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Symbolic Use of Fruit Images in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Abstract

The research article investigates the intended outcomes of a gustatory item- apricot on the human behaviors in John Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623). The eponymous character Duchess is seduced to have apricots so that her marital status is exposed. Initially, the Duchess is sworn not to remarry and asked to remain widow, later on she is found to have been married and pregnant. This exposure is facilitated by Webster's fruit strategy. Informed by a guiding question- How does Bosola employ apricot for proving the pregnancy of Duchess? This study uses the gustatory evidences related to Duchess and Bosola. Using cross-case and within-case analysis, a claim is reached. If Bosola, the spy had not been able to seduce Duchess offering apricots, the play would have taken a different route and there would not have been the possibility of the tragedy of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The instances where the apricot strategy is employed are taken as evidences and analyzed accordingly. The analytical framework consists of two directions: Consuming without paring: the dainties of Duchess and gullibility of Duchess: A Spanish fig for the imputation. In this framework, the favor of Duchess to the apricot and the imputation charged against Bosola, the spy are considered and a claim is yielded. The assertion as the outcome of the analysis can be stated as: the Duchess has fallen victim because of her unusual fascination to apricot and the imputation must be charged against Duchess and not against Bosola.

Keywords: Consuming without paring, imputation, inducing labor, a spy, vulturous eating, post-apricot hazards

Introduction

John Webster (1580-1632), the Jacobean playwright has discussed the

conspiracies in his play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623). Akin to the problems of royalty in the British regime, the play considers the problems of reign and greed. In that context, the play subsumes a scene known as the "apricot episode" wherein the Duchess's pregnancy is tested. After being hired by the Duchess's two brothers to handle her affairs, a spy named Bosola learns that the Duchess has married and is expecting a child. It is via the use of apricot that he learns this. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean era, it was believed that the apricot could induce labor. The Elizabethan England had "no less store of" "strange fruits" such as "apricots and peaches" (Withington and Harrison 31). In that line, the spy in this play has used the cultural knowledge as the medical toolkit. This research paper is guided by the research question: How does Bosola employ apricot for proving the pregnancy of Duchess? After exploration, the research yields a conclusion that the Duchess has fallen victim owing to her unusual fascination to apricot and the imputation must be charged against Duchess and not against Bosola.

Examining literature on *The Duchess of Malfi* reveals the main themes that have drawn attention to the play. The study of childbirth from a widowed woman takes a form of a woman's quest of independence. In that light, critics have paid attention to the study of widowhood, remarriage and childbirth. Next line of debate is on the medical knowledge from Renaissance period. Testing a woman's pregnancy using fruits such as apricot can signify the status of medical knowledge in the period. The modern-day physicians would find it too simple; the critics have debated over the testing of pregnancy and the available methods such as the use of the fruits. The fruit strategy for the revelation of pregnancy is one of the most important research themes around this play. This Jacobean tragedy has drawn the attention of critics in terms of the study of madness and carnivalesque readings. The insanity in the play is taken as the most enduring method of facing reality. The carnivalization by means of madness has helped the characters navigate the hazards among them. Alongside these themes such as quest of independence, status of medical knowledge, fruit strategy, and insanity for navigating reality, robust body of literature takes the play as the tragedy of blood. To particularize, Lori Schroeder Haslem locates the quest of female independence and states that the childbirth itself becomes associated with the purging of an ailing or overtaxed digestive tract, and the gestating woman becomes associated with "a patient who has overindulged appetites for the wrong foods" (439). The Duchess acts on her moods, whims denying the control exerted by her brothers. Asserting that there is nothing specific in the vast body of Renaissance medical knowledge would be foolish (Randall 180). Whether or not apricot really is the test toolkit of the present day gynecology has been another body of study. Fundamentally, why Bosola has used apricot in testing the pregnancy has become a remarkable line of investigation. Thus, this line of scholarship has drawn the attention of medical scholars. In addition, in order to clarify the goal of the apricot episode, Yann Garcette articulates that the reasoning behind Bosola's fruit strategy is "nowhere spelt out," and it has prompted "scholarly investigation" (1). Although Yann Garcette intends to state that apricot episode is understudied, it has become an enigmatic scene which has intrigued the scholars of many disciplines from food studies to medical scholarship.

Arther Lindley reads the apricot scene in the Bakhtian style and considers it

as “the foundation for the carnivalesque reading” (110). The eating of Duchess and the discovery of pregnancy have led to the love of insanity and characters do not and cannot act sanely. Additionally, even if we accept Shakespeare's Hamlet's superior artistic worth, Clayton M. Hamilton explores the idea that *The Duchess of Malfi* represents “the supreme climax of the tragedy-of-blood” (429). These major modes of investigations around the play pave a path for this research article. They do not direct their focus on the gullibility of Duchess and the seductive nature of the apricots to her. Hence, this study undertakes this line of analysis: the duchess was very malleable and she succumbed to the apricots leading to the claim: the seductive apricots and gullible Duchess are the sources of tragic events in the play.

Consuming without Paring: The Dainties of Duchess

The straightforward response to an inquiry—should Duchess have eaten the apricots or rejected—is simple; since they were her favorite fruits, she considered them her dainties, she should have eaten as she has done. Other lines of considerations are eschewed from this deliberation in this section:

BOSOLA: I have a trick may chance discover it,
A pretty one; I have bought some apricots,
The first our spring yields. (2.1. 64-6)

As Bosola is asked to look after the affairs of Duchess, he sees her with the different physique and different dresses. Thus, he wishes to examine her case with the apricots:

BOSOLA: I have a present for your grace.
DUCHESS: O, sir, where are they? I have heard of none to-year.
BOSOLA [aside] Good; her color rises. (2.1. 118-23)

Bosola has devised a strategy to test the Duchess's pregnancy by giving her apricots in order to determine her marital status. As it happens, he is aware of the Duchess's deep love for apricots. As a result, he tells the Duchess that he has brought her the gift. Due to her gardener's failure to plant apricots that year, the Duchess is depicted as being extremely rushed to locate the fruits. She is succumbed to the taste of the apricots.

DUCHESS: Indeed, I thank you; they are wondrous fair ones,
What an unskillful fellow is our gardener!
We shall have none this month. (2.1.121-3)

The Duchess starts the fruit enjoyment when Bosola hands her the apricots. They taste so good to her. The Duchess also recalls her house's gardener, who would be unable to grow the apricots that month. Bosola brought the apricots, and she appreciates Bosola for that. Her appreciation shows once more how much she loves apricots, even if she was unaware that they would induce the labor in her. She cannot sense. Bosola's efforts of testing her pregnancy and determining her marital status. The ulterior motives of Bosola were beyond the scope of Duchess's mind. She did not even have the slightest sense of suspicion on the offer of Bosola. Presumably, there lies the artistic success of Webster's characterization and depiction of the play that concludes in the tragic scene. Duchess's fondness of the fruits and her vulturous ways of eating lead Bosola to remind her to peel them:

BOSOLA: Will not your grace pare them?

DUCHESS: No. They taste of musk, methinks; indeed they do.

BOSOLA: I know not: yet I wish your grace had pared 'em.

DUCHESS: Why?

BOSOLA: I forgot to tell you, the knave gardener,

Only to raise his profit by them the sooner,

Did ripen them in horse dung. (2.1.124-9)

The Duchess does not even consider trimming the apricots because she loves them very much.

She feels that they smell really nice, and she does not want to avoid the pleasant scent, therefore she refuses to peel them when requested to.

She doesn't even find it difficult to eat without removing the apricots' skins after Bosola tells her that the apricots must have been coated with horse manure. Instead of paring the apricots and cleaning them, the lady is so much tempted to eat that she takes cautions as the jest and when her husband denies eating the apricots she is all prepared to eat alone calling her husband a "loath" who robs her enjoyments from her favorite fruit:

DUCHESS: O, you jest,

You shall judge: pray taste one.

ANTONIO: Indeed, madam,

I do not love the fruit.

DUCHESS: Sir, you are loath

To rob us of our dainties; 'tis a delicate fruit. (2.1. 128-33)

The Duchess tells him that Bosola must have been joking when she tells her that the apricots must have been covered in horse waste manure. Antonio refuses to sample the apricots when the Duchess asks him to. He is later told by the Duchess that he is not giving her enough encouragement. Her spouse ought to have eaten the apricots as she adores them. The parallels between Websterian and Miltonic characters have drawn a lot of scholarly interest. The Duchess's demand is similar to Eve's wherein the husbands are challenged and the downfalls of their own are the consequences of their own behaviours: the consumption of the forbidden fruits- apple for Eve and apricots for Duchess. Rather than considering the cautions and refusals, Duchess is so impulsive that she consumes them and begins the scene of thankfulness to Bosola:

DUCHESS: I thank you, Bosola. They were right good ones.

If they do not make me sick.

ANTONIO: How now, madam?

DUCHESS: This green fruit and my stomach are not friends;

How they swell me!

BOSOLA: [aside] Nay, you are too much swelled already. (2.1. 141-44)

The Duchess also appreciates Bosola for providing the benefits of her favour, pointing her that the issue is not just her quick eating.

By this point, though, she is cautious. She is

immediately sceptical of the fruit's effects after eating it and thanking Bosola.

She comes to know about the incompatibility between her stomach and the fruits and informs Bosola that it is the apricots that have caused the swelling. Nonetheless, Bosola tells her that the swelling existed before the introduction of the apricots.

Determining the causal links between the apricots and swelling becomes a matter of debate between Bosola and Duchess.

This section, thus, depicts how lovely the apricots were to Duchess. They were her dainties. She did not even think of cleaning and paring them before eating even when she was cautioned. She took the caution to be a jest. She considered the apricots to be restorative of her health which turned out otherwise at the later part of the play. The seductive apricots, at least for Duchess if not for Antonio, have turned Duchess almost blind. Neither she acted on the caution nor was strong enough to doubt upon the intentions of the spy. What she merely did was she acted on her impulses that drove her to the fall that she was destined to. We cannot assume that her paring or cleaning of the fruits could have reduced the effects. As readers we may think that Duchess should not have accepted the apricots and fallen victim of Bosola's plots. However, this is what Aristotle might have theorized as *hamartia*—the small error that causes an unimaginable downfall of a character of a considerable height: Duchess eats apricots and exposes her pregnancy to her brothers who would never want her to remarry for securing the hereditary wealth, prestige and power. Unfortunately, we have a Duchess who has a baby from a steward, a person of low social status.

Gullibility of Duchess: A Spanish Fig for the Imputation

Nowhere in the play do we find that Bosola has poisoned the Duchess. Nonetheless, he is charged of doing so. He does not accept this imputation. Even so, Antonio, the steward cum husband of Duchess charges him so that he could hide her pregnancy and save himself from the lurking danger. In fact, it is the gullibility of Duchess that has caused all the post-apricot hazards. Bosola signals a gesture (Spanish Fig) that hints at the ridiculing charge to him that he has poisoned and spoiled Duchess. Through the gesture of Spanish fig, what Bosola intends to convey is the message that it is Antonio who has poisoned Duchess and not Bosola. More clearly, either it is Antonio who has spoiled Duchess and encouraged "outlaw marriage" (Whigham 171), or, this article argues, it is the lack of restraint in Duchess that leads to all the untoward consequences in the play.

Bosola, the spy, employs fruit not only to test the marital status of Duchess, he employs it as metaphor even to the brothers of Duchess: "He and his brother are like plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich and overladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them" (1.1. 46-8). Bosola views that the Duchess's brothers are like the plum—a fruit that is helpful only to the birds like crows, pies, and caterpillars. They are the plums that are cultivated near the foul water. Despite their strength, many people find them useless. Through this characterization, Bosola has attempted to depict that it is not only Duchess who is weak, it is her brothers as well. Condemning Bosola or accusing him of the misdeeds is not justifiable. He does not merit the condemnation because the family of Duchess particularly, her brothers and Duchess are the spoiled people as plums that are utterly useless except to the nasty birds and dirty insects. Bosola and Duchess discuss the worth of apricots and their benefits to the environment.

The Duchess is then shown consuming the apricots. She consumes it so promptly that she becomes conceited and loses control of her circumstances because

"the craving for apricots is indulged" (Albala 152) Ultimately, Bosola learns about her remarriage after the Duchess eats the apricots as his purpose was to "read into her somatic reactions" (Charalampous 108). After reading, the lady's tragedy starts. When considering the issue of imputation, it should be the lady herself who is responsible for her downfall if it is because she eats the apricots without suspecting the intentions of Bosola. She is simply unable to read the intentions of the spy. Her inability, the gullibility, has invited her the disaster, the downfall:

BOSOLA: 'Tis a pretty art, This grafting.

DUCHESS: 'Tis so; a bettering of nature.

BOSOLA: To make a pippin grow upon a crab,

A damson on a blackthorn. [aside] How greedily she eats them! (2.1. 125-6)

The Spanish fog, or the rejection of imputation by Bosola can be further substantiated when she eats the apricots without attempting to grasp the intentions of Bosola, Bosola's apology is not the true apology as he knows that the Duchess has invited her downfall on her own accord and in her own right. The word "grafting" refers to the combination of "a peach and a plum" (Raphael Falco 12). Immediately after the consumption of apricots, she bears the effects:

DUCHESS: Oh, I am in an extreme cold sweat!

BOSOLA: I am very sorry.

DUCHESS: Lights to my chamber! O good Antonio,

I fear I am undone! (2.1. 144-7)

Following the apricots' intended effects, the Duchess's labour pain was revealed, and Bosola knew what he should know because the woman was sweating profusely and asking husband

to take her to a room so she could give birth. Bosola needed more concrete evidence, even when

he could already tell she was pregnant based on the size of her body and her outfits. He possesses the sound proof. The woman requests to be led to a room where she may give birth to a kid securely.

She is asked to be taken to a different room by her husband. Although the cause of this consequence can be attributed to Bosola, it is the Duchess herself- she is sweating and needs a room for delivering a baby. But Antonio, Duchess and Delio, the friend of Antonio cannot publicly accept that Duchess is giving birth to a baby. Thus, Delio devises a plan that they need to impose imputation to Bosola. They should share the information around that Bosola poisoned the apricots and fed to Duchess so that they can take Duchess to the physician:

DELIO: Make use, then, of this forced occasion:

Give out that Bosola hath poisoned her

With these apricots; that will give some color

For her keeping close. (2.1. 154-57))

Delio's plan has been executed afterwards, the imputation is charged to Bosola; he had poisoned the apricots and given them to Duchess whilst even as readers we know that the lady had eaten the apricots without paring them. Even when Bosola had cautioned her that the apricots were grown among the horse dung, the Duchess took it as a joke and ate them as the restorative fruits. Bosola cannot believe on their imputation and finds it evident that her eating promptly and the irritability

afterwards are the infallible prompts for having the baby in the womb: "So, so, there's no question but her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricots are apparent signs of breeding" (2.2.2-3).

Evidently, Antonio executes the plan hatched by Delio and charges imputation to Bosola. It is here that Bosola displays the Spanish fig utterly disbelieving and refuting the charge. The apricots were not poisoned. They were indeed fair and wondrous. What has spoiled the status of Duchess is not the apricots or the poison, rather it is Antonio who is a poison as Bosola wants people to believe.

ANTONIO: [aside] This fellow will undo me.

You gave the duchess apricots today;

Pray heaven they were not poisoned!

BOSOLA: Poisoned? A Spanish fig

For the imputation! (2.3. 29-33)

This section portrays the theme that charging imputation to Bosola is not justifiable, rather it is the Duchess herself who is very much susceptible to the temptation of Bosola. Thus, imputation needs to be charged to Duchess herself as "the immediate imputation of the crime to Bosola may be the displacement of failure" (Whigham 273) Her gullibility is the central reason for her downfall.

Conclusion

Begun with the basic inquiry of the role of apricots in the formation of a Jacobean tragedy, the article concludes that the Duchess's temptation of the fruit is the only cause of the foundation of the tragedy. She consumes the fruit even without paring and the attempt to charge imputation to Bosola is but a baseless charge. The within case analysis of the select evidences substantiate the claim that the play has used fruit for proving the weakness of the eponymous character Duchess who could have reduced the tragic instances had she been able enough to resist the temptation of eating her dainty.

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