

THE “PRETTY ART” OF DETECTING PREGNANCY IN *THE DUCHESS OF
MALFI*

by

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Abstract

Why is the pregnant body constructed as a secret to cover up and to uncover in the early modern period, and why, in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, do apricots uncover this secret? This thesis addresses the odd moment from Webster's play when the Duchess's brothers uncover her secret pregnancy by feeding her grafted apricots, causing her premature labour. By examining early modern obstetrical texts, this thesis argues that early modern patriarchal culture appropriated the secrets of the female body in order to control women. In keeping her pregnancy a secret, the Duchess unwittingly produces her brothers' desire to penetrate that secret. In order to do so, her brothers – particularly Ferdinand – feed her apricots, metaphorically transforming her body into a fruit tree. Early modern botanical texts show that the Duchess's botanical body legitimates her brothers' desire to control her. While apricots were not used as a pregnancy test according to early modern obstetrical texts, they could cause premature labour. This thesis sheds new light on the question of incest in Webster's play, arguing the centrality of a phallic pun that appears in early versions of the play – “apricot” was “apricock.” This pun highlights the penetrative characteristics of the fruit, adding to the evidence of Ferdinand's incestuous desire: his grafted apricocks penetrate the Duchess's body and produce (figuratively, at least) her apricock child. Early in the play, Ferdinand is described as a plum tree, and this thesis finds – in the early modern gardening manuals – that apricot trees were most often grafted to plum trees in order to produce fruit. The fruit of the Duchess's womb, revealed by her brother's grafted apricocks, is figuratively the fruit of the apricot tree – the Duchess – and the plum tree – her brother Ferdinand.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: “Troubled with the Mother”: Pregnancy and Secrecy in Early Modern England	9
2.1 Pregnancy as a Secret	9
2.2 Circulating Pregnancy Textually	14
2.3 Secrecy and Homosocial Circulation in <i>Duchess of Malfi</i>	20
Chapter 3: “Root up her Goodly Forests”: Controlling the Female Body through Botanical Transformation	27
3.1 Fructifying the Pregnant Body	27
3.2 Feminizing Nature	32
Chapter 4: “Apparent Signs of Breeding”: Apricots and Pregnancy in <i>Duchess of Malfi</i>	40
4.1 Early Modern Pregnancy Tests	40
4.2 Over-Eating and Inducing Labour	43
4.3 Apricots and Illness	46
4.4 Apricots in the Garden	49
Chapter 5: “Vulturous Eating of the Apricocks”: Ferdinand’s Incestuously Fruitful Penetration	54
5.1 Masquerading Apricots	54
5.2 Orthographical Variations of Apricots	56
5.3 Ferdinand’s Peculiar Passion	58
Chapter 6: Epilogue: “’Tis a Pretty Art this Grafting”	64
Works Cited	70

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (1623), the Duchess's brother, Ferdinand, hires Bosola to spy on his sister and determine whether there is a "young springal cutting a caper in her belly" (2.1.155). Bosola claims that he has "a trick may chance discover [her pregnancy], / A pretty one: I have brought some apricocks, / The first our spring yields" (2.1.70-72). Bosola offers the apricots to the Duchess, and she quickly gobbles them up. He sees that "her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricocks are apparent signs of breeding" (2.2.1-3). Within mere seconds of eating the apricots, the Duchess goes into premature labour, unravelling her secret marriage to the lower-born Antonio and precipitating a series of gruesome events that culminate in her murder. The idea for this thesis stemmed from one simple question: why are apricots used in that scene? Out of this simple question, new, more refined questions have grown, both about the specifics of the play and about early modern culture. The guiding questions of this thesis now are: why is the pregnant body constructed simultaneously as a secret to cover up and to uncover in the early modern period, and why, in Webster's *Duchess*, do apricots – of all things – successfully uncover this secret?

I ground my study of pregnancy in *Duchess* in the moment of apricot ingestion in Act 2 to explore how its consumption resonates more widely in the play. Although it is unclear how the boy actor playing the Duchess would have performed pregnancy – a pillow stuffed under the dress, perhaps? – and so it is equally unclear whether an audience member would have been able to see that the Duchess is pregnant two acts into the drama, I contend that *Duchess* employs the apricots to signal that the female lead is pregnant. By this logic, the fruit indexes the child in the mother's womb, and the

mother's fruitful body is the Aragon family tree. For in this fruit lies the possibility of a lineage that could counteract the degeneracy and sterility of Aragon's aristocratic men – one of the Duchess's brothers is a corrupt Cardinal, and the other becomes a werewolf by play's end. And yet these men – and especially the vulpine Ferdinand – put into motion plots to ensure that the prospect of such fruitful generation fails to take hold. Indeed, the Duchess is dead by the end of the play's fourth act, an unusual turn of events in a drama whose title bears her name.

Underpinning my investigation into pregnancy and the apricots is an awareness of the historical situation for women in the early modern period. In order to understand *Duchess* through this feminist lens, I need to provide here a brief survey of theory on the marriage economy and the homosocial circulation of the female body in it. In the early modern period, male relatives circulated unmarried daughters and sisters as part of a marriage economy. This type of marriage practice has been the subject of much critical attention. In the seminal anthropological work *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Levi-Strauss argues, for instance, that “the total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners” (115). I suggest that the Duchess's first marriage constitutes this exact formulation, wherein she was the object of exchange to the Duke of Malfi in order for her family to gain power and alliances. Responding to Levi-Strauss's theorization of marriage, Gayle Rubin argues that “the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights to their female kin and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin” (177). In addition, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

describes this practice as “the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bond of men with men” (26). The sex/gender structure at work in Webster’s play follows closely these structures of exchange: the Duchess’s male relatives exert control over the circulation of her body, whether in the pre-play marriage to the Duke of Malfi or in their blocking of her desire to remarry during the course of the play.

Once married (to the man of their male relatives’ choosing), however, early modern women became the possession of their husbands, and were no longer circulated as objects to cement homosocial relationships. Instead, they became analogous to secrets to be covered-up by their husbands. When I discuss secrets in this thesis, I am referring specifically to the meaning of something that is “kept from knowledge or observation; hidden, concealed” (*OED*). Under English law, married women were *femmes covertes*, or under coverture. According to the definitions in use during the early modern period, “coverture” carried a semantic range from “covering for the body, clothing; a garment,” “concealing covering; disguise, veil,” “concealment; dissimulation, deceit, covert conduct,” to “the condition or position of a woman during her married life, when she is by law under the authority and protection of her husband” (*OED*). “An Homily of the State of Matrimony” (1563) describes more fully the early modern theological understanding of marriage. Joan Larsen Klein explains that this particular homily was “intended to be read immediately after the ceremony of marriage” (12). The homily reads, “this let the wife have ever in mind, the rather admonished thereto by the apparel of her head, whereby is signified that she is under covert and obedience of her husband” (fol. 256). The only early modern printed text to give us a record of laws specifically

concerning women, *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights* (1632), also refers to the wife's status as femme covert, particularly in the context of property: a dower "is no other thing than that which a wife or some other body in her name, or for her sake, giveth to her husband to be his during coverture" (90). The text further explains that "a woman is covert . . . as soon as she is overshadowed with her husband's protection and supereminency" (94). "Overshadowed" suggests that the wife's subjugation to her husband is crucially tied to covering her head during the marriage ceremony with a veil. Under coverture, early modern married women were thus covered-up by their husbands. Additionally, I would argue that this covering-up of early modern wives made them the secret possession of their husband, to be revealed only at his will. There were, of course, exceptions to this general social structure, and this thesis explores what occurs when a literary woman – the Duchess – attempts to break free from this patriarchal marriage economy.

In Act Two, Scene One of Webster's play, the Duchess is "great with child" (2.1.123). However, she is not publicly celebrating her pregnancy, but is rather attempting to keep it a secret. Chapter 2 of this thesis begins by exploring how early modern English society understood pregnancy. Although early modern women were viewed as "secrets" to be covered-up and controlled by their husbands or male relatives, knowledge surrounding child-bearing was largely under the control of women. I argue that the proliferation of a new genre – the obstetrical text – in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries, demonstrates an attempt by male patriarchal authority to undermine female authority on pregnancy. In order to re-cover control over the circulation of women's bodies, male authors reconstructed the female body as a secret to

be uncovered by their texts and circulated among male readers; this forces (married) women's bodies back into a kind of homosocial circulation analogous to the early modern marriage economy. This chapter then turns to *Duchess* as a literary case study of what occurs when a woman refuses to accede to male control over her body. I explore what the Duchess's role has been in the marriage economy dictated by her male relatives, and how her brothers now want to keep her as their secret possession. Finally, I will turn to the Duchess's decision to keep her marriage and pregnancy a secret; in doing so, the Duchess reconstructs her body in a way that replicates her brothers' desire to keep her a secret. Ultimately, by keeping her pregnancy a secret, the Duchess unwittingly makes her body irresistible to her brothers who would uncover, or penetrate, her secret.

Chapter 3 examines the effects of the method that the Duchess's brothers use to uncover her secret pregnancy. Their method for penetrating it and wresting back control of her body is to transform the Duchess, by means of metaphor, into a botanical body. By feeding her apricots, the brothers and their agent Bosola set up a series of connections – between the fruit in her womb and the fruit she places in her mouth; the fruit in her mouth and the fetus in her belly; and the tree from which the apricots were plucked and her fruit-bearing body. After outlining the Duchess's metamorphosis into a fruit-tree, this chapter examines how the transformation proves yet another method of patriarchal control. Through a survey of early modern botanical texts, I suggest that “nature” was consistently gendered as feminine, and as an entity to be subdued and controlled by men. Just as the Duchess's brothers imagine her as something that is dangerously wild, so too was nature understood as a body that would run rampant if not controlled by male

scientists. By transforming the Duchess into a part of the natural world, her brothers legitimate and advance their desires to control her.

In Chapter 4, I look more specifically at the method of control that the Duchess's brothers use: Bosola's experiment with fruit. Why are apricots used as a pregnancy test in this scene? Although apricots were not used as a pregnancy test in early modern England, nor was their ingestion directly linked to premature labour, they were understood to be laxatives. Moreover, in early modern medical understanding, over-indulgence of certain foods produced premature labour. In associating the Duchess's pregnancy with her over-indulgence in food, the apricots suggest her moral failing – at least according to her brothers – that has led to her pregnancy. This chapter goes on to contend that the apricots are also etymologically connected to the apple. By ingesting the apricots, then, the Duchess reveals her Eve-like role in the “garden of Malfi,” one whose carnal sin – inapt marriage and sexual congress – is encoded by the fruit she puts into her mouth. Finally, Chapter 4 examines how early modern herbals indicate that apricots were a fruit that ripens too early. Thus, it is apt that the fruit that pre-maturates affects the fruit of the Duchess's womb, causing it to likewise become untimely ripe. But as a notoriously difficult fruit to grow and ripen in early modern England, apricots required the intervention and control of a (male) gardener, suggesting, once again, the domination that the Duchess's brothers attempt to gain over her body through the apricots.

Chapter 5 examines a crucial typographic curiosity in the early modern editions of Webster's play: the fruit that we call “apricots” was orthographically rendered there as “apricocks.” This chapter suggests that the original spelling of the word adds a critical dimension to the apricot scene because it contains puns that make the apricot a phallic

fruit. Viewing these apricocks through Ferdinand's peculiar desire for his sister, I demonstrate that Ferdinand repeatedly obsesses over her penetrability. Thus, when he hires Bosola to spy on the Duchess, and Bosola feeds her the apricocks, I read her ingestion of the apricocks as Ferdinand's penetration of her body. Perhaps only a playwright as vulgar as Webster could write this scenario, in which the agent of the Duchess's brother rifles her body with "apricocks," all in an effort to find proof that another man – Antonio – has already sexually enjoyed that body's "privities." But, for me, what is most startling about Webster's play is that it does not sacrifice the newborn boy to its death drive. He outlasts mother, father, siblings, and both of his nefarious uncles: does he become the seed of a new family tree, a fruit tree "in's mother's right" (5.5.131)? Or does he represent his uncle's final triumph over his mother's body? Ultimately, I argue that the establishment of the "apricock" heir on Malfi's throne is tainted by the disturbing penetration of the Duchess's body with Ferdinand's fruit.

In my epilogue, I will take-up the grafted nature of these particular apricocks. Turning back to the early modern gardening manuals and herbals, I examine how gardeners grafted apricots. These texts provide interesting insight into the relationship between apricots and plums, suggesting that a reference in Act 1, Scene 1 to Ferdinand and the Cardinal as plum trees connects Ferdinand even further to the Duchess's child. The insemination of the Duchess that engenders the child may be done by the man of her choice, but by implanting the Duchess's body with the grafted apricocks and transforming her and her son into botanical bodies, Ferdinand engages in his own violent and incestuous act of insemination: the new ruler of Malfi may be biologically the fruit of

the Duchess's chosen husband, but he is also figuratively the rotten fruit of the Duchess's brother.

Chapter 2: “Troubled with the Mother”: Pregnancy and Secrecy in Early Modern England

2.1 Pregnancy as a Secret

Although married women in the early modern period were to be under the power of their husbands, pregnancy was a site of female secret knowledge and power. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses the power of secret knowledge: “in this way, there is formed a knowledge that must remain secret, not because of an element of infamy that might attach to its object, but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged” (I: 57-58). Foucault discusses this type of secrecy in relation to the power of male master/student relationships, but secrets about the female body (particularly as pertaining to its reproductive functions) certainly held that “element of infamy” in the early modern period. However, the secret knowledge about pregnancy in the early modern period would also lose its effectiveness if divulged in the male-centered domain of print. Yet, paradoxically, by virtue of its being a secret, women’s secrets become irresistible to early modern medical men. Foucault explains, “is it not with the aim of inciting people to speak of sex that it is made to mirror, at the outer limit of every actual discourse, something akin to a secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing abusively reduced to silence, and at the same time difficult and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge” (I: 34-5)? Here, in his discussion of sex, Foucault articulates the allure of secrecy: a secret is something that in its covering-up becomes enticing to uncover. While Foucault’s argument is based on sex in general, I extend it to pregnancy, which is a

physical embodiment of sex. My argument in this chapter involves two different kinds of secrets. When I refer to “secret female knowledge,” I mean obstetrical and gynaecological knowledge about the female body that first circulated among women and was then appropriated by men and referred to as “women’s secrets.” When I refer to “women as a secret,” I mean the idea that in order to control women, early modern men wanted to keep their female family members concealed and hidden from men who were not chosen by them to engage in homosocial exchange. These two secrets are connected because, as I will argue in this chapter, men appropriated women’s secrets in order to “safely” keep women as their secret.

Knowledge surrounding pregnancy in the early modern period circulated as a secret among women. In *The Making of Man Midwives*, Adrian Wilson explains that

In England in the seventeenth century, and doubtless for centuries before, childbirth was emphatically under the control of women. The midwife ran the birth, helped by several female ‘gossips’; men were excluded both from the delivery and from the subsequent month of lying-in. The enclosed female space of the ‘lying-in chamber’ was dedicated to the mother’s rest and recovery and to the collective female ritual that surrounded childbirth. (1)

In a patriarchal society that theoretically left almost nothing in the power of women, pregnancy and childbirth were exceptional. In *Duchess*, the Duchess has prepared “ladies to attend her” at the birth, and she has also “procured / That politic safe conveyance for the midwife” (2.1.191-192). Even for aristocratic women, such as the Duchess, a midwife and not a physician was preferred. Although there is great panic and danger that surrounds the premature labour of the Duchess, her husband Antonio remains absent from

the birthing room. Patricia Crawford notes that “up to the mid-seventeenth century, the presence of any man at a childbirth was unusual” (21). Childbirth was a uniquely female ritual that engendered a network of female knowledge unavailable to men. Because knowledge about childbirth was circulated among women, pregnancy was something of a secret from men, and was one of the only times in which women were the authority on women’s bodies. In the Duchess’s case, pregnancy is a double secret to all but her husband.

Pregnancy not only created a network of women, but it was also closed-off to the view of men. Describing childbirth in “The ceremony of childbirth and its interpretation,” Adrian Wilson says that “the mother was moving into a different social space: away from the world of men (centrally, her husband) and into the world of women” (71). This world of women, while providing opportunities for female agency and power, also removed and contained the pregnant woman. According to custom, the mother was removed into a special chamber not only for the labour, but also for the subsequent month of “lying-in.” Wilson, describing this chamber, notes how “air was excluded by blocking up the keyholes; daylight was shut out by means of heavy curtains; the darkness within was illuminated by means of candles” (73). This chamber seems to have been intended to shut in the female world of pregnancy; there is a feeling of quarantine to this room, ensuring that the expectant and delivered mother cannot infect any of the surrounding men. Indeed, describing post-birth events, Wilson remarks that “in many respects the mother was now treated as if she were an invalid” (75) and suggests that the “lying-in satisfied a popular demand for the ritual purification of women after childbirth” (85). Returning to the *OED* definition of “secret,” the lying-in ensured

that the labouring and post-natal female body was “kept from . . . observation; hidden, concealed.” While pregnancy offered women temporary control over the female body, this control was allowable only if the women were secreted away, with no possibility of contaminating the outside world.

Pregnancy was threatening to men in the early modern period because it drew attention to the permeability of the female body that early modern culture was obsessed with keeping under control. In *Duchess*, Ferdinand obsesses over the penetrability of his sister’s body, going so far as to point out the ease with which it can be mortally penetrated, as he brandishes a poniard at her in Act 1, Scene 2. Even when, unlike in *Duchess*, the pregnancy is sanctioned by a non-secret marriage, it still serves as a reminder of the female body that needs to remain strictly under patriarchal control. Patricia Crawford argues that the dominant understanding in the early modern period was that “women were the disorderly sex, and their sexuality was to be controlled so that they bore children only within marriage, and then only to their lawful husbands” (6). Indeed, pregnancy serves as a potent reminder of the ultimate sin of women: Eve’s punishment for tempting Adam to eat the apple is that she will suffer pain in giving birth (Genesis 3:16).

Pregnancy is a physical symbol of the potential corruptibility of women; furthermore, in its physical embodiment, pregnancy is also connected to secrecy. Katharine Eisaman Maus explains that “[the womb] is a container, itself concealed deep within the body, with something further hidden within it: an enclosed, invisible organ, working by means unseeable by, and uncontrolled from, the outside” (93). Pregnancy is threatening to early modern men, not only because it represented the penetrability of the

female body, but also because the condition of pregnancy was a physiological secret – a secret that could potentially be hidden from men, as we see in Webster’s play. Therefore, the fact that women controlled the circulation of knowledge about pregnancy located a dangerous amount of secret power in their bodies.

As a natural process from which men were excluded by virtue of their biological inability to bear children, pregnancy would seem to be of little interest to men in the early modern period. Indeed, the set-up of the birthing and lying-in chamber suggests that men were pleased to maintain that secrecy and quarantine associated with the birthing process. Yet for a social order that revolved around birth-right inheritance, such secret feminine knowledge surrounding the birthing process could prove problematic for its men. If women had the power of their own secrets, then they could not be controlled as a secret – “kept from knowledge or observation; hidden, concealed” (*OED*) – by men. Shakespeare’s poem “The Rape of Lucrece” demonstrates the problems that occur when a husband does not keep his wife as a secret, but rather boasts about her and reveals her to other men: she is raped by one of the male voyeurs and kills herself.

Early modern men desired to keep unmarried women as their concealed objects only to be revealed to other men in homosocial exchange. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (25). However, the female-circulated knowledge about pregnancy allowed women to create their own network, to circulate their own knowledge, and to control their own bodies’ secrets. In fact, Adrian Wilson suggests that “the immersion of the mother in a female collectivity elegantly inverted the central feature of

patriarchy, namely its basis in individual male property” (“Ceremony of childbirth,” 87). The process of child-bearing was, of course, central to the maintenance of the society; Patricia Crawford explains that “because of women’s potential maternal function, society has an interest in attempting to regulate female lives” (3). While early modern patriarchal culture seems invested in keeping the child-bearing process covered-up and secreted away from the male gaze, it is also invested in making sure that those female secrets do not empower women so that they might displace patriarchal authority. In this way, there appears to be a sort of paradox in how early modern society understood pregnancy: not wanting to be contaminated by such a female process, men were willing to cover-up the time of birth. However, because patriarchy construed women as naturally lascivious, it wanted to maintain control over the female body so that it could be circulated by men to protect genealogical lines. In order to do so, men needed to uncover and control the secrets of women.

2.2 Circulating Pregnancy Textually

One way for men to control women’s secrets was to make them a collective secret. By placing the secrets of women into written texts, men incorporated them into a male literary discourse of knowledge. In *The Imprint of Gender*, Wendy Wall argues that “nondramatic works printed between 1557 and 1621 conceptualize the relationship between writer, text, and new reading public in particularly gendered terms” (4). Whereas, as Wall argues, the circulation of “literary” texts was understood in gendered language, in this section I apply Wall’s model to a selection of “scientific” texts. In the preface to *De secretis mulierum (Concerning the Secrets of Women)*, (Pseudo) Albertus Magnus claims to “bring to light certain hidden, secret things about the nature of women”

(59), facilitating the circulation of women as secrets among men. Indeed, by the late sixteenth century, there was a proliferation of what we now might call obstetrical texts, all authored by men. Elaine Hobby explains that “childbirth in early-modern Britain was almost entirely in the hands of women; midwifery manuals, by contrast, were almost all written by men” (xvi). Lianne McTavish argues that “obstetrical treatises [were] influential sources contributing to the acceptance of male attendance at births . . . the transmission of male medical theory and denigration of female midwives” (2). For Karma Lochrie, these obstetrical texts work “not only to enlighten men about the secrets of women but to appropriate the secrets of women’s bodies into masculine texts and create from the appropriation a masculine intimacy” (122). Working to dispossess women of any power they might retain by keeping feminine secrets, these texts do not allow women (whose bodies are the secrets) any knowledge about or control over these secrets: according to their logic, by nature women – especially pregnant women – simply are secrets, and they are to be uncovered by and circulated among men. Instead of circulating through a network of women associated with birth (midwives, mothers, gossips), the secrets of the female body were thus transmitted into textual form and circulated in a homosocial exchange analogous to the traffic in aristocratic women. The body of the text – gendered female because it is about women’s secrets – circulates among men like a physical female body in the marriage market.

One of the most influential obstetrical texts in circulation in the early modern period was Thomas Raynalde’s *The Birth of Mankinde, otherwyse named The Womans Booke* (1545). Discussing Raynalde’s text, Joan Larsen Klein remarks that it “is the earliest English printed textbook on obstetrics” (177) and that “it was the most popular

textbook on childbirth in [the early modern] period, going through at least fourteen editions from 1545 to 1654” (177). Raynalde claims that he writes this book so “that the simplest Mydwife which can read, may both understand for her better instruction, and also other women that have need of her helpe” (Aii). Furthermore, Raynalde writes a special “Prologue to the women Readers,” indicating his desired audience (1). There, Raynalde explains the history of this book: it was originally composed in Latin as *De Partu Hominis* and was then translated into English by Richard Jones “at the request and desyre of divers honest and sad matrones” (2). By composing a new English translation, Raynalde makes the secrets of women far more widely available. However, at the end of his prologue, Raynalde admits low literacy rates among women, punning that women should “beare the booke read by some other, or els (such as could) to reade it themselves” (16). Although Raynalde ostensibly retranslates this text for the reading benefits of women, this is still a text about women, written and translated by various men. This text works to dissuade women from using their own first-hand knowledge and experiences (whether collective or individual) about their bodies, in favour of this authoritatively male knowledge that Raynalde says will help women “the better to understand how every thing cometh to pass within your bodies” (3). As a text about women, for women, but written by men, *The Birth of Mankinde* labours to make male written knowledge “better” than female collective knowledge.

In order to privilege men’s textual knowledge over women’s oral knowledge, Raynalde responds to critics who say that women’s secrets should never be revealed by, or, to men:

Yet another sort is there, which would that neither honest ne dishonest men should see this booke, for because (as they say) be a man never so honest, yet by reading here of things to them before unknown, they shall conceive a certain lothsomnesse and abhorring towards a woman. To these I aunswere, that I know nothing in woman so privie ne so secret, that they should neede to care who know of it, neither is there any part in woman more to be abhorred, then in man. And if the knowledge of such things which commonly be called the womans privities, should diminish the hartly love and estimation of a woman in the minde of man, then by this reason, phisitians and chirurgians wives should greatly be abhorred and misbeloved of their husbands. (12-13)

Here, while trying to suggest that there is nothing disgusting about women's bodily secrets, Raynalde does engage in a rhetoric of secrecy, whereby women's "privities" or secrets are there to be uncovered by him. Furthermore, as Eve Keller elaborates, it implies that "there is something shameful about medical knowledge of women or something so awful inherent to it that readers will eschew women altogether" (82). Raynalde suggests that most midwives do not want his book consulted and that they tell everyone they know that "it should be a slaunder to women, forsomuch as therein was descried and set fourth the secretes and the privities of women" (16). Raynalde then praises "good Midwives" who embrace his book as better than their own knowledge (16). Near the end of the prologue, Raynalde explains that the book "may supply the roome and place of a good Midwife, to advise them many tymes of sundry causes, chaunces, and remedies, wherein peradventure right wife women and good Midwives shalbe full ignorant" (14). He goes on to discredit the knowledge of midwives and suggests that

they need his text in order to better perform their duties. Raynalde denounces women who insist on keeping their own female knowledge, claiming that they are slandering his book, and he praises women who are willing to replace their female knowledge with his authoritative knowledge.

Jacques Guillemeau's *Child-birth; or, The Happy Deliverie of Women* (1612) likewise works to increase male authority over the female body. Guillemeau remarks, "I had purposed above fifteene yeares since, to have written somewhat concerning this subject in my books of Chirurgery: but having more maturely considered thereof, I thought it fitter to write a Treatise of it by it selfe: which it deserveth both for the difficultie of the subject, and for the variety of the matter which I was desirous to observe therein" (5). Guillemeau's use of the word "fitter" is notable, as it suggests that there would be something unseemly about medical knowledge of women's secrets being included in a text with other (non-pregnancy-related) medical knowledge. In fact, Guillemeau's belief that women's secrets should be quarantined "by it selfe" suggests the isolation and secrecy of the lying-in rooms. Not only must women be contained and covered-up in a separate room during and after their labour and delivery for fear of contamination, but women's secrets must be textually isolated and contained in a separate book from other medical knowledge.

In *The Expert Midwife* (1637), Jakob Ruff continues the trend of male-authored texts that attempt to take away from women control over the secrets of women. The title of Ruff's text is particularly interesting, as Ruff not only claims authority for his text by saying that its knowledge is "expert," but he also either suggests that midwives need his text in order to become experts, or that he himself is the expert midwife. In the latter

case, Ruff then attempts to usurp years of practical female experience, suggesting that the male midwife is more “expert” than his female counterpart. Ruff discusses midwives in his preface:

The businesse whereunto God hath ordayned them of so great and dangerous consequence as concernes the very lives of all such as come into the world, and withal for preventing of great danger and manifold hazards, both unto the mother and unto the infant it being necessarily required that the parties employed thereabout, should understand the businesse which they take in hand, which cannot be without the knowledge of many particulars concerning both the mother and the Infant, which they can never attaine unto, but either by the use of books penned by skilful Physitians and Chirurgions, or by conference with the learned and skilfull. (A3)

By emphasizing the power over life and death that the midwives hold in their hands, Ruff suggests that it is too great for them. Ruff works to undermine the knowledge and skills of female midwives, suggesting that they cannot possibly perform their tasks properly without the male-authored knowledge circulating in his text.

The male-authored obstetrical texts uncover the secrets of women, which had been circulated in a network of female knowledge, and circulate those secrets in a textual network of male knowledge. Through the construction and appropriation of female secrets, these early modern male-authored obstetrical texts ensure that men have control over women’s bodies for their own homosocial textual circulation and consumption. This homosocial circulation of women functions as it does precisely because women are constructed by men in the early modern period as secrets. In his discussion of “The

Problematics of Secrecy,” Michel de Certeau argues that “secrecy is not only the state of a thing that escapes from or reveals itself to knowledge. It designates a play between actors. It circumscribes the terrain of strategic relations between the one trying to discover the secret and the one keeping it, or between the one who is supposed to know it and the one who is assumed not to know it” (97). In the early modern period, men attempted to both uncover the secrets of women and cover-up women as secrets – women are the objects that circulate in this network of “strategic relations” between men. The secrecy surrounding the pregnant female body has the potential to add a new dimension of control to the homosocial circulation of women between men. Not only did fathers and brothers circulate women as wives to other men in order to cement new alliances, but doctors held power over the female bodies during pregnancy. Once they had husbands, women no longer physically circulated between men, but by textually controlling child-bearing, men ensured that women’s bodies continued to circulate as secret knowledge and, therefore, as power, between men.

2.3 Secrecy and Homosocial Circulation in *Duchess of Malfi*

What happens when an early modern woman attempts to re-take control over the circulation of her body, by choosing and secretly marrying a husband, and by keeping her pregnancy by him a secret? This is the situation in John Webster’s *Duchess*. This play is deeply concerned with secrets, layering on various levels of secrecy: Ferdinand and the Cardinal secretly hire Bosola to be their spy; the Duchess secretly marries Antonio; Cariola secretly watches that wedding so that it can be witnessed; Bosola secretly spies on the Duchess; the Duchess is secretly pregnant; the apricots are secretly a pregnancy test; and there are multiple other secrets with which this thesis is not directly concerned.

All of these secrets that I have listed centre on the Duchess's sexuality and her brothers' desire to control her. We are first introduced to the Duchess as she enters the stage by her steward (and eventual secret husband) Antonio, who describes her perfect "discourse" (1.2.124) and "speech" (1.2.126), her "sweet countenance" (1.2.132), and her "noble virtue" (1.2.135). The audience is set-up to see the Duchess as a perfect, chaste (perhaps even virginal), aristocratic woman ripe for marriage. However, later on in the scene, we discover that the Duchess is no virginal woman; rather, "she's a young widow" (1.2.204). The name, "Duchess of Malfi," should have also been an indication that the Duchess has already been married. There is no direct reference made to the Duchess's now dead first husband in the play; however, given that she is still young and beautiful and he is dead (with no hint of foul play), it is likely that she was married off to the much older Duke as a way to cement power and alliances for her family. The Duchess has already been part of the early modern marriage economy that circulated the female body among men, and she now wishes to take control of her own circulation.

In a secret conversation with Bosola, the Duchess's brother Ferdinand explains that he "would not have [his sister] marry again" (1.2.205). Bosola's questioning reaction of "no, sir?" (1.2.206), suggests that Ferdinand's blocking of his sister's remarriage should seem odd. However, Ferdinand quickly shuts down any discussion by curtly replying, "do not you ask the reason; but be satisfied I say I would not" (1.2.207-208). Once Ferdinand successfully recruits Bosola to be his spy, Bosola exits as the Duchess and the Cardinal enter. In this next part of the scene, the Duchess's brothers menacingly demonstrate their control over the circulation of her body by demanding that she "never marry" (1.2.266). Their frightening argument dwells on what they perceive as

her carnal knowledge of “what man is” (1.2.253) and the “lustful pleasures” that she, as a widow, must be desiring (1.2.295). Ferdinand and the Cardinal vividly imagine their sister as a stereotypical “lusty widow” (1.2.313) who is dangerously open to sexual advances of men outside the homosocial network of exchange. But instead of safely re-entering her in the homosocial marriage economy, the brothers attempt to keep the Duchess strictly under their power and concealed from other men. As if the Duchess were not already aware of being under the power of her male relatives, Ferdinand explicitly reminds her, saying “you are my sister” (1.2.301). Not only is this menacing because Ferdinand uses the possessive here, reminding the Duchess that she belongs to him, but he also pulls out his “father’s poniard” (1.2.302). Invoking their father by using a phallic symbol of his power, Ferdinand assumes the paternal role in their family. However, in Act 3, Scene 2, when he knows about the Duchess’s pregnancies, he surprises her in her closet and “gives her a poniard” (stage direction 3.2.80). He tells her to “die then quickly” (3.2.80), suggesting that she should stab herself, perhaps alluding to the story of Lucrece. Here, Ferdinand acts like a betrayed husband insisting that his wife kill herself to save their honour. The poniard also reminds the Duchess that Ferdinand’s power over her is not merely the symbolic power of kinship, but is also the physical threat of death.

In the first poniard scene, the Duchess’s brothers threaten death, both implicitly – “such weddings may more properly be said / To be executed, than celebrated” (1.2.290-291) – and explicitly – with a dagger to the throat. What does it mean that the Duchess’s brothers are so concerned that she does not get remarried that they are willing to kill her? As an unmarried woman, the Duchess would have been under the control of the male

Aragons. However, as soon as her family circulated her to the Duke of Malfi, she became her husband's object to control and to conceal from other men. Legally, as a widow, the Duchess actually possesses more rights to her body and her possessions than she ever has before, so it seems strange that her brothers would want her to remain in such a position of legal agency. If the Duchess were to remarry, her title and wealth – amassed through strategic marriage to the Duke of Malfi – would be under the control of her new husband. By refusing to re-circulate their sister's body in the marriage economy, the brothers – especially Ferdinand – seem to want to have the same kind of control over the Duchess as a husband would. Indeed, their punishing of her illicit marriage and child-bearing is an over-exaggerated version of coverture and the wife's relegation to the private sphere: they turn her own palace into the ultimate place of concealment, a prison.

However, at the beginning of the play, the Duchess no longer wishes to remain under the control of her brothers. Discussing issues of agency facing early modern women, Maureen Quilligan argues that one of the two “ways to halt the traffic in women . . . is incest, where women make an erotic choice within their own close kin” (13). Whereas Quilligan offers incest as a way for a woman to avoid an unwanted marriage, the Duchess has no interest in such an endogamous match. In *Duchess*, she wants a new marriage of her own choosing and her brothers want her to be removed altogether from circulation in the marriage economy. However, Quilligan's argument about the relationship between the removal from a marriage economy and incest does point towards a topic that I will take up in Chapter 5 of this thesis: Ferdinand's desire to control his sister and remove her from the marriage economy might suggest that he harbours an incestuous desire for her. Incest aside (for now), the Duchess's brother's desire to control

her body and her desire to control her own body reach a level of conflict that can only be negotiated through secrecy.

Immediately after being threatened with death by Ferdinand, the Duchess invokes the necessity of secrecy. If she wishes to wrest control of her body away from her brothers, she believes she must do it in secret. The Duchess exposes her desire to take control of her marriage arrangements to her maid Cariola, remarking that “if all my royal kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage, / I’d make them my low footsteps” (1.2.314-316). She appears to be willing to step on her brothers if they get in the way of her decision to marry. However, she also recognizes that this is a “dangerous venture” (1.2.321), given the “frights and threatenings” from her brothers (1.2.320). Thus, fearing for her life, the Duchess chooses “secrecy” (1.2.323): instead of publicly announcing and legitimizing her subsequent marriage and pregnancy, the Duchess will “conceal this secret from the world, / As warily as those that trade in poison / Keep poison from their children” (1.2.326-328). Although the Duchess believes that she must keep her acts of agency (marriage and pregnancy) a secret, these lines foreshadow the tragedy that will occur after her brothers have uncovered that secret: she, her husband, and almost all her children will die.

Returning to Act 2, Scene 1, we see the Duchess’s secrecy stretched to its limit, not coincidentally, in the moment in which her body, too, is stretched to its limit. At the beginning of the scene, the Duchess’s body is “grow[n] fat,” naturally, because of her pregnancy (2.1.119). However, by the close of the scene the Duchess’s body has been “swelled” past its capacity for secrecy (2.1.181); the “loose-bodied gown” that she wears to cover-up her pregnant body can no longer keep her secret (2.1.173). In an act that

unintentionally and ironically imitates coverture – the covering of the woman’s body to signify her subjugation to a man – the Duchess has to use extra material to cover-up her body in order to hide her pregnancy. Yet the Duchess fails to keep knowledge of her body’s secrets – her pregnancy – hidden for much longer.

The Duchess’s failure to keep her pregnancy a secret is all but inevitable. In removing herself from the control of her brothers, she removes herself from patriarchal control over her body, a control that desires to keep her body concealed as a secret. Or, more specifically, the Duchess’s brothers desire to keep her body as their secret, so that she will not have the chance to be “debauched” by another man. The Duchess combats this brotherly control by choosing her own husband. Yet when her body becomes swollen with the sign of her secret marriage – pregnancy – she chooses to remain in the sphere of secrecy. Instead of revealing and uncovering the secret of her body, the Duchess re-enacts the work of her brothers, as she figures her own body as a secret in an attempt to hide her pregnancy. De Certeau suggests that “the secret introduces an erotic element into the field of knowledge [and] . . . impassions the discourse of knowledge” (98). Indeed, at stake in Webster’s play is the discovery of a secret that would uncover the eroticism of the Duchess’s body. And those who do not have access to that knowledge, in this case the brothers, become passionately desirous of that knowledge precisely because it is constructed as a secret. The Duchess unknowingly produces this desire in her brothers, because the terms that she uses overlap with the male desire to appropriate women’s secrets. By keeping her pregnancy a secret, the Duchess unwittingly returns her body to the realm of secrecy dominated by male patriarchal

authority; once she re-fashions her body as a secret, her brothers cannot resist violently uncovering, or perhaps we might even say, penetrating, that secret.

Chapter 3: “Root up her Goodly Forests”: Controlling the Female

Body through Botanical Transformation

3.1 Fructifying the Pregnant Body

In Chapter 2, I discussed how both of the Duchess’s brothers – Ferdinand and the Cardinal – attempt to control her body. At this point, I think it is crucial to differentiate between the two brothers in terms of their interest in the Duchess. In so doing, I will suggest how the Duchess’s botanical transformation may be particularly rooted to Ferdinand, a crucial point to bear in mind for later chapters. The first characterization that we get of the two brothers comes from Bosola, when he tells Antonio and Delio that “[the Cardinal] 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” (1.1.51-54). As interesting a characterization as this is (and I will return to it again in the Epilogue), it does not differentiate between the two siblings; they both appear to be good noblemen, but they are actually rotten to the core. In the next scene, we observe Ferdinand’s interactions with his officious courtiers and come away with an impression reinforced by Antonio’s description that he is of “a most perverse and / turbulent nature” (1.2.98-99). In this same scene, we learn from Antonio that the Cardinal is more of a behind-the-scenes evildoer: “where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for him than ever was imposed on Hercules” (1.2.86-88). Throughout the play, Ferdinand and the Cardinal confirm these impressions: Ferdinand is (overly) passionate and quick to anger, whereas the Cardinal is coldly controlled, choosing to engineer elaborate schemes of violence.

The differentiation in personality also applies to the brothers' respective relationships with the Duchess. Whereas the Cardinal is all detached and implicit menace, Ferdinand is frenzied and issues explicit threats. In the first shared scene between the three siblings, the Cardinal appeals to the Duchess's "discretion" (1.2.250), "honour" (255), and "high blood" (256) in order to discourage her from remarrying. He ends the conversation by telling her to "remember it" (1.2.298), leaving the end of that sentence – the "or else" – implicit. Furthermore, although he and Ferdinand alternate in speaking to the Duchess, he is far more economical with his speech, as he only has 16 lines to Ferdinand's 28 lines. In contrast, as his verbosity demonstrates, Ferdinand lacks the control and restraint of his brother. Immediately, Ferdinand brings passion into the conversation, as he twists a statement of the Duchess's status into an accusation of her sexual experience: "You are a widow; / You know already what man is" (1.2.252-253). His next interjection suggests intense anger at the very thought that his sister would "Marry!" (1.2.257), as that would make her "luxurious" (1.2.257), which is glossed in the Broadview edition as "unchaste" (683). This preoccupation with his sister's sexuality continues in the scene, as Ferdinand references "livers" (1.2.260) – the site of passion in early modern understanding (*OED*) – and "whores" (1.2.264). After touching on the corrupting influence of the court, "witches" (1.2.276), "giv[ing] the devil suck" (1.2.277), the Duchess's "privat'st thoughts" (1.2.281), and the possibility that she will "be executed" (1.2.291), Ferdinand has worked himself into such a lather that he finishes by thinking about her "lustful pleasures" (1.2.295). Thus, although both Ferdinand and the Cardinal want to control the Duchess's body and prevent her re-circulation in the

marriage economy, they attempt to control her in contrasting ways. It is even possible that they might want this control for very different reasons.

Bearing in mind Ferdinand's disproportionate stake in his sister's sexuality, I now move on to how the brothers reveal the Duchess's secret pregnancy and what effects their method of revelation might have. Indeed, the method they use proves curiously indirect. In order to catch the Duchess unawares and discover her secret, the brothers must keep their involvement a secret; so they hire a spy, Bosola,

To live i' th' court here, and observe the Duchess;
To note all the particulars of her 'haviour,
What suitors do solicit her for marriage,
And whom she best affects. (1.2.201-204)

Because Bosola remains under the Cardinal and Ferdinand's control until much later in the play, in Act 2, Scene 1, he serves as a proxy for the brothers, particularly Ferdinand. In Act 1, Scene 2, Ferdinand tempts Bosola to work for him, engaging in banter that foreshadows Act 2, Scene 1, in which Bosola tempts the Duchess with apricocks. When he has given in to Ferdinand's temptation, Bosola remarks that his "corruption / Grew out of horse-dung" (1.2.244-245). These lines anticipate Bosola's telling the Duchess after she has given into temptation that the apricocks "did ripen . . . in horse-dung" (2.1.159). Ferdinand's language infiltrates into Bosola's language in the later scene, fulfilling the corruption that Bosola prophesizes. This verbal echo suggests that although the play shows Bosola as the tempter of the Duchess, the brothers – and especially Ferdinand – are ultimately the ones tempting their sister with apricocks in order to penetrate the secret of her pregnant body.

Yet what is particularly peculiar about the method by which the brothers attempt to penetrate the Duchess's secrecy is not only that they do it by proxy, but also that they use fruit to do it. Chapters 4 and 5 will take up the particulars of the apricots, but I will first examine on a more broad scale, how this moment of discovery and revelation works. In order to retake control of their sister's body, the brothers employ a method that linguistically points to her secret pregnancy and metaphorically transforms her into a botanical body under the control of men. Both of the secret parents-to-be, Antonio and the Duchess, refer to the apricots that Bosola supplies as simply "fruit" (2.1.163, 165, and 178). This repetition of the word and their (presumed) presence onstage, set into motion a series of linguistic connections: the fruit that Bosola gives the Duchess indexes the fruit secreted away in the Duchess's womb; the fruit that the Duchess ingests reveals the fruit growing inside her belly. This chapter examines how the fruit in this scene gestures to a blossoming field in early modern publication history – botanical discourse.

Bosola elides the distinction between the two fruits in play, suggesting that we too should read the edible fruit as indicative of the fruit-fetus. After ingesting the fruit given to her by Bosola, the Duchess complains, "How they swell me!" (2.1.180). In response, Bosola claims that she could not possibly get more swollen as she is "too much swelled already" (2.1.181), presumably by the fruit of her womb. This scene further connects the two fruits together through its brief discussion of grafting. Bosola reveals that the fruit is the product of this horticultural practice:

'Tis a pretty art,

This grafting

.....

To make a pippin grow upon a crab,

A damson on a black-thorn. (2.1.167-8, 170-171)

Erin Ellerbeck discusses the way this conversation about grafted fruit signals the Duchess's secret pregnancy, suggesting that "the Duchess, according to Bosola's logic, has disrupted social categories and grafted part of another, lesser family tree onto her own" (7). Not only does this reference to grafting signal the fruit in the Duchess's womb, but it also signals her particular genealogical family tree: damsons and black-thorns were both types of plum trees, and earlier in the play, Bosola, remarks that "[the Cardinal] and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing-pools" (1.1.51-52). Finally, in describing the secret child as "the young springal" (2.1.175), Bosola again uses language that conflates a fetal body with a botanical body: "springal" carries with it tree-like connotations, as it refers to "a young man, a youth, a stripling" (*OED*). She will give birth to a boy.

What does it mean, then, for there to be this series of connections between the fruit and the Duchess's child? Or, if the child is a piece of fruit, ripening in his mother, what does that make the mother? I would suggest that if the child is a piece of fruit, then his mother is the tree upon which he grows. Through her brothers' attempts to control her body, the Duchess becomes a botanical body. Ellerbeck explains the genealogical metaphors at work here (7), as the Duchess grafts Antonio's stock onto her own family tree, the product of which is the fruit of her womb. Rebecca Bushnell also notes this scene in her discussion of grafting: "a conversation between the Duchess and the spy Bosola about grafted apricots is really a coded exchange about her pregnancy, the product of her secret marriage with her steward" (148). Pushing this botanical metaphor further, I

would like to point out that the Duchess's figuration as a tree ties into her brothers' elaborate plan to regain control over her unruly and secretive body, by controlling, possessing, and subduing her body as if it were "nature." Indeed, upon discovering his sister's pregnancy, Ferdinand re-emphasizes this association between the Duchess and nature, raging that he will "Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads, / And lay her general territory as waste" (2.5.27-28). In order to demonstrate the relationship between the Duchess's botanical body and her brothers' desire to control her, I turn now to an examination of the gendering of nature in early modern botanical texts.

3.2 Feminizing Nature

Describing the abundance of husbandry manuals, Andrew McRae suggests that "the emergence of English works [on the subject] can be dated from the publication of John Fitzherbert's *Boke of Husbandrye*, which went through twelve editions in thirty years after its initial printing in 1523, and a further six before the turn of the century" (136). Rebecca Laroche examines the increase in herbals in the early modern period, suggesting that "the new [print] technology makes the herbal knowledge accessible to a general buying public and, when this accessibility is combined with the herbals' being written in English, separates the British tradition from its classical and continental counterparts" (26). The language from the world of botany filtered into popular usage, as we see in Webster's play. But, how does the early modern understanding of botanical discourses relate to the brothers' attempt to reveal the secrets of and control their sister's body?

In the early modern period, nature was consistently gendered female. This gendering of nature produced a binary: women/nature as a passive, fertile mother and

women/nature as a dangerous, difficult force to control. Carolyn Merchant explains that through the ancient and early modern periods, nature “was personified as a female-being, e.g., Dame Nature; she was alternately a prudent lady, an empress, a mother, etc. . . . In both Western and non-Western cultures, nature was traditionally feminine” (xxiii). In his influential astronomy text, Nicolaus Copernicus describes, for instance, the marriage between the male heavens and the female earth, whereby “the earth conceives by the sun and becomes pregnant with annual offspring” (50). While the earth here is nurturing and fertile, she is still understood to be below (hierarchically as well as physically) the male heavens. Noted sixteenth-century botanist, Paracelsus, likewise writes,

Woman is like the earth . . . she is the tree which grows in the earth and the child is like the fruit born of the tree. . . . Woman is the image of the tree. . . . And yet woman in her own way is also a field of the earth and not at all different from it. She replaces it, so to speak; she is the field and the garden mold in which the child is sown and planted. (25)

According to Paracelsus’s thinking, the analogies between nature and woman are so deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness that they run interchangeably in both directions. Thus, when Webster’s play has the brothers’ proxy rhetorically transform her into a tree, it speaks to this perceived analogy between women and botanical bodies like trees.

Early modern English botanical texts extend the traditional correlations between nature and women. William Lawson, for example, describes nature as “the great mother of all living Creatures, the Earth” (2). Discussing the tradition of pastoral poetry in early modern England, Merchant takes up the significance of Nature’s perceived passivity.

She explains that “while the pastoral tradition symbolized nature as a benevolent female, it contained the implication that nature when plowed and cultivated could be used as a commodity and manipulated as a resource” (8). Shakespeare’s Sonnet 3 exemplifies the agricultural passivity of the female body, as he asks the young man “where is she so fair whose unearned womb / Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?” (lines 5-6). Here, nature is also, by implication, wild and in need of tillage. Although there does not appear to be anything harmful in the description of nature as a mother-figure, this equation between women/nature and passivity ultimately enables male domination.

One of the most popular herbals in early modern England (Munroe 30), John Gerard’s *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* visualizes such analogizing between women and nature. The title page of Gerard’s text foregrounds nature’s ages-old association with women. In the top left and right hand frames, Gerard places illustrations of Ceres, the ancient Roman goddess of agriculture, and Pomona, the goddess of fruitfulness. There are also images of three men on Gerard’s title page: two of the men – Theophrastus and Dioscorides – are Greek philosophers and writers on plants, and the other is Gerard himself. Thus, the men represent learning and knowledge in Gerard’s book, whereas the female figures represent the land’s abundance. In his dedication, Gerard writes that “none have provoked mens studies more, or satisfied their desires so much as Plants have done” (4). In using the phrases “provoked mens studies” and “satisfied their desires,” Gerard could be just as easily writing about women as plants. Gerard continues, “what greater delight is there than to behold the earth apparelled with plants, as with a robe of embroidered worke, set with Orient pearles, and garnished with great diversitie of rare and costly jewels” (4). Here, Gerard describes the earth as a

woman whose beauty is enhanced by her bedazzled dress. Nature is enrobed and covered-up by this costly apparel, ensuring that the secrets of her body will not be revealed and that men will look on her.

Yet such gendering does not simply imagine nature as a beautiful nurturing woman. It can also cast her as a dangerously wild woman. As Merchant argues, Central to the organic theory was the identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe. But another opposing image of nature as female was also prevalent: wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos. (2)

Nature thus embodies both the maternal and the dangerous sides of women as understood through a patriarchal lens. I would question, though, whether these two sides of women/nature were actually understood as the opposing images that Merchant proposes; rather, as I have suggested in Chapter 2, motherhood could be associated with uncontrollability. When the Duchess is transformed into part of the natural world (a family tree), she is being made to fit within this limited framework whereby women/nature are mothers and also dangerously unruly.

Early modern husbandry manuals, gardening manuals, and herbals, uphold the framework in which feminized nature must be dominated by masculinized practices of husbandry and the professional gardening. Bushnell acknowledges that there would have been some female readers of these botanical texts; however, she argues that “while women were addressed as readers who enjoy flowers, the art of breeding and cultivating all plants became a masculine activity, whether done for leisure or professionally” (110).

Indeed, the word “husbandry” is inherently gendered; according to the *OED*, it is derived from “husband,” meaning “the male head of a household.” In the earliest English book of husbandry, Fitzherbert elaborates the Biblical origins of husbandry. The opening words of this text argue that “a man is ordeyned and borne to do labour” (A2). This prologue draws attention to the male-gendering of husbandry, repeating “man” or male pronouns five times. The first subheading in Fitzherbert’s text makes it clear that this book is intended for “husbande men” (A5). Ralph Austen likewise begins *A Treatise of Fruit Trees* (1653) with the Biblical origins of husbandry, arguing that “the Art of Planting fruit-trees . . . is a part of the Husbandmans work as well as that; yea and the chiefest and worthiest part. Adam in time of his Innocency was employed in this part of Husbandry about Fruit-trees” (1). Austen draws attention to the gender dynamics of botanical practices, reinforcing the idea that men are the gardeners by referencing the biblical Adam. By highlighting Adam’s role as a gardener and husbandman, both of these texts implicitly point to the other half of that story, wherein Eve’s sin causes the fall of mankind. Indeed, the title page of John Parkinson’s gardening manual, *Paradisi in Sole* (1629), actually depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. These early modern English botanical texts draw explicit attention to the fact that the people undertaking the ploughing, tilling, sowing, gardening, and pruning of nature are supposed to be men; in order to combat the uncontrollability and potential for growth of nature, men must dominate her and make her fertility useful through husbandry and gardening.

Part of what makes nature so dangerously uncontrollable, according to early modern society, is that men simply do not know enough about her. Indeed, the language surrounding the unknown in nature is remarkably similar to the language surrounding the

unknown in women. Both nature and women are made out to be “secrets” by the men who write scientific texts about them (William Eamon, 3). As an addendum to the discussion of secrecy in Chapter 2, we can also say that by creating nature as a secret, early modern patriarchal society also created the drive to expose that secret. Bushnell argues that even “flower or fruit gardening, like other forms of scientific experimentation, was a kind of play exposing the secrets of nature” (101). Francis Bacon in particular seems obsessed with penetrating the secrets of nature, as he describes in “Of the Interpretation of Nature” (c. 1603), how the point of technological discovery is to “help us to think about the secrets still locked in nature’s bosom” (96). Bacon repeats this sentiment in *Novum Organum* (1620), describing how “we hope there are in Natures bosome many secrets of excellent use” (14). Not only does Bacon’s phrase (Nature’s bosom) gesture towards the obstetrical texts of the period that were obsessed with penetrating women’s secrets, but it also invokes the same sense of difference about that which contains the secrets; the secrets are hidden in the bosom, a possible site of difference between men and women. Discussing secretaries in early modern England, Julie Crawford notes that “to be a person’s bosom – a bosom friend – was to be entrusted with that person’s secrets” (114).

The proliferation of botanical texts in early modern England suggests an intense desire to exert further control over nature. Rebecca Bushnell reminds us that this type of book is designed “to teach the reader to shape an order in nature, whether through pruning, design, or grafting, just as the book itself subdues plants’ images to its own ends” (74). William Harrison’s *Description of England* (1577) suggests that man’s “art also helpeth nature” and that “gardeners ... do in manner what they list with Nature ... as

if they were her superiors” (265). And, William Lawson, in *A New Orchard and Garden* (1617), argues that man’s “art restoreth the Collectrix of Nature’s faults” (A2).

According to the early modern botanical texts, man should use nature for his art, pleasure, gain, and scientific advancement.

In the early modern male imagination, both gardening and husbandry involve the penetration of nature’s secrets so that she can be dominated and controlled by men. For Bacon in *Novum Organum*, new progressive technological discoveries “do not, like the old, merely exert a gentle guidance over nature’s course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations” (93) because “Nature is not overcome without submission” (1) and because “Nature should be obedient and yield to the benefits of men” (31). Merchant explains that in the seventeenth century, “the new image of nature as a female to be controlled and dissected through experiment legitimated the exploitation of natural resources” (189) – the mineral deposits hiding beneath earth’s robes. Merchant discusses the sanctioning of mining based on nature’s figuration as a female to be controlled and exploited, arguing that “digging into the matrices and pockets of earth for metals was like mining the female flesh for pleasure. . . . The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century imagination perceived a direct correlation between mining and digging into the nooks and crannies of a woman’s body” (39). With the increasing control over and instrumentalization of feminized nature through such endeavours as gardening, tilling, sowing, deforestation, and mining in the seventeenth century, the two-way metaphorical relationship between woman and nature becomes increasingly disturbing: if nature can have her secrets exposed and her body ordered, controlled, and exploited for men’s gains, then what can men do to women? This intimate relationship

between the sanctioning of gendered and botanical manipulation is precisely why the Duchess's brothers' plan transforms the Duchess into a botanical body. Indeed, Ferdinand fantasizes that he would "root up her goodly forests" (2.5.64), ravaging his sister until she is an uprooted tree. By making the Duchess a part of the natural world, her brothers legitimate and further their desires to order, control, and exploit her body. But why is the Duchess transformed into this particular botanical body – the apricot tree?

Chapter 4: “Apparent Signs of Breeding”: Apricots and Pregnancy in *Duchess of Malfi*

4.1 Early Modern Pregnancy Tests

By using fruit to reveal the Duchess’s secret, her brothers turn her unruly body into a piece of the natural world, meant to be ordered and controlled by men. But why use apricots? When Bosola wants to determine whether there is a “young springald cutting a caper in her belly,” he decides that feeding her apricots would be the perfect pregnancy test (2.1.155). Discussing this scene, Hillary M. Nunn remarks that “[the Duchess’s] body incurs increasingly relentless scrutiny as Bosola infamously baits her with apricots, quickly sending her into labor that she labels indigestion” (93). Nunn notes the apricots, but does not wonder what it is that makes them so effective. Any fruit could draw attention to the fruit of her womb, so why do apricots, of all fruit, appear in this scene? For us today, eating apricots is not generally a prescribed pregnancy test. In early modern England, however, they did have some medical connection to pregnancy. To recover this history, I will examine early modern obstetrical texts and their suggested methods for determining pregnancy in this chapter.

In *Child-Birth, or The Happy Deliverie of Women* (1612), Jacques Guillemeau discusses “the signes to know whether a woman be with childe, or no” (2). According to Guillemeau, “determining whether a woman be conceived, or no” is very difficult to ascertain medically (2). Eve Keller explains that “it was considered impossible to determine with any certainty that a woman was even pregnant” (133). Because of this difficulty in determining conception, Guillemeau advises:

A Chirurgion must bee very circumspect . . . because many have prejudiced their knowledge, and discretion, by judging rashly hereof. For there is nothing more ridiculous, then to assure a woman that shee is with childe; and afterward, that her naturall sicknesse, or store of water should come from her: and in stead of a childe, some windie matter should breake from her, and so her belly fall, and grow flat againe: which hath hapned unto many men, that have beene well esteemed, both for their learning, and experience. (2)

Guillemeau warns male doctors of being too quick to determine pregnancy because the female body is so tricky that gas and bloating can disguise themselves as the “bump.” The female body is thus a kind of secret for male doctors to reveal, but as a secret it also carries with it the dangerous potential for mocking male authority when the doctors cannot correctly determine what the secret is. As Monica H. Green argues about Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s *Secrets of Women*, in order to determine pregnancy, “for such women [women who want their pregnancy to be secret], the interrogator needs to employ alternate methods – in other words, knowledge about generation is to be *extracted* from women” (218). The stakes are similarly high in *Duchess*, as Bosola – playing doctor to the unwitting Duchess – risks being incorrect in his assumption that the Duchess’s stomach pangs must be labour instead of food poisoning. Although Guillemeau warns that pregnancy can be confused with stomach illnesses caused by food, Bosola is perfectly certain that his edible “trick” will “discover it” (2.1.76). Why would Bosola think that apricots are the perfect pregnancy test?

Guillemeau describes various ways of determining pregnancy, privileging “those signes which are taken from the man” (3), which include “extraordinarie contentment in

the companie of his Wife” (3) and the husband’s simultaneously feeling “a kind of sucking or drawing at the end of his yard” during orgasm (3). In *Duchess*, Bosola cannot rely on these post-coital signs because not only is he not the husband, but he does not even know the Duchess is married. As for the signs from women, Guillemeau determines that the best sign is a woman who no longer menstruates; however, he also suggests that female orgasm indicates pregnancy:

If she hath a kind of yawning, and stretching, and feeles within her a shaking or quiuering (such as we commonly find presently vpon making of water) which runneth through the whole body, with a kind of chilnesse, and is felt chiefly between the shoulders and the backe, with some paine about the Navell, and a rumbling or disquietnesse in the neather belly, which hapneth, because the Matrice shrinks it selfe together, to entertaine and embrace the matter of generation which it hath drawne and suckt in, feeling thereby a kind of tickling.

(4)

Of course, because he is not the mother of the child, Bosola cannot use any of these signs to tell whether the Duchess is pregnant. Guillemeau does mention that some other signs of pregnancy include the woman who “falls a vomiting, and spitting” (4); the “belly [that] swells and growes bigger” (5); and “eyes [that] be more hollow, and sunnke inward; and the white is turned bluish” (5). Bosola echoes these kinds of physical signs when he describes how the Duchess “is sick a-days, she pukes, her stomach seethes, / The fins of her eyelids look most teeming blue, / She wanes i’ th’ cheek, and waxes fat i’ th’ flank” (2.1.71-73). The closest that Guillemeau’s text gets to Bosola’s apricot test is when he describes how you should “give the woman Hydromell [mead] to drinke made with raine

water . . . or else Hony and Annisseed beaten and dissolved in water” (6); if she is pregnant, “she will feele great paines and griping in her belly” (6). Therefore, while Guillemeau does offer that there is a kind of edible pregnancy test, he certainly does not mention apricots or any other fruit, and he even qualifies that prescription by reminding us that “these signes are not so certain” (6).

4.2 Over-Eating and Inducing Labour

After the Duchess eats the apricots, Bosola gloats that “her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricocks are apparent signs of breeding” (2.2.1-3). However, whether Bosola intends to or not, the ultimate effect of his apricot feeding is to make the Duchess no longer pregnant: the apricots cause her to go into premature labour. Is there, then, a link in early modern medical books between apricots and premature labour? In *The Birth of Mankind* (1545), Thomas Raynalde includes a chapter on how to induce and help a woman through labour. Some of Raynalde’s methods for inducing labour indeed involve ingesting substances. He lists five substances; I include here only two:

The rynde and barke called Cassia Lignea [Chinese Cinnamon] beaten to powder, tempered with Wine, and drunken, provoketh well the birth. (112)

Saffron and Siler montanum [Hartwort] provoketh the birth of any living thing, if it be drunken. (113)

Finally, Raynalde provides “a plaster to provoke the byrth”: it consists of “wylde Goward . . . Mirrhe, the juyce of Rue, and Barley meale,” all of which is to be “la[id] . . . to the womans belly between the Navell and the nether parte” (114). At the end of this chapter, Raynalde acknowledges that “although many other things there bee which have vertue

and power to provoke the byrth” (114), he has only included the remedies “whose efficacie and power is sufficient to this present purpose” (115). In the thirteen concoctions that Raynalde posits as birth-inducing, there is no mention that the ingestion of apricots will provoke labour.

Other texts, less specifically obstetrical than Raynalde’s, offer similar edible methods of labour inducement. Eve Keller explains that the “explosion of medical book publishing did include books of learned and philosophical bio-medicine [such as Guillemeau’s, Paré’s, and Raynalde’s], but the greater number were intended for practical use in the home” (74). In *The tresurie of commodious conceits, and hidden secretes* (1591), John Partridge suggests, for instance, that to induce labour, “take leaues of Bittanie, and stampe them, or els make powder of them, and giue the woman that laboureth to drinke of it with a litle water” (27). A.T., in *A rich store-house or treasury for the diseased* (1596), recommends a plaster of “mugwort” to “provoke speedie delivery of Childbirth” (43), and provides a recipe in which the practitioner should “take Hisope, Veruoine, and Betony, of eache of them one handfull, stampe them very small with olde Ale, and straine it, and wring forth the juice thereof” (43). Additionally, A.T. recommends that the woman should “take Pollipodium, otherwise called Okefearne, and stampe it very well, then plaister it upon the seete of the woman that traveleth with childe, and it causeth speedy birth of the childe, eyther alive or dead. This is a marvelous good secret” (43). By referring to this remedy as “a marvelous good secret,” the text draws direct attention to how medical knowledge surrounding women is offered up as a secret to be shared by men in the early modern period. However, while some of these

secret methods to provoke childbirth involve ingesting a substance, none of these secrets specifically involve apricots.

Yet the link between eating and premature childbirth may in fact be fruitful. In Book 3 of *The Birth of Mankind*, Raynalde describes the various causes and ways to prevent aborted fetuses and premature births. Raynalde suggests multiple causes for premature births, including disease, coughing, sneezing, nose bleeds, and blood-letting. Raynalde further states that “excesse feeding and surfetting, by the which the byrth is suffocate and strangled in the belly, and the foode corrupt for lacke of due digestion” may cause premature birth (135). Guillemeau also finds that the diet of a pregnant woman is extremely important for her and her child’s health. He includes a lengthy discussion of what kind of food she should and should not eat; however, he focuses mainly on what kind of meats she can eat and how they should be prepared. He briefly mentions fruit, suggesting that “she may close her stomacke after meate with Peares, or Quinces bak’t or preserved; as likewise with Cherries, or Damsons” (20). Although Guillemeau does not directly reference apricots here, his suggestion about damsons is marginally related to the apricot scene in Webster’s play: referencing the grafted nature of the apricots, Bosola mentions how grafting can make “a pippin grown upon a crab, / A damson on a black-thorn” (2.1.170-171). Yet although the play mentions plums and apples, Bosola ends up using apricots.

The Duchess does appear to be particularly excited about the apricots, exclaiming “O sir, where are they?” (2.1.147), when Bosola tells her that he has brought her some. Perhaps the apricots are simply something that, according to Guillemeau, “women with child have oftentimes such disordinate appetite, by reason of some salt or sharp humor”

(21); however, the list of things that Guillemeau cites as examples of strange pregnancy cravings – “Coles, Chalke, Ashes, Waxe, Salt-fish . . . and Vinegar” (21) – does not include apricots. Guillemeau does warn that “such foode may much hurt and hinder both their owne and their childs health” (21). Guillemeau further links prenatal health with the mother’s digestive health, as he suggests that she must take a laxative of “some broth of Damaske-Prunes” to prevent constipation (24). He goes on to warn, however, that you must not “cause a fluxe of the belly, for feare of Abortment, or being delivered before their time” (24). Here, Guillemeau indicates that fruit, particularly plums, should be eaten during pregnancy to regulate the mother’s digestive functions, but also that too much laxative can cause the fetus to abort. The Duchess’s “greedily” eating fruit could, according to early modern medical logic, be a sign that indicating that premature labour looms (2.1.151).

4.3 Apricots and Illness

Not only was parturition thought to be caused by excessive eating and indigestion, but early modern herbals also drew a link between apricots and indigestion. In *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597), John Gerard suggests that

Aprecocks are colde and moist in the second degree, . . . and they are also more wholesome for the stomacke and pleasant to the taste, yet do they likewise putrifie, and yeelde nourishment, and the same colde, moist, and full of excrements: being taken after meate, they corrupt and putrifie the same; being first eaten before other meate, they easily descende, and cause the other meates to passe downe the sooner. (1261)

In *A Newe Herball: Or, Historie of Plantes* (1578), Rembert Dodoens also notes the apricot's potential to cause indigestion, explaining that "being ripe, they loose the belly, & engender noughtie humours: for they are soone corrupted in the stomacke, wherefore they ought not to be eaten after meates, but before, as Galen saith" (710). As these herbals suggest, while apricocks are not the only fruit connected to indigestion, they were certainly thought to cause indigestion (especially when eaten after meat) due to their being easily corrupted and putrefied in the stomach.

When the Duchess becomes physically ill after eating the apricocks, Webster connects indigestion to labour. In the early modern period, pregnancy was understood as an illness: Guillemeau suggests that "the greatest disease that women can have is that of the nine Moneths the Crisis and cure consists in their safe deliverie" (81). Indeed, as Eve Keller explains, "many of the signs of conception, such as dimness of the eyes, pallor of the complexion, and a pervasive weakness of the body, suggested disease as much as pregnancy" (134). The connection that the play makes between indigestion and pregnancy takes this early modern figuration of pregnancy as illness even further: the Duchess's pregnancy becomes associated with a self-inflicted sickness from over-indulgent eating. This association between the female body and illness is also represented in Webster's play through Bosola's disgusted conversation with the Old Lady about "scurvy face physic" (2.1.24). Lisa Hopkins, discussing this scene, suggests that "what Bosola wants to probe here . . . are specifically female mysteries and interiors" (124). In *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama*, Theodora Jankowski explains that "from what we are shown to be Bosola's point of view, women are adept as deceivers because they use cosmetics and costume to disguise/hide the defects of their

bodies in order to present themselves as something they are not – beautiful or chaste” (175). Bosola’s conversation with the Old Lady complements his delight in revealing the Duchess’s pregnancy: he cannot stand her hiding the interior “sickness” of her body in “a loose-bodied gown” (2.1.69).

The Duchess’s pregnancy is also imagined by her brothers and Bosola as a moral illness, rooted in the sin of lust, not only for sex, but also for food. Lori Schroeder Haslem contends that “the gestating woman becomes associated with a patient who has overindulged appetites for the wrong foods, and childbirth itself becomes associated with the purging of an ailing or overtaxed digestive tract” (439). When Bosola offers the Duchess the apricots and she “greedily” accepts them (2.1.151), her lust for food indexes her lust for sex, the very lustfulness that has, according to her brothers’ phobic logic, led to her pregnancy. The scene of apricot eating implies that “excreting bodily waste and birthing a child are similarly humiliating functions, that each represents a necessary means of purging the body of matter created by an excessive and immoral appetite” (Haslem, 443). The apricots’ prompting of premature labour solidifies this association, as the Duchess already “puke; her stomach seethes” simply because of pregnancy; ultimately, the birthing too is accompanied with severe digestive difficulties (2.1.65).

We discover that these particular apricots are also related to digestive and nutritive processes, as Bosola gleefully announces that “the knave gardener, / Only to raise his profit by them the sooner, / Did ripen them in horse-dung” (2.1.157-159). In *The Garden of Eden: or, An accurate description of all flowers and fruits now growing in England* (1652), Hugh Plat advises gardeners to

Mix Cow-dung and Horse-dung well rotted, with fine earth and Claret wine Lees, of each a like quantity, baring the roots of your Trees in Jan. February, and March: and then apply of this mixture to the roots of your Apricot Trees, and so cover them with common earth: by this means such Apricot Trees as never bare before, have brought forth great store of fruit. (148-149)

Thus, the procedure of employing dung to ripen apricots was in use during the early modern period, providing another clue as to why apricots appear in this particular scene. Bosola, of course, only announces that the apricots are covered in dung after the Duchess has already indulged in them; in saving that announcement until after she has bitten into the apricots, he seems to be deliberately trying to make the Duchess sick. Perhaps, then, Bosola (or, more likely, Webster) is familiar with the literature that relates stomach indigestion with premature labour, and this is why he reveals (whether true or not) that the apricots are covered in dung. The other effect that Bosola's revelation has is to lead to Antonio's refusal to taste the apricots. By revealing the excremental nature of the apricots after the Duchess has eaten them, Bosola ensures that she will be the only one to eat them. If Webster had allowed any of the other characters to be tempted by Bosola to indulge in the apricots, the apricots' importance as a marker of illness and pregnancy would have been undermined or confused. No one else eats them.

4.4 Apricots in the Garden

Apricots and the discourse surrounding pregnancy are further related through a philological connection. Both Gerard (1260) and Dodoens (709) agree that in Latin the apricot tree is called *malus armeniaca*. Etymologically, *malus* comes from the classical Latin for the apple tree and also means "ill, bad, of uncertain origins" (*OED*). This

relationship is extremely fruitful, not only because it reinforces the apricots' association with illness, but also because it associates them with the apple. The apple is indelibly coupled with the Biblical story of Eve's temptation. This link sets up a fascinating reading of the apricot scene in *Duchess*, whereby Bosola (as a proxy for Ferdinand) acts the part of Satan and the Duchess takes the role of Eve. Bosola's description of himself as a "devil" (1.1.262) and then Antonio's subsequent allusion to him as an "impudent snake" (2.3.39) work to secure this connection. The Duchess also tries to tempt her husband Antonio to eat the apricot, saying, "pray, taste one," but he seems to refuse his role as Adam, responding "I do not love the fruit" (2.1.144-145).

The Duchess's pregnancy further casts her in a typological re-play of Eve's story because God punishes Eve by making her suffer birthing pains. Dymphna Callaghan suggests that "the misogynistic curse serves to relocate man in the original tragic scenario of the exile from Eden" (121). By having Bosola tempt the Duchess with "a present" of apricots (2.1.131), immediately followed by her falling into premature labour, Webster foregrounds and compresses the Duchess/Eve analogue. While the audience does not see the Duchess's labour, there is no doubt that her giving birth is accompanied by the pains brought down on women by Eve, as Antonio reports that "she's exposed / Unto the worst of torture, pain, and fear" (2.2.71-72). While the apricots reveal an intriguing connection between scenes of temptation, that same connection could have been more readily made by using apples, like those Bosola mentions – "pippin[s]" and "crab[s]" (2.1.170).

Why, then, might apricots be particularly fitting to reveal the Duchess's Biblically inflected pregnancy? Dodoens explains that "the apereox are ripe in June" (710), and Gerard suggests that "their fruit is ripe in late July" (1260). Though the writers disagree

slightly as to the exact time of ripeness, it is clear that the apricots become ripe sometime in the summer, not around “*decimo non Decembris*” (2.4.60), the date Webster gives for the birth of the Duchess’s son. Furthermore, Bosola tells the audience that the apricots are “the first our spring yields” (2.1.72). There is an obvious discrepancy here between when the apricots should be ripe and when the child is actually born. Although this could simply be a case of Webster’s being careless with the facts of his play, I would suggest that this December date indicates that Webster specifically wanted to use apricots as the fruit, rather than some other fruit that would be ripe during December. Comparing it to its relative the peach, the apricot is, as Dodoens explains, “sooner ripe” (709). Dodoens also remarks that this particular fruit is “soner ripe, wherefore they be called Abrecox, or Aprecox” (709). The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the etymology of the word apricot back to the Latin *praecox*, which means “early-ripe.” In fact, the particular apricots that the Duchess devours are even sooner ripe because as Bosola explains, “the knave gard’ner, / Only to raise his profit by them the sooner, / Did ripen them in horse dung” (2.1.141-143). This connection to early ripeness fits with the fact that the apricots cause the fruit of the Duchess’s womb to ripen too early. In order to make these apricots ripen, the male gardener exerts force over nature so that he can make a good profit. This intervention is analogous to the early ripeness of the Duchess’s fruit: the child becomes early-ripe through the intervention of Bosola, who needs to prove that the Duchess is pregnant in order to gain profit. Bosola thus plays the role of both the male doctor taking control over a pregnant female body and the male gardener exerting his power over nature. Both figures excavate women’s secrets.

Early modern herbals and gardening manuals demonstrate the labour required for male gardeners to produce apricots. William Lawson points out the difficulty of growing apricots in England: “we meddle not with Apricookes . . . which will not like in our cold parts” (3). He does not, therefore, recommend growing them. For Hugh Plat, apricots are “rare fruit” (53). Lawson and Plat suggest, then, that apricot trees would have been seen as a relatively exotic fruit tree that required the meddling of a gardener in order to bear fruit. Describing the apricot tree, Gerard explains that “this tree is greater than the Peach tree, and hath a bigger bodie, it lasteth longer, especially if it be grafted or inoculated The flowers are somewhat white: the fruit round like a Peach, yellow both within and without, in which doth lie a browne stone nothing rough at all, as is that of the Peach, shorter also and lesser, in which is included a sweete kernel” (1260). Gerard’s description does not provide any information that make apricots seem out of the ordinary, although he does suggest that apricots may be of particular interest for the gardener who grafts.

Plat also draws attention to the relationship between apricots and grafting. He notes that “a grafted Apricot is the best: yet from the stone you shall have a faire Apricot, but not so good; and the grafted is more tender than the other” (136-137). Because apricots were (and, I think, still are) relatively uncommon to eat and were best cultivated through grafting, they represent a fruit that is explicitly associated with man’s intervention over the course of nature; apricots required gardeners – usually a male occupation (Munroe 26) – to interfere with and change the natural world in order to yield the most and the tastiest fruit. This masculine power over the secrets of nature is analogous to the control exerted by male physicians over the secrets of the female body in

the early modern period. The apricots in *Duchess* – created by an explicitly male gardener – suggest the control that men can exert over the character’s secrets of nature. Because men have control over the apricots and the apricot tree, and the apricots represent the child in the Duchess’s womb, with the Duchess herself as the apricot tree, how much control, we might wonder, does the Duchess actually have over her own body in the creation/generation of fruit? Working for the brothers, Bosola plants (figuratively) the apricots inside the Duchess’s pregnant body, causing her fetus-fruit to ripen too soon. If these men play such a large role in the premature ripening of the Duchess’s fruit, could they also have been involved with the planting (and grafting) of the fruit plucked from its mother? The final chapter will take up this question of precisely what role the brothers – particularly Ferdinand – have in the creation of the child and how that role might prompt a re-reading of the play’s otherwise hopeful ending.

Chapter 5: “Vulturous Eating of the Apricocks”: Ferdinand’s

Incestuously Fruitful Penetration

5.1 Masquerading Apricots

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the apricots penetrate the secret of the Duchess’s pregnancy. Yet there is something counterintuitive about the idea of an apricot as an object that could be literally penetrative. Apricots could reveal the Duchess’s secret pregnancy, but they are soft, round, sweet, and juicy fruit, so how could they penetrate? Indeed, these characteristics of the apricot would be more closely associated with femininity in the early modern period, particularly their ability to masquerade as perfectly ripe when they are secretly rotten on the inside. Dale Randall suggests that an “awareness of the Venus-apple-paradise-*malus*-sin-knowledge nexus may enable us to consider the claim that from Roman times and through the Middle Ages, the apricot (*Malus armeniaca* – *Prunus armeniaca*) was symbolic of the vulva” (182). Furthermore, the apricot appears to be similar to the pregnant body in that its plump exterior conceals a seed that can become more of its species. Actually, the seed in the apricot is doubly concealed: at the centre of the pulp is a stone that holds the seed. Given that “stone” has been slang for testicle since the twelfth century (*OED*), and testicles contain the seed prior to its blooming in the pregnant body, apricots can be connected to the male body; they simply masquerade as feminine objects. I contend that the apricots in Webster’s play do penetrate the Duchess’s secret. In fact, it is precisely because the apricots pose as feminine objects that the Duchess feels they are safe to eat. These apricots add another dimension to the multiple layers of secrecy at work in this

scene, as they appear to be unthreatening feminine objects, but are secretly penetrative masculine ones. In the same way that Bosola is secretly the spy of Ferdinand and the Cardinal, the apricots are secretly the fruit of the brothers.

This chapter takes up what makes these particular apricots into dangerous objects of penetration. In the original play, the fruit that we call “apricots” was orthographically rendered as “apricocks.” It may seem ridiculous to suggest that a pun is not simply a throw-away laugh, but is in fact key to understanding a central scene in Webster’s play. Margreta de Grazia, for instance, reads puns on “bear” in order demonstrate that the pun “is not marginal but pivotal to both the structure and import of *The Winter’s Tale*” (148), a play that, of course, features an onstage bear. Ultimately, de Grazia suggests that “until dictionaries determined the properties of a word, puns remained largely integral rather than conspicuously peripheral to the language” (151). Because Webster writes in what de Grazia calls “the period before lexical standardization,” I read his “apricock” pun as central to interpreting the events of the play.

But first I offer a digression on orthographic consistency. *Duchess* exists in four quarto publications, the 1623 first quarto, the 1640 second quarto, the 1678 third quarto, and the 1708 fourth quarto, which is an abbreviated and amended version of the text called *The Unfortunate Dutchess of Malfy or the Unnatural Brothers*. All four of these authoritative texts, upon which all subsequent editions of the play are based, employ the word “apricocks” to signify the fruit that Bosola feeds the Duchess. The next surviving printed version of Webster’s play is a re-written text that eighteenth-century critic Lewis Theobald adapted in 1733 for performance; this version erases not only the scene of apricot temptation, but also all indication that the Duchess gives birth to any children.

The fact that the children are erased from the text may suggest Theobald's unease at her body's fruitfulness. In Webster's version, the child installed as the Duke of Malfi is "in's mother's right" (5.5.140), and is Antonio's son, the apricock-child, not the son she bore from her previous marriage (3.3.82-83). It seems that for Theobald, it was far simpler to eliminate these seemingly indecorous elements of the play. Rather than ignoring this case of "incorrect" inheritance, I would suggest that the establishment of this apricock-child as the Duke of Malfi indicates just how crucial the apricocks are to the play.

5.2 Orthographical Variations of Apricots

In the nineteenth century there were six publications of *Duchess*, with all of the texts using the term "apricocks." However, the orthography varies in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century editions as editors modernized the spelling of antiquated words for ease of reading. In the 1964 Revels Plays edition, general editor Clifford Leech explains, "modern spelling is used, archaic forms being preserved only when rhyme or metre demands them or when a modernized form would not give the required sense or would obscure a play upon words" (vii). This particular edition of the text does, in fact, maintain the original spelling. I would suggest that it is precisely the obscuring of wordplay that is at stake in modernizing apricocks to apricots in other editions of Webster's *Duchess*.

Indeed, twentieth- and twenty-first-century publications of *Duchess*, from the 1933 Everyman's Library edition to the 2002 *Norton Anthology of English Renaissance Drama*, continue to "modernize" the spelling of "apricocks" to "apricots." While today, we no longer use the word "apricock" to signify a kind of fruit, within the context of the play it is completely clear to what fruit Webster refers even without modernizing the

word. Furthermore, the word “apricot” was in fact in use simultaneously with the word “apricock” in Webster’s day. In the countryhouse poem, “To Penshurst,” Ben Jonson describes the “blushing apricot and woolly peach” that are produced in the estate’s orchard (l.43). John Bonoel provides instructions for planting cherries in *His Maiesties gracious letter to the Earle of South-Hampton, treasurer, and to the Councell and Company of Virginia* (1622), suggesting that they should “be mannaged as the Peach and Apricot.” Of course, if all references in this period to the stone fruit that we call the apricot rendered the word as “apricot,” then the use of “apricock” could be simply a spelling error. However, texts as diverse as Thomas Tusser’s 1573 husbandry manual, Robert Albott’s 1600 poetic miscellany, and Thomas Dekker’s 1612 play *If It Be Not Good, The Devil Is In It*, all refer to “apricocks.” Thus, the use of apricocks in *Duchess* cannot simply be explained as a spelling error or a compositor’s error because multiple variants of the word were in use at the time.

This spelling variation is minor, with only a change of two letters. However, this minor variation in spelling allows for a major change in meaning. Both words denotatively refer to “a stone-fruit allied to the plum, of an orange colour, roundish-oval shape, and delicious flavour” (*OED*), but the “apricock” spelling allows for a crucial pun: the apricock fruit becomes a phallic object twice over. Breaking the word down, we discover a pun in the sound of the second syllable, “prick,” and a pun in the sound and look of the third syllable, “cock.” According to the *OED*, the twentieth sense of the noun “cock,” and the one that *Duchess* employs, is simply defined as “penis.” The dictionary suggests that this slang meaning was certainly in use in the early modern period, as the *OED* offers fifteen quotations, with eight instances of this usage occurring before 1630.

The word “apricock” also offers an equally pointed pun on “prick.” According to the *OED*, “prick” is coarse slang for “the penis.” It is, in fact, an even older slang word than “cock,” with the first usage of “prick” in print occurring in 1552. A more famous early modern example of “prick” in its slang form comes from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 20.

Describing the beautiful young man, the speaker complains that Nature “prick’d [him] out from women’s pleasure” (l. 13). This particular meaning of “prick” seems related to two other meanings that the *OED* provides for the word, “a pointed weapon or implement; a dagger or pointed sword” and “a small sharp projecting organ or part.” I will discuss Ferdinand’s penchant for threatening to penetrate the Duchess with a pointed weapon in further detail later in this chapter, but this definition of “prick” reinforces that association between penis and sword. The pun on “prick” in apricock also points towards the verb form of “prick,” which means “to pierce or indent with a sharp point.”

According to the *OED*, a meaning of “prick” first used by Francis Bacon – “to plant (seeds or seedlings) in small holes made by piercing the ground at suitable intervals” – plays out this sense of indentation. Although the Duchess, in my reading, is a fruit tree rather than a patch of earth – both, of course, are feminized “nature” – Bacon’s definition of “prick” does point to the association between women as botanical bodies and men exerting (violently) penetrative control over them.

5.3 Ferdinand’s Peculiar Passion

The Cardinal’s desire to control his sister’s body seems to concern economic situation, aristocratic status, and the Cardinal’s love of power. While Ferdinand purports to have the same reasons for controlling his sister’s body, critics have long recognized that the intensity of passion displayed by him about and towards his sister might suggest

an incestuous desire. As Norman Rabkin explained some time ago, “though critics continue to debate the incestuousness of his passion, and though attempts to translate the perceptions of seventeenth-century writers into the language of twentieth-century psychology all too often distort literary facts, the inescapable peculiarity of Ferdinand’s passion is the disproportion between its intensity and the financial reasons which he seems to believe set him against his sister’s remarriage” (5). Like Rabkin, Robert Ornstein is loathe to label Ferdinand’s “peculiar” passion incestuous, instead arguing that “we do not have to exaggerate the faint suggestions of incestuous desire to motivate Ferdinand’s fury at the Duchess; even more terrible than any hints of unnatural lust is his frenzied conception of ‘Honor,’ his pitiless identification with his sister” (70). Discussing the scene in which Ferdinand and the Cardinal learn of their sister’s pregnancy, James L. Calderwood counters this scholarly tradition, which William Empson dubbed “the famous Incest Problem” (94). Calderwood argues, “only if we accept the unmistakable suggestions of incestuous jealousy in this scene does Ferdinand’s behavior become more understandable for us than for the Cardinal” (79). While the potentially incestuous nature of Ferdinand’s passion for the Duchess is a territory that has also been well-rehearsed by the likes of Michael Best, M.C. Bradbrook, and Frank Whigham, critics seem to miss the potential link between this discourse and the apricocks.

In order to consider fully Ferdinand’s incestuous passion for his sister, we need to examine his relationship to the apricocks. Although Bosola is the person who tempts the Duchess to eat them, Ferdinand is the person who hires Bosola to perform this penetration of his sister’s secrets. Ferdinand is the “Calabrian Duke,” and therefore cannot remain present in Malfi to watch over his sister (1.2.6). Both the Cardinal and

Ferdinand are in on this plot, yet Webster has Ferdinand directly interact with Bosola, explicitly connecting Ferdinand to the secret-penetrating apricocks. Ferdinand pays Bosola

To live i' th' court here, and observe the Duchess;
To note all the particulars of her 'haviour,
What suitors do solicit her for marriage,
And whom she best affects. (1.2.201-204)

In Act 1, Scene 2, Ferdinand tempts Bosola to work for him, engaging in banter that anticipates Act 2, Scene 1, in which Bosola tempts the Duchess with apricocks. When he has given into Ferdinand's temptation, Bosola remarks that his "corruption / Grew out of horse-dung" (1.2.244-245). This line presages Bosola's telling the Duchess that the apricocks "did ripen . . . in horse-dung" (2.1.159). Through this verbal foreshadowing, the play reminds us that Bosola is a secret proxy for Ferdinand, and so the Duchess is not wary of his fruity offerings. Unbeknownst to her, though, these are Ferdinand's apricocks.

In fact, I would even go so far as to suggest that we might productively regard Bosola as a gardener employed by Ferdinand. In the early modern period, although there were elaborate gardens and orchards on aristocratic estates, the aristocrats themselves were not usually the gardeners. Rebecca Bushnell observes, "sustaining the gardens of the gentry were the hands and minds of weeding women and laboring men. . . . For many, however, the gardener was a permanent household servant. . . . If one were privileged to be a royal gardener, of course, one could make considerably more and pave the way to social advancement" (18-20). As a non-aristocratic member of the court, Bosola is

certainly looking for social advancement. When he shows the Duchess the apricocks, their talk falls to gardeners, with the Duchess remarking, “what an unskilful fellow is our gardener” because he has not managed to produce any apricocks (2.1.151). The Duchess does not ask Bosola from where he procured the apricocks; however, given what I discussed in Chapter 4 regarding the difficulty of growing apricocks, it seems somewhat strange that the highest ranked household in Malfi – the Duchess’s court palace – would not have the most skilled gardener. There is no evidence that Bosola is actually “the knave gardener [who], / Only to raise his profit by [the apricocks] the sooner, / did ripen them in horse-dung” (2.1.157-159); yet he is the knave gardener who, to gain profit from Ferdinand, ripens the fruit of the Duchess’s womb too soon. Thus, Bosola works as a kind of gardener for Ferdinand, discovering and exploiting the secrets of nature – here, the Duchess’s body and pregnancy – for the benefit of his employer.

Ferdinand also expresses his disproportionate interest in his sister’s sex life through a series of phallic images. In Act 1, Scene 2, Ferdinand thrusts his “father’s poniard” at the Duchess in an act that does not actually penetrate her body, but certainly suggests a threat to do so (1.2.302). A few lines later, Ferdinand tells his sister to “beware that part, which like the lamprey, / Hath never a bone in’t” (1.2.307-308). The image of the lamprey eel that Ferdinand uses to warn his sister is already phallic, but he continues to re-enforce his obsession with phallic objects with his reference to the part that lacks a bone: the Duchess’s reaction – “fie, sir” (1.2.309) – suggests (perhaps tellingly) that she thinks he refers to a penis. Ferdinand covers himself by saying that he is referring to the tongue, an image that is still phallic. Theodora A. Jankowski argues, in “Defining/confining the Duchess,” that “Ferdinand’s reference to the poniard (and his

implicit threat to use it) and to the lamprey/tongue/ (penis) imply the demand (and desire) for more intimate sexual knowledge” (229). This scene, in which Ferdinand continuously makes phallic allusions, demonstrates his attempt to penetrate and instil in his sister’s mind the idea that she cannot allow her body to be penetrated by any man. By punning on cock and prick, the play links a doubly phallic fruit with the network of phallic images that constitute Ferdinand’s psychologically penetrative thrusts at the Duchess.

The “apricock” pun also illuminates Ferdinand’s action after the Duchess gives birth. Both of the Duchess’ brothers find out the news simultaneously in a letter, but only Ferdinand obsesses over his sister’s penetrated body. Ferdinand’s first response to the letter is to rail that his sister has become “loose i’ th’ hilts” (2.5.5-6). By transforming the Duchess’s body into hilts, Ferdinand suggests that she has permitted a sword (or multiple swords) to fit into her. A few lines later, Ferdinand vividly imagines his sister’s penetration by “some strong-thighed bargeman, / Or one o’ th’ wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge,” suggesting just how rampant thoughts of his sister’s bodily penetration by lower class men run in his mind (2.5.57-58). When Ferdinand finally confronts the Duchess, he sneaks into her bedroom, and the Duchess first thinks that he is Antonio, her husband. Addressing Antonio, the Duchess demands “have you lost your tongue,” and is immediately confronted by Ferdinand thrusting a poniard at her (3.2.76). Ferdinand replaces Antonio’s absent tongue with his own dangerously present phallic image, the poniard: here, Ferdinand penetrates the interior space of the Duchess’s closet by replacing her absent husband. Indeed, Ferdinand’s threat of violence in reaction to the Duchess’s secret pregnancy is more in line with early modern depictions of a husband whose wife has been unfaithful than to a brother whose sister has remarried.

Because the fruit the Duchess eats is an apricock, not an apricot, I would like to suggest that this moment of consumption should be read figuratively as a moment of sexual penetration. Furthermore, because the apricock temptation scene is ultimately controlled and enacted by Ferdinand, his obsession with his sister's penetrability culminates with his figurative penetration of her body. The point of feeding the Duchess the apricocks is to determine whether she is pregnant, or, to put it most crudely, to determine whether her body has been penetrated by another man's cock. In fact, the Duchess's body has been penetrated and fertilized by Antonio who, during his marriage ceremony to the Duchess, vows that they will "imitate the loving palms, / Best emblem of a peaceful marriage / That never bore fruit divided" (1.2.489-491). By this logic, the child implanted in the Duchess's womb is the fruit of their peaceful union. Yet after eating the apricocks, the Duchess discovers that "this green fruit and [her] stomach are not friends," and she goes into painful premature labour (2.1.159). The Duchess's body violently revolts against Ferdinand's penetration, suggesting that the apricock penetration is a kind of sibling rape. It is to this fruit, plucked too early from the womb, that we now finally turn.

Chapter 6: Epilogue: “’Tis a Pretty Art this Grafting”

After eating the apricocks, the Duchess turns to Bosola and remarks, “they say they are restorative” (2.1.147). In what seems to be a strange dodging of an innocuous half-question, Bosola responds enigmatically with “’tis a pretty art, this grafting” (2.1.148). However, Bosola’s seeming lack of response to the Duchess’s question turns out to be a response, because *Duchess* figures grafting as a potentially restorative process – “a bett’ring of nature” (2.1.149) – that culminates in the birth of Antonio’s son. The early modern language surrounding the process of grafting is shared with the language of pregnancy: as Erin Ellerbeck explains, “the use of horticultural language in the theater often elucidated the complexities of human reproduction; the unsanctioned combination of different family lines was viewed as analogous to the practice of mixing various plants” (5). Pregnancy and the bearing of children (or fruit) is the sole biological means for the perpetuation of family lines. These patterns of inheritance are very much an issue in *Duchess*, as we see with Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s attempts to wrest away from the Duchess land and possessions that would normally pass down to her first husband’s children. As their sister, the Duchess is part of Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s “royal blood of Aragon” (2.5.22), forming a branch of their family tree. By secretly marrying Antonio without her family’s consent, she grafts their royal family tree with a scion that is “basely descended” (3.2.260). Although the Duchess’s brothers see this engrafting of Antonio onto their family tree as making them need “to purge infected blood” (2.5.26), could the grafting of Antonio into the corrupt royal family tree really be “restorative” (2.1.147)?

Two of the Duchess and Antonio's children are brutally murdered alongside their mother, but the eldest child, and crucially the one whose birth was prematurely brought on by the apriocks, survives. This "bastard" child is extricated from the ruthless clutches of his uncles when the Duchess insists that Antonio "take [his] eldest son and fly towards Milan" (3.5.59). After the bloodbath of the final scene, Delio emerges with "Antonio's / . . . son and heir" (5.5.125-126). In a play deeply concerned with inheritance, the final speech appropriately concludes with the establishment of a male heir. However, as Theodora Jankowski suggests, "to reinforce the patriarchal order this act ostensibly supports, this child should be the son of the Duchess's first marriage, the son of the dead Duke of Malfi" ("Defining/Confining the Duchess," 244). Webster's decision "to establish [the Duchess and Antonio's] young hopeful gentleman / in's mother's right" (5.5.139-140) could suggest that the grafting of royal, but tainted blood, with low, but morally uncorrupted blood, may lead to the successful rehabilitation of the Aragon dynasty. The play makes a point of juxtaposing the pure, but corrupt blood of the Duchess's family with the "mean" (3.5.120), but morally pure blood of Antonio. Antonio is praised as a man whose "own actions / be arguments and examples of his virtue" (3.5.121-122), a virtue that Webster also extols in his dedication to the play. Webster's lauds his dedicatee George Harding, Baron Berkeley for being both of "the ancient'st nobility" and for being "a man to confer honour on himself" (ll. 11-12). With the grafting of Antonio's worthy branch into the Duchess's noble tree, Webster works out the possibility that the fruit of this tree will be a man like Baron Berkeley. In the same way that Leonard Mascall describes how a tree that is "to long without fruite" can "beare the same yeare" by means of grafting (54), genealogical grafting allows the Duchess's family

tree the chance to bear fruit that is untainted. The child is directly associated with grafting, with both described using the epithet “pretty” (2.1.148) (5.5.126). The grafting discourse in the play seems to posit a potential for the cleansing the blood/sap of the Aragon family tree.

The fruit of the Duchess and Antonio’s engraftment becomes the potential hope for healing her corrupt family line. This is precisely the argument that Ellerbeck makes: “by describing the Duchess’s reproductive state in horticultural terms, Webster hints that her private pregnancy, which works against the preservation of her distinguished lineage, is an innovative improvement upon her familial circumstances, rather than a socially disadvantageous situation” (9). The child is, in Ellerbeck’s essay, “the play’s hope for peace” (13). Yet this argument does not account for the violent transformation that the Duchess and her unborn child make because of the apricocks. The apricocks do not merely appear in the play as something to be discussed or shared by multiple characters; the apricocks appear in the play in order to penetrate the Duchess’s secret, and they ultimately cause her dangerously premature labour. While the grafted apricocks certainly point to the grafted nature of the fruit/child, their penetrative violence makes me question the nature of the grafting. As the container for both the child and the apricocks, the Duchess is unquestionably one party to the grafting, but who is the other?

Given that Antonio is the Duchess’s husband and the biological father of the child, it is logical to assume that he is scion to be grafted onto the Duchess’s stock. Responding to the Duchess’s suggestion that grafting is “a bettering of nature” (2.1.169), Bosola explains how this procedure works: the gardener’s task is “to make a pippin grow

upon a crab, / A damson on a black-thorn” (2.1.170-171). In discussing these lines, Ellerbeck explains:

The metaphor refers to the grafting of two varieties of apple trees: pippins and crab apples. By alluding to this particular combination, Bosola displays his disapproval of the Duchess’s pregnancy and signals the ostensible illegitimacy of her fetal child. While crab apples were known for their sour flavor, pippins were a sweet, dessert-quality apple. The two varieties were in some sense opposites: they were compatible and could be made to grow together by grafting, but they formed an undesirable combination. (7)

However, Ellerbeck only looks at the first part of Bosola’s example. What about the damson and the black-thorn? Damsons and black-thorns are both in the plum family. And, in the first scene of the play, Bosola – the same character who references the damsons and black-thorns – suggests that “[the Cardinal] and his brother are like plum-trees” (1.1.51). Bosola uses plum-trees as one of his examples of grafting, and Ferdinand has already been described by Bosola as a plum-tree: to what extent is Ferdinand’s plum grafting related to the apricock grafting?

Here, I would like to turn back to the gardening manuals of Chapter 4 in order to take a closer look at apricock grafting. Ralph Austen notes that “the white *Pearl-plum-stock* is accounted the best to *Inoculate Aprecott-buds* on” (98). A few pages later, he re-emphasizes this relationship between apricocks and plums: “though *Aprecocks* are (in the general) accounted *Plums*, yet because of the excellency of the fruit, they may be spoken of by themselves. . . . I account the *White-pearl-plum-stocks* the best to *Inoculate Aprecock buds* upon, *although* they may be done upon other *Plum-stocks* with good

success, if they be good juicy stocks, able to give a large nourishment, for Aprecock-trees require much nourishment” (109). Austen’s suggestion that apricocks are related to plums offers a crucial link between Bosola’s description of the Cardinal and Ferdinand as “plum-trees” (1.1.52) and the Duchess’s apricock-child. If apricocks were considered in the early modern period to be a type of plum, then the Duchess’s apricock-child becomes far more closely associated with the brothers. Indeed, Vin Nardizzi explains that “it would be best to graft stocks and scions that are more approximate in nature” (156). As botanical family members, Ferdinand’s plum tree and the Duchess’s apricot tree would be ideal candidates for engraftment. Providing the most detail about the apricock grafting process I have found, Hugh Plat explains,

Plant an Apricot in the midst of other plumme Trees round about it, at a convenient distance; then in an apt season, bore thorough your plum Trees, and let in to every one of them, one or two of the branches of your Apricot tree, thorough rough those holes, taking away the barke on both sides of your branches which you let in, joining sap to sap, and lute the holes up with tempered loame; and when they are well knit, the next year cut off the branch from the Apricot Tree: and so you have gotten many Apricot Trees out of one. Take away in time all the head of your plum Tree, and all other branches maintaining onely that which is gotten from the Apricot. (127-128)

In light of Ferdinand’s and the Cardinal’s depiction as plum tree, these grafting handbooks demonstrate a disturbing generational link between grafted apricocks and plum trees. Although both brothers are plum trees, as I discussed in Chapter 5, Ferdinand is the only brother who desires to penetrate his sister’s body. Given that Bosola mentions

plums in his discussion of grafting and that plum trees were most often used in apricock grafting, it is likely that the grafted apricocks that penetrate the Duchess's body come out of a graft between an apricock tree and a plum tree. Coupled with the violently penetrative nature of these apricocks, their relationship to the plum tree suggests that the apricock-child in the Duchess's womb is not the fruit of "the loving palms" (1.2.489) – Antonio and the Duchess – but rather (figuratively, at least) the incestuous fruit of the grafted union (a union that can, at best, be described as violent, and at worst, as rape) between the plum-tree and apricock-tree – Ferdinand and his sister, the Duchess. Such grafting does little to better nature.

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