

Staging taste

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Thomas Randolph's *The Muses' Looking Glass*, first performed by the Children of the Revels around 1630, features a character called Acolastus, a semi-allegorical caricature of a '*voluptuous Epicure, that out of an immoderate, and untam'd desire seekes after all pleasures promiscuously, without respect of honest or lawfull*'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Acolastus is obsessed with taste, and he delivers a paean to his favourite sensory experience:

Foole was he that wish'd but a cranes short neck.
 Give me one, nature, long as is a Cable,
 Or sounding line, and all the way a palate
 To tast my meate the longer. I would have
 My senses feast together; Nature envied us
 In giving single pleasures; let me have
 My eares, eyes, palate, nose, and touch, at once
 Injoy their happinesse[.]¹

Acolastus's desire to prolong and intensify the sensation of taste is evoked in his declaration that to have a neck like a crane – the desire of the glutton, Philoxenus, cited in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* – displayed a sad lack of ambition. Taste is, for Acolastus, the pinnacle of all other senses, which will 'feast together'. He desires to experience all of the senses simultaneously, in a heady, synesthetic experience, and his description conjures in sensuous detail the intensity of its sensation. In performance, moreover, Randolph's words would combine with the performance of the actor, who perhaps draws out the vowels in 'one ... long ... sounding ... longer' or uses gesture to suggest the glutton's ecstatic frustration.

Taking Acolastus's transcendent fantasy as its starting point, this essay explores the ways in which taste was staged in early modern plays, situating it in the context of broader debates about the nature and status of this sensory experience. Recent studies of taste in early modern drama have tended to focus on its metaphorical use – usually via its connection with food, appetite and consumption – or on its material connection with the substances that are tasted. Jeff Masten, for example, provides a wonderfully illuminating account

of the linguistic, material and dramatic uses of sweetness; Peter Stallybrass explores the physicality of the image of consumption in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (King's Men, c. 1606); Stanley Cavell analyses the ways in which food figures in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (King's Men, c. 1609); and Karen Britland untangles some of the connections between women and wine in early modern drama.²

While it draws on these approaches, this essay is a response to Farah Karim-Cooper's provocative recent analysis of touch and – to a lesser extent – taste in the early modern playhouse.³ In particular, it explores the fundamental paradox of taste's simultaneously bodily and immaterial dramatic status, focusing on the specifics of the way in which taste was literally and metaphorically 'staged'. My focus is on the precise moments at which characters are required to taste something – foodstuffs, drink, other characters' lips – and the ways in which these moments supplement, reinforce or, potentially, challenge a discourse of taste that is deployed elsewhere in the plays and in early modern culture. The first section, 'Tasting', explores the divided reputation that this sense had in early modern England, drawing on visual, medical and moral traditions. The remainder of the essay then looks in detail at taste in the playhouse. Section two, 'Material tasting', examines the ways in which the physical action of tasting was presented on stage, concluding in a short analysis of Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*; the third section, 'Immaterial tasting' looks at figurative and semi-figurative uses of taste in early modern plays, finishing with an account of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Finally, section four, 'Material and immaterial tasting', brings the elements together in an analysis of Middleton's taste-infused tragedy *Women Beware Women*. Throughout, I explore something that we might term a theatrical aesthetics of taste, one that draws on the raw physicality of the action of tasting, on the metaphorical notion of tasting as exploring or testing, and on emerging notions of aesthetic taste.

Tasting

Although comic, Acolastus's speech encapsulates and depends upon some of the most important preconceptions about taste that circulated in early modern England. Taste was frequently seen as one of the lower bodily or material senses. Aristotle in *De Sensu* famously notes that 'the sense of smell comes midway between the tactile senses (touch and taste) and those that operate through a medium (sight and hearing)'.⁴ Whereas senses such as touch and taste involve direct physical contact, sight and hearing are seen as working through the 'mediums' of air and water. As Helkiah Crooke relates, 'Aristotle and almost all Philosophers' ranked sight as the highest sense, followed by hearing, smell, taste and touch, although 'Physitians & Anatomists' often argued for a reverse order: touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight.⁵ From this perspective, touch was the

highest sense precisely because it was the most material, solid and reliable, and it was sometimes viewed as being synonymous with the experience of life itself.⁶

As Acolastus seems to recognize, taste is also intertwined with the other senses. It interacts with smell, as odour and taste both relate to flavour or savour (*OED* flavour, n. 1–2; savour, n. 1–2, 3), and it shares with touch its dependence on corporeal experience. Indeed, the earliest uses of the word ‘taste’ in English appear to mean touch (*OED* n.¹ 1, v. 1): taste emerges from touch, and shares many of its conceptual and experiential uses and problems. Taste is, in addition, similar to touch – and unlike the other senses – in terms of the range of functions associated with its primary organ, the tongue, which plays a role in eating, kissing, pulling faces, and so on.

Taste’s divided reputation is clear in early modern texts. Crooke quotes extensively from Julius Casserius Placentinus, who places touch first in his hierarchy of the senses and argues that taste, placed second, is ‘not only commodious [...] but also necessarie vnto the conseruation of the *Indiuiduum*’ because it is ‘the chiefe Sense in discerning of Sapors [tastes or flavours]’ and therefore it has a crucial role in protecting the rest of the body:

without it we cannot discern of Sapours, nor iudge betwixt hurtfull things and healthfull, neyther betweene that which is pleasant and vnpleasant, but become inferiour not onely to brute beasts but also to plants, which do not confusedly and without choyce, attract any Aliment but that which is most agreeable to their Nature, and so conuert it into their owne substance. (pp. 649–50)

Yet the powerful hold that taste held over the body and its desires also made it open to abuse. It was associated strongly in Christian thought with the Fall from the Garden of Eden. Richard Brathwaite begins his essay on taste with the comment ‘THIS *Sence* makes mee weeppe ere I speake of her; sith hence came our greefe, hence our miserie: when I represent her before my eyes, my eyes become blinded with weeping, remembring my grandame *Eue*, how soone she was induced to *taste* that shee ought not’.⁷ Similarly, in his *Essays* (1600–01), William Cornwallis declares that ‘The trap of our first parents, was licourishnesse: and all our calamities are licourishnesse, not induring wholesomnesse without sweetnesse’.⁸ Taste might be not simply crude, but dangerous to the spiritual health.

In *A Good Companion for a Christian* (1632), John Norden discusses in detail the spiritual benefits and bodily hazards associated with taste, commenting:

take heed thou pleasest not thy taste too much, for if thou giue way vnto it, it will ouermaster thee, and exact from thee, that will make thee a poore man, bee thy meanes to feed it neuer so great [...] at length it will grow strong and ouermatch thee, and make thee seruile and slauish vnto it, and in the end deuoure thee.⁹

Bodily taste should be carefully moderated, and spiritual taste equally carefully cultivated; Norden argues that ‘the temperate man, the man knowing and

fearing God, findeth in himselfe a taste of another and of a more high nature a *spirituall appetite*, and hungreth and thristeth as much for heauenly and permanent, as doth the *corporall appetite*, for vanishing and perishing food' (G12^v–H1^r). Brathwaite similarly extracts a moral lesson from the fleeting sensation of a particular taste, comparing it to 'the frailty and breuity of all earthly pleasures' and writing, 'Whatsoever ministers singular^st content vnto our *appetite*, is no longer satisfieing then in the *palate*; for after going into the stomach, that content is done' (p. 46).

Supremely unaware of the spiritual dimensions of taste, Acolastus nonetheless embodies the warnings of moralists about its bodily temptation. This aspect of taste is developed in detail in early modern visual representations of the senses, in which a number of features recur.¹⁰ Some seventeenth-century Dutch images of taste portray a pancake woman surrounded by peasants who eat hungrily, as in Cornelis Dusart's 'De Smaek' (c. 1693), while a print by Crispijn de Passe the Elder (c. 1590–1637) shows a man and a woman, the man clutching a leg of mutton.¹¹ The woman, who is noticeably more richly dressed, holds a drinking vessel, and a monkey sits on her shoulder. Women also represent taste in other prints. In three images published in England in the 1620s and 30s, taste is a fashionably dressed woman smoking a pipe. In George Glover's engraving (c. 1625–35), a glass of sack sits beside her on a table, while in those of Johan Bara (c. 1623–35) and an anonymous artist (c. 1630–40) she holds it in her free hand.¹² Bara and the anonymous artist also include a monkey who is greedily eating. In each print the image is combined with text. A caption on Glover's engraving comments, 'To none of our Viragoes shee'l giue place, | For Healthing Sacke, and Smoaking with a Grace', Bara's makes the lesson more explicit, commenting 'Tis Not proper for This Sex and Kind', and the third comments more broadly:

Som with the Smoaking Pye and quaffing Cupp,
 Whole Lordships oft have swallow'd and blowne vpp:
 Their names, fames, goods, strengths, healths, & lives still wasting
 In practicing the Apish Art of Tasting.

Taste is here represented as a woman who breaks social taboos: she wears quasi-masculine clothing of the kind criticized in the satirical pamphlet *Hic Mulier, or The Man-Woman* (1620), smokes tobacco and, it is suggested, drinks the sack that was often associated with male carousing. Further, although the caption to the 1630s print suggests that the monkey represents the imitative aspect of tasting that was prominent in convivial drunkenness and smoking, it also had connections with lust. The connection between taste and lust features in other prints. Like de Passe's engraving, many images of taste portray men and women together in postures that suggest sexual interest. An early eighteenth-century French print by Pierre Aveline shows couples eating and kissing, while a late

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2 Frontispiece illustration from Thomas Heywood, *Philocothonista,
or, the Drunkard, Opened, Dissected, and Anatomized* (1635)

sixteenth-century print by Jan Saenredam, based on an image by Hendrick Goltzius, shows a woman feeding a man a piece of fruit while he caresses her breast, a chained monkey looking on from the wall behind them.¹³

While monkeys represent the capacity of taste to entice, and its connections with lustful actions such as kissing, elsewhere animals are used to emphasize the bestial associations of taste with drunkenness. The title page of *Philocotonista, or The Drunkard Opened, Dissected, and Anatomized* (1635) (Figure 2) shows a collection of bird- and beast-headed men drinking and, in one case, regurgitating the substances that taste leads them to over-consume. An ox-headed man tastes tobacco, ram- and crane-headed men drink from cups, a pig-headed creature vomits, and bear- and ass-headed creatures pick a fight in the background; the only wholly human figure is that of the maidservant who apparently enables this bad behaviour.

Taken together, these verbal and visual responses to taste suggest its dominant associations in the early modern period. Linked with bodily pleasure and fleshly desire, taste both enabled the Fall and forcibly reminded commentators of it, facilitating lesser sins that mirrored the great Christian act of transgression; simultaneously, however, taste protected the body and allowed for discrimination. All of these features made it ripe for exploitation within the playhouse.

Material tasting

Randolph's depiction of Acolastus and these pictorial representations of taste all suggest taste's dependence on the other senses for its visual and dramatic 'life'. Experiences of tasting were, of course, available in the playhouse in both literal and metaphorical terms: nuts and other foodstuffs were sold and consumed;¹⁴ playgoers might 'taste' each other's lips when they kissed, either in friendly or sexual contexts; and the experience of watching a play was itself a form of 'tasting', through the term's association with experiencing, sampling, testing or judging (*OED* n. 2, 6–7; v. 2–3). But a spectator always experienced a play's representation of tasting at a remove. Even when two people taste the same substance their experience may be markedly different, and except in very limited or carefully designed contexts spectators cannot literally taste what a character or actor appears to taste. Taste was necessarily proxied, therefore, by the other senses. A playgoer might watch a character taste something, might hear their description of that taste, might even smell a foodstuff if the playhouse was small or the audience were pressed close to the stage. Taste on stage is second-hand and strangely disembodied, despite its status as one of the most corporeal and fleshy of senses.

Acolastus embodies one way in which taste appears on the early modern stage: in the form of an allegorical figure. Similar characters appear in Thomas Nabbes's *Microcosmus* (Queen Henrietta Maria's Men, 1637), in the Masque of

the Five Senses in Shakespeare and Middleton's *Timon of Athens* (King's Men, c. 1607), and in Thomas Tomkis's Cambridge University play *Lingua* (published 1607), in which Gustus appears with Appetitus, his 'hungry Parasite'.¹⁵ In addition, the figure of gluttony features, with the other Deadly Sins, in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (Strange's Men, 1589–92). Plays also introduce the figure of the taster, the court officer whose duty it was to protect a ruler from poison: such characters appear in *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (Queen Elizabeth's Men, 1588); Robert Greene's *Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (?Queen Elizabeth's Men, c. 1590), Henry Chettle's *Tragedy of Hoffman* (Admiral's Men, 1603); and Barnabe Barnes's *The Devil's Charter* (King's Men, 1606).

Elsewhere, acts of tasting appeared in less formal but nonetheless richly symbolic contexts, the physical gestures of the actors being supplemented with dialogue. Often characters inform spectators about the flavours they taste, be they pleasant or unpleasant, in ways that are tailored to the dramatic context. 'The taste is perfect, and most delicate' comments Arnoldo of a banquet presented to him in Fletcher and Massinger's *The Custom of the Country* (King's Men, c. 1620), his pleasure suggesting his vulnerability to Hyppolita's carefully staged seduction.¹⁶ In contrast, Mulligrub in John Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (Children of the Queen's Revels, 1605–06) enjoys the taste of a cooked salmon that he thinks has been delivered to him by mistake. 'Some vinegar, quick! Some good luck yet. Faith, I never tasted salmon relished better. O, when a man feeds at other men's cost!', he cries, only to comment 'Pah! how this salmon stinks!' when he realizes that he has been gulled.¹⁷ Here, taste is clearly subjective, affected by the circumstances in which a foodstuff is consumed.

A yet clearer example of the way in which dialogue shapes the perception of taste appears in *How a Man May Tell a Good Wife from a Bad* (Worcester's Men, c. 1601), in which the abused Mistress Arthur describes the pledge offered to her by her erring husband:

The welcom'st pledge that yet I euer tooke:
 Were this wine poyson, or did taste like gall,
 The honey sweet condition of your draught,
 Would make it drinke like Nectar[.]¹⁸

Taste may deceive, but dialogue can create the impression of pleasant flavours for the audience, an effect that is achieved partly through references to familiar taste-sensations such as the 'honey' and 'sweet' of *How a Man May Tell a Good Wife from a Bad*, or to specific substances such as the vinegar that will accentuate the taste of the salmon in *The Dutch Courtesan*. Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (King's Men, 1634), in contrast, creates through dialogue the paradoxical impression of food that does not taste of anything. The witches have stolen from the wedding feast

of Lawrence and Parnell, and while they enjoy the food the boy they have kidnapped complains, ‘Meat, lie there, for thou hast no taste, and drink, there, for thou hast no relish, for in neither of them is there either salt or savour.’¹⁹ The witches’ feast is unnatural, and their treatment of the boy impedes his ability to taste the rich food properly.

I will pause here on one of the most intriguing presentations of the literal act of taste on the early modern stage, in Dekker and Massinger’s *The Virgin Martyr*, performed by the Revels Company at the Red Bull playhouse in 1620. The play focuses on the mission and martyrdom of St Dorothy, or Dorothea as she is named here, and its climax focuses on the conversion of her main tormentor, Theophilus. Theophilus is brought a basket of fruit and flowers by Angelo, a mysterious boy – in reality an angel – who accompanied Dorothea in earlier scenes. As Jane Hwang Degenhardt points out, Dekker and Massinger draw closely on established, Catholic tradition in which:

On her way to her own execution Dorothy’s unwavering faith is mocked by a scribe called Theophilus, who asks her to send some roses and apples from the garden of her spouse, Christ. Shortly after Dorothy’s execution, Theophilus is visited by a fair, curly haired child dressed in a purple garment, from whom he receives the very basket of roses and apples that he had requested. Theophilus is immediately converted to Christianity and goes on to help convert most of the city before he too is martyred under the pagan prefect.²⁰

One of the ways in which the dramatists adapt this narrative is in heightening its visual and theatrical impact; they achieve their effect by manipulating references to the senses and, especially, taste, and by carefully staging the act of tasting.

Theophilus’s initial response to the basket exploits the relationship between actors, props and dramatic dialogue. ‘Tis a tempting fruit’, he says, ‘And the most bright cheek’d child I euer view’d, | Sweete smelling goodly fruit, what flowers are these?’²¹ The reference to Angelo is almost an aside, presented between the two responses to the contents of the basket, yet Theophilus’s allusion to the ‘bright cheek’d child’ suggests that he responds to a complete sensory experience, one that entices and tempts him, even though at this point he is not sure what this temptation might involve. When he succumbs and eats some of the fruit, the audience see him eat it, and hear the response of the devil, Harpax, who has accompanied Theophilus in the guise of his servant. Theophilus addresses the absent Angelo, but the response to his words and actions comes not from the angel but from the devil:

	be thou a spirit
Sent from that Witch to mock me, I am sure	
This is essentiall, and how ere it growes,	
Will taste it.	<i>Eates.</i>
<i>Harpax.</i> Ha, ha, ha, ha.	<i>Harpax within.</i>

Theophilus. So good, ile haue some now sure.

Harpax. Ha, ha, ha, ha, great lickorish foole.
(5.1.78–83)

The dialogue emphasizes the corporeal reality of the fruit, and the staging presents Theophilus performing the act of tasting on the main stage while Harpax mocks him from within.²² Furthermore, the devil's description of Theophilus as a 'great lickorish foole' underlines the scene's emphasis on the sensual experience of eating and tasting.

Theophilus eats again, and Harpax is provoked into entering the stage, appearing for the first time in his true form:

Theophilus. Agen, what dainty rellish on my tongue
This fruit hath left, some Angell hath me fed,
If so toothfull, I will be banqueted. *Eates another.*

Enter Harpax in a fearefull shape, fire flashing out of the study.

Harpax. Hold.

Theophilus. Not for *Cæsar*.
(5.1.120–23)

Although the appearance of Harpax must have been a notable *coup de théâtre*, taste appears to outstrip sight: Theophilus's experience of tasting the 'dainty' and 'toothfull' fruit, which he compares to the elite sensory event of the banquet, is so intense that he barely seems to register Harpax's '*fearefull*' new appearance. Moreover, the power of the fruit's taste is emphasized in Theophilus's response to Harpax, and his newly rebellious stance in relation to both spiritual and temporal authority.

The scene climaxes as Harpax intensifies his attempt to stop Theophilus from eating:

Harpax. [...] cast thou downe
That Basket with the things in't, and fetch vp
What thou hast swallowed, and then take a drinke
Which I shall giue thee, and I'me gon.

Theophilus. My Fruit!
Does this offend thee? see.

Harpax. Spet it to'th earth,
And tread vpon it, or ile peece-meale teare thee.

Theophilus. Art thou with this affrighted? see, heares more. *Flowers.*

Harpax. Fling them away, ile take thee else & hang thee
In a contorted Chaine of Isicles
I'th frigid Zone: downe with them.

Theophilus. At the botome,
One thing I found not yet, see.

A crosse of Flowers.

Harpax. Oh, I'me tortur'd.
(5.1.129–39)

The raw physicality of the scene is underlined in the devil's attempt to make Theophilus vomit up what he has eaten. Theophilus's refusal to submit, and his desire to continue tasting the fruit is further emphasized on the word 'see', at which point he apparently eats again. The line also suggests, in addition, the role that sight increasingly plays here, and at the climax the 'higher' sense takes over with the appearance of the '*crose of Flowers*' from the bottom of the basket.

The sequence parodies the Fall, which, as we have seen, was closely associated with the sense of taste; Harpax's description of Theophilus as a 'great lickorish foole' even echoes Cornwallis's language. Eve's guilty act of eating the apple on Satan's suggestion is mirrored by Theophilus's compulsive consumption of Angelo's gift. Enticed by the appearance of the fruit and, thereafter, its taste, Theophilus is overwhelmed by the sensory experience. The sequence oscillates between the 'low' sense of taste – here recuperated as a tool of salvation through a paradoxical form of virtuous gluttony – and the 'high' sense of sight that eventually caps Theophilus's conversion and his divinely inspired rejection of Harpax.

Immaterial tasting

Theophilus's taste-assisted conversion in *The Virgin Martyr* suggests both the complex associations of taste in the playhouse and the opportunities that the physical representation of tasting offered to dramatists. Similar processes are at work in early modern drama's deployment of semi-figurative and metaphorical uses of taste. Many Jacobean and, especially, Caroline playwrights employed a discourse of taste in order to shape spectators' responses, drawing on an emergent model of aesthetic taste that is more often seen as a characteristic of eighteenth-century culture.²³ Plays thus often present themselves as dishes that are 'tasted' by spectators. '*PLays are like Feasts*', declares the epilogue to John Suckling's *Aglaura* (King's Men, 1638), declaring that '*everie Act should bee | Another Course, and still varietie*',²⁴ while the prologue to Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* (Children of the Queen's Revels, 1609–10) claims that 'Our wishes, like to those make public feasts, | Are not to please the cook's tastes, but the guests'.²⁵ Probably encouraged by the fact that many of his scenes are set in a venue for eating and drinking, in his prologue to *The Demoiselle, or The New Ordinary* (Queen Henrietta Maria's Men, c. 1638) Brome takes this stance further, saying:

Readers and audients make good plays or books;
 'Tis appetite makes dishes, 'tis not cooks.
 But let me tell you, though you have the power
 To kill or save, they're tyrants that devour
 And princes that preserve.²⁶

Here, the ability of the audience to taste, in the sense of to test or try, and to come to the right opinion about what they taste, is figured through the ability to judge culinary flavours accurately. The *Demoiselle* prologue is apparently optimistic about its ability to shape the taste of the spectators, but others were less so. The prologue to James Shirley's *St Patrick for Ireland*, performed at the Werburgh Street playhouse in Dublin around 1639, appears to despair of ever being able to diagnose accurately the audience's taste: '*WE know not what will take, your pallats are | Various, and many of them sick I feare: | We can but serve up what our Poets dresse.*'²⁷ Such prologues and epilogues helped to shape and broaden an existing playhouse discourse of taste, linking the representation of taste on the stage with the processes through which those plays were received and 'tasted' by playgoers.

Within plays, the language of taste often inflects the treatment of kissing and, in particular, kissing on the lips. Some writers refer to the tastes of specific drinks or foodstuffs. Mercury in the Folio version of Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* (Children of the Chapel, 1600), parodying courtly modes of courtship, cries, 'He that had the grace to print a kiss on these lips should taste wine and rose-leaves.'²⁸ References to sweetness are ubiquitous, and they frequently take on a high degree of irony, especially when stage action and dialogue combine. In Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (King's Men, c. 1606), Spurio comments as he kisses his stepmother, the Duchess, 'Had not that kiss a taste of sin, 'twere sweet.'²⁹ The 'sweetness' of a forbidden kiss is invoked elsewhere. In Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (King's Men, 1626), for instance, the idea that a kiss tastes like nectar is invoked twice in relation to Domitia, initially Lamia's wife, who is coveted by the tyrannical emperor Domitian. Parthenius tells the unwilling Lamia, 'She's Caesar's choice. It is sufficient honour | You were his taster in this heavenly nectar, | But now must quit the office', and Domitian reinforces the insult when he kisses Domitia shortly afterwards to underline his possession of her, commenting, 'There's no drop | Of melting nectar I taste from her lip | But yields a touch of immortality.'³⁰ The language of taste here conveys both sexual allure and the abuse of the royal prerogative.

Images of tasting as the expression of sexual appetite are further removed from stage action and become more purely metaphorical.³¹ Gazetto in Dekker's *Match Me in London* (Queen Anna's Men, c. 1611–13) describes lecherous men as being 'like Mice amongst many Cheeses, they taste euery one, but feed vpon the best'.³² Women's desire is also figured through taste. Emilia in *Othello* (King's Men, c. 1604) draws on the conventional references to specific flavours that we saw in physical representations of taste on the stage, telling Desdemona:

Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have.
(4.3.92–95)

Here, the progression from sight to smell to taste appears to map a descent from the higher to the lower senses, as the case that Emilia makes for women's agency becomes increasingly sexualized. In other plays, the idea that sexual desire is a form of appetite, dependent on the achieved or anticipated 'taste' of the lover, becomes more unsettling. In the first scene of Shakespeare and Wilkins's *Pericles* (King's Men, c. 1607), the hero is determined to solve Antiochus's riddle and thus win his daughter, crying:

You gods that made me man, and sway in love,
That have inflamed desire in my breast
To taste the fruit of yon celestial tree
Or die in the adventure, be my helps[.]
(1.62–65)

Pericles's image is relatively conventional in the context of courtship, but the presentation of sexual desire as appetite becomes increasingly disturbing as the scene progresses. The incestuous relationship between Antiochus and his daughter – of which the audience are forewarned – is made clear to Pericles through images of consumption. The opening of the daughter's riddle reads, 'I am no viper, yet I feed | On mother's flesh which did me breed' (1.107–8), and the shocked Pericles tells Antiochus that his daughter is 'an eater of her mother's flesh, | By the defiling of her parents' bed' and the father and daughter 'both like serpents are, who though they feed | On sweetest flowers, yet they poison breed' (1.173–76). Such images both reinforce and complicate the references to taste uttered by characters when they kiss, and the repeated allusions to serpents recall again the links between taste and the Fall.³³

A full range of the figurative uses of taste are brought into play in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (Chamberlain's Men, c. 1602–03). As Britland notes, conviviality plays an important role in this play, occurring 'in a space between battles', during which a 'metaphorical feasting on strange flesh generates a notion of a community creating its martial identity through the expulsion of an alternative conceived as luxurious, effeminising and dangerous'.³⁴ The play's uses of the idea of taste run alongside this multivalent 'feasting', both complementing and complicating its political, martial and gendered positions. In the early scenes references to taste figure strongly in discussions of the quarrel between the Trojans and Greeks, and the presentation of political advice. Nestor, for example, repeatedly refers to taste, declaring to the assembled Greek lords, 'For here the Trojans taste our dear'st repute | With their fin'st palate' (1.3.331–32), and commenting of Ulysses's plan to set Ajax against Achilles, 'I begin to relish thy advice, | And I will give a taste of it forthwith | To Agamemnon' (1.3.380–82). Here, taste figures in a generally positive manner – Nestor likes the taste of Ulysses's advice, and his diagnosis of the political dispute depends on his ability to judge the Trojans' own ability to discriminate. 'Bad' political advice is also figured through taste. Troilus's

inability to take Cassandra seriously is evoked in his resistance to the idea that her warning might ‘distaste’ their cause:

Her brainsick raptures
 Cannot distaste the goodness of a quarrel
 Which hath our several honours all engaged
 To make it gracious.
 (2.2.121–24)

Similarly, the political danger that Achilles’s refusal to cooperate poses for the Greeks is suggested by Agamemnon in his resonant description of way in which the warrior no longer ‘tastes’ the same to him:

Yet all his virtues,
 Not virtuously of his own part beheld,
 Do in our eyes begin to lose their gloss,
 Yea, and like fair fruit in an unwholesome dish
 Are like to rot untasted.
 (2.3.116–20)

The play thus begins to associate correct and decorous acts of tasting with male martial valour, and to associate ‘distasting’ with effeminate behaviour or female characters.

These associations, established in the early scenes of the play, develop and modulate as the action progresses. As Troilus waits for his encounter with Cressida he invokes the sensation of taste:

I am giddy. Expectation whirls me round.
 Th’imaginary relish is so sweet
 That it enchants my sense. What will it be
 When that the wat’ry palates taste indeed
 Love’s thrice-reperèd nectar?
 (3.2.16–20)

Troilus here uses the intensity of taste as a sensory experience to evoke his sexual anticipation and frustration. And the image is still on his mind when Cressida casts doubt on the performance and faith of lovers: ‘Praise us as we are tasted; allow us as we prove’ (3.2.87–88), he tells her, punning on the use of taste to mean ‘test’. Yet the taste metaphor cannot stand well against this kind of pressure. When Cressida is forced to leave Troilus she cries:

Why tell you me of moderation?
 The grief is fine, full, perfect that I taste,
 And violenteth in a sense as strong
 As that which causeth it. How can I moderate it?
 If I could temporize with my affection
 Or brew it to a weak and colder palate,
 The like allayment could I give my grief.
 (4.5.2–8)

Again, the immediacy of tasting as an experience is evoked, and the capacity to overpower mental and bodily decorum noted by Norden and others. Troilus is not on stage when Cressida says these words, but he nonetheless picks up her metaphor, saying that Time ‘scants us with a single famished kiss, | Distasted with the salt of broken tears’ (4.5.46–47). The idea of kissing as tasting is not articulated in the following sequence during which Cressida is kissed by each of the Greek lords in turn, yet it reverberates through it, and through the action that follows. Taste, like the dispute itself, is increasingly associated with sexuality – we recall Thersites’s declarations that ‘All the argument is a whore and a cuckold’ (2.3.71) and ‘Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery! Nothing else holds fashion’ (5.2.196–97). Notably, in this context, Diomedes’s scepticism about Helen’s worth is encapsulated in the taste metaphor that sets up his critique, as he tells Paris that the Trojans are ‘as well to keep her that defend her, | Not palating the taste of her dishonour, | With such a costly loss of wealth and friends’ (4.1.60–62). Although politicians may attempt to control its uses, and to regulate it, taste is overpowering and uncontrollable, the domain of fevered appetites and famished kisses.

Material and immaterial tasting

I close this chapter with Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, performed by the King’s Men, probably in the early 1620s. This play brings together some of the tactics through which dramatists and actors ‘staged’ taste – literal and figurative, visual and verbal – that I have surveyed so far. Middleton’s skilful handling of sustained lines of imagery has been well-known since the important work of M.C. Bradbrook and Christopher Ricks, both of whom pick up on the play’s food imagery. Bradbrook counts a total of 22 passages in which food imagery is crucial, and notes the presence of ‘continual direct references to feasting’, while Margot Heinemann comments on its ‘reiterated metaphors from cooking and house-keeping’.³⁵ Yet the specific ways in which taste blurs the boundaries between what is said and what is staged mean that this brand of sensory imagery cannot be wholly subsumed within *Women Beware Women*’s broader language of food.

Images of tasting are first introduced by Livia when she and Fabritio discuss the problem of arranged marriages and society’s refusal to allow women to choose their own husbands. Invoking a sexual double-standard, Livia declares that the husband:

tastes of many sundry dishes
That we poor wretches never lay our lips to,
As obedience, forsooth, subjection, duty, and such kickshaws
All of our making, but served in to them;
And if we lick a finger then sometimes,
We are not to blame; your best cooks use it.³⁶

In Livia's cynical view of the relationship between men and women, women in their sexual capacity are presented as 'dishes' served up to men, while marital infidelity is 'lick[ing] a finger'. Like Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, Middleton draws here on the unruliness of taste.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the image of taste then recurs in the opening of Livia's exchange with Isabella, in which the older woman attempts to persuade the younger to respond positively to her uncle Hippolito's sexual desire for her. She tells her, 'If you can make shift here to taste your happiness, | Or pick out aught that likes you, much good do you. | You see your cheer; I'll make you no set dinner' (2.1.121–23). Isabella, who was not present at the earlier debate, fails to understand the metaphor fully, and responds, 'And, trust me, I may starve for all the good | I can find yet in this. Sweet aunt, deal plainlier' (ll. 124–25). There is a heavy irony to Middleton's use of the rhetoric of taste: not only was it intertwined with sexual behaviours and assumptions – as we have seen in the preceding discussion – but it was often used in reference to bawds and whores.³⁷ Livia is thus Isabella's 'aunt' – a slang word for a bawd – in more ways than one, and the exchange with her niece slips into established patterns of stage dialogue.

The ironies intensify as Livia's cheerful amorality and materialism – together with her use of the taste metaphor – are assimilated by Isabella after her aunt has convinced her that she is not her father's daughter. When Isabella apologizes to Hippolito for rejecting him she deploys the sexual associations of taste, food and appetite, telling him:

When we invite our best friends to a feast,
 'Tis not all sweetmeats that we set before them;
 There's somewhat sharp and salt, both to whet appetite
 And make 'em taste their wine well. So methinks
 After a friendly sharp and savoury chiding,
 A kiss tastes wondrous well, and full o'th' grape.

[*She kisses him*]

How think'st thou: does't not?
 (ll. 198–204)

Isabella apparently kisses Hippolito as she describes the kiss, and her metaphor draws on the range of flavours evoked in dramatic contexts, moving from the 'sharp and salt' rejection to the kiss that tastes of wine. Middleton brings together visual and verbal representations of tasting – the audience hear about the taste of the kiss even as they watch the actors 'taste' each other's lips. Intensifying the implications of taste within the play, Isabella also uses this line of imagery in the following Act, when she discusses the Ward and his desire to inspect her before marriage, saying:

the comfort is
 He's but a cater's place on't, and provides
 All for another's table. Yet how curious
 The ass is! – like some nice professor on't
 That buys up all the daintiest food i'th' markets,
 And seldom licks his lips after a taste on't.
 (3.3.37–42)

The Ward is figured here as the expert professional caterer, purchasing rich foodstuffs and their pleasurable tastes for another's ultimate benefit.

Although the majority of the images of taste feature in the sub-plot, their applicability to the main plot, in which the Duke forces his sexual attentions on to the newly married Bianca, is evident. Indeed, it is underlined in Livia's comment after the 'seduction' which she facilitates – again acting in the role of the bawd who caters to the 'taste' of her clients – 'Sin tastes at the first draught like wormwood-water, | But, drunk again, 'tis nectar ever after' (2.2.475–76). These lines close the second Act, suggesting Middleton's structural uses of the image of taste. Furthermore, as Helen Wilcox points out, the centrepiece of *Women Beware Women* is the banquet that takes place in Act 3, and 'this mouth-watering but disturbing moment in the play symbolizes the unworthy desires of those many characters who long to taste "sweetmeats" and, as the play proceeds, "grow so greedy" (3.1.268, 3.2.77)'.³⁸

The ironies of Middleton's use of images of taste become, however, fully apparent only at the end of the play. Although Ricks finds this sequence 'pitifully unconvincing' it in fact represents the culmination of the dramatist's careful combination of visual and verbal representations of taste.³⁹ In the opening lines of the wedding masque, Hymen presents a cup to Bianca, and Ganymede and Hebe offer 'nectar' to the Duke and Cardinal:

Hymen. To thee, fair bride, Hymen offers up
 Of nuptial joys this the celestial cup.
 Taste it, and thou shalt ever find
 Love in thy bed, peace in thy mind.
Bianca. We'll taste you sure; 'twere pity to disgrace
 So pretty a beginning.
 [*She drinks*]
Duke. 'Twas spoke nobly.
Ganymede. Two cups of nectar have we begged from Jove.
 Hebe, give that to innocence, I this to love.
 [*He gives the Duke a cup, and Hebe gives the Lord Cardinal a cup*]
 (5.1.88–95.1)

This ceremonial 'tasting' is apparently part of a socially sanctioned process, yet the play's earlier uses of taste, and its association with illicit and coercive sexuality, endow the moment with added ambiguity and significance. Moreover,

the presentation of ‘nectar’ here echoes in a potentially disturbing fashion Livia’s reference to the way in which accustomed sexual sinning ‘tastes’ like nectar.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, one of the cups of nectar has been poisoned by Bianca and is intended for the Cardinal who has opposed her marriage. However, Ganymede and Hebe manage to give it to the wrong man: the Duke. Again, ironies gather around the image of taste – the Duke’s desire to ‘taste’ Bianca sexually eventually results in his tasting the poison. When Hippolito, the Duke’s opposite number in the sub-plot, dies, the applicability of the taste metaphor is made explicit:

Lust and forgetfulness has been amongst us,
And we are brought to nothing.
[...]

Leantio’s death

Has brought all this upon us – now I taste it –
And made us lay plots to confound each other.
(ll. 184–85, 187–89)

‘Taste’ here means to touch, feel or experience, but it also registers the physical impact of death upon Hippolito’s and, in performance, the actor’s body.

Bianca’s death, which caps the sequence, is presented as a literal and figurative tasting. She drinks from the same cup as the Duke, and declares,

Pride, greatness, honours, beauty, youth, ambition,
You must all down together, there’s no help for’t.
Yet this my gladness is, that I remove
Tasting the same death in a cup of love.
(ll. 259–62)

Bianca’s final action, tasting the poison that she meant for the Cardinal, and her last words, which underscore that gesture, connect together all of the acts of sexual betrayal that have been encapsulated and enabled by the action and metaphor of taste. Taste thus shapes the verbal texture, staging and dramaturgical structure of Middleton’s tragedy.

Conclusion

In Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (Chamberlain’s Men, c. 1590–02), Katherine calls Grumio – who is starving her on Petruccio’s orders – a ‘false, deluding slave | That feed’st me with the very name of meat’ (4.3.31–32). In doing so she describes a strategy crucial to the staging of taste, and one that was central to its power on the early modern stage. Because taste can never be fully shared, spectators are always ‘fed’ a substitute experience. They see Theophilus eat the fruit, and perhaps smell it too; they hear Troilus complain that kisses taste salty when they are mingled with tears. As we have seen, the

potent associations of taste with both physical excess and spiritual endeavour, with cultivated appreciation and violent dislike, made it amenable to a wide range of dramatic uses, across innumerable styles and many genres. Like Acolastas, the embodiment of the sense with which I began this essay, taste can be simultaneously bodily and ecstatic, able to evoke both bestial desire and spiritual gluttony. This potent combination of materiality and ineffability lends it both imaginative and dramaturgical power, as generations of early modern playwrights were acutely aware.

Notes

- 1 *Poems with The Muses Looking-Glasse: and Amyntas* (Oxford, 1638), p. 27 (the play has separate pagination).
- 2 See Masten, 'Toward a Queer Address: The Taste of Letters and Early Modern Male Friendship', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10 (2004), 367–84; Stallybrass, 'Reading the Body: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Jacobean Theater of Consumption', *Renaissance Drama*, 18 (1987), 121–48; Cavell, "'Who Does the Wolf Love?': Reading *Coriolanus*", *Representations*, 3 (1983), 1–20; Britland, 'Circe's Cup: Wine and Women in Early Modern Drama', in *A Pleasing Sinne: Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. by Adam Smyth (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2004), pp. 109–25. For useful overviews of the field see Patricia Cahill, 'Take Five: Renaissance Literature and the Study of the Senses', *Literature Compass*, 6 (2009), 1014–30; Holly Dugan, 'Shakespeare and the Senses', *Literature Compass*, 6 (2009), 726–40; Joan Fitzpatrick, 'Reading Early Modern Food: A Review Article', *Literature Compass*, 8 (2011), 118–29; David Goldstein, 'Shakespeare and Food: A Review Essay', *Literature Compass*, 6 (2009), 153–74.
- 3 'Touch and Taste in Shakespeare's Theatres', in *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance*, ed. by Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2013), pp. 214–36.
- 4 *Parva Naturalia*, revised text with introduction and commentary by David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 212 (ch. 5, 445a 4).
- 5 *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (1615), p. 661. On hierarchies of the senses see also Louise Vinge, *The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition* (Lund: Gleerup, 1975).
- 6 For further discussion see Elizabeth Harvey, 'Introduction: The "Sense of All Senses"', in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 1–21.
- 7 *Essaies Vpon the Fiue Senses with a Pithie One Vpon Detraction* (1620), p. 45.
- 8 William Cornwallis, *Essayes* (1600–01), 2B8v.
- 9 *A Good Companion for a Christian Directing Him in the Way to God* (1632), G1v–G2r.
- 10 All of the images discussed in this paragraph and the one following are available on the British Museum's Collection Online. See www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx. On visual representations of the senses see also Carl Nordenfalk, 'The Five Senses in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 28 (1985), 1–22.

- 11 See British Museum S.3810 and 1873,0809.721.
- 12 See British Museum 1870,0514.1121, 1870,0514.1126 and 1997,0928.25.
- 13 See British Museum 1875,0508.14 and 1874,0711.1864.
- 14 See Karim-Cooper, 'Touch and Taste', p. 234.
- 15 *Lingua: Or the Combat of the Tongue, And the Five Senses for Superiority* (1607), C4r.
- 16 *The Custom of the Country*, ed. by Cyrus Hoy, in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, general editor Fredson Bowers, 10 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966–96), viii, 3.2.53.
- 17 *The Dutch Courtesan*, ed. by David Crane (London: A&C Black, 1997), 3.3.74–76, 93.
- 18 *A Pleasant Conceited Comedie, Wherein is Shewed, How a Man may Chuse a Good Wife From a Bad* (1602), G3v.
- 19 *The Late Lancashire Witches*, ed. by Helen Ostovich, in *Richard Brome Online*, general editor Richard Cave (Royal Holloway, University of London/Humanities Research Institute, Sheffield University, 2010), www.hrionline.ac.uk/brome, 4.1; speech 597 (this edition numbers speeches rather than lines).
- 20 'Catholic Martyrdom in Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martir* and the Early Modern Threat of "Turning Turk"', *ELH*, 73 (2006), 83–117 (p. 87). For an illuminating account of the uses of spectacle in this play see also Holly Crawford Pickett, 'Dramatic Nostalgia and Spectacular Conversion in Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*', *Studies in English Literature*, 49 (2009), 437–62.
- 21 *The Virgin Martyr*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953–61), iii, 5.1.56–58.
- 22 On this technique see Mariko Ichikawa, "'Maluolio within': Acting on the Threshold Between Onstage and Offstage Spaces', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 18 (2005), 123–45 (pp. 124–25).
- 23 For further discussion of this issue see Karim-Cooper, 'Touch and Taste', pp. 231–34; on the history of aesthetic taste see Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), esp. pp. 3–18.
- 24 *Aglaura* (1638), p. 50.
- 25 *Epicene*, ed. by David Bevington, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Plays of Ben Jonson*, general editors David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), iii, Prologue, ll. 8–9.
- 26 *The Demoiselle*, ed. by Lucy Munro, in *Richard Brome Online*, Prologue (speech 2).
- 27 *St Patrick for Ireland. The First Part* (1640), A2r.
- 28 *Cynthia's Revels: Revised Scenes from the 1616 Folio*, ed. by Eric Rasmussen and Matthew Steggle, in *Cambridge Ben Jonson*, v, 5.4.442–43.
- 29 *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. by MacDonald P. Jackson, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, general editors Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.5.204.
- 30 *The Roman Actor*, ed. by Martin White (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 1.2.62–64, 2.1.197–99.
- 31 On sexual 'tasting' see Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, 3 vols (London: Athlone, 1994), iii, 1367–68.
- 32 *Dramatic Works of Dekker*, iii, 4.1.87–88.

- 33 For more detailed discussion of food images in *Pericles* see Doreen DelVecchio and Antony Hammond, eds, *Pericles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 49–51.
- 34 Britland, pp. 109, 110.
- 35 Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 229; Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 188. See also Ricks, ‘Wordplay in Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*’, *Review of English Studies*, 12 (1961), 238–50. For a suggestive reading of the uses of the senses in the play, which looks briefly at taste, see Helen Wilcox, ‘New Directions: *Women Beware Women* and the Arts of Looking and Listening’, in *Women Beware Women: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Andrew Hiscock (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 121–38. Other useful accounts include J.A. Cole, ‘Sunday Dinner and Thursday Suppers: Social and Moral Contexts of the Food Imagery in *Women Beware Women*’, in *Jacobean Drama Studies: Jacobean Miscellany 4*, ed. by James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1984), pp. 86–98; Ann C. Christensen, ‘Settling House in Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*’, *Comparative Drama* 29 (1995–6), 493–506.
- 36 *Women, Beware Women*, ed. by John Jowett, in *Middleton: Collected Works*, 1.2.40–45.
- 37 See Williams, III, 1367–68.
- 38 Wilcox, p. 121.
- 39 Ricks, p. 246.