

“Some Women Are Odd Feeders”: Male Fantasies of Perverse Female Desire in 17th-Century English Tragedy

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The idea of taking a ‘frightful pleasure’ in things we are not supposed to like is a common feature of early modern literature but a challenge for early modern theories of literature, which typically privileged normative beauty and virtue. Concerns about the appeal of the ugly or evil become even more acute for early modern writers considering the possibility of women desiring people or qualities that run contrary to what men want them to want. Male characters in early modern drama often seek to engender disgust for female desires in order to police their potential disruption of the patriarchal order. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling* demonstrate how some early modern playwrights navigated the tension between allowing audiences to take a certain kind of pleasure from disgusting descriptions while reckoning with the use of disgust as a tool of patriarchal control. In these plays, male characters’ pervasive descriptions of diseased female desire are almost invariably shown to be fantasies in which the men project their own demonized appetites onto the women and then blame them for it.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Changeling*, female desire, misogyny, perversity, sinister aesthetics

Introduction

Female sexual desire is inherently problematic in early modern patriarchal societies, since it involves multiple sources of cultural anxiety: femininity, sex, and powerful emotions. One crucial way that these anxieties get expressed in the literature of the period is through representations of female desire as a disgusting and unnatural appetite. This article will consider four major 17th-century English tragedies in which male characters describe female desire as morally and aesthetically perverse. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet and his father’s ghost de-

scribe Gertrude's attraction to the allegedly repulsive (and certainly corrupt) Claudius as an appetite for garbage. In *Othello*, Desdemona is accused of unsavory sexual appetites for wanting to sleep with a Moor and also, in a bitter *Catch-22*, for supposedly losing interest in Othello and sleeping with Cassio. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess's brothers figure her desire to remarry as a disordered appetite as well as a moral stain. Lastly, in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, the villainous De Flores fantasizes that Beatrice-Joanna might harbor a perverted desire for his ugly countenance. Such claims attribute a special kind of evil to women, although in these plays they ultimately reflect the evils, or at least the desires and fears, of the misogynistic male accusers.

At the core of such accusations is the possibility of taking pleasure in things that society has deemed ugly and/or evil, an idea that deeply troubled early modern English theological, moral, and literary theorists. Evil was, of course, a central problem for both Christianity and imaginative literature. The theological problem of evil (whose original formulation predates Christianity and is traditionally attributed to Epicurus) asks how God can permit evil if he is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. In *Sinister Aesthetics: The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature* (Slotkin 2017), I argued that this problem required not only a logical solution but also an aesthetically and affectively satisfying one – and therefore that poets such as Milton were uniquely well-positioned to attempt the real work of theodicy.

But poetry had its own problem of evil. English Renaissance literary theories were shaped by Neoplatonic assumptions about beauty and goodness being fundamentally related and naturally attractive – albeit tempered by a Protestant pessimism about the ability of fallen humans to choose good over evil. These theories typically emphasized the importance of morally improving readers or audiences in order to justify the pleasure these texts might provoke, which could otherwise be seen as a sinful indulgence. This goal required the poet to make sure that goodness was also attractive and appealing, while evil was represented as repugnant¹. In practice, of course, early mod-

¹ Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (1595), for example, defends poetry only on the condition that the pleasure it produces is tied to moral instruction (see

ern literature is full of attractive representations of evil. The idea that audiences might take pleasure in artistic representations of things that were evil, horrifying, or even disgusting threatened to undermine the basic premises of early modern literary theory. Rather than revising the theories to account for the actual aesthetic sensibilities of audiences, accusing audiences of having corrupt appetites proved a more popular way of trying to escape this dilemma.

The problem becomes even more acute for early modern writers when they consider the possibility of women desiring people or qualities that run contrary to what men want them to want. Male accounts of female desire in early modern drama often rely on engendering feelings of disgust to demonize socially inappropriate desires and police their potential disruption of the patriarchal order². Crucially, this disgust is mobilized not only against women as aesthetic objects (i.e. unchaste women are disgusting), but also against women's own aesthetic sensibilities as subjects (i.e. unchaste women desire things that are disgusting). Seventeenth-century tragedies demonstrate some important ways in which early modern English authors tried to navigate the tension between allowing audiences to take a certain kind of pleasure from disgusting descriptions while reckoning with the use of disgust as a tool of patriarchal control³. Although each of the four plays I will discuss here offers a complex

Sidney 1989). For an early modern account that is more pessimistic about the potential of poetic pleasure to promote virtue, see Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579) and *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), in Kinney 1974.

2 See Bartels 1996 for an account of how Desdemona and the Duchess of Malfi negotiate "the dictates of an anxious patriarchal network, intent on regulating inevitably unruly female voices and bodies" by using submissive rhetoric to advance rebellious goals (417). It is important to note, however, that there has been a significant scholarly backlash against prior work that either individually or collectively made the patriarchal policing of women in the early modern period seem more ubiquitous or effective than it actually was, and thereby obscured some of the real agency possessed by early modern women. See for example Rackin 2005, 8-9.

3 Robinson 2014 helpfully complicates the idea of disgust as pure aversion. The philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer coins the term "aesthetic disgust" and argues that "although this emotion seems to represent pure aversion, disgusting objects can also fascinate – and even attract. Disgust can exert a paradoxical magnetism" (2011, 3). See also Baker 2010.

and distinct approach to this challenge, their pervasive descriptions of diseased female desire are almost invariably shown to be fantasies, in which the men project their own demonized desires and appetites onto the women and then blame them for it.

In my previous work, I suggested that early modern English writers attempted to manage both the religious and literary problems of evil by means of various “sinister aesthetics”. I defined a sinister aesthetic as “a set of poetic conventions that generates pleasure by representing things we are supposed to dislike, including deception and cruelty, filth and disease, deformity and monstrosity, destruction and punishment, and the demonic and infernal” (Slotkin 2017, 9). Although these systems serve to represent ugliness, chaos, and the violation of normative aesthetics, they have their own underlying order and their own historically and culturally specific representational conventions – well-known to artists and audiences within a given culture, if not always explicitly acknowledged⁴. Dramatists could use sinister aesthetics to make Vice-like characters such as Richard III or Iago appealing, while religious writers and poets like Milton could encourage readerly engagement with the dark side of God’s providence, especially his earthly and infernal punishments.

In the four plays this essay will focus on, as in many other works of 17th-century tragedy, the male characters are often associated with sinister aesthetics relating to metaphysical horror or violence and cruelty. In *Hamlet*, the ghost’s introduction leans heavily on what we might now call the Lovecraftian pleasures of cosmic horror:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
 Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
 Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
 Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
 And each particular hair to stand an end
 Like quills upon the fearful porcupine. (I.v.15-20)

Clearly, Shakespeare wants the audience to desperately want to hear this forbidden, madness-inducing tale, even though – or rath-

4 One particularly concrete and familiar example of such representational conventions would be the traditional depiction of devils with horns, bat wings, tails, and cloven hooves.

er, partly because – the ghost is telling us that any sane person would not want to hear it⁵. *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi* present the villains Iago and Ferdinand as artists and connoisseurs of aestheticized cruelty⁶. A seminal proponent of this reading of Iago is Bernard Spivack, who describes Iago as “an artist of evil [...] eager to demonstrate his skill by achieving a masterpiece of his craft” (1958, 30). In *The Duchess of Malfi*, when Ferdinand confronts the Duchess with wax sculptures meant to look like her murdered family, he gloats: “Excellent: as I would wish; she’s plagu’d in art” and cites the skillful craftsmanship of the “curious master [...] Vincentio Lauriola” (IV.i.111; 113-14). Ferdinand then commissions a performance of music and dancing by “mad-folk” (IV.i.128), again suggesting a perverse kind of art that takes discordance, irregularity, and chaos as its aesthetic principles instead of beauty, harmony, and order. Similarly, in *The Changeling*, Alibius plans a wedding entertainment in which madmen and fools will dance a “wild, distracted measure” to produce “a frightful pleasure” in the wedding guests (III.ii.251; 253) – a clear invocation of an alternative set of aesthetic standards, that is to say, a sinister aesthetic.

5 Later on, Hamlet combines this metaphysical horror with a description of his own violent impulses as an alteration in his sense of aesthetic taste: “’Tis now the very witching time of night, / When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on. (III.ii.381-85)”. Hamlet is excited by the darkness, the hellish contagion, and the imagined taste of blood in his mouth. Indeed he is so concerned about being carried away by these sinister appetites that he has to remind himself not to murder his mother, but only to “be cruel” (III.ii.388).

6 One of Iago’s numerous stated motives is the pleasure he takes from “double knavery” for its own sake (I.iii.386); it is perhaps the motive least likely to be a cover for his real priorities. Iago wants to share the beautifully sophisticated artistry of his cruelty with the audience, e.g. in his soliloquy at the end of Act II, where he boasts of pouring “pestilence” into Othello’s ear, turning Desdemona’s “virtue into pitch” and using “her own goodness” to “make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (II.iii.341-50). In Oliver Parker’s 1995 *Othello* movie, Kenneth Branagh’s Iago lovingly smears black ash on his hands while delivering these lines – not for any practical purpose, but purely to echo his metaphorical language, even though he painfully burns his hand in the process. This choice of stage business highlights the ways in which the text of the speech seems to aesthetically value pitch and pestilence over beauty and virtue. And of course, Iago is deliberately inviting the audience to share this sinister aesthetic sensibility.

Although early modern authors are highly dependent on exploiting the pleasures of sinister aesthetics, they nonetheless demonize characters who demonstrate 'aesthetic perversity'⁷. An aesthetically perverse sensibility cannot appreciate beauty and finds pleasure only in the violation of normative aesthetic ideals. Such characters are almost always evil and difficult to identify with. In Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton gives us a pleurably sinister depiction of Sin and Death (2.650-673), but he makes Satan appear more sympathetic by having him express a normative disgust and aversion for these monstrous figures (2.744-45). In Book 10, however, Satan perceives Sin as beautiful (10.352-53; 384), and this shift in sensibilities marks and contributes to his waning attractiveness. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling*, one of the most powerful ways to paint women as utterly corrupt is to accuse them of harboring aesthetically perverse desires.

"A will most rank": Male Theories of Female Desire

In *Hamlet*, the most explicit discussions of female desire occur as Hamlet and the ghost of his father attempt to make sense of Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius. Gertrude's own reticence leaves an explanatory void that the Hamlets can fill with theories that may have little relation to her real feelings. As Richard Levin observes, Gertrude "and her libido are constructed for us by the two men who have grievances against her and so must be considered hostile and therefore unreliable witnesses, while she herself is given no opportunity to testify on her own behalf" (2008, 323). By not fully dramatizing Gertrude's subjectivity, the play highlights male theories about women's sexual tastes that often seem wildly inaccurate and more revealing of men's patriarchal anxieties and obsessions. Audiences then have to decide how they feel about how Hamlet feels about how Gertrude feels.

Hamlet and his father's ghost consistently argue that Gertrude's presumed attraction to Claudius stems from a disordered sense of aesthetic taste and judgment. However, various disagreements and ambiguities emerge as they continue to express their feelings and grope for explanations. Does Gertrude's embrace of Claudius sug-

7 For an interesting perspective on sexual perversity in *Othello* and its relation to the theological problem of evil, see Dollimore 1990.

gest the absence of aesthetic judgment – an inability to distinguish between the magnificent Hamlet senior and the repulsive Claudius – or an actively perverse sensibility that somehow prefers the inferior brother? Is Gertrude’s problem a distinctly female one, or is it a failing to which all humans are equally vulnerable? Is it innate and unchangeable, or can it be encouraged or discouraged by habit?

Hamlet’s initial attempts to describe Gertrude’s choice of Claudius reveal a struggle to rationalize behavior that he finds overwhelmingly baffling and disgusting:

Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month –
Let me not think on’t; frailty, thy name is woman –
[...]
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle,
My father’s brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. (I.ii.143-46; 150-53).

Although Hamlet attempts to solve the problem with a patriarchal canard about female frailty, it proves inadequate to stop his ruminations. Hamlet imagines his father as food that Gertrude can eat without becoming satiated – in fact, consuming it only makes her hungrier. Richard Levin (2008, 306) notes the similarity to Enobarbus’s account of Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra* II.ii.246-48). But the insatiable desire of the men surrounding Cleopatra is clearly the result of her uniquely attractive qualities, whereas Gertrude’s supposed addiction to King Hamlet might suggest either his special appeal or the intensity of her own appetites. In support of the former, Hamlet repeatedly asserts his father’s godlike handsomeness. But Gertrude’s swift embrace of the inferior Claudius, which Hamlet blames on the sexual incontinence of women as a gender and compares unfavorably to the behavior of animals, suggests the importance of the latter. It also suggests that Gertrude has no aesthetic judgment, that she cannot distinguish between desirable and repulsive love objects. Later in the scene, Hamlet complains that “The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (I.ii.180-81), suggesting that Gertrude marrying Claudius is like choosing to eat the cold, unappetizing leftovers of her former husband.

The ghost goes further, suggesting that Gertrude might have a perverse sense of taste that prefers disgusting men:

But virtue, as it never will be moved,
 Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
 So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
 Will sate itself in a celestial bed
 And prey on garbage. (I.v.53-57)

The ghost's account, though savagely critical of Gertrude, is marginally less misogynist than Hamlet's in that it does not particularly attribute her failings to her femininity. Rather, the ghost offers a morally bifurcated vision of humanity: the virtuous, who will not succumb even to sophisticated temptations, and the lustful, who will exhaust their taste for legitimately desirable objects and develop an appetite for "garbage".

In the bedchamber scene, Hamlet picks up on the ghost's claims about Gertrude's perverted taste for garbage, while suggesting that our tastes are more malleable than in the ghost's formulation. His accusations focus less on Gertrude's possible complicity in the murder and more on her perversion of taste, her willfully choosing the uglier of two pictures, "The counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (III.iv.54). Gertrude, according to Hamlet, has rejected "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself" a man whose handsomeness reflects his manly virtue (III.iv.56) in favor of "a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" a corrupted and corrupting parody of a man (III.iv.64-65). To enjoy sex with Claudius, in Hamlet's view, is to enjoy vile bodily fluids the way a person of normative sensibilities would enjoy honey: "to live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty" (III.iv.91-94).

Defined this way, Gertrude's choice becomes harder to understand. Hamlet calls it an extreme perversion of "sense", but that word can (and here does) confusingly refer to both sides of a fundamental dichotomy in the early modern view of the self. It can mean "intelligence" and "the ability to make sound judgements" (*OED*, II.11) or "The bodily senses considered as a single faculty in contrast to intellect, reason, will" (*OED*, II.12.b). In describing Gertrude as lacking sense, or having her sense "apoplexed" (III.iv.73), Hamlet enumerates the bodily senses of sight, hearing, smell, and touch (III.iv.78-79),

but he also uses “sense” to refer to a seemingly more rational faculty that reserves “some quantity of choice” to distinguish between such men as Hamlet’s father and his uncle (III.iv.74-75). The word “taste” presents precisely the same ambivalence, since it can refer either to one of the bodily senses or to a faculty of judgment, and although Hamlet’s list of bodily senses curiously omits taste, the concept is evoked by lines such as “Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, / And batten on this moor?” (III.iv.66-67). Hamlet continually rebels against the idea that Gertrude’s bodily senses or rational judgment could be diseased enough to respond positively to Claudius and still allow her to function as an animate creature.

However, Hamlet does suggest an alternative theory for how Gertrude’s tastes might have become so perverted: acquired tastes for things that aren’t naturally delicious come from continued practice, from the “custom” or “habit” of tasting them. He promises to spark remorse in her heart “If damnèd custom have not brazed it so / That it be proof and bulwark against sense” (III.iv.37-38). This “custom” can serve as a barrier against sense (i.e. either the evidence of one’s own senses or one’s capacity for choosing). And, Hamlet argues, tastes can be un-acquired in the same way:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster custom, who all sense doth eat
Of habits evil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence; the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either [lodge] the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency. (III.iv.160-70; brackets in original)

Earlier, Hamlet asserts that any functioning creature would embrace certain objects and reject others. This passage suggests a more relativistic notion of taste, where it is possible to train one’s taste to like or dislike anything, although these tastes still retain a moral valence. It also does not draw a distinction between the capacity of men and women to form good or bad habits. Of course, this model still does not explain why Gertrude would have chosen to acquire the taste for

the evil and (to Hamlet) disgusting Claudius in the first place. And where Hamlet earlier emphasizes the speed with which she fell into Claudius's arms, the process of weaning herself from him looks to be slow and painstaking, suggesting – contrary to the Neoplatonic impulse to link the beautiful and the good – that bad tastes are actually easier to acquire than the supposedly more natural good tastes.

Much of the sexual revulsion in *Hamlet* is Hamlet's disgust with Gertrude's failure to be disgusted by Claudius, a disgust animated by Hamlet's obsession with Gertrude's choice of sexual partners and his wish to control those choices. Sexual revulsion plays a similarly central role in Shakespeare's *Othello*, but the question of male desirability or undesirability is complicated by racist standards of attractiveness. Many of the male characters invest a great deal of energy in interpreting – or rather, completely misinterpreting – and policing Desdemona's putative sexual desires and revulsions. Sexual disgust is accordingly one of Iago's major tools for manipulating these other men, either by causing them to feel revulsion for Desdemona's sexual choices or by convincing them of Desdemona's disgust with Othello or other potential sexual partners. Iago arouses Brabantio's disgust to set him against Othello. He tries to convince both Roderigo and Othello that Desdemona is bound to become disgusted by Othello, to encourage the one and discourage the other. And, most tellingly, he insinuates to Othello that Desdemona's sexual interest in him is itself disgusting, which feeds into Othello's self-disgust. Throughout these processes, the male characters' belief in Desdemona's supposed sexual disgust for Othello – or, conversely, their fears about her attraction to him – become repositories and points of expression for their own racial disgust (including Othello's racial self-loathing).

Iago seeks to inspire Brabantio's revulsion by forcing him to imagine his friend and his daughter "making the beast with two backs" (I.i.115). Presumably, Brabantio would feel an aversion to contemplating his daughter's sexual activity in general, but Iago also evokes a specifically racist disgust by referring to "an old black ram [...] tuppung your white ewe" (I.i.87-88) and to "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (I.i.124).

Brabantio in turn speculates about Desdemona's own sexual aversions. He notes that "she shunned / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (I.iii.67-68), a fact that Iago later uses to convince Othello of Desdemona's perversity, but that Brabantio more optimistically

takes as an indication of her extreme chastity. He tells Othello that she would naturally be repulsed by “the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou” unless she had been enchanted or drugged (I.iii.70-71). As he says, “For nature so prepost’rously to err, / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not” (I.iii.62-64) – a claim that Othello comes to believe.

While Brabantio is forced to recant his claim that Desdemona feels revulsion towards Othello (which he does readily enough at I.iii.188 after speaking briefly to his daughter), Iago gets a lot of mileage out of the idea that such disgust is Desdemona’s natural state, and her decision to marry Othello merely a brief divergence from it. As Iago tells Roderigo,

Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties; all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice. (II.i.224-33)

Sexual appetite here is analogous to the appetite for food, subject to satiation and revulsion. Earlier, Iago had told Roderigo that Othello would similarly get sick of Desdemona: “The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida” (I.iii.347-48). But Iago does not figure Desdemona’s attraction to Othello as an appetite for sweetness that becomes cloyed. Rather, it is inexplicably perverse that she showed any interest in him at all, and she will therefore quickly return to a more natural state of nausea.

Under the influence of Iago and his own insecurities, Othello gradually becomes convinced that there is something repulsive in Desdemona’s attraction to him. His account of their meet-cute serves the primary dramatic function of establishing the Othello-Desdemona relationship as a positive one despite societal prejudices against intermarriage – the Duke says “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (I.iii.171). Yet with the benefit of hindsight, Othello’s romantically compelling account reveals potential racial insecurities that Iago later exploits. Desdemona loves Othello’s story, he says, be-

cause it is “strange” and “pitiful” (I.iii.160; 161). He claims that Desdemona would “seriously incline [...] with a greedy ear” (I.iii.146; 149) to hear stories “of the cannibals that each other eat, / The anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (I.iii.143-45). There is something odd in the intensity of Desdemona’s reported hunger for stories of monstrous cannibals and blemmyae, and yet Desdemona herself never expresses an interest in the exotic or grotesque⁸. Perhaps Othello subtly misreads the nature of Desdemona’s fascination with his story, because he subconsciously fears she has a perverted interest in the monstrous races of Africa and might see him as yet another grotesque, exotic creature.

Iago exploits this vulnerability by transferring the racist argument he used on Roderigo to Othello:

I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent. (III.iii.235-38)

Iago does not go so far as to tell Othello that Desdemona will “heave the gorge” at him (II.i.231), as he said to Roderigo, partly out of strategic tact, but also because he is engaged in shifting the locus of disgust from Desdemona as subject to Desdemona as object:

Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends –
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural (III.iii.229-33)⁹

8 For an alternate but related reading, see Chamberlain 2019, who argues that Desdemona feels “erotic desire” for Othello’s travel stories (204), which allows Othello to misinterpret “her desire for travel within the strange and wondrous world he has known [...] as desire for sexual adventure beyond the bounds of matrimony” (209).

9 Bradley Irish’s *Shakespeare and Disgust* rightly emphasizes the importance of this speech for generating self-disgust in Othello via disgust with Desdemona’s desire for him: “he is disturbed that Desdemona could be attracted to what he perceives as a repulsive object, so he once again projects his own disgust onto another, by assuming that she too will inevitably come to feel what he feels” (2023, 158).

In these lines Iago is not stoking fears that Desdemona will grow disgusted with Othello, but rather suggesting that her attraction to him reflects perverse aesthetic sensibilities that make her unattractive and disgusting. Iago's "Foh!" expresses visceral revulsion with Desdemona's failure to find Othello's blackness repulsive¹⁰. It is important to note that Iago interrupts Othello as he was possibly about to volunteer some version of this theory himself: "And yet, how nature erring from itself –" (III.iii.227). Although we can't know exactly what Othello would have said, his phrasing echoes Brabantio's at I.iii.62 ("For nature so prepost'rously to err"), suggesting that Othello has already internalized this racist model of aesthetic judgment.

The Duchess of Malfi's Ferdinand owes a lot to Hamlet: madness and misogynistic bewhoring of a close family member that potentially conceals incestuous desire for her. However, where Shakespeare keeps Gertrude remarkably opaque, Webster gives us a great deal of access to the Duchess's thoughts and feelings while wrapping a certain amount of mystery around Ferdinand's motivations (e.g. at I.i.257-58 and III.i.84-86). Much of the misogynistic rhetoric in *The Duchess of Malfi* is fairly superficial and conventional. The play's male characters attempt to portray the Duchess as either an angel of chastity or a whore. Antonio claims she has "so divine a continence / As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope" and that "her nights [...] Are more in heaven than other ladies' shrifts" (I.i.199-200; 202-03). Her brothers, of course, take the opposite tack, asserting women's innate frailty in the arena of chastity. The Cardinal complains: "Unequal Nature, to place women's hearts / So far upon the left side!" (II.v.32-33; see also II.iv.13-15), a sentiment that Ferdinand immediately echoes (II.v.33-36). For all their intense focus on the Duchess's sexual activity, the brothers' theories of female desire are not as deeply worked out as those of Hamlet and his father, or Othello and Iago, relying on well-worn tropes of women as a "weaker vessel" (1 Peter 3:7 [KJV]) incapable of restraining libidinous impulses. They also do not delve as deeply into fantasies of the Duchess being attracted to disgusting men. Ferdinand does express a certain amount of anxiety and disgust surrounding the idea that the Duchess's

10 On "foh" as an expression of disgust, see Robinson 2014, 559. Iago's use of it here is calculated rather than involuntary, although his racist and misogynist contempt are presumably real enough.

lover might be lower-class: a “strongthigh’d bargeman” or a “lovely squire” (II.v.42; 44) – or Antonio. But in general, his concerns about his sister’s sexual desires do not seem to hinge on whether their object is conventionally handsome or respectable.

Bosola echoes the brothers’ assessment of the Duchess when he says that “*lust [...] is never wise*” (II.iii.76-77; italics mine); however, Bosola’s more thoroughgoing anti-feminist diatribes do not present women in general as driven by uncontrollable passions. Rather, they are cold-blooded Machiavellians who seduce men through “mathematics” in order to further their ambitions: “some of you give entertainment for pure love; but more, for more precious reward” (II.ii.22; 16-18). Hence Bosola’s obsessive focus on cosmetics rather than sexual activity when berating the Old Lady at II.i.21-60. The perverted sexual desire suggested by his anti-make-up speech is not that of women, but of the men who could be attracted to a face that “resembled an abortive hedgehog” or was more foul than “a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague” (II.i.29; 38-39). Bosola’s tirade sits at the intersection of normative disgust and sinister pleasure. On the one hand, it seems clearly intended to disrupt conventional notions of female attractiveness and engender a sense of aversion to them. On the other hand, the speech is a lovingly and vividly detailed tour de force of Rabelaisian excess that also seems to invite a kind of admiration for the inventive nature of its vileness.

In *The Changeling*, De Flores advances claims about the prevalence of female erotic perversity (specifically, a sexual attraction to disgusting men) that echo a lot of what we have seen elsewhere:

I must confess my face is bad enough,
 But I know far worse has better fortune –
 And not endured alone, but doted on –
 And yet such pick-hatched faces, chins like witches,
 Here and there five hairs, whispering in a corner
 As if they grew in fear of one another,
 Wrinkles like troughs, where swine-deformity swills
 The tears of perjury that lie there like wash
 Fallen from the slimy and dishonest eye. (II.i.37-45)

The argument recalls Hamlet senior’s rhetoric about preying on “garbage” or Iago’s “will most rank”. The style resembles the grotesque

excess of Bosola's makeup diatribe. However, where Bosola depicted disgusting female faces that men should not be attracted to but are, De Flores applies the same representational techniques to disgusting male faces that women should not be attracted to but are.

De Flores is (at the risk of understatement) not as philosophical-minded as Hamlet, and his explanation for this phenomenon is not as thoroughly reasoned, but revealing nonetheless:

Hunger and pleasure, they'll commend sometimes
Slovenly dishes, and feed heartily on 'em –
Nay, which is stranger, refuse daintier for 'em.
Some women are odd feeders. (II.ii.150-53)

De Flores's claim that "some women are odd feeders" is partly a way of dodging the question of why this should be so. But he does suggest that sexual desire is a matter of taste, and that some people – here specifically women – have a sense of taste that rejects normative ideas of beauty and embraces an alternative and opposing set of aesthetic standards. This idea runs very strongly through *Hamlet* and *Othello*, although it is not as clearly discernable in *The Duchess of Malfi*, where Ferdinand takes issue with any sexual desire on the Duchess's part, regardless of how normative or conventional it may be.

"Have not we affections?": Women on Female Desire

Although for obvious reasons male opinions predominate in these plays, female characters do get some opportunities to talk about their own desires. *Hamlet's* famously enigmatic Gertrude is the least forthcoming of these characters and therefore does the least to refute her son's and former husband's theories about the nature of her feelings for Claudius. Her strikingly cold-hearted suggestion that Hamlet should not mourn his father because the death of parents is "common" (I.ii.72) could corroborate Hamlet's claims that she stopped caring about his father, especially because Gertrude has no trouble expressing strong emotions in other contexts. There are a few scraps of text that can be read as evidence of Gertrude's enthusiasm for sex in general or sex with Claudius in particular, but there is no emotional intensity behind any of these brief and indirect comments to match what the Hamlets claim to see in her. She describes her marriage to

Claudius as “o’erhasty” (II.ii.57), possibly suggesting her inability to control her desire to be with him. While watching *The Mousetrap*, she complains that the Player Queen “protests too much” when swearing to never remarry (III.ii.226), which could mean that Gertrude thinks permanent celibate widowhood is an unfairly onerous burden, or simply that the fulsomeness of the Player Queen’s oaths make them sound insincere. This evidence is sufficiently tepid and ambiguous that it hardly supports Hamlet’s belief that Gertrude is addicted to sex with Claudius, which we can see in his attempts to wean her off this supposed addiction at III.iv.161-70.

The other three plays allow female characters to offer more explicit counterpoints to the prevailing misogynist rhetoric of the men. Towards the beginning of *Othello*, Desdemona declares her love in terms that implicitly refute Iago’s attempts to frame her as perverse: she neither loves nor loathes Othello’s blackness, but rather loves him for his “quality [...] honors and [...] valiant parts” (I.iii.251; 253)¹¹. Her behavior throughout the play suggests the sincerity of these claims. Emilia pushes back more forcefully against male sexual rapaciousness and hypocrisy, but in terms that echo Iago’s account of desire as a taste easily cloyed, an appetite that can quickly turn to revulsion: men “are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, / They belch us” (III.iv.103-05). Although Emilia’s description of Desdemona’s marriage to Othello as a “most filthy bargain” (V.ii.158) suggests her racism, she does not explicitly discuss the idea of Desdemona’s attraction to Othello being aesthetically perverse. Indeed, she suggests that everyone, men and women, shares similar “palates both for sweet and sour” (IV.iii.95) – a contrasting mix of flavors, but not an unhealthy or unnatural appetite.

The Duchess of Malfi combines Desdemona’s virtue and nobility with Emilia’s candor and matter-of-factness about female sexual desire. Webster portrays the Duchess in vivid detail as a human, not a saint or devil. She gets pregnancy-related cravings and indigestion (II.i.131-59). She worries about her hair going gray (III.ii.59-60). Cariola complains that the Duchess is annoying to share a bed with because “she’s the sprawling’st bedfellow”, a detail that is charming precisely

¹¹ For an account of the debate around Desdemona’s assertiveness vs. her passivity, see Slater 2019.

because of its banality (III.ii.13). Most importantly, in wooing Antonio, she explicitly positions herself between the misogynistic extremes of the virgin/whore dichotomy, by leveraging her status as widow:

What is't distracts you? This is flesh, and blood, sir;
 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
 Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man!
 I do here put off all vain ceremony,
 And only do appear to you a young widow
 That claims you for her husband, and like a widow,
 I use but half a blush in't. (I.i.453-59)

The Duchess's denial of being an alabaster statue associated with death stands in sharp contrast to Othello's wish that Desdemona become one. The phrase "half a blush" adds a mathematical precision to the Duchess's delicate self-positioning between and outside the rigid categories of virgin and whore. Although she is conscious of some impropriety in her proposal, once married she freely expresses an interest in sex that might more commonly be articulated by a male lover: "Alas, what pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?" (III.ii.10).

The play's secondary female characters help to position the Duchess as a kind of happy medium. Cariola demonstrates that she has internalized misogynistic ideas when she wonders whether the Duchess's behavior reflects "the spirit of greatness or of woman" (I.i.504) – that is, is the Duchess acting like a great hero (albeit perhaps a tragic hero), or demonstrating a feminine inability to use reason and judgment to control her destructive sexual passions? At the opposite extreme, Julia proudly declares herself one of the "great women of pleasure" (V.ii.191) and demonstrates an unconventional level of female sexual aggressiveness by wooing Bosola at gunpoint. Although the play is presumably not offering Julia as a literal role model for early modern women, the play presents both Julia's over-the-top sexual assertiveness and the Duchess's more moderate version as refreshing (and also potentially titillating) rather than repulsive¹².

Perhaps the most complex representation of the interiority of female desire in these plays comes from *The Changeling's* Beatrice-Joanna. She is somewhat unusual as a female version of the Renaissance

12 For a positive account of Julia, see Luckyj 1987.

tragic hero/villain, an archetype typically embodied by a male character such as Macbeth. Compared to Gertrude and Desdemona, Beatrice-Joanna offers a much more detailed glimpse into her own thoughts about love and desire. Unlike the Duchess, Beatrice-Joanna becomes a much more compromised character, both morally and in her aesthetic sensibilities (Antonio is depicted as a morally and aesthetically worthy love object for the Duchess, despite his lower rank).

The Changeling introduces questions of taste and judgment right from its opening scene, primarily through Beatrice-Joanna's attraction to Alsemero, her corresponding loss of interest in Alonzo, and her disgust with De Flores. Beatrice-Joanna initiates the play's discussion of taste by suggesting that contrary faculties of judgment govern our romantic desires and choices:

Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgements,
And should give certain judgement what they see;
But they are rash sometimes, and tell us wonders
Of common things, which when our judgements find,
They can then check the eyes, and call them blind. (I.i.68-72)

First, our eyes are supposed to guard our judgments like "sentinels". Next, the eyes themselves are tasked with giving judgments. Finally, our judgments are a separate faculty that "can check the eyes" – i.e. serve as guards against their misprision, much as the eyes were supposed to do initially for the judgments. Beatrice-Joanna doesn't specify the nature of the non-ocular faculty of judgment here, but later on she characterizes it as "intellectual" (II.i.19). This imprecise use of the term "judgement" may be a symptom of her lack of self-awareness and habit of rationalizing her own destructive choices. However, the slippage between rational/intellectual and carnal/sensory foundations of taste is similar to Hamlet's, which may suggest a larger tension in early modern accounts of judgment and sense.

A moralistic interpreter might see Beatrice-Joanna's sudden attraction to Alsemero and abandonment of Alonzo as the kind of fickleness that comes from a failure to let the judgment govern the eyes. Beatrice-Joanna, however, rationalizes it as an over-hasty embrace of Alonzo, based on his superficial appearance, with Alsemero representing the more well-considered choice: "For five days past / To be recalled! Sure mine eyes were mistaken: / This was the man was meant

me." (I.i.79-81). Later, she similarly asserts "Methinks I love now with the eyes of judgement [...] A true deserver like a diamond sparkles [...] Yet is he best discernèd then / With intellectual eyesight" (II.i.13-19). Here, she figuratively conflates visual and intellectual judgments. She also asserts that the worthiness of a love object is a quality that visibly sparkles on the surface and then immediately contradicts this idea by characterizing it as a hidden quality that can only be inferred.

The most interesting questions of taste are raised by Beatrice-Joanna's relationship to De Flores. Initially, Beatrice-Joanna appears disgusted by De Flores. This disgust might readily be explained by De Flores's appearance, since even by his own admission his face is notably unattractive (II.i.37). Yet despite this readily available and (at the time) socially acceptable explanation for Beatrice-Joanna's aversion, her account of it to Alsemero makes it seem mysterious:

Your pardon, sir, 'tis my infirmity;
 Nor can I other reason render you
 Than his or hers of some particular thing
 They must abandon as a deadly poison,
 Which to a thousand other tastes were wholesome:
 Such to mine eyes is that same fellow there,
 The same that report speaks of the basilisk. (I.i.104-10)

She compares De Flores to something "wholesome" that normal tastes would enjoy, yet is deadly only to her. There are some relatively concrete story-related reasons for this formulation. The source for *The Changeling* – John Reynolds's *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge* (1621) Book I, History IV, pages 105-46 – does not describe De Flores as unattractive, so the reference to De Flores as "wholesome" may be partly a vestige of this original character. The unusual intensity of Beatrice-Joanna's dislike for De Flores also reflects the common literary convention of characters having premonitions of future disasters. Elsewhere Beatrice-Joanna says the sight of De Flores makes her "think / Of some harm towards me" (II.i.89-90)¹³.

13 Tomazo has a similar instinctively negative reaction to De Flores at V.ii.13-15, presumably because De Flores is his brother's murderer. Beatrice-Joanna's account of inexplicable distaste also recalls Shylock's disingenuous non-explanation for hating Antonio at the beginning of the trial scene in *Merchant of Venice* (IV.i.40-62).

Yet Alsemero's response, which further expounds on this idea, suggests its thematic importance to the play:

This is a frequent frailty in our nature;
 There's scarce a man amongst a thousand sound
 But hath his imperfection: one distastes
 The scent of roses, which to infinites
 Most pleasing is, and odoriferous;
 One oil, the enemy of poison;
 Another wine, the cheerer of the heart
 And lively refresher of the countenance.
 Indeed this fault – if so it be – is general:
 There's scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed (I.i.111-20)

Like Beatrice-Joanna's explanation, Alsemero's is not strongly gendered – that is, the "frailty" in question is not explicitly labelled as a uniquely feminine characteristic, as it often is in *Hamlet*. Alsemero also takes a marginally less moralistic view of taste than Hamlet: certain dislikes might represent a "frailty", an "imperfection", and perhaps a "fault", although he questions the applicability of the latter term. Alsemero expands on Beatrice-Joanna's highly dubious suggestion that most people would find De Flores "wholesome", comparing De Flores to various healthful and/or pleasing substances: roses, oil, and wine. If De Flores's face were in fact like these things, Beatrice-Joanna's disgust for him, rather than her possible attraction to him, would be the more unnatural taste.

In the end, when all her schemes have fallen apart, Beatrice-Joanna presents herself as an emblem of diseased femininity, telling her father:

O come not near me, sir, I shall defile you:
 I am that of your blood was taken from you
 For your better health (V.iii.149-51)

This attempt to consolidate all of the corruption of the play's world within Beatrice-Joanna's dying body leads to the conclusion, in which Alsemero offers himself as a son to Vermandero, despite the fact that Beatrice-Joanna is dead and their marriage was never consummated. From a certain Renaissance patriarchal perspective, this is the perfect marriage: a union between two powerful men uncontaminated by the necessity of using a live woman (with her potentially inappropriate desires) to cement it.

Although the end of *The Changeling* portrays Beatrice-Joanna as genuinely corrupt, the play does not present all female libido as inherently unhealthy. Indeed, a lot of Beatrice-Joanna's problems stem from her attempts to be a good patriarchal subject and strictly maintain her virgin purity – in the eyes of society if not in fact. She is racked with anxiety about the possibility of being found unchaste, and she accordingly deceives herself into believing in her own innocence until well after she has lost it. These obsessions are among the constraints that force her into a sexual relationship with the deprived De Flores.

In contrast, her waiting-woman Diaphanta has an attitude that we might now describe as sex-positive, yet she keeps her virginity until a moment of her choosing, when Beatrice-Joanna makes her a good offer for it. Diaphanta is chaste (before the deal is consummated), happy, and in touch with her own desires, while Beatrice-Joanna is anxious, deprived of the sex she wants, and corrupted by sex that she doesn't want. As Diaphanta retorts when Beatrice-Joanna suspects her eagerness to have sex means she is not a virgin, "Not a maid? [...] Your honorable self is not a truer / With all your fears upon you – [...] Than I with all my lightsome joys about me" (IV.i.93-96). Her claim to be a maid is immediately verified by her response to Alsemero's virgin-detecting potion (IV.i.105-18). The results of the bed trick in V.i make the differences between Beatrice-Joanna and Diaphanta painfully clear: Diaphanta enjoys Alsemero all night and emerges filled with a deep post-coital contentment and a complete lack of regret or shame (V.i.77-81), while Beatrice-Joanna waits outside all night tortured by jealousy, anxiety, humiliation, rage, and sexual frustration. Although Diaphanta's subsequent murder could be interpreted as a providential punishment for her extramarital romp with Alsemero, it is hard not to see her as a healthier and indeed more moral person than Beatrice-Joanna¹⁴.

14 One important caveat is that Diaphanta can be somewhat less anxious about sex because her social station is lower than Beatrice-Joanna's. See for example *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Hero is almost destroyed by false accusations of consorting with Borachio, while her waiting-woman Margaret, who actually was with Borachio, is not only excused but described as "just and virtuous" (V.i.293).

*"My imagination will carry me / To see her, in the shameful act of sin":
Misogyny as Sexual Meta-Fantasy*

Generally speaking, the female perspectives offered in these plays tend to undermine the male characters' misogynistic theories about female desire. In many cases, the failings attributed specifically to women are shown to be universal human frailties. Men in tragedies rarely exemplify the triumph of reason, will, and judgment over destructive passion that supposedly distinguishes masculinity from femininity. Ultimately, the men's ideas about women reveal more about early modern masculinity and the social demands, psychology, and aesthetic sensibilities of the male characters.

In particular, male accusations of female aesthetic perversity in the erotic domain tend to be projections of the men's own non-normative sensibilities. In the bedchamber scene in *Hamlet*, Hamlet's initial rhetoric positions his own sensibilities as normative. When he says Gertrude's behavior "takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love, / And sets a blister there" (III.iv.42-44), the antithesis positions virtue as inherently attractive, and vice as an ugly "blister". The beautiful side of the description receives more attention, and the blister is an unpleasant negation of that beauty. The rhetoric does not put anyone – not Hamlet, the audience, the imaginary owner of the "fair forehead," or even Gertrude – in a position to appreciate the blister as an aesthetic object.

However, as Hamlet becomes more impassioned, his aesthetic framework shifts to a sinister mode. He takes a disturbing delight in vivid depictions of the "bloat king" and his attempts at seduction (III.iv.182). With a level of detail that ought to be gratuitous but that he is clearly invested in, he paints a deeply sensual picture of his mother's sex life with Claudius: "to live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty" (III.iv.91-94). These lines simultaneously suggest Hamlet's sadistic pleasure in forcing his mother to contemplate such ugliness and Hamlet's embrace of the perverse aesthetic sensibilities for which he is punishing Gertrude in the first place. In contrast to the previous example, Hamlet seems to be imaginatively wallowing in filth with as much gusto as he attributes to Gertrude. Hamlet's strategy here also raises questions about how the play is encouraging

the audience to respond. Are they expected to suffer revulsion during this speech or to take pleasure in the grotesque imagery?

While the nature of Gertrude's guilt in *Hamlet* is complex and ambiguous, *Othello* offers us a clearly innocent woman in the person of Desdemona and therefore a more decisive critique of Iago and Othello's misogyny. Desdemona's supposedly perverted aesthetic sensibilities are entirely a product of the diseased male imagination, not the diseased female imagination. By the end of the play, Othello embraces not only a misguided view of Desdemona's love for him as an unnatural attraction to the exotic, he also perverts his own sensibilities to be repulsed by a living Desdemona and attracted to a dead one. He does so out of his growing belief that any female erotic agency at all is inherently dangerous to male honor, regardless of its object:

O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses. (III.iii.268-73)

His disgust with Desdemona's capacity to love extends not only to the adulterous love of Cassio but to her unnatural attraction to him.

As Othello becomes more patriarchal, wishing to control not only Desdemona's body but her desires, the scope and intensity of his revulsion increase. Othello finds the idea that Desdemona might want something other than what he wants her to want more revolting than the idea of being a toad and breathing polluted air. While Desdemona is objectified into a "thing", she is still a desirable thing – "the thing I love" and "delicate". But the next time Othello's thoughts turn to toads, they suggest that Desdemona's supposed desire for Cassio has turned her into a disgusting object. Leaving his heart with her would be like leaving it in "a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in" (IV.ii.61-62). Here the lust is directly embodied in the toads, and its metaphorical stench is so repulsive that "Heaven stops the nose at it" (IV.ii.77).

The only cure for the perils of female agency is for Desdemona to not be alive, to be a still, cold statue as "smooth as monumental alabaster. [...] Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee af-

ter" (V.ii.5, 18-19). Othello's necrophilia here reveals how much his jealousy has caused him to alter his own aesthetic sensibilities away from the normative. These sinister sensibilities allow him to love a corpse and to respond to Iago's suggestion to "Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" with pleasure at the poetic nature of the punishment: "Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!" (IV.i.202-05)¹⁵.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, as in *Othello*, critiques of the Duchess's sexual predilections are thoroughly discredited by what the audience can see about her character (and Ferdinand's). The allegedly wicked marriage of the Duchess and Antonio is shown not to be monstrous at all – their fault lies simply in the hubris of believing they could avoid punishment. But despite the male characters' focus on scapegoating female sexuality, their misogyny is linked to a hatred and fear of their own sexual impulses.

Webster vividly emphasizes the extent to which misogyny requires men to simultaneously cultivate and police their own transgressive erotic imaginations¹⁶. When Ferdinand first learns that his sister has taken a lover, he accuses women as a gender of being naturally incapable of self-control: "Foolish men, / That e'er will trust their honour in a bark / Made of so slight, weak bulrush as is woman" (II.v.33-35). However, he immediately exhibits a similar inability to control his libidinous thoughts and begs his brother: "talk to me somewhat, quickly, / Or my imagination will carry me / To see her, in the shameful act of sin" (II.v.39-41). The Cardinal (perhaps out of deliberate cruelty) ignores Ferdinand's plea for a distraction and instead asks him for details, which prompts some vivid sexual fantasies of their sister:

Happily with some stronghigh'd bargeman;
Or one o'th'wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge,

15 For more on poetic justice and its relation to Dantean *contrapasso*, see Slotkin 2017, 155, and elsewhere.

16 William Cook Miller makes a similar argument about Ferdinand's reference to a lamprey at I.i.336: "In forcing the Duchess to picture an unspoken penis resonating between a grotesque 'lamprey' and a 'tongue,' Ferdinand plays both the corruptor, planting a loathsomely distorted phallus in his twin sister's mind, and the corrupted, acting as though the Duchess's own imagination has misunderstood his innocent comparison" (2015, 194).

Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings. (II.v.42-45)

In addition to the incestuous implications of contemplating his sister's sex life so intensely (like Hamlet imagining Gertrude in a sweaty bed), the speech also offers a striking amount of detail about the men the Duchess is supposedly having sex with, who are either hyper-masculine or effeminate. Is there something about Ferdinand's sexuality that causes him to turn his mind to the strong-thighed bargeman or the lovely squire? While Ferdinand wallows in fantasies – which he also hates – of his sister having sex with other men, he seeks to replace the Duchess's normative feelings for Antonio and her children with horror and disgust, by means of the wax figures. Hamlet may believe that he seeks to cleanse Gertrude's sensibilities, but Ferdinand is pretty clearly doing the opposite.

"Broken rib of mankind": Beatrice-Joanna and Aesthetic Corruption

In *The Changeling*, Beatrice-Joanna is the female character who comes closest to potentially exhibiting the aesthetic perversity attributed to her, although not as early nor as fully as the men's accounts would suggest. De Flores's claim that if a woman once commits an unchaste act "She spreads and mounts then like arithmetic – / One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand" (II.ii.62-63) is both conventional misogyny and wishful thinking, and it completely mischaracterizes the real nature of Beatrice-Joanna's corruption¹⁷. She is in fact trapped in a de facto monogamous sexual relationship with De Flores, and the only other man she has any sexual designs on is Alsemero. Similarly, De Flores begins hoping that Beatrice-Joanna is an "odd feeder" long before she gives him any reason to think so, and in context that comment tells us more about his fantasies than hers.

Once Beatrice-Joanna develops her plan to use De Flores as her assassin, she tries to trick him into believing her aesthetic and erotic sensibilities have shifted by praising his least praiseworthy attrib-

17 For an alternate view, see Burks 1995, 774: "Middleton and Rowley endorse De Flores's analysis of her susceptibility to corruption, and the play confirms the underlying conventional wisdom that a woman false to one might be false to any".

ute: his face (II.ii.72-75). At first, she simply claims that it isn't as bad as she thought (II.ii.80-81), but then she suggests that "When we're used / To a hard face, 'tis not so unpleasing, / It mends still in opinion, hourly mends" (II.ii.87-89). In other words, De Flores's ugliness becomes more appealing through what Hamlet calls "custom". There is a double dramatic irony here: on the one hand, De Flores does not know that Beatrice-Joanna is lying, telling him what he wants to hear, and in fact she is currently experiencing no such process of acclimation to his face. On the other hand, Beatrice-Joanna does not know that she will eventually become acclimated, at least in a sense, to De Flores.

As Beatrice-Joanna becomes more enmeshed with De Flores, and despite the fact that he blackmails her into sleeping with him, she shows signs of beginning to appreciate and perhaps even love him. She presents her love as a quasi-moral obligation in recompense for his protecting her: "I'm forced to love thee now, / 'Cause thou provid'st so carefully for my honour" (V.i.48-49). This could again be flattery, but she expresses even more enthusiasm when he is absent: "How heartily he serves me! His face loathes one, / But look upon his care, who would not love him? / The east is not more beauteous than his service" (V.i.70-72), and, a few lines later, "Here's a man worth loving!" (V.i.76). She imagines his behavior to be virtuous or at least solicitous, and therefore to possess a kind of aesthetic appeal that his face lacks. As before with her switch from Alonzo to Alsemero, Beatrice-Joanna attributes her morally bankrupt change of affections to a deeper and more profound vision or insight.

The fact that Beatrice-Joanna refers to De Flores as "beauteous" could mean that it was a mistake to dismiss as purely manipulative her assertion of alternative aesthetic standards of male beauty: "Hardness becomes the visage of a man well, / It argues service, resolution, manhood, / If cause were of employment" (II.ii.92-94). Nonetheless, even the passage describing De Flores as "beauteous" sounds more like a misguided version of Desdemona's "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii.252) than like an erotic fixation on De Flores's diseased skin. In the end, it is perhaps possible that Beatrice-Joanna might have become the "odd feeder" that De Flores hoped she was. But if Beatrice-Joanna comes to find De Flores beautiful, it does not spring from a hedonistic and perverted desire for novelty, as the men in all four of these plays would assume. Rather, it is something she is driven to as

she tries to navigate the harsh constraints of patriarchal society, the predatory influence of De Flores, and the fallout from her own selfish but self-destructive choices¹⁸.

Conclusion

As with most moral systems, the patriarchal values that define female chastity are enforced by tying morality to aesthetics: proper behavior is beautiful and improper behavior is ugly. This pervasive link between morality and aesthetics is even tighter and more overdetermined in the case of sexual morality, because of the inherent connection between sexual desire and aesthetic elements such as attraction/repulsion and sensual pleasure. Accordingly, the men in these plays attempt to mobilize the power of disgust against female sexual desire by imagining unchaste (or allegedly unchaste) women as disgusting objects and/or aesthetically perverse subjects who are attracted to disgusting male objects.

For male characters in these plays, dishonor – especially the dishonor of being linked to an unchaste woman – is so destructive to their identity that it demands a response utterly superseding all other moral, religious, or aesthetic considerations. The necessity of combating dishonor unreservedly leads them to embrace both evil and the sinister. *Hamlet's* Laertes offers a prime example of this attitude, albeit in a context unrelated to female sexuality:

To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil,
 Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!
 I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
 That both the worlds I give to negligence,
 Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged
 Most throughly for my father. (IV.v.131-36)

18 Joost Daalder and Antony Telford Moore argue that Alsemero's phrase "There's scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed" (I.i.120) is evidence "that love and hate are intimately related and even interchangeable", although in context Alsemero attributes the love and hate to different people, not one ambivalent subject (1999, 508). I agree with their argument that the play rebuts the idea "of love and loathing as two quite distinct feelings" but not with their claim that Beatrice-Joanna's initial aversion to De Flores hid an unconscious desire for him from the very beginning (508). I would suggest rather that any attraction she might feel for De Flores is a product of what Hamlet calls "That monster custom" (III.iv.161).

It would be hard to overstate the radical incoherence of this argument on a moral or theological level. What possible moral framework could support a filial piety that explicitly violates the standards of both human and divine moral law? Hamlet displays a similarly disturbing and radical idolatry of masculine honor in the previous scene, when he envies Fortinbras for finding “quarrel in a straw / When honor’s at the stake” (IV.iv.55-56) and for engineering “The imminent death of twenty thousand men [...] for a fantasy and trick of fame” (IV.iv.60-61).

Yet with the partial exception of Beatrice-Joanna, the plays repeatedly and explicitly debunk claims of female aesthetic perversity as poisonous and false male fantasies. The plays suggest instead that aesthetic perversity is primarily a characteristic of the male sexual imagination, which men attribute to – and seek to impose on – women. Indeed, the level of a male character’s investment in these ideas at any given moment correlates highly with his current level of malevolence and/or insanity. As for the female characters, their ability to speak about their desires is highly constrained, but the statements they do make refute male theories of female aesthetic perversity.

Viewing misogynist rhetoric through the lens of sinister aesthetics allows us to acknowledge the allure of these male fantasies of disgust, and not only to the characters within the play. The men’s vehement protestations of repugnance for the female perversity they rail against cloak their own deep sensual engagement with disgusting sexual imagery. Characters like Hamlet and Ferdinand bring to life fantasies of perverted female desire to police their female relatives, but they also imaginatively wallow in them to the point where it becomes a distraction from their more pragmatic patriarchal goals¹⁹. They avoid wrestling with their own sinister sensibilities by projecting them onto women whom they can more safely condemn. They try to instill a normative disgust for unchastity in themselves by link-

19 To be fair, Hamlet also repeatedly expresses deep disgust with the world (“a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” [II.ii.272-73]), humanity in general (a “quintessence of dust” [II.ii.278]), the male sex (“arrant knaves all” [III.i.129]), old men (“their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum” [II.ii.198-99]), and most famously, himself. But his diatribes against women have a psychological, cultural, and aesthetic significance distinct from his more universal indictments of humanity and his self-hatred.

ing it with disgusting imagery, but they become obsessed with the aesthetic qualities of what was supposed to repulse them. The lush and vivid descriptions of sinister sexuality that result are evidence of their own distempered imaginations but also an important part of the poetic experience these plays offer to their audiences.

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