

Tulipomania as a Cultural Reckoning in the New World

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WRITER'S COMMENT: During my springtime trip to the Netherlands last year, I was fortunately able to visit the Keukenhof Tulip Gardens at the peak of tulip season, where the millions of bulbs planted in the autumn had bloomed into a colorful floral wonderland. In Professor Frances Dolan's "Consuming 'New' Worlds" seminar, the tulip was one of myriad trade items whose complex histories we discussed. I found the Western gaze imposed upon the tulip in our course readings to be particularly fascinating, and I leapt at the opportunity to dive into the flower famously responsible for the first recorded financial bubble. This research paper combines analysis of Hester Pulter's poem "The Garden: or The Contention of Flowers" with historical records and scholarly work focused on the 17th-century Dutch tulipomania to explore shifting Western attitudes toward global trade and the sustained exoticization of the "other." These literary and scholarly texts better informed my thinking about the still-relevant cultural reckoning manifesting from tensions between the need to preserve a particular national identity and the need to embrace the new.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Hannah wrote this paper in a seminar called "Consuming 'New' Worlds," in which a lively group of undergraduates considered how imported luxury commodities—especially flowers, sugar, coffee, and tea—motivated the expansion of empire and transformed English culture in the seventeenth century. Some of the questions that animated our seminar included: What does it mean to ingest the "foreign" and be transformed by it? How does literature participate in (and not simply register) such processes of cultural change? Students initiated and directed much of our conversation, crowded around a seminar table in a classroom whose warmth and high energy make me feel nostalgic in this moment of online

instruction. We shared food, ideas, and stories with one another; we visited rare 17th-century books in Special Collections; and students embarked on independent research. Hannah was an extraordinary participant from the start. Her excellent work culminated in this paper on the “tulipomania” that made tulips so fashionable and expensive in the period and what the Tulip has to say for itself in Hester Pulter’s poem “The Garden: or The Contention of Flowers.” Although many texts in the period censure the Tulip as an outsider, intruding on the English garden, Hannah shows that Pulter’s tulip emphasizes its exotic origins as, paradoxically, its strategy for assimilation. This is an original and provocative argument, supported through careful research and subtle, smart textual analysis. I’m delighted it will find a wider audience here.

—Frances E. Dolan, Department of English

There is a famous tale that emerged from the 17th-century Dutch Republic about a sailor who ate a tulip after mistaking it for an onion. One version of the story says the sailor ate the flower bulb for breakfast (Lee), while another version says the sailor received “raw herring at the kitchen door of a rich merchant and a tulip fancier” and subsequently “picked up some roots which were lying outside, cooked them with it, and ate them, thinking them to be onions” (Silberrad and Lyall). In both versions, the lesson lies in the absurdity: The sailor was “unaware that they were priceless tulips” (Silberrad and Lyall) and so obviously “did not realise [sic] the onion-like bulb was a precious object” (Lee). This story seems the most apt embodiment of the futility and falsity of Tulipomania, a mania of consumption which centered around the flawed belief that flowers could somehow be “priceless” and “precious” objects. Any interpretation of this event, or of the tulip’s history and status in the West, would be incomplete without recognition of the flower’s foreign origins and exotic appeal. As noted by English scholar Benedict S. Robinson, “a flower is not like any other commodity,” in that “it is not simply imported into England, but, once imported, grows there, perhaps even becomes part of an English ecology.” The idea that an exotic flower can assimilate more effectively—to the point that its own history is rewritten—is explored indirectly through the personified tulip in Hester Pulter’s poem “The Garden, or The Contention of Flowers.” By placing scholarly analysis of Tulipomania in conversation with Pulter’s poem, we can begin to explore the New World’s desire for the perfect

natural object—an idea that seems oxymoronic, but is, nevertheless, a byproduct of New World attempts to assimilate foreign goods.

The garden as a private, exclusive, and artificial natural realm is important context to note before diving into an analysis of the historic or literary tulip. The word “garden,” which dates back to the 13th century, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a traditionally enclosed piece of ground where “flowers, fruit, or vegetables are cultivated.” Later use of the word, popularized by the British, characterizes “garden” as “private property,” typically “adjoining a building.” The idea of the garden, then, is, by definition, entrenched with both private tastes and preferences in its curation as well as cultivated through private enjoyment. There is a sense of privilege evoked by the garden: the garden as leisure time, rather than as serving a purely utilitarian function. A similar sense of the garden as a relaxed yet exclusive pastime is present in Pulter’s poem, specifically in the first three lines:

Once in my garden as alone I lay,
Some solitary hours to pass away,
My flowers most fair and fresh within my view

The repeated use of the word “my” establishes the garden as a private space. Yet the idea of possession over the garden and the flowers effectively creates an immediate and very obvious dichotomy between the natural and the unnatural. Despite the fact that the garden in Pulter’s poem is comprised of 13 different flowers with origins spanning the globe—meaning the garden has been specifically curated and cultivated to represent personal preference—the unnatural assortment of flowers is naturalized in the words “my flowers” and “my garden.”

The implications of this language exist outside of the poem, as this viewpoint is at the crux of the New World’s outlook—an outlook informed by seemingly boundless desires and by the seemingly limitless abundance of trade and colonial pursuits. The garden, a clearly defined and identifiable space, “opens onto the wider and less determinate spaces of nation, race, or culture” through the assimilation of exotic flowers into English gardens (Robinson). Furthermore, the practice by which foreign flowers are naturalized into English gardens “might suggest English control over the networks of global trade and consequent access to exotic objects of value and beauty,” yet “it might also trigger a more

anxious sense that the integrity of an English ecology was being eroded, that England was being subtly altered by its own undisciplined desires” (Robinson). The idea that England is simultaneously benefitting from foreign goods yet also experiencing a sort of cultural identity crisis as a result of its desire for more seems, at once, too large an idea to truly define or comprehend. It also, however, seems like the give-and-take and push-and-pull at the heart of how we think about and define the New World. John Gillies, writing about “The Figure of the New World in *The Tempest*,” describes the evolution of the New World “as concept” with the word “new” left “deliberately vague”—“The New World might have been ‘new’ in a genuinely ontological sense, but then again it might have been ‘new’ merely in the contingent sense of only recently having come to European notice.” Just as *The Tempest*’s Miranda shifts her world view dramatically, acquiring a sense of the “brave new world” when exposed to ideas outside of her existing realm of knowledge, Europe, too, is experiencing a cultural reckoning at this time. And Tulipomania, specifically, is a perfect microcosm of this reckoning.

The Dutch Golden Age was characterized by a hunt for new, exotic goods. This hunt brought Dutchmen to the East, and they brought back with them animals, herbs, spices, plants, and flowers, including the tulip. Originating from the Ottoman Empire (now modern-day Turkey), the tulip, which arrived in the Netherlands in 1590, was described as “an ‘oriental’ object that fascinated the Dutch” (Lee). Pulter’s tulip prizes its “Turkish turbans,” a unique attribute which “enlarge[s its] frame.” The tulip’s very etymology derives from the word “turban,” and the associations evoked by the latter word are significant. The tulip’s own name “identified it as a stranger” (Robinson). As referenced in Pulter’s poem, the tulip’s unique, turban-like shape and Middle Eastern origins are part of its appeal. Whereas a number of the other flowers in Pulter’s poem actively Anglicize themselves, the tulip makes active reference to its Middle Eastern origins because its exotic roots are what make it an alluring and economically successful product.

Additionally, as the trope of the conflation between floral and feminine beauty goes, literary texts frequently depict the tulip’s beauty as derived from its feminine appeal. In Pulter’s poem, each of the 13 flowers, except the Adonis, presents itself in a feminine form. The personified tulip praises its unrivaled beauty in the poem. It also, however, praises its

reserved nature: “besides my beauty, I have virtue.” Indeed, the tulip was seen as “seductive enough to win the title of the most beloved flower in the Ottoman Empire” while also thought to be “modest because it bows its head to admirers” (Lee). Although the tulip has a globally recognized appeal, it is undeniable that the Western gaze has effectively sexualized a foreign object—as in Pulter’s poem. It seems likely, then, that the tulip’s popular appeal in the East would be hyper-intensified in the West given that, outside of its context of origin, it exists as an item of beauty, mystery, and intrigue. This rationale might begin to explain the mania for the flower that overtook the Dutch during Tulipomania.

The tulip’s exotic appeal is inseparable from its value in the West, but the tulip had long been sexualized and admired in the East before Tulipomania. In Persia, tulips were a frequent reference in poetry. “Regarded as a symbol of declared love . . . on account of the elegance of its form,” and “the beauty of its colours,” the flower had been considered “an appropriate symbol of a female who possesses no other recommendation than personal charm” (Silberrad and Lyall). Other scholarly texts describe the tulip as “wildly sexy,” “seductive,” “a matchless pearl” and a “symbol of undying love” (Lee).

Yet the tulip that stole hearts in the East was not the exact same much-admired tulip of the West. Preferences of kind and variety differed depending on location. At first, the tulip was brought to Europe as a “resident alien,” but over time, the flower was naturalized to “local conditions and local tastes” through gardening. Thus, “as the tulip changed Europe, the flower itself was changed by Europe” (Robinson). The language being employed in this passage feels strikingly similar to that of human migration. There is still an idea and expectation that “resident aliens” who come to the United States or any other Western nation assimilate themselves accordingly. The U.S. and the United Kingdom champion themselves as global symbols of diversity and inclusion—as a kind of cultural melting pot. Yet to assimilate means to abandon one’s foreign identity and culture in exchange for loosely defined ideas of freedom and prosperity largely rooted in aspirations for economic mobility. It might be concluded, then, that the tulip, as one of the most economically advantageous flowers in history, succeeded in assimilating, at least in the Western sense of the term. The tulip, however, is not the anomaly, it is the rule. The tulip’s beauty allowed it to assimilate successfully. And beauty seems to be the gatekeeper for successful

assimilation for migrants to Western countries. Migrants from European countries, who have light skin, are more readily accepted as Americans, whereas a disparity exists in terms of the willingness or readiness to accept migrants of color, those with attributes that do not align with Western beauty standards.

Scholars have tried to explain Tulipomania, a craze for tulips that overtook the Dutch between the years 1634 to 1637, as a result of mob mentality; a symptom of the unhinged desires run rampant in the face of New World acquisitions; a market gamble and, in the most naïve sense, an act of adoration for nature in the purest and most chaotically idyllic sense. The stories, the numbers, and the prices that emerged from this period are almost too wild to be true, and any one of these explanations taken alone would present Tulipomania in too reductive a form. Looking at prices alone, it is difficult to get a tangible sense of the extreme value the tulip amassed. A better sense might be had in looking at what was given for one single rare tulip species: the Viceroy. According to Scottish journalist Charles Mackay, the following articles were exchanged for a single one of these rare tulips: two lasts of wheat; four lasts of rye; four fat oxen; eight fat swine; twelve fat sheep; two hogsheads of wine; four tuns of beer; two tuns of butter; one thousand lbs. of cheese; a complete bed; a suit of clothes and a silver drinking-cup. And in Haarlem, one of the premier cities for bulb auctioning in Amsterdam, a stone, set down in 1637, marks the location of “Tulip House,” a house infamously exchanged for a single tulip. On the stone, there is the following inscription: “This stone was kept as a remembrance of the famous tulip trade of the year 1637, ‘when one fool hatched from another, the people were rich without substance, and wise without knowledge’” (Silberrad and Lyall). Any one of these exchanges seems surprising, but it bears the question: Why is one good more valuable than another? According to Robinson, recognizing the chaos exhibited by the Dutch tulip market is a “recognition of the market’s power to assign fantastic values to what might seem to be trivial or ephemeral objects. . . . [I]t is naive to be shocked at the high prices tulip bulbs could command, since exchange value is a function of the market, that is, of desire: the value represented by a commodity, as Marx famously wrote, is ‘purely social’” (Robinson). Thus, it is perhaps only fruitful to examine the value of a commodity in terms of its social value, as a direct representation of the desires and priorities of the time.



Figure 1. *Flowers in a Glass Vase* by Jan van den Hecke, Flemish, 1625-1684. Oil on canvas. Bequest of Alice Speed Stoll to the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY. (Lesnaw and Ghabrial).

Using this lens, let us then examine the most highly prized tulip of the period, the variegated tulip, as the embodied representation of English desire. When seedling tulips first flower, which can take up to seven years, they are “self-colored.” Over the course of several more years, however, they “break,” causing the flower to become no longer self-colored, but variegated (Silberrad and Lyall). Today, tulips are bred specifically to produce streaks of color, but in the 1600s, when the variegated tulip first entered Western consciousness, the variegation was caused by the potyvirus Tulip breaking virus (TBV) (Lesnaw and Ghabrial). It was not until the 1930s that the viral cause of this variation was

understood. And as the seemingly random outcome of tulip bulbs came to be thought of as a kind of gamble, Dutchmen began to play the tulip market as a gamble in and of itself. The tulip came to be beloved for its variety, and the error effectively made the tulip more valuable. According to Silberrad and Lyall, in the time of Tulipomania, from 1634 to 1637, the more the tulips “were striped, violet and rose on a pure white ground, the more was paid for them.” Even over a century later, between the years 1790 and 1797, although tulip prices had dropped considerably, the standard “was much the same: the colours in greatest estimation in variegated tulips are the blacks, golden yellow, purple violets and rose and vermilion, each of which being variegated various ways; and such as are striped in three different colours distinct and unmixed, with strong regular

streaks, but with little or no tinge of the breeder, may be called the most perfect tulip” (Silberrad and Lyall). It might be curious then that while the other flowers in Pulter’s poem speak of themselves in their perfect forms (“I from heaven descended,” says the Caledonian Iris), the tulip is nevertheless ardently adored for its unexpectedness. A few of Pulter’s flowers wax poetic about their distinctive characteristics. For instance, the poppy specifically emphasizes its unique capability to produce opiates. For the most part, however, the flowers highlight their beauty and virtue. The tulip does this as well, yet it does something different by mentioning its flaws: “My roots decayed nature doth restore.” The line is strikingly humble in tone, an example of a flower owing its health and vibrancy not to its own perfection but to the natural world it is born from.

Yet that natural world is very much unnatural, at least according to English poet Andrew Marvell (1621-1678). In “The Mower against Gardens,” Marvell criticizes the “white” tulip for seeking out “complexion” and learning to “interline its cheek.” He writes of the self-colored tulip as a pure entity, chastising its variegation as a sort of ominous façade. The following lines in Marvell’s poem, however, make clear that the consequences of the tulip’s variegation run much deeper than what might be seen as just a made-up falsity:

And yet these rarities might be allowed
To man, that sovereign thing and proud,
Had not he dealt between the bark and tree,
Forbidden mixtures there to see.
No plant now knew the stock from which it came;
He grafts upon the wild and the tame . . .

Grafting, an undeniably unnatural process, is the root of the variegated tulip’s success: “color breaking in tulips was demonstrated to be transmissible from bulbs of variegated tulips to bulbs of uniformly colored tulips by grafting.” And the grafting owed its success to TBV, a fact then unknown (Lesnaw and Ghabrial). As made strikingly clear, the variegation is depicted as a threat to the purity of the tulip. These lines, however, are not strictly a pointed criticism of the variegated tulip, but more so a criticism of the mixing of the new with the old as effectively diluting the sanctity of England. The “forbidden mixtures” then are a reference not just to grafting techniques, but to the mixing of races, the mixing of cultures, miscegenation, and the implications of New



Figure 2. A Vase of Flowers by Jan Brueghel I, 1568-1625. (Lesnam and Ghabrial).

World desires as a threat to both English purity and the purity of the “white race.” Of course, we have previously seen the idea that acquisitions from trade and colonialist conquests simultaneous benefit and degrade Western society, complicating the ways it perceives itself, in the aforementioned work of Robinson. To expand this point, Robinson addresses commodity histories as narrating the “emergence of global capitalism as a scene of seduction” where Europe is “invaded, penetrated, conquered, rescued, seduced and dominated” by these foreign goods. The separate histories of sugar, tobacco,

chocolate, rice, and flowers, and their emergence in the New World, decontextualize relevant and important origins, serving to fragment the identities of these goods as pre-New World and post-New World. Yet by reversing these narratives—thinking of these goods in terms of having “invaded,” “penetrated,” and “conquered” those colonial forces thought of as acting upon these goods—an important autonomy is bestowed upon these commodities.

In light of this reversal, then, let us imagine Pulter’s tulip as not having been a curated entity, but as having acted upon the garden. Let us observe and interpret the tulip as the catalyst which orientalizes Western taste, therefore sparking “an errant desire for exotic plants that rooted itself right into the soil, taking hold of and subtly altering an English ecology” (Robinson). Interpreting the tulip in this way preserves the flower’s history as separate from its Western assimilation. It is also an important rewriting of its assimilation history, allowing the tulip to exist

beyond the role of idealized, imagined, exotic wonder.

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