lived, been loved, enjoyed,
 Had not thy will thy happiness destroyed.
 Thought'st thou by oaths to have thy deeds well borne?
 Thou shouldst have come when man was ne'er forsworn:
 They are dangerous now; witness this breach of thine.
 Who's false to his own faith will ne'er keep mine.
 We must be safe, young man, the deeds unknown. (IV.iii.112-118)

By shooting him, the Queen transgresses her gender expectations – with the bullets she penetrates his body and thus uses a male weapon to kill her lover. Only after she has shot him in cold blood, the tyrant, who wants to avoid any suspicion of their illicit affair, finally enters the scene. Though his wife tries to establish the murder as one in self-defense and declares that Tymethes entered the chamber violently to rape her, Armatrites drops his guard, presents his evidence and bluntly calls the Queen a “whore” (IV.iii.150) and a “strumpet” (IV.iii.175). As evidence, he and his servant, the scheming Mazeres, confront her with the preparation and proceedings of her first adultery: Tymethes was “[b]anqueted and received / To all her amplest pleasures!” (IV.iii.187-188). The punishment for the Queen’s adultery is worse than the cruel murder of her lover. The tyrant’s verdict is the following:

Thou shalt not die as long as this is meat.
 Thou killed'st a buck which thou thyself shalt eat.
 [...]
 Here's deer struck dead with thy own hand;
 'Tis venison for thy own tooth. Thou know'st the relish:
 A dearer place hath been thy taster. (IV.iii.213-217)

The combination of eating and sex prevails once more with a pun on what she held “dear” now becoming “deer”, i.e. meat to eat. This pun also refers to her dearer place, i.e. her vagina, which has received him as now does her other organ, her mouth. The display of monstrosities and hate-inflicted deeds continues on further levels of the plot, too. When Amphridote, the tyrant’s daughter, finds out about the execution of her first and long-time admirer and trusted friend Mazeres, because he witnessed and did not prevent the Queen’s adultery, she transgresses her gender expectations and becomes active.

She poisons a drink and vindictively tricks her brother into suicide for him to carry out the execution.²² She asks him to join her in a toast to revenge and together they drink from the poisoned cup and die. What Amphridote directs here is suicidal feasting. Loyalty and treason are thus presented on a further layer and are resolved by a transformed type of consumption – in this case poisoned wine, a fact that recalls Mazeres' failed attempt at poisoning Tymethes. Here, poison succeeds: the children of the tyrant die and their death prophetically indicates that the usurped court of Armatrites has no future. It is penetrated by vice, a fact that is supported by an ominous show of supernatural portents, exactly as Roxano foretold: "*Thunder and lightning. A blazing star appears.*" (v.i.110).

At the end of the play, the performed torture is only overcome by a trick of fate and via the dramaturgical frame story that has not been mentioned yet. As indicated in the beginning, Armatrites is the tyrant and the usurper of the kingdom. In the end of the tragedy, the old, legitimate king returns with his armed forces. Before he is executed by the former and true king's invading troops, the tyrant Armatrites stabs his queen to prevent her from being saved. With this crime, he is thus penetrating his wife with a knife – an action that recalls a sexual encounter, but is carried out as an act of violence.

In the earlier scene of adultery and murder, Armatrites, dominated by his jealousy, orders the body of his wife's lover to be butchered and the limbs to be hung up for public display. The Queen, confronted with the object of her former sexual appetite is then ordered to eat the remains of her lover as a cannibalistic punishment for her lust and adultery. The "Bloody Banquet" takes place in the final act of the revenge tragedy, the banquet is now not only used as a pure instrument of pleasure and foreplay, but also – reminiscent of its former function – as a punishment which reminds of the act of sexual physicality:²³ "This grisly stroke of barbarity and cannibalistic sadism becomes the pretext of the second banquet and the final scene of the play, the eponymous 'bloody banquet'."²⁴ Eating as a means of giving structure to pleasure is now perverted into a disorderly arrangement

²² See Gasper, *op. cit.*, p. 639.

²³ See Gerhard Neumann, "Gewährung und Enzug des Abendmahls: Zu den Banketten und ihrer kulturellen Funktion in den Dramen Shakespeares" *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 145. *op. cit.*, p. 29-48, p. 31.

²⁴ Meads, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

with a repulsive force:²⁵ the scenario, which is presented on the stage is that of a slaughterhouse. Tymethes' limbs, quartered on Armatrites' order are hung up like barbarous monuments. This banquet is a public display of eating. The limbs constantly remind us of physical desire and carnal embrace: "Sweet was your lust; what can be bitter there?" (iv.iii.277). It is a spectacle of perverted horror, later commented as catching the spectator's eyes in every single direction (v.i.152). The possible aesthetic value of a meal with its "social custom and practice, of ceremony and hospitality, of proper behaviour and improper aspiration"²⁶ is sadistically inverted into a nauseating and ugly display of horror – the transgression of sensual pleasure is strategically refined to offend.

The Queen is ordered to eat her lover's body, a female eater of a male body. This happens on the order of one male, but nevertheless the male is consumed by the female gender. It is a woman who devours a man. "Tymethes is a wastrel who ends up being literally consumed by a woman".²⁷ She is not tricked into eating human limbs like Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*. Her punishment creates disgust and public humiliation. Thus "drama demonstrates the vulnerability of the spectacle of dining."²⁸ The power of food and the forcing or rather force-feeding of food creates an image of horror. Thus the last scene is no more than a consequent continual of the preceding action: The motif of the banquet, which served as foreplay to the sexual congress between Tymethes and the queen is now, too, served as preparation for the incorporating union of the bodies of these lovers, the female receiving the male – only not via the lower but the upper organ, i.e. not the genitals but the palate, as the tyrant states: "The lecher must be swallowed rib by rib / His flesh is sweet; it melts, and goes down merrily" (v.i.204-205).

The formal banquet thus serves as a festive and adequate backdrop to revenge in that it echoes the crime. Similarly as before, soft music is played when the banquet is served and the Queen is presented with "*flesh, with a skull all bloody. (She sits at the table, and begins to eat the flesh, and drink blood from the skull.)*" (v.i.154). The

²⁵ Cf Neumann, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁶ Holland on *Macbeth*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁷ Gasper, *op. cit.*, p. 639.

²⁸ Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Christian symbolism of drinking wine, transsubstantiated into blood is here inverted into blood which is drunk like wine. Eating is no more associated with physical desire, but only disgust. At first, the Queen might have appeared as a secretive, man-eating “insatiate countess” – the title of a different Renaissance play by Marston – but her forced consumption of the male body becomes sadistic and repulsive.²⁹ Her gender transgression is atrociously transgressed. Culinary or gastronomic perversion becomes sexual perversion and “necrophiliac horror”.³⁰ Thus *The Bloody Banquet* is a prime example of the atrocious extremities of perverse eating, a representation of an extreme and even transgressed use of gender transgression and a revenge tragedy worth its cannibalistic title.

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²⁹ See Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

³⁰ Gasper, *op. cit.*, p. 640.