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## Forbidden Tastes are the Sweetest: Motivations and Desires

John Webster explores the attraction of that which is forbidden in a plethora of ways. The nature of the attraction, and the powers that determine that which is forbidden vary throughout. However, the theme remains manifest in all the instances discussed in this essay. It is clear that a strong comparison can be drawn between 'The Duchess of Malfi' and John Milton's 'Paradise Lost' concerning the theme of attraction to the forbidden.

One of the first allusions to the theme of attraction to the condemned is that of Bosola discussing the corrupted and morally repulsive nature of Ferdinand and the Cardinal. He states that "He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them." This demonstrates how he is aware that their actions within the court are utterly reprehensible and therefore arguably morally forbidden. However, later in his discourse he mentions how he "would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off." Despite being aware of the moral bankruptcy of the brothers, he is prepared to submit himself to an internally self-destructive moral conundrum in the pursuit of monetary and social patronage. He depends on this patronage to sustain himself as due to his previous criminalities, he has been forced to surrender part of his autonomy to the brothers. This notion of pandering in the court would've resonated especially with the Jacobean audience of the period. James I's court was notoriously plagued with corruption; it was an institution abundant with those tasting the financially and socially sweet fruit that is political sycophancy. A key tenet of renaissance tragedies is the greater emphasis on an anthropocentric world view. Therefore, God and the divine becomes a lesser element within the plays. This change is also paralleled in the morals of renaissance plays as ethical paradigms shifted to that which is more self-serving as opposed to the teachings exemplified in religion. This explains the sycophancy within the court of James I, and also Webster's cynical depiction of the courtiers in 'The Duchess of Malfi'. The mention of "plum-trees... o'erladen with fruit" can be interpreted as an allusion to the forbidden fruit of Milton's 'Paradise Lost'. Although in 'Paradise Lost' the tree in the Garden of Eden is presented as somewhat divine, it truly represents the transition into a postlapsarian era and the fall of man. Therefore, the crooked plum tree metaphor that Bosola talks of is similar in that it represents sin and sycophancy, and vices of mankind, akin to the tree in the Garden of Eden.

The marriage of the Duchess and Antonio is also a clear example of attraction to the forbidden. For Antonio, he is socially forbidden to marry the Duchess as he would be marrying above his status and overreaching. Although Antonio acts against the social construct that forbids their

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marriage, he simultaneously participates in it, as he upholds many social expectations of him, even minor things such as doffing his hat. In the Jacobean period, it was considered a gross violation of societal norms for nobility to marry those considered unworthy of their wedlock. Despite this, and the Duchess' brother's inevitable violent repercussions, Antonio goes ahead with the marriage anyway. Although his pursuit of this marriage is self-destructive, his demonstration of a lewd incitation of both lust and love for the Duchess with his lengthy speech in Act 1 Scene 2 shows that he is prepared to risk well-being in virtue of love. He revels in her rapture and the ecstasy within her speech; "For her discourse, it is so full of rapture, You only will begin then to be sorry when she doth end her speech". This demonstrates how he considers the Duchess to be arguably the sweetest taste of all. Furthermore, the fact that she is forbidden in the social sphere to Antonio may be the cause of his desire and love for her. However, an alternative interpretation would be that it is false to draw a connection between the Duchess being socially forbidden and Antonio's intense attraction towards her. There is nothing to explicitly suggest that the cause for his attraction to the Duchess is due to the fact that she is forbidden, although it can be entertained as a potential factor for his love.

The dynamic of the marriage can also be looked at from the perspective of the Duchess, as she too would have been forbidden to marry. Although the brothers did suggest marriage to a few potential suitors, including Bosola, it is clear through later dialogue that they wish for her to remain unmarried. This is primarily so that the financial wealth of the Duchess isn't shared and drawn out from the family. Like Antonio, the Duchess would've been socially forbidden from marrying Antonio because of the general public disdain for marrying outside of one's class. The Jacobean audience of the period would've shared this sentiment and would argue that policy should be upheld. It should be noted that the primary source of the play was 'The Palace of Pleasure', which is a text that would've argued for the condemnation of the Duchess' marriage as she is marrying below her quality. Quality was determined by one's position in society, and she is violating an accepted societal norm by ignoring Antonio's quality. The statement of 'forbidden tastes are the sweetest' seems most applicable here, as it can be argued that part of the reason she pursues Antonio is because by doing so she realizes the ability to demonstrate her autonomy, and becomes an explorer of the unknown. She is a woman employing her freewill, which was largely uncommon, and therefore by pursuing Antonio she is combating patriarchal social confinements that attempt to bar her from doing so. The Duchess would've also been forbidden from marrying Antonio on a potentially legal and moral level. If her previous marriage was not annulled, then it would be incredibly improper for her to then marry again. The contemporary audience of the time would've been aware of this and therefore would be less sympathetic towards the Duchess. The audience wouldn't have been afforded the same social mobility as a more modern audience would be, so this must be considered when contemplating how they would react. A present-day audience would be far more sympathetic to the Duchess than a contemporary Jacobean audience and therefore this must be considered when investigating Webster's portrayal of characters. The Duchess' actions are

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the catalyst for the tragedy within the play, linking to the theme also present in 'Paradise Lost', where straying women bring about final destruction of their societies. The Duchess and Eve are both not free from blame as although they acted with no malicious intent, they both brought downfall upon themselves and their loved ones through their disobedience to social structures. It can be argued that they were naive to believe they could challenge or overcome these structures.

A clear instance in the play that would relate to the statement would be that of the apricots in Act 2 Scene 1. That which is forbidden in the play usually can be categorized as either socially, morally, or legally forbidden. These events and occurrences aforementioned are intrinsically forbidden, however the apricots are forbidden consequentially. The act of eating an apricot is, of course, not forbidden in and of itself. However, for the Duchess, they are forbidden in relation to her because they expose her, and they also expose that which is forbidden. People of the renaissance era believed that pregnant women craved fresh fruit, and that apricots specifically would induce labor. Webster's contemporary audience would've been acutely aware of this and therefore the mention of apricots would've immediately alerted them to the danger that the fruit possessed for the Duchess. There is a plethora of relations that can be drawn to 'Paradise Lost', relating to the forbidden fruit and the acts of women. In an aside, Bosola says "How greedily she eats them!", demonstrating the Duchess' intemperance. This relates to Paradise Lost as the intemperance of women (the Duchess and Eve) directly causes their downfall. Eve too cannot resist the temptation of the fruit and therefore succumbs to her intemperance and eats it. This directly leads to her and Adam's downfall. There are also similarities in the perpetrator who seduces the woman of both texts, Bosola and Satan. They both present the fruit as something that should be eaten, and they both deceive the women into exposing themselves. Another relation can be drawn between Adam in Paradise Lost' and Antonio; they are both men who suffer because of their partners succumbing to temptation. Furthermore, the apricots not only are forbidden as they will expose the Duchess, but what they expose (the pregnancy) is also forbidden too. The baby is the result of a potentially illegitimate marriage as the previous marriage of the Duchess is suggested to have not been annulled. This would've meant the Jacobean audience, who were more concerned about the holy sanctity of marriage and the legitimate procedure of the sacrament, would've had less sympathy towards the Duchess for marrying Antonio whilst not properly ending the marriage with her previous deceased husband (as aforementioned).

The statement 'Forbidden tastes are the sweetest' also relates to forbidden sexual desire. For example, Julia is a forbidden fruit for the Cardinal, as this adulterous relationship is forbidden both socially and morally, and furthermore the Cardinal's position in the Church means that he should be abstaining from sexual relations anyway, making his sexual fraternizing even more shocking. This exposure of corruption within the Church parallels David Carnegie's statement "the Church stripped of its disgusting roes be revealed as barbaric." The actions of the Cardinal

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would've greatly shocked a renaissance audience; however, the severity and scandalous nature of his actions may be lost on a present-day audience. In an attempt to combat this, directors of recent renditions of 'The Duchess of Malfi', notably Kevin Spacey, have gone as far as to have the actors portray sex on stage in order to attempt to incite the same outrage as a Jacobean audience. The most prominent example of a forbidden relationship is the incestuous relationship that Ferdinand desires with the Duchess. He has an intense desire for her, but recognizes that it is socially and morally forbidden so he attempts to conceal it. Upon Bosola's inquiry as to why Ferdinand wants him to survey the Duchess; "Do you not ask the reason; but be satisfied. I say I would not." Ferdinand's taboo desire arguably stems from his obsession with maintaining a purity of blood, and hence why he is so disapproving of the Duchess marrying anyone else. It can be alternatively argued that this isn't the case as Ferdinand does suggest different suitors for the Duchess, however it seems clear that he doesn't truly intend for these marriages to come to fruition and he suggests them simply to maintain the mask of not having incestuous desires for the Duchess. This desire motivates a lot of his actions throughout the play, however upon realizing that the Duchess had married Antonio and produced children with him, his motivation shifts. No longer is the forbidden sweet taste an incestuous relationship with the Duchess, but instead it has become murderous revenge. His revenge killing of the Duchess is also forbidden in moral, social, and legal fields, however the sating nature of revenge means that the sweetness of this forbidden action makes it impossible for Ferdinand to violate the Duchess in this way.

To conclude, it is evident that there are multiple observable instances of forbidden tastes being the sweetest. Although there are instances in the play where forbidden tastes are shunned, such as Bosola's protestations to torturing the Duchess, and his general shift in motivation towards the end of the play. However, it remains clear that sweetest tastes are forbidden, as all the main character's primary motivations are forbidden. The Duchess and Antonio both desire each other which is socially forbidden as it's a violation of marrying to one's quality. The Cardinal desires to retain power and he does so through information from intelligencers and sycophants which is morally dubious. Ferdinand's primary desire is to keep the Duchess from marrying so she can retain her economic wealth (which he ultimately can control), but also, he is motivated by an incestuous desire. Therefore, I would argue that it is clear that there is a clear theme of intense attraction to the forbidden. Webster's reason for making this theme so prevalent was likely to comment upon the flaws of the society in which he existed and participated in. He would've observed the panderers of James I's court, and the social confinement of women. His position as a social outcast would likely have inspired sympathy for women, so therefore he portrayed the Duchess as a moral center of the play and a victim of that which is socially forbidden. The social constriction of women limits her from actualizing her morally good desires; to love Antonio.

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