Chapter 5

“A Bett’ring of Nature”: Grafting and Embryonic Development in The Duchess of Malfi

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Children in their mother’s womb are like tender plants rooting in a garden .... They are forced to draw their nourishment from the sap that comes to them there.

—Jaques Duval, Des Hermaphrodits, accouchemens des femmes

In one of the defining moments of John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1613), Bosola devises a pregnancy test. After observing that the Duchess is “sick a-days,” that she “pukes, her stomach seethes,” and that she wears a “loose bodied gown” (2.1.66–71), he believes that he has found a way to discover her condition.² His experiment, “a trick” that will uncover the Duchess’s bodily state (2.1.72), hinges on her eating apricots, which were often used in the period as a laxative and were believed to induce labor.³ The Duchess’s “tetchiness” and her eagerness to consume the fruit are, to Bosola, “apparent signs of breeding” (2.2.2–3). As he discusses with the Duchess the gardener’s method for producing the fruit, Bosola quickly moves from talking about apricots to talking about the child that he imagines to
be growing inside her belly. In order to deduce her reproductive state, he enlists a horticultural metaphor as double entendre: he describes both the improvement of apricots through horticultural means and the Duchess’s supposedly illegitimate pregnancy as “grafting[s]” (2.1.148). Bosola aligns illicit, extramarital reproduction, in other words, with a particular horticultural practice.  

The Duchess of Malfi is frequently noted for its portrayal of lycanthropy, a disease that convinces its sufferers that they have been “transformed into wolves” (5.2.10). The trope of lycanthropy allows Webster to portray the disruption of the boundaries between the human and the animal worlds.  

Less commonly observed, however, are the play’s analogous portrayals of the porous border between the human and plant worlds. Although editors and critics frequently acknowledge Bosola’s investigative use of apricots as evidence of an early modern belief that the fruit could aid digestion and encourage labor, his related use of a grafting metaphor to describe the Duchess’s pregnancy has received considerably less notice. Bosola’s comparison of grafting to her purportedly illicit pregnancy aligns socially unsanctioned reproduction with the violation of biological kind. The child, however, is in fact legitimate, the product of a secret marriage between the Duchess and Antonio, her steward. Bosola first employs the grafting metaphor for his own purposes, but, as I will demonstrate, his reference to grafting inadvertently reveals the Duchess’s control over her reproductive behavior—it shows that she chooses to transgress standard, familial rules of reproduction, marrying and procreating without her brothers’ permission.

In this chapter, I will first consider the classical and biblical origins of grafting. Webster’s own conception of grafting likely emerges from ancient and Christian antecedents, as well as from popular gardening and horticultural pamphlets published in the early modern period. I will then examine the emergence of figurative uses of grafting and the ways in which such metaphors signal connections between characters in The Duchess of Malfi. Next, I will explore early modern attitudes toward grafting in relation to Webster’s play, noting what horticulturalists held to be its principal tenets and investigating common perceptions of the practice. Webster’s use of the grafting metaphor for bastardy and embryological development, I contend, follows a long tradition of describing human procreation in arboreal terms; pre-Linnaean conceptions of human generation often held that grafting and reproduction mirrored one another.  

The Duchess of Malfi, however, uses the language of plant life and horticulture to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate human reproduction and to