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The apricots episode in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (2.1.104-158): an anti-Catholic farce.

Yann Garcette

Before the eponymous heroine of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* makes her second entrance on the stage at 2.1, the dramatist is careful to have his choric character Bosola, the "intelligencer" (1.1.254)¹ secretly commissioned by the Duchess's two brothers to spy on their sister, prepare the audience for a shocking change in her habits, physical appearance and dress style:

I observe our 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,
And, contrary to our Italian fashion,
Wears a loose-bodied gown. (2.1.72-74)

Bosola's description is a far cry from Antonio's encomium in 1.1. Initially praised "[f]or her discourse [...] so full of rapture" (1.1.183), and a "sweet countenance" that would "raise one to a galliard | That lay in a dead palsy" (1.1.189-90), the Duchess is now noted for puking, belching, looking drawn in the face and large at the waist. The contrastive diptych highlights the extent to which the paragon of elegance and virtue has deteriorated, her physical appearance now calling for a language that dispenses with decorum.

Bosola's gaze is not the "male gaze" commonly found in literature: intense though it may be in its scrutiny, it is not filtered by sexual longing. It is the gaze of the physician, capturing a stark impression of an ailing body. The resulting portrait is a half-medical, half-burlesque version of the Petrarchan blazon, itemizing the symptoms of a disordered physiology. These symptoms Bosola takes for evidence of a secret that might be of concern to the Aragonian brothers: "There's somewhat in't" (2.1.68). Suspecting a pregnancy the Duchess is hard put to hide, he comes up with a "trick [that] may chance discover it" (2.1.69): presenting the Duchess with "some apricots" (2.1.70) as one baits a prey. The rationale behind Bosola's fruit strategy is nowhere spelled out, and it has prompted scholarly investigation of early modern pharmacopoeias for alleged abortive properties in apricots.² The scene, however,

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1. All references are to John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Michael Neill (ed.). New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2015.

2. Dale B. J. Randall, "The Rank and Earthy Background of Certain Physical Symbols in *The Duchess of Malfi*", in *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 18, 1987, p. 171-203.

invites alternative routes of investigation, focusing not so much on the fruit's properties as on Bosola's gesture and the Duchess's response to it.

By introducing an element of nature in a courtly environment, Bosola's gift puts into relief the artificiality of palatial life. But the fruit is itself an artefact, its growth sped up by the gardener's craft. A product of man's transformation of his environment, it appears in the scene as a visual emblem crystallizing the various ramifications of a larger reflexion on the nature/culture dichotomy, a familiar topic of debate here carried out in two brief exchanges, one on horticultural techniques, the other on sartorial conventions. But for an audience customarily exposed to Christian iconography, Bosola's present of a fruit to a woman soon to give birth to a son would have immediately recalled the combined images of the Temptation of Eve and the Annunciation to Mary. The simultaneous references reflect the contradictory evaluation of the Duchess between sinful woman and saintly heroine in the text as in critical literature. The Biblical intertext alerts to the scene's cryptic involvement in contemporary religious polemics between Reformers and Roman Catholics. Bosola's charged gesture is ultimately turned by Webster into an occasion for staging a fierce burlesque of Catholic sacraments, dogmas and practices.

Dis/covering nature under the cultural fabric

The introduction of fruit in the courtly context initiates a short exchange of views between the Provisor of the horse and the Lady of the house on the "pretty art" of horticulture (141), the final echo of the moralized comparison between nature and culture which has reverberated over the course of 2.1 through motifs as diverse as social posturing (1-15), facial makeup (23-43), human/animal hybridity (45-51) and luxurious clothing (52-58).

Gardening matters: secret husbandry

The subject of gardening is brought up twice, and the supremacy of culture reaffirmed each time with the description of nature mastered by scientific knowledge and technical expertise. Yet, this supremacy is questioned on moral grounds. The apricots, Bosola warns, were made to "ripen [...] in horse dung" (137) by the gardener who intended to "profit by them the sooner" (136). Judging from the Duchess's response – the apricots are "wondrous fair" (129) and "good" (149)³ – the experiment was successfully conducted. Yet, Bosola calls the gardener a "knave" (135), that is "a man of low rank or status; a commoner, a peasant" (*OED* knave 2), a "dishonest unprincipled man; a cunning unscrupulous rogue; a villain" (*OED* knave 3).⁴ An unfavourable value-judgment may be heard in the condescending reference to the man's inferior social status, Bosola implicitly pronouncing the lower-class

3. On the conjunction of food and manure, see Ezechiel 4:12, "And thou shalt eat it as barley cakes, and thou shalt bake it with dung that cometh out of man, in their sight" (*KJV*).

4. On the status of gardeners in early modern England, see Jill Francis, "Order and Disorder in the Early Modern Garden, 1558-c. 1630", in *Garden History*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2008, p. 24-25; also Sally O'Halloran and Jan Woudstra, "'Keeping the Garden at Knolle': The Gardeners of Knole in Sevenoaks, Kent, 1622-1711", in *Garden History*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, p. 34-55.

fruit grower a moral delinquent. Is Bosola being critical of the gardener's avaricious impatience? Of his unorthodox method? Or of his meddling with the cycle of the seasons? The text suggests all three charges: Bosola's interpolated comment seems to object to the gardener's mercenary greed; the Duchess jeers at his use of dung; and the overall context makes a case for the baleful speeding up of time. A husbandman, Gervaise Markham observes, is "he which with discretion and good order tilleth the ground in his due season".⁵ With his *curiositas*, or abuse of knowledge, and *hubris*, or intemperate ambition, the "knave" gardener is another example of one "plagued in art" (4.2.108). An overreacher in his ill-advised use of scientific knowledge as well as a man corrupted by greed, his appetite for gain causes him to stray from a natural environment where he ought to have contemplated the excellent principles of God at work and acquired a superior type of wisdom.⁶ Although a gardener by calling, he is really a man informed, or more exactly deformed, by culture. So seems to imply the fact that the apricots are pleasant to the senses, but unwholesome in substance. Instead of being "delicate fruit" (140) supposed to be "restorative" (141), they have been unnaturally rendered indigestible or possibly poisonous (2.1.163-4).

Grafting is the other motif serving to evaluate man's interference in the natural process. Bosola calls it "a pretty art" (141) while the Duchess praises it as "a bett'ring of nature" (142). To be sure, there is a large degree of disingenuousness in Bosola's remark, who only registers appreciation to prompt the Duchess to compromise herself by approving of a practice that obliquely reflects on her own mismatch. As Michael Neill has noted, Bosola's wonderment that one can "make a pippin grow upon a crab, | A damson on a blackthorn" (143-4) implicitly suggests "that the Duchess's womb is about to bear fruit and that her pregnancy results from a mixing of social kinds".⁷ Social and horticultural concerns meet in the word *husband/ry*. The commonplace analogy between grafting and bastardy had been the topic of an exchange in *The Winter's Tale* only three years before (4.4.79-103).⁸ The underlying principle holds that social status is comparable to natural species with the implication that the quality of blood differs from one person to the next according to hierarchical distinctions. The analogy, however, stops short of harmonizing the

5. Gervaise Markham, *The English Husbandman*. Printed by T.S. for Iohn Browne, London: 1613, ch. 1, A3.

6. Orchards, however, were said harmoniously to combine pleasure and profit. See Judith Roberts, "The Gardens of the Gentry in the Late Tudor Period", in *Garden History*, vol. 27, n°1, 1999, p. 89-108.

7. As glossed by Michael Neill in Michael Neil (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

8. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (ed.). London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014. Interestingly, the passage in *The Winter's Tale* draws a similar parallel between grafting, bastardy, facial makeup and costume. See also 2 *Henry VI* (3.2.212-215) where Suffolk accuses Warwick of being a bastard: "Thy mother took into her blameful bed | Some stern untutored churl, and noble stock | Was graft with crab-tree slip, whose fruit thou art, | And never of the Nevilles' noble race." On the analogy between grafting and bastardy, see Erin Ellerbeck, "'A Bett'ring of Nature': Grafting and Embryonic Development in *The Duchess of Malfi*", in *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi (ed.). London: Palgrave, 2012, p. 85-99; and Miranda Wilson, "Bastard Grafts, Crafted Fruits: Shakespeare's Planted Families", *ibid.*, p. 101-117.

gardener's conclusion on the benefits of grafting with the moralist's view of the corrupting effect of mingling high with low blood. The botanical advantage of growing a sweet apple ("pippin" [95]) on a sturdy crab-tree articulates, by innuendo, the cultural anxiety that the purest of all human bloods, that of kings – like "King Pippin" (2.1.95) – may actually be issued from a "crabbe of the country" or rude peasant.⁹ The same kind of cultural prejudice is obscurely detected in Bosola's illustration of what "a pretty art", i.e. embellishing falsification, grafting is. Furthermore, grafting makes it possible to grow "[a] damson on a blackthorn" (152). Moralists would have been alarmed to hear in that description a licence for the birth of a *son* to a *dam*, or *dame*,¹⁰ impregnated by the *thorn* of a man of *black*, i.e., meaner, sort – a birth aberrant beyond repair.¹¹ Grafting would then be evocative of disparagement, "marriage to one of inferior rank" (*OED* disparagement 1). "Black" can also denote something "evil or wicked; iniquitous; foul, hateful" (*OED* black 10): this makes "dam" an allusion to the "devil's dam" as well as a pun on *damn*.¹² Lastly, "black" in the sense of "deeply stained with dirt; soiled, filthy, begrimed" (*OED* black 5) makes the *black/thorn*, or begrimed phallus, resonate with the apricot (*a-prick-cock*) befouled with horse dung or *whore's dung*. The sexual quibble contributes to the suggestion, familiar in medieval and early modern popular representations, of anal conception and birth of the sort which François Laroque has detected in the carnivalesque appearance of Trinculo from under Caliban's "gaberdine" in *The Tempest*.¹³

9. "A rude peasant or crabbe of the country" is Thomas Cooper's definition of "*rusticus tetricus*" in his *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae*, London: 1578. <https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/lexicon/entry/1400/154499>.

10. A female ruler and/or a woman of a superior rank (*OED* dame. I.1).

11. "Black" refers to social inferiority, rusticity. Cp. Joan Puzel's self-description as "black" in *I Henry VI*, (1.2.72-3, 78-80, 83-6, italics added): "Dolphin, I am by birth a shepherd's daughter, | My wit untrained in any kind of art; [...] | God's mother deigned to appear to me | And, in a vision full of majesty, | Willed me to leave my base vocation [...] | And, whereas I was *black and swart* before, | With those clear rays which she infused on me, | That beauty am I blest with, which you may see." In his gloss on "black and swart" Burns notes that "[t]he distinction here is one of social class [...]" Joan Puzel there says [...] she was sunburnt, unlike a fair-skinned aristocrat or bourgeoisie." William Shakespeare, *I Henry VI*, Edward Burns (ed.). London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, Third series, 2000, p. 134.

12. A term "applied opprobriously to a woman" (*OED*) which, in a period concerned with witchcraft and demonology, originated in the belief that witches had intercourse with the devil, begetting either a demon or an antichrist (half human, half devil, as opposed to Christ who was entirely human and divine). On the dam/damn homophony, see Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and their Significance*. London, MacMillan, 1989, p. 69.

13. "How cam'st thou to be the siege of this mooncalf? Can he vent Trinculos?" (2.2.105-6). François Laroque, "En marge de l'idéologie: Antimasque et grotesque dans le *Dr Faustus* et *La Tempête*", in *Actes du Congrès de la Société française Shakespeare*, vol. 3, 1981, p. 108-109. Other allusions in Shakespeare's drama to anal conception and birth include *Othello*, 1.2.21-2: "I fetch my life and being | From men of royal siege" (Everyman editor John F. Andrews glosses "siege" as meaning "both (a) seat, and (b) excrement"); *The Winter's Tale*, 3.3.70-74: "A boy or a child, I wonder? A pretty one, a very pretty one – sure some scape; though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work". "[T]runk' and 'behind-door' (backdoor) were probably euphemisms for the penis and anus", Arden3 editor John Pitcher notes. He could have included the flatulent-sounding "pretty" with the

In sum, Bosola's remarks unwittingly comment upon the Duchess's marriage to her steward and the offspring likely to issue from it. Nature serves as metaphor for deep cultural anxieties regarding a union that ignores social boundaries and moral standards. The mercenary "knave gard'ner" is the same "saucy and ambitious devil" (1.1.400) that Antonio fears he will appear in the eyes of the world when it is revealed that "he plowed [the Duchess], and she cropped".¹⁴ Ripening "a delicate fruit" in animal dung and growing superior fruit through grafting on an inferior stock hint at the illegitimate production of aristocratic bastards for which unequal unions like that between the Duchess and Antonio were stigmatized. By questioning the wisdom of meddling with the laws of nature, the debate highlights the discrepancy between the facts of *physis* and the values of *polis*. What proves "restorative" in the natural order is construed as "corrosive" (4.2.92) in the cultural system of representations: culturally abject dung is a natural fertilizer; hybridization in nature can improve a stock, but social hybridization invariably produces mongrels. The Duchess however is very clear about her own views: the apricots have a delightful taste of "musk" (133), and grafting is "a bett'ring of nature" (142). She has little consideration for the arbitrary moral prejudices of her conservative culture so violently endorsed by her tyrannical brothers.

Sartorial matters

The Duchess's cumbersome attire functions as a cover-up for her compromising pregnancy and an obstacle for Bosola's investigation:

A whirlwind strike off these bawd farthingales,
 For, but for that and the loose-bodied gown,
 I should have discovered apparently
 The young springal cutting a caper in her belly! (145-148)

The conspicuous camouflage is entirely congruent with the double game of hide-and-seek/conceal-and-reveal that makes for a large part of the play's action. Because the gown bars *direct* visual access to the physiological evidence that would confirm his suspicions, Bosola must rest satisfied with *indirect* statements or signs: the Duchess's demand for a litter "[s]uch a one as the Duchess of Florence rode in [...]"

additional pun on "prat", slang for buttock, and "scape", a synonym for "fart". See entry for Pēdo, is, pēdi, ēre: "To let a scape or a fart: to breake wind backward" in Thomas, *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (1587), also Rubinstein, "scape", *op. cit.*, p. 329; and *Titus Andronicus*, 4.2.61-2, 64-68, 115 (italics added):

NURSE: Our empress' shame and stately Rome's disgrace:
 She is delivered, lords, she is delivered. [...]
 AARON: Well, God give her good rest. What hath he sent her?
 NURSE: A devil.
 AARON: Why then, she is the devil's dam: a joyful *issue*.
 NURSE: A joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful *issue*. [...]
 CHIRON: Rome will despise her for this *foul escape*.

14. Agrippa's words in *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.2.238). A similar analogy is used by the Duchess: "So, now the ground's broke, | You may discover what a wealthy mine | I make you lord of" (1.1.416-418).

when she was great with child” (107-108); her being “troubled with the mother” (113); her hot flushes (128) and “swell[ing]” (152). Although Bosola later concludes that “there’s no question but her tetchiness and most vulturous eating of the apricots are *apparent* signs of breeding” (2.2.1-2, emphasis added), signs are not the thing itself and doubts linger. This is suggested by the semantic ambivalence of the word “apparent”, an echo to the earlier adverb “apparently” (147): to appear is “to become visible” and also “to seem, as distinguished from to be” (*OED* appear 1 and 11).

The object that “apparent signs” fail to “discover [...] apparently” relates the game of hide-and-seek/conceal-and-reveal to the nature/culture dichotomy. For the “nature” that the circumference of the gown and the circumlocutions of the text half conceal and half reveal, and that Bosola circumspcctly proceeds to glimpse is not just the Duchess’s pregnancy (*natura* > *nasci*, to be born), but ultimately her genitalia (*OED* nature 3). In other words, the success of Bosola’s endeavour to discover the naked truth about his mistress depends on the possibility of lifting up her clothes to uncover her “close”.¹⁵ This is Webster’s own take on [Baubô’s *anasyrma*](#),¹⁶ an act so alien to cultural decency that only the formidable violence of a natural hazard, a “whirlwind,” could accomplish it. The Duchess’s “nature” is the blind (and blinding) spot around which both action and dialogue revolve, the “nothing” about which there is much ado,¹⁷ the eye of the storm.¹⁸ The gown, complete with “farthingales” and a “ruff” (109), allegorizes the enforcement of cultural taboos on areas of the anatomy or on conditions of the body considered improper for public exposure.

The clothing motif is only part of a larger system foregrounding the nature/culture dichotomy and the dynamic interplay of visibility/invisibility. Act 2, scene 1 opens with Bosola in his favourite role as satirical malcontent, scolding

15. Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins. Language, Culture, Context*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 255, notes a similar connection is the description of Ophelia’s death: “In contrast to the ‘natural modesty’ of women [...], Ophelia, in the ‘melodious lay’ [...] of her drowning, floats more openly, face up, ‘her clothes spread wide’ [...] in lines the ear may hear [...] as the spreading wide of her ‘close’”.

16. *Anasyrma* (Greek ἀνάσυρμα) describes the self-exposure by a woman of her genitalia or buttocks by lifting her skirt. As a type of *anasyrma*, Bosola’s ploy has a precedent in classical mythology. The legend has it that, after nine days and nights searching for her abducted daughter, Persephone, and grieving over her loss, Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility (whose name is etymologically linked with motherhood), being entertained by an old woman named Baubô, refuses to taste of the wine and food Baubô offers her. Hurt by the goddess’s refusal, or perhaps in an effort to amuse her, Baubô pulls up her dress over her head and exposes her private parts, causing Demeter to laugh, and eventually to accept the offered food and drink. In some versions, a little boy, Iacchus, appears from under Baubô’s dress or peers out of her vagina. The episode makes the myth swerve from tragedy to comedy whereas the apricots episode draws the love comedy of the first act to a burlesque conclusion before the dramatic action takes its tragic course. For a detailed review of early references to Baubô in literature and a rich study of the possible interpretations of her name and gesture, see Maurice Olender, “Aspects de Baubô. Textes et contextes antiques.” *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, tome 202, n°1, 1985, p. 3-55 and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La Mort dans les yeux. Figures de l’Autre en Grèce ancienne : Artémis, Gorgô*. Paris: Hachette, coll. Littératures, 1998, p. 34.

17. In early modern language, “nothing” designates the female sex, and “thing” the male sex.

18. Cp. the Duchess’s description of her embrace: “All discord, without this circumference, | Is only to be pitied and not feared, | Yet, should they know it, time will easily | Scatter the tempest” (1.1.456-459).

Castruchio and the Old Lady for aspiring to social recognition beyond their natural limitations:

Though we are eaten up of lice and worms,
And though continually we bear about us
A rotten and dead body, we delight
To hide it in rich tissue. (2.1.55-58)

The repeated concern throughout the scene that cultural sophistication (mannerisms, cosmetics, dress style) dissimulates natural corruption leads to the suggestion that high civility is but a superb display of illusory signs, a dazzling *theatrum mundi* belying the ultimate and only truth of human existence: death. Death is nature's repugnance to culture's histrionics.

The superficiality of court culture is the object of a brief exchange about the French habit of wearing "hats on 'fore the King" (115), which the Duchess reckons should be imported to Malfi. Antonio objects that hats serve a higher purpose than merely protecting the head from adverse weather: "I have seen, in colder countries than in France, | Nobles stand bare to th'prince, and the distinction | Methought showed reverently" (123-125). To her, courtly attire is but "ceremony" (119); to him, it affirms "duty" (119). Their debate centres on reverence as much as reference, for what is at stake is the validity of the visual signs by means of which aristocratic culture fashions itself. If Antonio regards a courtier's hat as a performative symbol of class pride, for the Duchess a hat is a hat, "a piece of felt" (120); in Baudrillard's terminology, their opposition is that between representation (Antonio) and simulation (Duchess):

Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalences, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference [*mise à mort de toute référence*]. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.¹⁹

Life at court is a spectacular simulacrum with no reference to anything other than its own lie; such is the no-nonsense outlook that the Duchess opposes to her steward whose readiness to put too much sense into forms bespeaks an obsequiousness smacking of superstitious iconoduly contrasting with the Duchess's iconoclastic rationality. The rich tissue of courtly attire does not materialise some

19. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (tr. Sheila Faria Glaser). Michigan: University of Michigan Press, "The Body in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism", 1994, unpaginated. <https://www.e-reading-lib.com/bookreader.php/144970/jean-baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulation.pdf>. The original text, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981) is available at https://monoskop.org/images/4/4b/Baudrillard_Jean_Simulacres_et_simulation_1981.pdf (quotation p. 16).

natural superiority as Antonio would have it; rather, it gives men and women the false appearances of the false distinctions that culture imposes on them. Sartorial sublimation is but a *trompe l'œil* exhibiting a hierarchy which is pure fabric/ation. Court culture, like horticulture, is “a pretty art” (141).

The Duchess’s view accords with her strategy. She is compelled by the tyranny of her brothers to accept the political game for what it is, a game of make-believe where the winners are cheaters. She uses clothing to her own advantage, both as a screen to keep the embarrassing truth of her “nature” from public exposure, and as a decoy to display the semblance of chastity on which her honour culturally depends. Arguably, her extravagant dress style reflects her anxiety to secure a hold on her political *persona* at a moment when it is threatened by the growing visibility of her uncontrollable body. However much she tries to contain her swelling belly within the confine of her clothes, it now pushes against the fabric of her gown at the risk of revealing her bare womanhood – her body natural – and of tearing to pieces her political semblance – her body politic. Noting her “double position of wife and ruler”, Theodora A. Jankowski contends that the Duchess “attempts to secure herself politically by divorcing her natural body from her political one,”²⁰ but eventually fails in her endeavour for “[t]he boundaries of the Duchess’s two bodies are indistinct and perpetually slipping”²¹:

In separating her body natural from her body politic, the Duchess has not provided a means for dealing with the fact that her married body natural is expected to become pregnant while her “widowed” body politic is expected to remain “unpregnant,” constant of shape. When her pregnancy impinges upon her political body and its shape changes, she does nothing beyond wearing a loose gown to disguise it. Far from being successful at concealing her pregnancy, this stratagem simply serves to call attention to both her stereotyped changing female shape and her stereotyped sexuality [in conformity with “early modern notions of the hypersexuality of widows” (p. 317)]. In allowing these stereotypes room for consideration, the Duchess forces consideration of her as *woman* rather than *ruler* and foregrounds her body natural at the expense of her body politic.²²

The Duchess’s dress, therefore, reveals as much as it conceals, exposing the fault it is expected to cover: the farthingales are termed “bawd” (145) and the gown is described as “loose-bodied” (68, 146), a pun on “loose” in the sense of “dissolute” (*OED* loose A.7). Even the “ruff” (109) may be evocative of illicit sex by reason of an unwelcome echo with *ruffian*, a whore hunter or whoremonger. The pregnancy which Bosola describes in terms pertaining to disease now produces symptoms transpiring through the clothes.

Because it serves as subterfuge, the gown is re-semanticized *within* the play as what it is *without* the play: a stage costume used by the Duchess to play the part

20. Theodora A. Jankowski, “Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*”, in Michael Neill (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 314.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

forcibly imposed upon her and by the boy-actor to perform the part of the Duchess. The pregnant body bursting out of the courtly dress comes dangerously close to exposing the Duchess's public *persona* as performance, while the body about to be discovered, in the event of the gown coming "undone", is that of the adolescent player underneath it. "[T]he young springal cutting a caper in her belly" (148) points in two directions at once: intradiegetically to the infant the Duchess carries and extradiegetically to the boy-actor playing the role of the heroine, thus conveying the striking image of a character pregnant with her own impersonator (how to make sense otherwise of Bosola's hope to "see" the child by simply lifting the gown?).²³ The androgyny suggested by the actual presence of a male body beneath the fictional trappings of femininity, together with the common allegation of homosexuality made against boy-actors at the time, may explain the text's insistent allusions to male genitalia ("apricocks", "musk", "dainties"²⁴), castration ("pared them", "to rob us of our dainties", "cutting a caper"²⁵) and buggery (the apricocks ripened in "whore's/horse dung", "blackthorn", "pretty art/ prat-y *ars[e]*").²⁶

DUCHESS: Lights to my chamber! O good Antonio,
I fear I am undone
DELIO: Lights there, lights! (2.1.154-155)

The call for lights gives the signal that the inside show put on by the "disguised" Duchess has now reached an end and that, even as she seems about to give premature birth, the larger play itself is in danger of coming to an untimely close with the actor shedding his costume before the drama's due conclusion. "I fear I am undone" is ambivalent and, to a certain extent, ambivocal, too, as two voices are heard here. The outcry both expresses the Duchess's fear that she has been found out/unbuttoned, and the boy-actor's anxiety that his body is beginning to peer from under the Duchess's dress. The suggestion here is that the abrupt emergence of male presence behind female semblance might have been accompanied on stage by a change of voice, the real male voice suddenly breaking through the fake female voice in a moment of metadramatic epiphany.²⁷ Panic tinged with the sense of being "lost in amazement"

23. On "springal" and "whirlwind", see Sophie Chiari, "'The Work of heaven' in *The Duchess of Malfi*", in *John Webster's 'Dismal Tragedy'*. The Duchess of Malfi *Reconsidered*, Sophie Chiari and Sophie Lemercier Goddard (ed.). Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2019, p. 147.

24. "Musk" alludes to the testicles by way of its possible etymological association to "Sanskrit *muṣka* scrotum, testicle, since the musk-bags were thought to resemble these" (*OED* musk). "Dainties" has the same connotation, see Rubinstein, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

25. "Caper" plays on Latin *caper* defined in early modern bilingual dictionaries as gelded goat. The allusion to gelding is made more explicit by the collocation of "caper" with "cutting".

26. On the *pretty*/*prat-ty* quibble, see Rubinstein, *op. cit.*, p. 203; "art" puns on "arse" through the Latin root *ars*.

27. Joy Leslie Gibson, *Squeaking Cleopatras. The Elizabethan Boy Player*. Stroud: Sutton, 2000, p. 66, notes that "boys' voices were breaking at around fifteen to sixteen." Dick Robinson (c. 1597-1648) would have been 17 by the time he presumably took the part about 1614, and Richard Sharpe (1601-1632) would have been 16 or 17 when the play was revived around 1617-18. On the 1617-18 revival, see the Arden edition, p. 94; for the cast in this particular production, see the Norton edition,

(169) implies that the performance is approaching a moment of aporetic self-annihilation with the fatal discovery of the “body beneath”²⁸ cancelling the “willing suspension of disbelief” required for dramatic illusion.

Bosola’s gesture does not simply lift the veil on the physical body of the actor, but also on a doctrinal body/corpus that turns the scene into a Christian allegory crystallizing the theological debates which are at the heart of the play.

Eve and Mary, the biblical intertext

The (meta)dramatic crisis in the apricots episode coalesces with a rich biblical intertext that brings together two major events in Christian historiography, the Temptation of Eve and the Annunciation to Mary, which along the lines of typological symbolism belong together, the second Eve, Mary, redeeming the first. Their evocation is another contribution to the play’s religious engagement, while their coincidence in this episode fosters the moral ambiguity in the Duchess’s characterization.

The Temptation of Eve

Chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis relates the circumstances of the Fall of mankind from an everlasting state of virtue and innocence to a historical condition of mortality and guilt coinciding with a transition in space from a place of perfection to one of corruption. This is Webster’s model for the early stages of his heroine’s downfall. It has frequently been noted that the apricots episode formally builds upon Eve’s Temptation, a reference made explicit by terms suggestive of the loss of Eden and the curse of Adam doomed to till the earth: “fall’n” (157), “lost” (156, 169), and “gardener” (130). The “wondrous fair” (129) but unwholesome apricot that makes the Duchess sick is a version of the fruit “pleasant to the eyes” which eventually proves fatal to mankind.²⁹ The shameful discovery of the Duchess’s body rehearses Adam and Eve’s shameful consciousness of their nakedness.³⁰ From Bosola’s invitation to taste of the fruit to the Duchess’s hurried exit, the sequence replicates the account of the Temptation from the moment Eve “took of the fruit [...] and did eat” to the moment “the Lord God sent [man] forth from the garden of Eden”.³¹

The biblical intertext symbolically recasts Bosola as the serpent offering the fruit to the Duchess identified with Eve. But Antonio, unlike Adam, “do[es] not like the fruit” (139) and turns down his partner’s invitation to partake of “our dainties”

p. 8. On boy actors in early performances of *The Duchess of Malfi*, see Roberta Barker, in Chiari and Lemerrier Goddard (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 49-66.

28. See Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Sallibrass, “Transvestism and the ‘body beneath’: Speculating on the Boy Actor”, in *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 207-219.

29. Gen 3:6.

30. Gen 3:7: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons”.

31. Gen 3:6, 23.

(140), leaving the Duchess solely responsible for her future predicament. Although the filtered reminiscence of the Temptation accusingly points to the Duchess, the analogy stops short of making the tragic heroine a fallen woman if by “fallen” is implied her sinful nature. The Duchess disobeys not the Word of God, but an arbitrary restriction pronounced by the perverse brethren. The apricots episode only evokes the biblical narrative to reverse the logic of its moral demonstration: disobedience in the drama appears as an act of resistance against tyrannical power. The Duchess is a martyr, more sinned against than sinning. Her transgression paradoxically appears as an attempt to regain or recreate the paradise lost by Eve’s disobedience. The “circumference” (1.1.456) in which she invites Antonio to enjoy love and protection against “[a]ll discord” (1.1.456) delineates a sanctuary apart from the corruption of Malfi, a secret bower of bliss where the spiritual innocence of the Garden of Eden harmonizes with the physical sensuality energizing the pastoral setting of the Song of Songs. Bosola’s serpent-like stratagem engineers the fall of the dissenting female from an otherworldly sphere of happiness, freedom and peace into the “deep pit of darkness” (5.5.99) where there is only misery, bondage, perversity and strife. The Duchess’s downfall at the very moment she is delivered of a child is redefined as a birth into death. Symbolically stripped naked, the Duchess descends into the sinful world like a new-born babe forced out of the womb. In generic terms, the apricots episode allegorizes the heroine’s departure from the comedy of life-giving love and her entrance into the tragedy of heinous madness and deadly revenge.

A widow shall conceive and bear a son: the Annunciation to Mary

The other scriptural intertext, the Annunciation to Mary, is based not so much on the sole account of it in Luke 1:26-38 as on the iconography, replete with polysemous symbols, it subsequently generated.³² The first hint comes with Bosola’s remark that the apricots are “[t]he first our spring yields” (2.1.71). That the notation is not meant to create what Roland Barthes terms an *effet de réel* becomes clear as the vernal apricots quickly prove to be caught in a tangle of impossibilities. The Duchess has – predictably – “heard of none to-year” (128) and rightly presumes that “[w]e shall have none this month” (131) because in the normal scheme of things – in the world as we experience it – apricots are not ripe until well into high summer. She laments that her own gardener should be such “an unskilful fellow” (130) when another manages to grow them in a way that makes them true to their etymological precocity, *praecox*.³³ When Bosola next explains that they were “ripen[ed] in horse dung” (137), the Duchess has every reason to think that “[he] jest[s]” (137), and so do we, for the method is unheard of and could only make them rot. The overall

32. In addition to Luke 1:26-38, the Annunciation is recorded in a set of apocryphal texts known as the infancy gospels, in particular the Gospel of James or Protoevangelium of James.

33. A possible etymology for “apricot” is through the “Arabic *al-burqūq*, *-barqūq*, i.e. *al* the + *barqūq*, <Greek *πραικόκιον* (Dioscorides, c100; later Greek *πρεκόκκια* and *βερικόκκια* plural), probably < Latin *praecoquum*, variant of *praecox*, plural *praecocia*, ‘early-ripe, ripe in summer’” (*OED*).

improbability of the scene is further heightened by an abrupt acceleration of time defying all physical laws: within moments of the apricots episode, the Duchess is reported to deliver her child on 19 December (2.3.56-58).

That Webster is fully aware of his poetic license in the handling of time may be inferred from the not-so-incident story about apricots growing off season (either too early in spring, or too late in winter).³⁴ Like a “knave” yet skilful “gard’ner” (135) who contravenes the order of nature, the playwright devises a work of art that resolutely abides by artistic principles and refuses entirely to submit to the limitative requirements of naturalistic accuracy. “ ’Tis a pretty art, | This grafting” (142): Bosola sounds as if he spoke for his author anxious to defend his own “graph-ting” or writing as “a bett’ring of nature” (142). Webster proves readily avant-garde in crafting a literary work which self-consciously asserts its status as an artistic, not a scientific, piece and demands to be “judge[d]” (138) accordingly. Webster’s meddling with the time sequence should not be discarded as unrealistic *bizarrierie* or authorial inadvertence. Rather, it ought to be regarded as an artistically motivated scheme devised to elevate the drama to a superior signification.

Retrograde computation would establish that a child born on 19 December was conceived some time near 25 March, the day that has been fixed by Christian tradition since the sixth century as that of the Annunciation. From a purely dramatic point of view, the apricots episode can still be read as what it appears to be: the moment when the Duchess “is fall’n in labor” (157) prior to delivery. The conflicting seasonal specifications included in the same stretch of dramatic action necessitate that conception and birth be acknowledged to coalesce as one single point in time although they occur within nine months of each another. Interestingly, such an unnatural(istic) overlap of time³⁵ whereby the past contains the future and the future retains the past is not unusual in the literature and imagery of Christian theology and, for this reason, it ought to be interpreted not as a narratological accident but as a deliberate artefact signalling the latent, yet operative, presence of a dense scriptural intertext. As Georges Didi-Huberman argues:

Il y a dans “Annonciation” le mot *annonce*, et ce mot suffit à indiquer combien l’idée d’un moment est ici dépassée – relevée, au sens hégélien d’une négation dialectique – dans quelque chose qui semble constituer une véritable *concrétion* du temps sacré, un nœud de plusieurs temps éloignés dans l’histoire ou même disjoints dans l’ordre ontologique [...] [c’est à

34. See Delio’s (metadramatic) comment:

ANTONIO: Since you last saw her,
She hath had two children more, a son and a daughter.
DELIO: Methinks ’twas yesterday. Let me but wink
And not behold your face – which to mine eye
Is somewhat leaner – verily I should dream
It were within this half hour. (3.1.6-11).

35. Cp. Bosola’s observation that “[t]he orange tree bears ripe and green fruit and blossoms all together” (2.2.13-14).

savoir :] le présent virtuel [...] un passé commémoré [...] un futur préfiguré.³⁶

By artificially setting the apricots episode in spring, Webster designs the interaction between the Duchess and Bosola as a dramatic emblem replicating the iconography inspired by Luke 1:26-38.³⁷ The heroine now appears to be cast as Mary while Bosola assumes the part devoted to the archangel Gabriel. The Word delivered to the Holy Virgin by the mysterious messenger materialises as the handful of apricots offered by the secret intelligencer to the expectant widow. This is consistent with the shift from spiritual abstraction to physical materiality, from a desexualized form of impregnation proceeding, as it were, through the ears straight to the heart or soul,³⁸ to a scene of sexual impregnation rendered through a coarse food metaphor as

36. “‘Annunciation’ is cognate with *announcement*, a word which, in itself, suggests the extent to which the idea of a moment is transcended – indeed, sublated in the Hegelian sense of a dialectical negation – into something which appears to constitute an actual *concretion* of sacred time, uniting together historically distant or ontologically disjointed periods of time, [namely:] the virtual present [...] a commemorated past [...] a prefigured future.” (my translation). In Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance et figuration*. Paris: Flammarion, 2009, p. 237-238.

37. Sophie Lemerrier Goddard, “Going Places: Haunting and Mobilities in *The Duchess of Malfi*”, in Chiari and Lemerrier Goddard (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 126-129, sees additional traces of the Annunciation in the Loreto scenes. The Loreto Shrine was said to be the place where the house of Mary – the place where she was visited by Gabriel and gave birth to Jesus – was miraculously removed after the Passion. The increasingly darkened picture of the Duchess, Lemerrier argues, turns her into a replica of the black Madonna in Loreto (*ibid.*, p. 133).

38. By conflating the story of Eve eating the apple (manducation) and Mary being impregnated by the Word of God (conception), Webster can articulate his food metaphor for sex and shape his dramatic adaptation of the Annunciation into a scene of exacerbated physicality. By doing so, Webster reverses the extraordinarily high degree of abstraction in the accounts of Jesus’s conception (and birth) in which all references to the physiological reality of either event are effaced. In “The Madonna’s conception through the ear. A contribution to the relation between aesthetics and religion” (1914), Ernest Jones parses a large array of cultural myths possibly at the root of the medieval idea of auricular conception. He argues that auricular conception sublimates one of the most “repellent” of “all infantile theories of procreation”, one that has “a Father incestuously impregnating his daughter (i.e., a son his mother) by expelling intestinal gas, with the help of the genital organ, into her lower alimentary orifice, one through which her child is then born. In the legend [of the Annunciation], the site of exit is completely omitted, and that of ingress is denoted by the receptive organ of music, an orifice with fewer sensual implications than any other in the whole body, than the navel, the mouth, or even the eye” (*Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*. London, Vienna: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1923, p. 357.). Although this theory has particular resonances with our reading of the apricots episode, we believe that a perspective grounded in the historical context of early modern Europe, and more specifically in the religious disputes initiated by the Reformation, is more likely to elucidate Webster’s decision to re-introduce in his mock Annunciation all the physicality that its scriptural model suppresses. This is the point of view adopted here. For further reading on the theme of auricular conception, see William Herzog, “La conception virginale du Christ”, in *Revue d’Histoire et de Littérature Religieuses*, XII, 1907, p. 117-133; by the same author, “La virginité de Marie après l’enfantement”, *ibid.*, p. 320-40; François Remigereau, “Les enfants faits par l’oreille. Origine et fortune de l’expression”, in *Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg*, CVIII, 1947, p. 115-176; José Maria Salvador-González, “Per aurem intrat Christus in Mariam. Aproximacion iconográfica a la concepcion per aurem en la pintura italiana del Trecento desde fuentes patristicas y teológicas”, in *Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones*, 20, 2015, p. 193-230; Jacques Poucet, Texte, traduction et commentaire de *L’Évangile selon Jean d’Outremer (XIV^e s.)*. *Autour de la Naissance du Christ (Myreur, I, p. 307-347 passim)*, chap. III, §9, published in *Folia Electronica Classica*, 28, 2014.

“a most vulturous eating of the apricots” (2.21-2) causing the Duchess’s “stomach” (150) to “swell” (151). The food/sex analogy is foregrounded by the old spelling “apricock,” enabling the double phallic wordplay: a-prick-cock. The sight of the fruit elicits excitation (“Her color rises” 128) springing from an indeterminate below that may be construed as either her stomach (food craving) or her womb (sexual craving). The “dainties” (140), or testicles,³⁹ Bosola hands over to his mistress who “greedily [...] eats them” (144), suggest an act of sexual penetration simultaneously gesturing to the unseen intercourse between the Duchess and Antonio and to the invisible “odumbration” of Mary by the Holy Spirit. The apricots are evocative of the male seed and the divine Verb that makes either woman fruitful – figuratively for the pregnant maid, figuratively and literally for the expectant and full-stomached widow. Also, the apricot may be regarded as a substitute for the lily traditionally seen in Gabriel’s hand in the iconography of the Annunciation from the fifteenth century. The flower, a symbol of Mary’s virginity, is changed to a fruit, thereby pointing to the Duchess’s gestation of her “springal,” a description evocative of Jesus, whose life on earth began and ended in spring. In one case the identity of the Father is undiscoverable whereas in the other case the father is as yet to be discovered.

The identification of the Duchess to Mary at a moment when Bosola dreams of searching the heroine’s entrails for evidence of pregnancy recalls a type of devotional statue popular throughout Europe between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries: the *Vierge ouvrante* or “opening Virgin”, a device condemned by reformers as a manifestation of Catholic Mariolatry, and another instance of the Duchess-as-statue in the play. A specimen in the [Cluny](#) Museum in Paris represents Mary holding the fruit of the temptation in her left hand and her own redeeming fruit, the infant Jesus, in her right hand. The piece, a three-dimensional triptych, opens along the centre, revealing a representation of Christ’s Passion.

The Duchess: fallen Eve or Blessed Mary?

The conjunction of Temptation and Annunciation is in keeping with the typological interpretation of the Scriptures, whereby the Holy Virgin and Blessed Mother of the Saviour who reasonably acquiesces to God’s favour (*gratia*), stands as the “restorative” (141) figure redeeming the foolhardy transgression of Eve, the mother of fallen humanity.

In the play, the two episodes are not organised in a straightforward fault-to-redemption sequence. They are fused together and their combination breeds a complex network of antitheses evil/good, sin/virtue, fault/innocence, folly/ reason, materiality/spirituality, error/truth, impurity/purity, disobedience/submission, corruption/reparation, curse/grace, condemnation/salvation, etc. The Duchess is poised at the frontier of each, in the unstable zone where opposed perspectives, her own and her brothers’, crisscross. Conflicting responses to her character testify to the ambivalence of her situation and, to a certain extent, to changes in the modern mindset. Critical consensus has recently moved toward sympathy with the Duchess’s attempt to secure a space of her own and escape the brutal tyranny and irrational

39. See note 24, *supra*.

bigotry of the Aragonian pair. That is, until the pendulum swings back towards a more conservative approach to gender.

An anti-Catholic burlesque

In scene after scene of *The Duchess of Malfi*, a character attempts to draw secret information from another who is unwilling to speak for fear of being compromised until a twist brings the action to an unexpected conclusion. The significance of such encounters resides not so much in the matter investigated, the details of which are usually already known to the audience, as in the way the investigation is conducted. Bosola's strategy to wring the Duchess's secret from her through forced exposure and food poisoning serves Webster's own strategy to criticise papism by staging the scene as an anti-Catholic burlesque.

Stripping bare the Catholic whore

Bosola's task is no easy business as the Duchess has almost literally barricaded herself in layers of clothes which only "a whirlwind" could possibly blow away. At the peak of their popularity in sixteenth-century Europe, "ruffs" (108) and "farthingales" (145) were regularly noted, admiringly or disparagingly, for their rigidity and amplexity. Women who sported such appendages would magnify their presence to a degree of conspicuousness that the misogynistic early modern culture found shockingly immoderate. Ruffs and farthingales were rarely worn in combination, however, especially if the ruff was of the large round-the-neck cartwheel type, and the hoopskirt of a drum-like shape like the French [verdugalle, or vertugadin](#).⁴⁰ By wearing both together, the Duchess has expanded her figure out of all proportion. Protection, not fashion is at stake here. Clothes form a buffer zone defended by a stiff network of osiers or whalebone hoops that materialise the "circumference" of private feminine space (1.1.456) while the rigid wired support of the ruff – called [supportasse](#), piccadill, or underpropper – defends that space against unwanted male invasion.⁴¹ Commenting on the *guardainfante*, an early seventeenth-century Spanish development of the *verdugado*, Amanda Wunder writes that

critics of the *guardainfante* saw it as a weapon that women were using to subvert male authority. The shape and size of the *guardainfante* contributed to this perception: its circumference took up a great deal of space, gave women control over a wide perimeter around their own bodies, and kept men

40. Few sported both the ruff and the farthingale. Queen [Isabella of Bourbon](#) was one, but her style of dress was in the Spanish fashion. There are a couple of portraits of [Elizabeth I wearing both](#), but, as a rule, they feature small ruffs, and hoopskirts are of the less cumbersome, conical, *verdugado* type. Most of the time, the much lighter rebato replaces the ruff. Like elite women of her time, Queen Anne of Denmark favoured [a low-cut bodice in combination with a hoopskirt](#).

41. Stubbes, in *The Anatomie of Abuses*, London, 1583, n.p., referred to a supportasse or piccadills as "A certain device made of wyers... calleth a supportasse or vnderpropper. This is to be supplied round about their necks under the ruffe [...] to beare up the whole frame & body of the ruffe, from falling and hanging down". In 1615, an order was issued by the Vice-Chancellor against wearing piccadills in England.

at arm's length. The cavernous space beneath its stiff hoops provoked suspicions that women were using their hoopskirts to hide things from men.⁴²

Illegitimate pregnancies were what men predictably feared could be concealed under “bawd farthingales” (145), a serious threat in a society where rank, office, wealth and privileges were contingent on patrilineal inheritance. It was even alleged that the garment, nicknamed *cache bastardz* in France (“bastards hider”), had been especially designed for that purpose: “the fashion of wearing Farthingals of old, were politickly invented to hide the shame of great bellies unlawfully puft up.”⁴³ Hence Bosola's immediate suspicions on seeing the Duchess's garb.

Regarded as an item of clothing which at once kept men at a distance and dissimulated evidence of promiscuity, signalled female assertiveness even as it hampered their bodies, pleased the coquetry of prostitutes and ladies alike,⁴⁴ the wide-hipped farthingale was an ambivalent sign blurring the line between freedom and restraint, sexual incontinence and sexual control, women's empowerment and their disciplining. In the play, there is a symbiotic relationship between dress and protagonist: both throw dangerous confusion over the categorical distinction between the unsubordinated, baseborn whore and the domesticated chaste noblewoman. The

42. Amanda Wunder, “Women's Fashions and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Spain: The Rise and Fall of the *Guardainfante*”, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 68, p.143. See also Sarah A. Bendall, “‘Take measure of your wide and flaunting garments’: The Farthingale, Gender and the Consumption of Space in Elizabethan and Jacobean England”, in *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 33, issue 5, November 2019, p. 712-737. Bendall has also investigated the fashion in French culture in “The Case of the ‘French Vardingale’: A Methodological Approach to Reconstructing and Understanding Ephemeral Garments”, in *Fashion Theory*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2019, p. 363-399. For the eighteenth-century development of the hoopskirt, see Kimberly Chrisman, “Unhoop the Fair Sex: The Campaign Against the Hoop Petticoat in Eighteenth-Century England”, in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, p. 12-13, and Reed Benhamou, “Who Controls This Private Space? The Offense and Defense of the Hoop in Early Eighteenth-Century France and England”, in *Dress*, vol. 28, 2001, p. 13-22.

43. Hannah Woolley, *The gentlewomans companion; or, A guide to the female sex containing directions of behaviour, in all places, companies, relations, and conditions, from their childhood down to old age...* London: printed by A. Maxwell for Dorman Newman at the Kings-Arms in the Poultry, 1673. Joana of Portugal, Queen consort of Castile was reported to cover up her pregnant state under a farthingale.

44. Wunder *op. cit.*, p. 134, writes that in 1639 King Philip IV of Spain “had issued a proclamation banning the wide hoopskirt that was known as the *guardainfante*. The garment first had appeared in the Spanish capital about five years earlier and caused a great deal of scandal and disruption, with critics of the fashion claiming that women were using the *guardainfante* to hide illicit pregnancies. The 1639 ban outlawed the *guardainfante* for all women except for prostitutes in an effort to discredit the fashionable garment. [...] But the crackdown on the *guardainfante* proved to be short lived. Instead of enforcing its own law, the Crown promoted and encouraged the fashion, which was worn by the king's own wives and daughters. In the decades following the ban, the *guardainfante* only grew larger in size and popularity.” Ruffs seem to have carried the same social ambivalence, being worn by the nobility and also by lowborn whores like Doll Tearsheet; cp. *2 Henry IV*, 2.4.132-3; in a footnote glossing the line, Arden editor Bulman writes: “Prostitutes during Elizabeth's reign were known for wearing large ruffs around their necks, and the tearing off [...] of such ruffs signified sexual assault in drama of the period” in William Shakespeare, *2 Henry IV*, James C. Bulman (ed.). London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, Third series, 2016.

“monstrous” ruff and farthingale, as they were sometimes called,⁴⁵ had considerable potential as stage props, allowing for comic vignettes like the apricots episode.⁴⁶ The contrast between the model of elegance of act 1 and the animated dummy suffocating underneath a mass of clothes in 2.1 is designed for laughter. Cued by the text, the boy-actor may have used his talent for slapstick comedy to ham it up from the moment the Duchess makes her immense way onto the stage. The Duchess can hardly move about without the help of Antonio’s “arm” (104), asks “Do I not grow fat?” (104), complains that she is “exceeding short-winded” (105) – hints encouraging an overly theatrical performance by a mountainous, overdressed Duchess. The love romance of act 1 builds up to an apotheosis – or, rather, plummets to a farcical bathetic low – of comic outrageousness before the action takes a tragic turn. Considering the macabre tone that typifies Webster’s art, the scene stands out as an exceptional moment of laugh-out-loud comedy.

As evidenced by the choice of costume, the intention is ultimately satirical, and the burlesque is directed against Catholicism. In Protestant minds, the ruff and the farthingale were consistently associated with the long-time Catholic enemy, Spain. A ballad reprinted several times in the seventeenth century emphasized the point:

When Edward was in England King,
The First of all that Name,
Proud Ellinor he made his Queen,
A stately Spanish Dame:
Whose wicked Life and sinful Pride,
Thro’ England did excel;
To dainty Dames and gallant Maids,
This Queen was known full well.

She was the first that did invent
In Coaches brave to ride;
She was the first that brought this Land
To deadly Sin of Pride.
No English Taylor here could serve
To make her Rich Attire;
But sent for Taylors into Spain,
To feed her vain Desire.

45. See for instance Philip Stubbes’s diatribe against ruffs in his *Anatomie of Abuses*, *op. cit.*, n.p. Stubbes imagines the half-comic, half-pornographic situation of a woman in a large ruff being blown off her feet by the wind and falling over with her legs up in the air: “They haue great and monstereous ruffes, made either of Cambrick, holland, lawn or els of some other the finest cloth that can be got for money, whereof some be a quarter of a yard deep, yea some more, very few lesse. So that they stand a full quarter of a yarde (and more) from their necks hanging ouer their shoulder poynts, instead of a vaile. But if Aeolus with his blasts, or Neptune with his stormes, chaunce to hit vppon the crasie bark of their brused ruffes, then they goe flip flap in the winde like rags flying abroad, and lye vpon their shoulders like the dishcloute of a slutte”.

46. See Amanda Wunder, *op. cit.*, p. 139: “Golden Age fiction writers used the *guardainfante* for sight gags (women stuck in doorframe) and as the inspiration for devious plots (women hiding guilty secrets beneath their skirts) in countless short stories, skits, plays, and poems”.

They brought in Fashions strange and new,
With Golden Garments bright;
The Farthingale and mighty Ruff,
With Gowns of rich Delight.⁴⁷

To Protestants, the sophistication, vain ostentatiousness, and Spanish origin of ruffs and farthingales made them apt symbols of the “old faith” and its meretricious display of wealth. The Duchess uses the showy trappings of Catholicism as camouflage in order to delude and placate the two brothers portrayed as barking mad papists. But she does so awkwardly. Indications that the ruff needs “mend[ing]” (109) and that the skirt feels uncomfortably oppressive (“I am exceeding short-winded” [105]) subtly signal that such accoutrement is ill-suited for one graced with natural immunity against the Romish heresy.

For all its flagrant buffoonery, this scene of religious (un)cover(ing) touches upon the controversial issue of outward conformity as opposed to hardline recusancy. Seen from that angle, it becomes a parodic reversal of crypto-Catholicism in England, an object of much preoccupation for the authorities of the recently established Church, and a cause for indignation in stalwarts of either camp who relied on absolute opposition for the definition of their respective confessional identity. Webster uses, as it were, the Italian setting to stage a negative of Protestant England.⁴⁸ This interpretive possibility involves two related possibilities. The spectacle of the Duchess in Catholic disguise may be intended as a reminiscence of the not so distant reign of Queen Mary (1553-1558) when Protestants had to go undercover to escape state persecution. Simultaneously, the scene may give dramatic form to actual concerns that England may relapse into Romish superstition and Protestants would once again have to act Catholic for the sake of their lives. In the eyes of many, King James’s ongoing plan to seal a peaceful alliance with Spain by marrying his heir to the Infanta Maria ominously confirmed that Reformation was not quite yet a done deal. The Duchess’s Catholic extravaganza, which humorously looks back to bygone clandestinity even as it projects the fear of a forced return to it, appends a comic prologue to the tragic drama and, notwithstanding the radical difference in tone, gears the ensuing action to the didactic use of collective memory that characterized Protestant literature in the early decades of Jacobean rule. *The Duchess of Malfi* is both a commemorative work of fiction steeped in Protestant historiography and martyrology, and a cautionary tale urging continued vigilance in a context of renewed incertitude. Finally, the attempted “unclothing” of the Duchess is a symbolic “dis-mantling” of Catholicism, exposing it as an imposture. This is what Webster develops through Bosola’s attempted poisoning of the Duchess by turning it into a parody of the Catholic sacrament of auricular confession.

47. Anonymous, *The Lamentable fall of Queene Elnor, vvho for her pride and vickednesse, by Gods iudgment, sunke into the ground at Charing crosse, and rose vp againe at Queene hiue. To the tune of, Gentle and courteous*. London, ca. 1600.

48. See “A Catholic nightmare before Christmas: John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, act 2, scene 3”, forthcoming.

A parody of the Catholic sacrament of confession

Bosola's ploy to get the Duchess to divulge her trespass approximates to the Catholic sacrament of auricular confession:

The general act of penance, which includes oral confession, consists of three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Contrition, or heartfelt repentance, represents the first route in this journey; oral confession covers the second tranche in the path to salvation; satisfaction redeems the practical consequences of sins, thus achieving the liberation of the sinner.⁴⁹

The ritual follows a threefold pattern effecting a spiritual conversion, or *metanoia*, from sinner to repentant. In the apricots episode, both the form and the significance of penance are degraded in the satirical perversion of the rite.

During the first stage of contrition, the repentant sinner is expected to express heartfelt remorse for, and detestation of, his faults. This moment was usually accompanied with blushing and the shedding of tears, the outward manifestations of true inner sorrow. The only expression of regret in 2.1, "I am very sorry" (153), comes not from the supposed sinner but from her self-appointed confessor who does not even mean it. The Duchess registers no regret, she only feels queasy. The spiritual change from obstinacy in sin to detestation is turned into a change from craving for food to nausea: "they were right good ones – | If they do not make me sick [...] | This green fruit and my stomach are not friends" (149-150, 151). Likewise, the two *signa doloris* of sincere contrition are debased from motions of the soul to organic reactions. *Erubescencia* or the blushing of cheeks caused by the sinner's awareness of his guilt becomes a flushing of the face prompted by gluttony and/or lust ("Her color rises" [128]), while the copious crying⁵⁰ recommended to the penitent on the ground that "*lavant lacrimae delictum quod voce pudor est confitieri*"⁵¹ is translated into "an extreme cold sweat" (153) induced by overeating.

Confession, the second stage in the act of penance was defined as voluntary and total exposure of the soul, done in private and sealed in secrecy. All these requirements are perverted in the scene. Bosola must reckon without the Duchess's cooperation. His ploy traduces an impulse either to violate her intimacy by breaking through the barrier of clothes into the secret of her body or, failing to do so, to force a confession out of her body and against her will. In either case, he carries out a manoeuvre that inverts confession into extortion and aims not simply to break into her body but to break her. Also, confession was understood to be a private business: "[a] prominent aspect of the sacramentality of auricular confession is the unswerving precept of absolute secrecy over the words exchanged between priest and

49. Rocco Coronato, *Shakespeare's Neighbors: Theory Matters in the Bard and his Contemporaries*. Lanham, New York, Oxford: University Press of America, 2001, p. 2.

50. Ambrose advises the penitent to augment his tears ("*fletus augeat*") and Origen that he wash his couch with them ("*lavat peccator in lacrimis stratum suum*"). Cp. Bosola's metaphoric description of his tearful eyes: "Where were | These *penitent fountains* while she was living?" (4.2.350, italics added).

51. "Tears wash away the sins that the voice does not dare to confess" (Ambrose's words in his commentary of Luke 22, lib 2, my translation).

confessant”.⁵² The secrecy precept is flouted by Bosola whose stratagem aims at public exposure and shaming. Confession meant a total discovery of the soul. In an exhortation that chimes in with the ideas universally promulgated by Catholic theologians and preachers, Peter the Chanter insists that “we confess to priests by mouth our sins nakedly (*nude*), openly (*aperte*), and stripped of skin (*excoriate*) with all their circumstances. [...] No circumstance should be hidden that sin not be garbed in robes but revealed to the confessor as it was done”.⁵³ This aspect of confession is literalized and corporealized in the text. Bosola has no means to bare the soul of the Duchess or, for that matter, her body, but he certainly wishes he could strip her naked and, even as one would “pare” (132) an apricot, peel the skin of her round belly to reveal evidence of her trespass. “I fear I am undone” (155): the suggested nudity concluding the inquisition turns *nuditas virtualis*, the nudity of innocence resulting from the performance of sacramental confession into *nuditas naturalis*, physical nakedness, and, more crucially, into its opposite, *nuditas criminalis*, the nakedness of the condemned, revealing, in Bosola’s eyes anyway, his mistress’s culpable indulgence in debauchery.⁵⁴ The Duchess’s sudden exit frustrates Bosola’s enterprise, leaving his parody of the sacramental act of confession missing its third and ultimate stage, satisfaction.

A parody of Catholic exorcism

The parodic perversion of the Catholic ritual of penance casts Bosola, the arch villain’s henchman and Ferdinand’s devilish “familiar” (1.1.252), in the role of the priest appointed to cleanse the penitent. The diabolical dramatization of the sacrament turns the parody of confession into a searing mockery of the public exorcisms routinely performed by Catholic priests. These crowd-drawing events caused great stir in England in the 1580s, prompting Samuel Harsnett to publish *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603) which fostered the official view that papists resorted to mere hocus pocus to try and rally backsliding Anglicans to their cause. In the demonstration, Harsnett made ample use of his “striking[ly] [...] detailed knowledge of the theatre” as he “continually return[ed] to his comparison [...] of the tricks of the exorcists to a stage performance.”⁵⁵ Public exorcisms, Harsnett concluded, were mere shows put on by crooked priests with the complicity of so-called possessed victims.⁵⁶ The theatricality of the fraud is cleverly replicated

52. Coronato, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

53. Quoted in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, Peter Biller and Alastair J. Minnis (ed.). York: York Medieval Press, 1998, p. 202.

54. The quadripartite typology of *nuditas* used here was established by Pierre Bersuire (Petrus Berchorius) in his *Dictionarii seu repertorii moralis* quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ouvrir Vénus: nudité, rêve, cruauté*. Paris: Gallimard, “Le Temps Des Images”, 1999, p. 47-48. The fourth type of nakedness, *nuditas temporalis* or the voluntary renunciation of worldly possessions, is also pertinent to the passage which marks the early stage in the Aragonian brothers’ scheme to deprive their sister of her riches.

55. Kenneth Muir, “Samuel Harsnett and *King Lear*”, *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1951, p. 1; 2.

56. See Stephen Greenblatt, “Shakespeare and the Exorcists”, in *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988, p. 94-128.

in Webster's drama by his choice to make his parody of Catholic exorcisms an embedded farce: the metadramatic nature of the apricots episode is explicitly signalled by the final call for "lights" (154-155) by Delio, who had been silently spectating all the while. The provoked delivery of the child appears as a derisive allusion to the "pretence of casting out devils"⁵⁷ from possessed bodies. Amy Wolf observes that "[Harsnett's] book exposes the exorcisms as a sham and paints a portrait of priests who are treasonous and treacherous, more devilish than the devils they claim to exorcise."⁵⁸ Webster's parody is entirely designed to reflect the wickedness of those (Bosola and, through him, the Aragonian brothers) who seek to exorcise the supposedly sinful Duchess.

The scatological subtext

Webster's denunciation of Catholicism goes even further in its satirical intention. The dramatist pushes his diabolical caricature to its most sacrilegious expression, scatology.⁵⁹ He could draw on two traditions. One is the assimilation of sin to filth which became popular in medieval Christian culture.⁶⁰ In her richly documented exploration of the theme, Martha Bayless observes that

excrement was not merely used as a figure of speech but was central to a popular medieval metaphysics. It was not a symbol of sin or a consequence of sin: it *embodied* sin. It was an alternate manifestation of sin, as ice is an alternate manifestation of water. Excrement was sin made material. In the modern period, filth and excrement are deplorable but otherwise meaningless material realities, most useful as metaphors. In the Middle Ages, filth and excrement were the foundation of the understanding of human history. They were as important as sin because they *were* sin. This is a radical and crucial difference from modern attitudes.⁶¹

With the largely accepted axiom that *peccata stercora dicuntur* (sins are ordure) came the related verdict that "[j]ust as the self is always producing sins that need confession, so it is always manifesting noxious humors that demand evacuation,"⁶²

57. From the title of Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of egregious Popish Impostures, to with-draw the harts of her Maiesties Subiects from their allegiance, and from the truth of Christian Religion professed in England, vnder the pretence of casting out deuils* (1603).

58. Amy Wolf, "Shakespeare and Harsnett: 'Pregnant to Good Pity'?", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1998, p. 1.

59. See Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim (ed.), *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art: Studies in Scatology*, Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2004; in that volume, see in particular Jeff Persels, "'The Mass and the fart are sisters': Scatology and the Calvinist Rhetoric against the Mass, 1560-63", p. 38-55.

60. See Heiko A. Oberman, "Teufelsdreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the 'Old' Luther," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988).

61. Martha Bayless, *Sin and Filth in Medieval Culture: The Devil in the Latrine*. New York: Routledge, 2012, p. xvii.

62. Michael Carl Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton*. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 34, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 33.

This analogy was supported by, and in turn supported, the coeval association of ordure and anality with the devil, as may be observed, for instance, in mystery plays or in Christian iconography. Reformers unabashedly capitalized on these two widespread traditions in their invectives against the “old religion.” Popery was poopery because it perpetrated the diabolical perversion of the Gospel.

Webster, therefore, had solid ground to shape his anti-Catholic burlesque of confession and exorcism into a scene suggestive of defecation, and he could be sure that his audience would pick on the scatological allusion and, more importantly, understand its polemical import. Bosola’s observation that the Duchess’s “color rises” (128) obliquely evokes a sudden fit of the “colic passion.”⁶³ The apricots, significantly ripened in horse dung, are too “green” to be “friends” with the Duchess’s “stomach” (151). Under her “loose-bodied gown” (146), a description evocative of the loosening of bowels, her belly begins to swell with what seems to be intestinal “whirlwind” or *farting gales* if the possibility of a pun on “farthingales” (145) is allowed. In this context, the birth of the child, compared earlier to the purgation of sin and the casting out of a demon, now appears like the evacuation of faeces, as may be suggested by the word “litter” (10) which combines the ideas of excretion (the mixture of “straw and dung together” that serves as bedding for animals, *OED* litter 3b) and procreation (“the whole number of young brought forth at a birth,” *OED* litter 5a). When the Duchess finally exits in a hurry, it is impossible to decide whether “she’s fall’n in labor” (157) and about to give birth or is in urgent need to relieve her *prat-y*, or big-buttocked, *arse* (the underlying pun in “pretty art” [140]) of not so “delicate [a] fruit”⁶⁴ as *whore’s dung* (“horse dung” [137]).

A parody of the Catholic Eucharist

From medieval and Renaissance exegesis and art Webster inherited the typological juxtaposition of the Temptation and the Annunciation, and its implied analogy between eating a piece of fruit and being impregnated with a child. The diatribes and caricatures produced by his co-religionists in their aspersions of Catholicism emboldened him to pursue this analogy to its logical conclusion: the equation of childbirth with excretion.⁶⁵ At the centre of this double nexus of

63. In his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson distinguishes four types of colick, the third of which involves the womb: “It strictly is a disorder of the colon; but loosely, any disorder of the stomach or bowels that is attended with pain. There are four sorts: 1. A bilious colick, which proceeds from an abundance of acrimony or choler irritating the bowels, so as to occasion continual gripes, and generally with a looseness; and this is best managed with lenitives and emollients. 2. A flatulent colick, which is pain in the bowels from flatus’s and wind, which distend them into unequal and unnatural capacities; and this is managed with carminatives and moderate openers. 3. An hysterical colick, which arises from disorders of the womb, and is communicated by consent of parts to the bowels; and is to be treated with the ordinary hystericks. 4. A nervous colick, which is from convulsive spasms and contortions of the guts themselves, from some disorders of the spirits, or nervous fluid, in their component fibres”.

64. In the context, “fruit” is an onomatopoeic pun on fart, cp. *AYLI* (3.2.233-234): “It may well be called Jove’s tree, when it drops such fruit”.

65. On the analogy between “digestive/excretory and female reproductive processes” as an element of “the rhetoric of the maternal body as diseased” used “to justify female humiliation,” see Lori Schroeder Haslem, “‘Troubled with the Mother’: Longings, Purgings, and the Maternal Body in

digestion and procreation is the body of the Duchess which appears outrageously porous, unbound, “undone” (140) – the type of body Bakhtin relates to the aesthetics of grotesque realism:

The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed. [...] This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body [...] Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body [...]. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.⁶⁶

A classic example is Rabelais’s account of how Gargamelle is delivered of Gargantua after a dish of “gaudebillaux [qui] sont grasses tripes de coiraux” induced a loosening of her bowels:

Elle commença à souspirer, lamenter et crier. Soubdain vindrent à tas saiges femmes de tous coustez, et, la tastant par le bas, trouverent quelques pellauderies assez de mauvais goust, et pensoient que ce feust l’enfant, mais c’estoit le fondement qui luy escappoit, à la mollification du droict intestine – lequel vous appelez le boyau cullier – par trop avoir mangé des tripes comme avons declairé cy dessus.⁶⁷

Bartholomew Fair and *The Duchess of Malfi*,” in *Modern Philology*, vol. 92, no. 4 (May, 1995), p. 438-459, especially p. 442-443; 454-456.

66. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky (trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 317.

67. François Rabelais, *Œuvres Complètes*, Tome 1, § IV-VI, Pierre Jourda (ed.). Paris: Garnier, 1962, p. 21-32, 30. “A few moments later she began to groan, lament and cry out. Suddenly crowds of midwives came rushing up from all directions. Feeling and groping her below, they found certain loose shreds of skin, of a rather unsavory odor, which they took to be the child. It was, on the contrary, her fundament which had escaped with the mollification of her right intestine (you call it the bumgut) because she had eaten too much tripe, as I explained above.” Jacques Le Clerc (tr.), *The Five Books of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. New York: The Modern Library, 1936, p. 22. URL: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.182937/mode/2up>

After the incident, Gargamelle is given an astringent of such power that all her sphincters lock up at a sudden, causing her infant to leap out of her left ear. In typical carnivalesque jumble, Rabelais models the begetting of Gargantua on a double ostial reversal: arsy-versy (the imagined anal birth), then topsy-turvey (the actual auricular expulsion). Significantly, in either case, the vaginal route is bypassed. That the episode has theological import, notably as regard the much-disputed dogma of Mary’s perpetual virginity, becomes clear in the narrator’s polemical address to those of his readers he suspects will doubt the truth of his story:

The tripes, may it be noted, were rotten (*pourries*), which Rabelais puts down to diabolical mishap (*une grande diablerie*).

If the tone in Rabelais is genially festive, it is bitterly contentious in the Jacobean playwright who, unlike the French polymath, wrote after a century of Counter-Reformation atrocities. Webster's suggestion of anal birth is intended as a crude jibe at the papist dogma of Mary's *in partu* and *post-partum* virginity.⁶⁸ His

Why should you not believe what I tell you? Because, you reply, there is no evidence [*apparence*]. And I reply in turn that for this very reason you should believe with perfect faith. For the gentlemen of the Sorbonne say that faith is the argument of non-evident truths [*Car les Sorbonistes dissent que foy est argument des choses de nulle apparence*].

Is anything I have related beyond our law or faith, contrary to our reason, or opposed to Divine Scriptures? For my part, I find nothing in the Holy Bible that stands against it. And if such had been the will of God, would you affirm that He could not accomplish it? Ha, I pray you, do not ambiguembrace your minds with such vain conceits [*ne emburelucoquez jamais vous espritz de ces vaines pensées*]. I tell you that nothing is impossible to God and, if He but pleased, women would henceforth give birth to their children through the left ear.

(The first paragraph did not appear in the 1542 edition.)

As has been noted by critics, Gargantua's "*estrange nativité*" is a parodic reversal of the widely accepted understanding that Mary was impregnated by the word of God through the ear canal (cf. note 33, *supra*), yet was delivered of her child in the ordinary way.

By adapting the idea of Mary's auricular conception into the fiction of Gargamelle's auricular parturition, Rabelais draws attention away from the consensual fact of *ante-partum* virginity on to the controversial proposition of *in-partu* and *post-partum* virginity (a Catholic claim that early Protestants found dubious). Through the grotesque scenario of a child aurally expelled from his mother's womb, Rabelais presents a comic explication of the Catholic doctrine of perpetual virginity that his narrator exhorts his uncredulous (i.e., lacking "perfect faith") readers to accept without going into wasteful ratiocination over the matter – a taunt that Catholics routinely directed against the irreligious habit of Protestants of "ambiguembranch[ing] [their] minds with [...] vain conceits."

The narrator has no qualms about the validity of his own "vain conceits", pointing that "nothing in the Holy Bible stands against" it, but disingenuously omitting to add that nothing in the Holy Bible promotes it, either (a qualification of major importance to Protestants who rigorously abided by the *sola scriptura* principle). The blatant absurdity of his theological sophistry translates the deterioration of faith into superstition for which Protestants blamed Catholics, notably by means of scatological caricature, the basic motif of which was that Catholics turned divine order into diabolical ordure.

Gargamelle's rectal prolapse in Rabelais's text certainly winks at those repugnant images (pictures as well as metaphors) that were then found in anti-Catholic publications. By implying the anal route as an alternative to the ear canal for a possible explication of the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, the digestive incident mocks the Catholics' excessive sacralisation of the mother of God in a style recognizably borrowed from the most opprobrious Protestant lampoons. The allusive tableau of Christ being defecated by his perpetually virginal mother simultaneously evokes the scatological satire Protestants made of the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist by pursuing the objectionable (in their view) dogma of transubstantiation to its most logical, and distasteful, and sacrilegious, conclusion.

Whether Rabelais was a Catholic or a Protestant has been much debated. Today, critics generally agree that he was a Catholic who bemoaned the abuses of his own religion. His chapter on Gargantua's nativity seems to demonstrate that folly prevails in either camp in equal proportion. Webster was a Protestant activist: no tongue-in-cheek humour in his drama, at least when it comes to convey a religious message. The apricots episode, for all its thematic parallelisms with Rabelais's text, shares its crude tone with contemporary anti-Catholic satire.

The quoted passage is quoted from Jacques Le Clerc (tr.), op. cit., p. 23.

68. Roman Catholics defended the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, before giving birth (*ante-partum*), during childbirth (*in partu*) and after giving birth (*post-partum*). Although they acquiesced for some time to this view, Protestants eventually dismissed the doctrine of *post-partum*

foreshortening of time, whereby defecating and eating, birthing and conceiving are made to coincide all in an instant, conjures up the disturbing image of a Duchess caught in a dual process running in a loop: ingesting horse dung, she egests whore's dung; ingesting fruit, she begets the fruit of her womb. She excretes/engenders what she eats and eats what she excretes/engenders. By commingling coprophagy and cannibalism, Webster turns his anti-Catholic farce into a parody of the Eucharist in total adequation of style with the Protestant caricatures that had been circulating throughout Europe.⁶⁹

Commenting on the profuse cannibalistic imagery during the French Wars of Religion, Frank Lestringant writes:

Cette prolifération de l'image est surtout sensible au sein du discours protestant, suscitée à l'origine par le sang des martyrs et dont la composante théologique devait pendant plusieurs décennies se cristalliser dans la critique du dogme de la Présence réelle et corporelle du Christ dans l'Eucharistie.⁷⁰

Protestants went even further in their criticism of the Mass with the assumption that, once ingested, the body of Christ would “go [...] into the belly and [be] cast out in the privy.”⁷¹ Lestringant calls attention to “cette chute [...] misérable qui préoccupe si fort les protestants, du corps de Dieu, le dieu de pâte, dans les latrines.”⁷² The gestural parallelism between Bosola offering apricots and the priest distributing the Host alongside the arsy-versy incontinence of the Duchess compose

virginity as a dogmatic error, derisively suggesting that if so, Jesus must then be supposed to have been delivered through the anal route or through the ear.

69. Douglas Burnham and Enrico Giaccherini (ed.), *The Poetics of Transubstantiation: From Theology to Metaphor*, ed. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005. Frank Ardolino, in “Misperception and Protestant Reading in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, *Studies in English Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 25, observes that “Protestants often resorted to gross images to ridicule the real presence; for example, they depicted the Host being eaten accidentally by mice and other vermin and being excreted by communicants following consumption.” Few things “so convincingly and viscerally [...] convey the primary and pressing concerns of [...] the eucharistic and soteriological drama of the Reform crisis [...] than the rhetoric of elimination and purgation, oral and anal”, Persels observes, *op. cit.*, p. 38-39.

70. “The image is especially seen to proliferate in Protestant rhetoric. It was originally inspired by the blood shed in martyrdom before its theological implication evolved over the course of several decades into a criticism of the dogma of the Real Presence of the body of Christ in the Eucharist.” (my translation). In Frank Lestringant, *Une sainte Horreur ou le voyage en Eucharistie: XVI^e - XVIII^e siècles*, 2nd ed., Genève: Droz, 2012, p. 90.

71. John Jewel, *An Apology of the Church of England* (1564), J. E. Booty (ed.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963, p. 33-34.

72. “the lamentable fall of the body of God, the god of dough, down the latrine, which troubled Protestants so much” (my translation) in Frank Lestringant, *op.cit.*, p. 302. Lestringant, p. 85, quotes Agrippa d'Aubigné: “Et si vous adorez un cyboire pour estre | Logis de vostre Dieu, vous devez, sans mentir, | Adorer ou le ventre ou bien le cul d'un Prestre, | Quand ce Dieu mesme y loge et est prest d'en sortir.” The quote is from Agrippa d'Aubigné, *Pièces épigrammatiques*, III, in *Œuvres*, H. Weber (ed.). Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969, p. 345. In Satire IV of *Satires upon the Jesuits* (1681), John Oldham traces the scatological process of the wafer through the body of the communicant “Down goes the tiny Saviour at a bit |To be digested, and at length beshit;| From altar to close stool or jakes preferred,| First wafer, next a God, and then a turd” (*The Compositions in Prose and Verse of Mr John Oldham*, by Edward Thompson, London, 1770, vol. 1, p. 73).

a representation of the Eucharist that accords with the sectarian view of Roman Catholicism as the diabolical befouling of true Christian faith. In this perspective, the apricot reveals its most profound significance as an anti-Catholic symbol. It is designed to ridicule the dogma of transubstantiation underlying the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence – that the substance of bread miraculously becomes the body of Christ, only the material accidents or species (appearance, taste, texture, odour) remaining. The description of “a delicate fruit” grown in “horse dung” depends on the same differentiation between substance and species, but it bends the logic to a demonstration diametrically opposed to the mysterious conversion predicated by Holy Communion. The apricot, with its fair skin dissimulating its foul pulp, deprecates the postulated presence of the deity in the consecrated bread and wine even as it discredits Catholic liturgy by showing how the superstitious, too literal understanding of the Words of Institution leads to the worst profanity: the true, real, substantial presence of the body of Christ under the species of ordure. This is, for Protestants, the process of transubstantiation carried to its sacrilegious, diabolical – and necessary – completion. Mass is degraded from sacramental to excremental rite by Catholic communicants who are imagined making faecal matter out of the Son of God, defecating him in rank commemoration of his anal birth – so the apricots episode seems designed to imply through the simultaneous references to eating, excreting, conceiving and birthing against a background of anti-papalist vituperation. It is nothing less than the doctrine and mystery of the Incarnation that Catholics are represented to desecrate through the evocation of a child issuing from his mother’s backside on the same day that Christ took flesh from his perpetually virginal mother.

In sum, the apricots episode composes a dramatic emblem inspired by the most insulting imagery and rhetoric that reformers had come up with in their relentless attack on Roman Catholicism. The carnivalesque dimension of the episode, momentarily transforming its dignified heroine into a punk in tawdry apparel while downgrading the plot to the level of a dirty joke, is meant to convey how much the pristine excellence of the Christian Church had been deformed by centuries of Catholic abuse; how much the profound truth of the Holy Scriptures had been enshrouded in layers upon layers of popish fallacies; how much the plain message delivered through Christ had been made inaudible by the beguiling gibberish of Romish doctors. At this moment in the play, as romantic comedy suddenly falls into scatological farce before carrying on the tragic tack, the fiction makes a generic swerve that reflects the deviation taken by Christian History ever since “knaves” Papists, by their “pretty art”, had deflected its course from the happy end that the Annunciation promised and the Incarnation confirmed to the faithful, i.e. the eschatological redemption by Mary’s “restorative [...] fruit” (140-141) of the penalty incurred by humanity the moment Eve ate of the “fair wondrous” “pippin” that was but a “crab” (143) full of filth/sin. If Mary, the Mother of God, was universally seen as the embodiment of the True Church, the Duchess is here presented as her Roman Catholic counterpart from a protestant perspective, the *babilonia magna meretrix*, “that great Babylon that mother of whoredoms, and abominations of the earth” (Rev. 17:5, *Geneva Bible*), making herself sick on the foul poison of fair but false doctrines, and giving birth anally to an antichrist.

“I am lost in amazement. I know not what to think on’t” (2.1.169), says a nonplussed Antonio at the close of the scene, a response shared by audiences and critics alike. The episode illustrates the “extraordinaire densité de sujet et d’écriture” which Henri Fluchère celebrates in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.⁷³ The apricots episode, albeit short, is replete with scriptural and theological allusions weaving a rich web of potential meanings that resonate with contemporary disputes between the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Church. Just as the Duchess’s swelling belly appears to burst out of her dress, the scene’s hermeneutic inflation expands in excess of its dramatic frame. The plurality of references simultaneously pointing to sinful transgression and purgation of sin, brings the tragedy to a structural crisis. The scene draws together in an instant the elements constitutive of tragic action: *hamartia* (the eating of the apricots as a rehearsal of the original sin), the fall (the Duchess “fall’n in labor”, 157), and *catharsis* (confession, exorcism, childbirth and excretion). *Anagnorisis* almost successfully occurs with the near revelation of the expectant wife behind the semblance of the chaste widow, a discovery that is prevented at the last minute, for it would have ultimately exposed the body of the boy actor, and the theatrical performance, not just the tragic fiction, would have come to annihilation. Those were rotten apricots, indeed.

73. Henri Fluchère, “Webster John (1580-1625)”, *Encyclopædia Universalis* [en ligne], accessed 3 may 2020. URL : <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/john-webster/>

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