

## Taste of Deception: Enchanted Food as a Means of Power, Control, and Manipulation

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### Abstract

“Dip the apple in the brew. Let the Sleeping Death seep through. Look! On the skin! The symbol of what lies within. Now, turn red, to tempt Snow White, to make her hunger for a bite.”- The Evil Queen. Be it the poisoned apple that puts the princess in deep slumber or the cursed apple that can change fate; food plays a vital role in fairy tales and fantasy literature. This paper aims to analyze the role of enchanted food in the following works: Stephanie Garber’s *Once Upon a Broken Heart Series* (2021-2023) and Holly Black’s *The Cruel Prince* (2018). I will examine the following questions in my paper: How does enchanted food serve as tools of power to deceive and entrap characters? Why are female characters often associated with the creation or use of enchanted food? What kind of transformation do the characters undergo after consuming the enchanted food? What roles do the acts of eating in banquets and feasts play in showcasing manipulation or control through food? How does enchanted food bind people to curses or bargains?

**Keywords:** Control, Curse, Enchanted, Food, Power

Enchanted food and its consumption have been a recurring theme in fairy tales and fantasy stories. Food, which is fundamental for survival, becomes a symbol of temptation, danger, and control. Food plays a pivotal role in fairy tales as food frequently has transformative powers. “Fairy tales often feature food, with the caveat of warning that when people enter into the fairy realm, they should never eat fairy food, no matter how appetizing it seems to be” (Newman-Stille). This context can be seen in the story *Snow White*, where food is used to tempt and deceive the innocent. Similarly, in *Hansel and Gretel*, “food is used as an instrument of allure and enchantment; the witch uses food as bait to entice the lost children. She constructs an enchanted cottage which is made up of cake, sugar, and bread. She is overjoyed when she succeeds in ensnaring the children” (Khan 5). It is considered rude not to offer food. Fairy tales frequently centre around curses that have resulted from not offering a beggar food, because of jealousy among the characters, or to exercise power. Food also represents a bond between the person who offers food and the person who eats it becomes controlled by the one who offers the enchanted food. Many fairy tales feature the idea of food as a threat. They explore the power of food that is used to feed, but also has the potential to kill. It also reveals the power dynamics; the protagonists are seen fighting the villains who attempt to overpower them.

## Enchanted Food as Tools to Deceive and Entrap Characters

One of the common themes in the fairy tales is that appearances can be deceptive and sweet talk can be a trap. The Evil Queen in *Snow White* deceives Snow White into consuming the enchanted apple, making it look appealing, and telling her that it is a magical apple that could make her dreams come true.

QUEEN. And because you've been so good to poor old Granny, I'll share a secret with you. This is no ordinary apple. It's a magic wishing apple.

SNOW WHITE. A wishing apple?

QUEEN. Yes! One bite and all your dreams will come true. (“Snow White (1937 Film)/Transcript”)

Enchanted food and drinks are often made lucrative to seduce the defenceless; the characters get tempted by the allure of the enchanted food and consume it. “Take a gulp and take a breath and go ahead and sign the scroll!” (“The Little Mermaid (1989)/Transcript”). In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula lures Ariel into consuming the magic potion that will turn her into a human for three days. However, the deal came with a heavy price for Ariel as Ursula kept on hindering Ariel’s quest. We come across a similar instance in *Once Upon a Broken Heart (2021)* by Stephanie Garber. The heroine, Evangeline, comes across enchanted drinks called “Fortuna’s Fantastically Flavoured Water” that are visibly tempting; they strip the people of autonomy and the people have an insatiable desire to consume them and experience different emotions.

Enchanted food and drinks give power to people. However, this power is frequently exploited by the villainous characters to add hurdles in the way of the protagonists. As the story progresses, Evangeline discovers that her step-sister, Marisol, has been deceiving her by appearing to be meek and vulnerable and using magic secretly. She learns that Marisol has been hiding the cooking books that were actually spell books to enchant and curse the food and drinks. Marisol uses magic potions to control the male characters and to gain more power over Evangeline. These instances force Evangeline to come out of her vulnerabilities, and she learns about the dangers of trusting someone blindly. Additionally, it is observed that not only villains but also protagonists use enchanted food and drinks to entrap other characters. Sometimes the characters use enchanted food to navigate their way out of adversities. For instance, Evangeline uses the Serum of Truth to escape the death sentence. She tricks Prince Tiberius into consuming the potion and Tiberius confesses that he killed his own brother.

“He keeps breaking off because he can’t lie,” Evangeline said, “and he knows that I’m innocent. I had no reason or desire to kill Apollo—I was the person with nothing to gain and everything to lose, and Tiberius knows that.”

“She’s—she’s—she’s telling the truth—” The prince’s face turned red. “Evangeline didn’t kill my brother. I did.” (Garber)

## Association of Female with the Creation of Enchanted Food

Historian Ronald “Hutton defines magic as ‘any formalized practices by human beings designed to achieve particular ends by the control, manipulation and direction of supernatural power or spiritual power concealed within the natural world’”. Women in the stories and

history are associated with beauty, kindness, and meekness. They are usually caretakers and assigned simpler tasks than men. While men fight in battles and exhibit acts of valour, women prepare food and raise the children. They often depend on the male characters in the stories for their survival. In patriarchal societies, women are denied direct power. So, women seek power through indirect ways. Enchanting or cursing the food or drinks are the most common methods they employ. In the early days, women used to go to the forests to gather herbs, which they used to heal the people; sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't, resulting in the death of an individual. Using the simple and effective technique, i.e., enchanting of food and creation of potions, they control the people and the surroundings without being noticed. Food brings people together; it is a symbol of trust. Since women are considered gentle, no one expects them to enchant or curse the food. Thus, food that is used to demonstrate love and care becomes a tool to manipulate and deceive people.

In *Circe* by Madeline Miller, Circe's extensive knowledge of herbs is evident; her discovery, learning, and use of herbs are fundamental to her magical practices.

"Circe's magic, called "pharmaka", which related to "herbs with wondrous powers, sprung from the fallen blood of gods...as well as those which grow common upon the earth. It is a gift to be able to draw out their powers". Circe's process is imagined as an instinctive and artful labour of love. The Greek goddess-witch spent hours isolated on her island experimenting with potions in what can only be described as an intuitive, self-taught process. (Zambon)

Consider the instance from *The Odyssey* by Homer where Circe enchants the food using herbs and incantations.

She brought them into her palace, seating them on high-backed chairs, then she mixed them a potion—cheese, barley, and pale honey mulled in Pramnian wine—but into the brew she stirred her wicked drugs to wipe from their memories any thought of home. When they had drunk the potion, she struck them with her wand, drove them into her pigsties, all of them bristling into swine.

Similarly, according to both Greek and Roman cultures, Hecate is another infamous witch who was associated with the underworld and witchcraft, and used herbs for enchantment. Herbs like mandrake, henbane and belladonna, along with incantations, were often used for enchantment because of their euphoric effects for personal gains. Occasionally, when women are envious of other female characters, they curse the food. In *Once Upon a Broken Heart*, Evangeline's step-sister, Marisol, is jealous of Evangeline, observing how Luc, her lover, cares about her and treats her lovingly, and uses love potion on Luc to make him fall in love with her. Later, she uses the love potion on Prince Tiberius, knowing that the crown prince, Apollo, has died and Tiberius, being next in line for the throne, will be the king. She dreams of becoming the queen and plots to get Evangeline executed for the murder of Apollo, but ultimately fails. This scene highlights the hidden desires of women to acquire power and control over others. Usually, self-conscious or insecure female characters are observed making use of enchanted food and drinks to boost their egos. While queens and women are associated with enchanting food, the male characters rarely do this. The male characters directly wield power. Prince of Hearts, Jacks, in *Once Upon a Broken Heart*, either consumes or offers enchanted food. The cursed apples that Jacks consumes are a part of his

mysterious persona as the Prince of Hearts. He doesn't need to enchant them because he is a powerful fate and cannot be killed. However, women do not obtain power directly so they navigate indirect ways of acquiring power. This context is evident in *The Little Mermaid*, where Ursula entices Ariel into consuming the magical potion to take revenge on King Triton.

### **Transformation Through Enchanted Food**

Enchanted food can have varied effects on the characters. Usually, the transformations are related to the ambitions and wants of the villainous characters. The transformations can be temporary like Ariel's, who became human for three days, or can become permanent over time, like in the story of Snow White, based on the nature of the enchantment used. To reverse these transformations, either antidotes are used, or a series of difficult tasks must be completed if the transformations occur because of the putting of the curses.

In *The Cruel Prince* (2018) by Holly Black, the terrible consequences of consuming the faerie fruit by mortals can be observed. The fae deceive the mortals and feed them the faerie fruit to control them and turn them into a public spectacle of mockery. Valerian tricks Jude into eating the faerie fruit which leads Carden and his friends to ridicule Jude. Jude gets anxious searching for salt, which acts as an antidote, but fails as faerie fruit starts tricking her mind "Faerie fruit, which muddles the mind, which makes humans crave it enough to starve themselves for another taste, which makes us pliant and suggestible and ridiculous. Dain's geas protected me from enchantment, from anyone's control, but faerie fruit puts you out of even your own control" (Black). The Faerie fruit intoxicates Jude making her vulnerable and helpless against the magic of the Faerie world. This context illustrates the power hierarchy in the Fae world, where the power belongs to the Fae, and humans are considered detestable. This reflects a modern take on the classic concept of succumbing to deception, as shown in Snow White. This instance plays a pivotal role in the character development of Jude, and later, she is seen challenging the hierarchy of Elfhame. Jude undergoes a transformation and we see Jude stepping up as a strong female protagonist. Her hunger for power increases, and she refuses to be controlled or manipulated by Fae. So, Jude prepares faerie poison for herself after reading a magic book. She uses blusher mushrooms, deathsweet, wraithberry, and faerie fruit. She takes small doses of this poison every day to build immunity so that she'll be harder to kill by the fae. "Mithridatism, it's called. Isn't that a funny name? The process of eating poison to build up immunity. So long as I don't die from it, I'll be harder to kill" (Black). Here, we notice that Jude refuses to surrender to the power and manipulation of the Fae.

In *Once Upon a Broken Heart*, Evangeline bargains with Jacks and asks him to stop the marriage of her step-sister, Marisol and her lover, Luc. Later she discovers that Jacks had stopped the wedding by turning them into stone. Out of regret, she drinks the poison from the goblet to reverse the curse and takes their place; she turns into a stone figure. This instance highlights that one wrong decision of willingly consuming the enchanted food or drinks can have perilous effects on the characters. The transformations that are induced as a result of consuming the enchanted food and drinks can be physical, emotional, or psychological. In most stories, the characters do not undergo physical transformations after consuming the enchanted food. They usually lose the ability to think and comprehend; they lose control of themselves and succumb to the powers of the Fae. In some other circumstances, we notice some drastic effects of consuming the enchanted drinks and potions. Consider the instance

from *Once Upon a Broken Heart*, when Evangeline learns about her step-sister's betrayal and comes across a truth spell in the magic book that came with a caution. "Warning! There is a cost to every spell. More truths than people want are often revealed. Additional effects of Serum for Truths are usually temporary, and they may include fatigue, impaired decision-making and judgment, dizziness, the inability to tell a lie, and the urge to reveal any unspoken truths" (Garber). The transformations often have negative effects on the lives of the characters adding hurdles to their lives.

### **Banquets and Feasts as Sites of Manipulation and Control**

Banquets and feasts are the occasions where all the power-related games are played in the stories. In *The Cruel Prince*, Jude talks about taking revenge on Balekin for getting prince Dain's son murdered: "We're going to walk right into Balekin's feast and steal his kingdom out from under him. How's that for vengeance?" (Black). The atmosphere of the banquets consists of intimate music for dancing, exotic drinks, ample amounts of mouth-watering food as well as jaw-stopping decorations consisting of chandeliers, garlands that fill the air with intoxicating perfume, etc. During these occasions, people are in a merry mood and overlook the hidden conspiracies or evil tricks being plotted and become the victim of enchanted food and evil schemes. Power dynamics come into play at the banquets. In *The Cruel Prince*, Jude reflects on the dire effects of faerie wine when mortals consume it. She confesses that when she was eleven, she went to a banquet and a fae forced her to drink Fae wine.

'But he compelled me to drink, and so I drank; the grass-green faerie wine slipping down my throat like nectar. He danced me around the hill. It was fun at first, the kind of terrifying fun that makes you screech to be put down half the time and feel dizzy and sick the rest. But when the fun wore off and I still couldn't stop, it was just terrifying. It turned out that my fear was equally amusing to him, though'. (Black)

Here, food becomes a means for manipulation and dominance over the helpless. This instance also shows the vulnerability of humans before powerful beings. During the banquets and feasts, it is important to stay vigilant as the chances of falling into the magical traps are high. In a scene, Oriana, Jude's stepmother warns Jude and Taryn of the dangers of consuming the enchanted food and drinks at the banquets. She asks them to carry salt with them which acts as an antidote against enchanted food. In some cases, the female protagonists are seen taking precautions and avoiding eating the food at feasts and banquets to avoid falling into the traps of the villains. Jude practices self-discipline and resists the faerie food because she does not want to give the Fae any control over her. Fate and choices play important roles in the lives of the characters as one wrong choice or misstep can lead to hidden dangers. Food and drinks appear harmless and are delightful, but can lure people to curses and even death.

### **Enchanted Food as a Medium to Bind Characters to Curses or Bargains**

Enchanted food, especially faerie fruit, drinks, and potions, are used to deceive the characters and control them and use them to achieve personal motifs. Typically, the characters make a bargain with the fae out of desperation, or they upset the evil fae, it results in their eternal entrapment. They think that they will be able to fulfil the bargains and come out of it easily, "instead, they often lead people to new desperate deals to fix their first bad bargains" (Black). In *The Cruel Prince*, Jude talks about the effects and consequences people

face when the Fae deceive them and they enter into the bargains and become their slaves. She cites the example of Prince Balekin's human servants, who were stripped of their freedom and autonomy after they were tricked into making a bargain, they were drugged using the faerie fruit and they went into a trance-like state.

But I know there are also humans who make bad bargains or offend the wrong faerie and who are not treated so well. Taryn and I hear things, even if no one means for us to—stories of humans sleeping on stone floors and eating refuse, believing themselves to be resting on feather beds and supping on delicacies. Humans drugged out of their minds on faerie fruit. Balekin's servants are rumored to be the latter, ill-favored and worse-treated. (Black)

This instance illustrates the corrupt and cruel nature of the powerful beings. The powerful beings often manipulate and ensnare those who come to them out of desperation for help, exert control over them and keep on making a mockery of them.

In *Once Upon a Broken Heart*, some instances demonstrate that reversing of the curses can be a challenging endeavour that can leave people in a miserable state. Evangeline goes through a cooking book which was a spell book. She comes across a page that warns the users of the consequences of using enchantments on food:

Warning! There is a cost to every spell.

To undo spell: Love spells and potions rarely reverse on their own, though the people who cast powerful ones often come to regret their choices. (Garber)

The warnings are a constant reminder for the characters to reconsider their decision to create or consume the enchanted food. Later in the story, Evangeline confronts her stepsister, Marisol, after discovering that Marisol used a love potion to deceive Evangeline's lover and made him fall in love with her. Evangeline asks why she didn't reverse the spell. Marisol explains, "I wanted to, but the book I had said the only methods of undoing the spell were vampire venom or killing the person" (Garber). This instance shows that appearances can be deceptive and trusting people naively can be dangerous. Here, food serves as a weapon of enchantment and control.

We observe the use of the enchanted fruits, wine, potions, and other edible things to deceive and control the mortals and exert power over them by ridiculing them. The villainous characters make the mortals do things against their will, and the people get bound to the curses and bargains after consuming the enchanted food. The fae know that finding the cure for the curses is challenging, so they enchant the food and drinks to gain power over the defenceless. The mortals succumb to the power of the enchanted food particularly the faerie fruit, which can have permanently lasting effects on the consumer unless a more powerful being discovers it and saves them. The villains and witches use enchanted food and drinks to weaken the innocent characters, ultimately exerting power over them. Consuming the enchanted food puts the people under the control of the spellcaster. Bargains and curses reflect the continuous struggle of choosing between indulgence and desire.

## Conclusion

Enchanted food and its consumption is intimately tied to temptation, power, control, and betrayal. Commonly, women are associated with the enchantment of the food and drinks because they are considered weak in the stories. So, they have indirect means to obtain power to control people. Enchanted food and drinks make the characters vulnerable, resulting either in a dark descent into danger, or it can lead to character development in some situations. Banquets and feasts are the main sites where power dynamics come into play and the villains come up with their strongest but concealed attacks. Enchanted food and drinks serve as a medium for inflicting curses and bargains that are used by the villains to exert power over others by manipulation. Thus, we notice that the role of enchanted food and drinks is pivotal in exerting power, deceiving people, and controlling them.

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