

# THE POETICS OF SPICE

*Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic*

TIMOTHY MORTON



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## CHAPTER I

### *The confection of spice: historical and theoretical considerations*

. . . cinnamon, and odours and ointments, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and beasts, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and the souls of men.

(From the description of Babylon ('the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her' . . . , 11), Revelation 18:13)

## INTRODUCTION

Capitalism arose not only from concrete economic and social relations, but also from desire – it was in itself a kind of poetry. Fantasies about an ideal substance, of extraordinary wealth and beauty and located in distant imaginary realms, percolated into poetic language. This language persisted even after the economic and social relations within which it had emerged passed away. Romantic writers inherited this long literary tradition, and their evocation of the ideal substance encapsulated it. Moreover, they modified the tradition to depict the developing consumer culture of their age. Even when they were reacting against capitalism, their poetic language was shaped by the fantasy substance.

The fantasy substance was spice. Long after the demise of Roman cuisine, Europeans heard about spices from reports brought back from the Crusades. Literary fantasies about spice flourished – legends of the Land of Cockayne and descriptions of Paradisal gardens as in *Le Roman de la Rose*, fantastic medical discourses, and so forth. The search for the Terrestrial Paradise, a land of inexhaustible plenty, became a realisable objective. The spice race resembled the space race, as John Keay has noted: like the moon, which was visible but could not at first be reached, the spice islands had swum into Western Europeans' ken before they were accessible. Renaissance

commemorations of the discovery of ‘actual’ spice islands in the East Indies celebrated the incarnation of a legend. The East Indies, bent to serve the realisation of desire, became spice monocultures. European consumers of spice grew more sophisticated, refining their tastes for spice, developing non-Christian discourses on luxury and leaving behind the civic humanist distaste for luxurious consumption. Consumer society was born.

The apex of this history – the point at which consumer society began to know itself as such – was the Romantic period. Forms of self-reflexive consumerism developed, producing a bohemian culture that gradually permeated almost all levels of civil society. It even became possible to criticise luxury in new ways. Writers parodied the advertising language of luxury culture, blowing it up hyperbolically rather than simply opposing it. This is where John Keats’s poetry achieves its brilliant, camp reworking of a language underpinning capitalist ideology – the language I have chosen to call *the poetics of spice*.

Spice participates in discourses of spectrality, sacred presence, liminality, wealth, exoticism, commerce and imperialism. It is caught up in, but not limited to, forms of capitalist ideology. A literary-critical approach to this topic is apposite principally because spice itself is such a figurative substance. It could even be considered a sign made flesh, a hypostasised signifier. It served as money in the absence of an exchange rate on trade routes to the Far East; and it has become a metaphor about metaphor, as in the case of analogies between the Eucharist and spice. *Spice* is a complex and contradictory marker: of figure and ground, sign and referent, species and genus; of love and death, epithalamium and epitaph, sacred and profane, medicine and poison, Orient and Occident; *and of the traffic between these terms*. *The Poetics of Spice*, the first long literary critical study of its topic, principally explores the persistence of tropes, figures, emblems and so forth involving spice. Moreover, these readings offer something to cultural historians of capitalism. Literary criticism, aware of the complexities of figurative language, is able to demonstrate aspects of this topic which have not been pursued in cultural anthropology and histories of the commodity. It is able to treat issues of rhetoric, representation, aesthetics and ideology, including notions of race and gender, in ways that make us sensitive to the power and ambiguity of sign systems.

This book investigates how, principally in the English literature

and culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the representation of spice operated within ideologies of consumption, including notions of trade, abstinence and luxury. The Romantic period was the acme of developing, overlapping discourses of spice. This is the point at which a new, reflexive kind of consumerism became possible, following the growth of a consumer society (as investigated by McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb). Campbell has made some useful observations about this kind of consumerism, and the title of this book is partly an echo of his *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987). Reflexive consumerism encapsulated ideologies of consumption latent in bourgeois values of efficiency, productivity, work and reified market forces: fantasies of cornucopian consumption. These fantasies had been prepared for by the poetics of spice.

The Romantic period came at the end of a century during which the actual *economic* value of spice had been declining, but also during which its *ideological* value, because of the debate on luxury, had been rising. It was also the period that witnessed the birth of imperialism, the global institutionalisation of those forces that had been inspired by and caught up in the poetics of spice since the later Middle Ages. The haunting trace of spice was left, a perfume that had opened up global space. For Keats and Percy Shelley, to talk about spice was to talk about capitalism, and most notably, consumerism and luxury. These poets mounted a critique of capitalism through a poetics that could register the new kinds of consumerist desire that had gradually deconstructed the civic humanist self throughout the eighteenth century.

This does not mean that the Romantic period is in *all* respects different from the other periods under discussion – a formalist proposition Romantic studies is commonly in danger of making. Our criteria for distinguishing among the medieval, early modern and modern periods in general, and between the Romantic period and the long eighteenth century in particular, need to be reconsidered. The Romantic rhetoric of spice draws on a *long history* of representation, economics and politics, and the period is not hermetically sealed. A diachronic approach to studying the poetics of spice is therefore required. For instance, a study of the long eighteenth century indicates political, economic and poetic reasons for Keats's representation of spice in such poems as *The Eve of St Agnes*. This is why I prefer to use 'the Romantic period' rather than 'Romanti-



cism'. To think of an author who wrote between, roughly, 1776 and 1830, is not necessarily to think of a 'Romantic' author in the old-fashioned sense.

Besides being a way of making my American colleagues pronounce Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological study, *The Poetics of Space*, with a cockney accent, *The Poetics of Spice* is, to use the well-worn phrase, about the 'politics and poetics' of spice. I still believe in the usefulness of 'ideology', despite ubiquitous postmodern Father Christmases bearing gifts for humanities departments in the guise of literary approaches to non-literary disciplines. This book is a study of ideology, broadly conceived to include ideas about poetry and poetics. Unlike some historicist works, however, it does not shun close reading: after all, it analyses a *style* of consuming.

Ideology is externalised in food. As Žižek jokes in *The Plague of Fantasies*, imitating the catchphrase of the TV series *The X-Files*, 'The Truth is Out There'.<sup>1</sup> Consider *Little Derwent's Breakfast* (1839), a collection of poems addressed to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's seven-year-old grandson. Written by Emily Trevenen, an acquaintance of William Wordsworth and friend of Charles and Mary Lamb, it is an educational poem in the sense that education is an externalised form of ideology, embodied in what Louis Althusser called Ideological State Apparatuses. Trevenen does not merely exhort Derwent Coleridge to behave like a little gentleman at the breakfast table, though it is an ideal scene of instruction in manners. She also provides lessons on the commercial origins of sugar, exotically illustrated by the idyllic fantasy realms of the West Indies, China and Arabia. She furnishes a homily on class relations entitled 'The Rivals; or, Sugar and Salt'. The presence at table of both condiments provides an opportunity for a quarrel and reconciliation (by 'Nature') between the bourgeoisie (in the form of sugar) and the working class (in the form of salt). The poem 'Coffee' begins with an indecorously surreal depiction of the coffee blossom petals falling 'Like the flakes of a fresh-fallen shower of snow'.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps this exposition is not indecorous, if it is a celebration of the artificiality of commodities, a tribute to how the world has been turned into an aesthetic object. The last two stanzas depict *Arabia Felix*:

The land where the choicest of coffee is grown,  
Is a country for costly productions well known;  
For jewels and spices – fruits richest and best –  
And hence they have named it, 'Arabia the blest'.

Again, in our West India islands 'tis found  
 That coffee plantations now richly abound:  
 But none can with coffee from *Mocha* compare,  
 Which the Turks with their hookas luxuriously share.<sup>3</sup>

The close is significantly orientalist. The slippage of 'fruits . . . ' indicates either actual fruits, or the jewels and spices in a metaphorical register: the fruits of trade and empire. The naturalising depiction of trade as the plucking of fruit is strongly ideological. *Little Derwent's Breakfast* resembles David Harvey's opening question to his geography students at Johns Hopkins: where did your breakfast come from?<sup>4</sup> To think about this is to uncover global networks of power. The difference is that *Little Derwent's Breakfast* is a didactic work designed to *produce* ideology rather than *unmask* it:

How many different hands 'twill take  
 A single loaf of bread to make! –  
 That tea and sugar must be sought  
 In distant lands, whence they are brought:  
 In short, what time it will employ  
 Only to feed one little boy!<sup>5</sup>

#### HISTORICISING SPICE

My principal sources for the history of spice are Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *Tastes of Paradise*, Fernand Braudel's three-volume history of capitalism, and the works of Piero Camporesi (*The Incorruptible Flesh*, *Exotic Brew* and so forth). Also figuring in this study are the many histories of Levantine trade and the European East India Companies, treatises on the relation between sugar and slavery, and material and textual microhistories of spice.

Literature on spice is divided into the history and theory of consumption and the history of commerce. Sidney Mintz's monumental work on sugar, *Sweetness and Power*, and Massimo Montanari's discussion of medieval and early modern diet, *The Culture of Food*, have been strong influences. John Brewer and Roy Porter's *Consumption and the World of Goods* has been invaluable. I have also drawn inspiration from *The Machiavellian Moment* and *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, J. G. A. Pocock's studies of the interaction between civic humanism and capitalist ideology.

Schivelbusch's history is phenomenological. Some may disagree with his idealist, teleological and anthropocentric model of spice

bootstrapping the Middle Ages into modernity.<sup>6</sup> He claims that 'With the help of spices the Middle Ages were, so to speak, outwitted. Spices played a sort of catalytic role in the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times.'<sup>7</sup> This catalyst image is reified, omitting a sense of the actual flows of labour and capital. *Tastes of Paradise* lacks the story of spice's changing mediation through history.

In its inclusion of chapters on such items as chocolate and opium, *Tastes of Paradise* belongs to a group of popular studies of the history of food and eating. Henry Hobhouse's *Seeds of Change*, for instance, discusses sugar, quinine, tea, cotton and potatoes. *The Poetics of Spice* is not as inclusive, in that it does not study coffee, chocolate, tobacco and opium *per se*.<sup>8</sup> While it does refer to commodities such as coffee and opium, it would be misguided for it to approach commodities as phenomenologically discrete entities. To write a chapter on spice which concluded with the end of the Middle Ages would be easy, but how would one account for spice's persistence in cookery, poetry and other discourses, and how would one explore attributes such as 'spicy' which apply to substances other than cinnamon, pepper and so forth?

Histories of food often restrict spice to the Middle Ages. References to spices in the literatures and cultures of Britain are not confined to the medieval period, however, but are found in eras beyond the time when the spice trade was a significant factor in the development of long-distance trade. References to trade with the Spice Islands appear in the poetry of Sir Richard Blackmore and mid-eighteenth-century mercantile panegyrics, such as James Thomson's *Summer*, as well as in Romantic period works. Robert Southey, Mary and Percy Shelley, Landon and Keats provide some of the most interesting references, though there are some in Wordsworth, William Blake and Coleridge. The writers of novels and other narratives of the period, such as William Beckford and Jane Austen, also take an interest in spice. Moreover, the significance of items such as sugar, coffee, tea and tobacco cannot be underestimated. The chapter 'Blood Sugar', which considers the relationship between the representation of sugar and anti-slavery poetry, barely broaches the huge number of literary texts waiting to be studied in this light.

In addition to the literary representation of spice and other kinds of products that we now think of as 'food supplements', there is an extensive medical and dietary discourse in the period. The vegetarian literature of the long eighteenth century contains invectives

against the adoption of highly seasoned cooking amongst the middle and upper classes, who were often inspired by French culinary fashions. These invectives, far from being merely locally significant, were caught up in emergent ways of talking about the body, economics and the nation that flourished between 1790 and 1820. A new kind of consumer and producer, efficient, hard-working and yet capable of consuming vast surpluses when required, was being created. The role of what Christian discourse called temperance became freshly significant, not as self-abnegation but as what Michel Foucault would have called a technique of the self.

This book is not just a book about history, but it does have certain historicising features. *The Poetics of Spice* takes a non-biographical approach to literature. In contrast with *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, it focuses less on individuals and their milieux. With this in mind, we could reflect on two issues of historical analysis and methodology:

- (1) what a long narrative can tell us about the history of the representation of trade and capitalism
- (2) what such a narrative can tell us about methodological approaches to the study of the commodity.

Braudel has usefully opened the field of speculation on both these points. *Civilization and Capitalism* deals with ways in which the spice trade was crucial to the establishment of capitalism in Europe. A renewed interest emerges in what counts as a ‘luxury’ commodity. Most sociological approaches to spice, such as that of Arjun Appadurai in the introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, consider it purely as a luxury product, thereby establishing a simple binary distinction between spice and a ‘necessity’ such as wheat. Braudel reveals how useful and ‘necessary’ to the development of capitalism spice was as a commodity, and how the Annales School overlooked the spice trade in its eagerness to study what appeared to be ordinary and essential about daily life.

Unlike Schivelbusch’s phenomenology, Braudel’s approach more thoroughly historicises spice. *Civilization and Capitalism* was written with an eye for labour and capital which might unbalance its sublime project of total history. But perhaps not: the details Braudel relates are significant as local information and as part of the larger history of capital flow. Braudel is appealing for his gathering together of a mass of primary evidence and deploying it in a long narrative that questions distinctions between the medieval and modern

periods. His trilogy on capitalism surpasses previous research, both empirical and Marxist. Christopher Berry's *The Idea of Luxury* (1994), an exemplary long history, has also been a significant influence, as it demonstrates how 'luxury' has shifted through the rise and fall of Christian, civic humanist and capitalist discourses. Berry is sensitive to the changes that could take place in the meaning and value of luxury as capitalism developed a culture of surplus.

*Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* discussed how food played many different roles in literature. It also showed how food itself was an object permeated with ambiguous and shifting figurative meanings and values. I am continuing this approach in *The Poetics of Spice*, trying to move beyond a naive 'economism' that relates all signs and meanings to an economic base. There is no easy economic way of assessing the role of spices in, for example, the poetry of Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan, two so-called metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. They often describe God's providence as a flow of spices from heaven. Concepts such as Marcel Mauss's potlatch and contract sacrifice could be used to illuminate this. Similarly, eighteenth-century panegyrics to trade, which modified this mystical language into a form of economic mysticism, cannot be discussed solely in terms of a one-to-one reference to a 'base', as the spice trade was now less an economic reality than a literary code. Moreover, works such as Lord Tennyson's *Maud*, Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels or Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* have more recently developed the literary language of spice in English.

The resistance of figurative language to naive economism is especially true of the Romantic period. It is impossible to do a vulgar Marxist reading, concocting a one-to-one relationship between culture and the economy. In fact, what really becomes necessary is to account for the gap between the economic and poetic value of spice in the Romantic period. For despite Wordsworth's and Coleridge's attempts to write non-ornamented, non-'luxurious' poetry, the value of spice was high, due to the development of self-reflexive consumerism. The culture of surplus had made it possible to reflect on one's acts of consumption. One way in which this was achieved was that the very 'age' of spice, the aura of antiquity surrounding both spice and the rhetoric of spice, made it a valuable aesthetic commodity.

Recent literary study has described relationships between texts and their historical contexts. Even more recently, scholars have read

literature closely again, informed by new thinking about contexts. Romantic-period studies has left the intellectually rarefied realm of abstract philosophical speculation to become more devoted to the play of culture and history. Apart from my work, some attention has been directed towards the representation of food, and more particularly spice. Marjorie Levinson's discussion of Keats's *The Eve of St Agnes* in *Keats's Life of Allegory* shows an awareness of the significance of the image of a spiced meal of sweetmeats. In addition, fresh work on the rediscovered women poets of the Romantic period has renewed the significance of close reading. There is no necessary contradiction between 'contextual' and 'close' approaches.

There have also been notable contributions to a growing field of research into relationships between economics, literature and culture, such as in the work of Kurt Heinzelman, Marc Shell and the conference 'New Economic Criticism' at Case Western Reserve University in October 1994. Lisa Jardine's *Worldly Goods* (1996) is a history of the Renaissance which links cultural to economic changes. Studying Florentine ideology in the fifteenth century, Jardine shows how money and an abundance of purchases were related to the metaphorical rebirth of culture. In so doing, however, *Worldly Goods* distinguishes too rigidly between medieval and modern worlds. The study of themes associated with orientalism and colonialism has grown in importance since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and any work on the economic figuration of spice must account for Western mappings of the Orient.

In addition, social science disciplines such as anthropology and sociology have benefited from the study of figurative language and a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which meaning is produced, as in the work of Michael Taussig. The historian Sidney Mintz, whose work on sugar is of great significance, has moved into areas of cultural history. *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* owed much to Keith Thomas, whose *Man and the Natural World* pioneered the study of cultural formations through time and challenged the idealism of the 'history of ideas'. Moreover, there is a growing interest in the history of international trade.

Within the growing critical genre which one could call 'literature and . . .', studies of relationships between food and figurative language have grown in number and scope. Michel Jeanneret's *A Feast of Words* (1991) is a study of eating and rhetoric in the Renaissance, and Emily Gowers's *The Loaded Table* discusses food in

Latin literature. Maggie Kilgour has written about Coleridge's addictive personality in her wide-ranging *From Communion to Cannibalism* (1990). To write about food and literature is to encompass a broad range of approaches, from cultural and literary history to Marxism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

The cultural study of scent has been increasing in recent years. Annick Le Guérer's *Les pouvoirs de l'odeur* (1988), which contains a section on spice, was translated into English as *Scent* in 1994. Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott published *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* in 1994. The recent work of Hans J. Rindisbacher on smell in literature and culture, *The Smell of Books* (1992), has been an inspiration for my study of aromatic spices. Rindisbacher's work, however, reproduces hegemonic literary-historical teleologies. Thus the distinction between ancient and modern depends upon an opposition between the smells of primal sexuality and perfume, which *The Smell of Books* equates with an opposition between nature and technology. Older Europe, he declares, used scent to cover the stench of thanatos; later, perfume was created as a supplement that simultaneously brought out and dissimulated a natural sexuality. The real opposition here is between a ruse with one twist and a ruse with two twists, two layers of disguise. Moreover, it is unclear whether disguise was ever a primary motive in the medieval use of spice.

Furthermore, perfume was used medically in the Middle Ages, as a means towards positive thinking: not smelling or not feeling bad could keep the plague at bay. In William Bullein's *A Dialogue Against the Fever Pestilence* (1564), the doctor, Medicus, tells the protagonist Antonius to avoid all but the most sanguine (hot and moist) foods. Spices and rotten fruit are both out, spice being choleric, but Medicus does recommend saffron, cloves and mace in his medicine: for example, pills of saffron, myrrh and aloes. Medicus prescribes a pomander of storax, calamite, cinnamon, sandalwood, aloes, lilies, violets, mastic, poppy seed, camphor, amber, musk and spikenard to defend against the plague. Bullein's play also prescribes perfume as medicine against corrupt air and urges the avoidance of anger and the cultivation of mirth (Bullein, *Dialogue*, fo. 83ff). Certain features of the AIDS panic are remarkably similar: the avoidance of negative thinking about HIV in counselling and advertising as a precaution against full-blown AIDS. The ruse with one twist is still with us.

*The Poetics of Spice* is thus informed by historical and cultural

approaches to the study of food in literature and culture. It is not preoccupied with empirical distinctions between one kind of substance and another (pepper and coffee, for example). It deals principally with *spice* as a cultural marker rather than as a solid substance. Moreover, *The Poetics of Spice* is interested in the way in which spice as substance is never divorced from notions of language, including the languages of economics and money. This book does not assume a teleological narrative or a rigid division between modern and pre-modern. It tries to be sensitive to questions concerning figurative language while remaining interested in historical context. Finally, it shows why the Romantic period was a formative moment in the development of the poetics of spice.

#### THEORISING SPICE

Spice is a linguistic and ideological operator rather than an essentialised object. It has only quasi-objective status: almonds and dried fruits in the Middle Ages were classified as spice, along with the expected pepper, cinnamon and nutmeg. The foods listed alongside spice in Bullein's *Bulwarke of Defence* (1562), a medical treatise, include crushed gems and stones and animal flesh, notably oxen, weasel, fox and earthworm, powdered hedgehog (good for baldness), and mandrake, unicorn's horn and medicinal dung.<sup>9</sup> According to Christopher Dyer, the medieval category of spice 'included dried fruits or rice as well as condiments such as pepper and ginger'.<sup>10</sup> Consider the first lines of *Speke Parott* (1521) by John Skelton (1460?–1529), a lampoon of Cardinal Wolsey:

My name is Parot, a byrd of paradyse,  
 By nature deuysed of a wonderous kynde,  
 Dyentely dyeted with dyuers delycate spyce,  
 Tyl Euphrates, that flode, dryueth me into Inde;  
 Where men of that contrey by fortune me fynd,  
 And send me to greate ladyes of estate:  
 Then Parot must haue an almon or a date.<sup>11</sup>

The almonds and dates are part of the parrot's luxurious diet of spices.

Examining closely poetic representations of spice, we find that one of their strangest aspects is the way in which *spice* is used as a general term. Spices may be separately named: the members of the genus *spice* are occasionally listed. For example, there is Milton's 'flowering



odours, cassia, nard, and balm' (*Paradise Lost* v.293), but spice is only occasionally directly named in the particular. More significantly, it is hardly ever given an extensive figurative description. Not a single device is used, whether it be metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche . . . Even if there is a list of spices, as in Milton's line, the generalisation of 'flowering odours' takes priority over its specific instantiations. The use of spice as a term denoting a general quality or kind of object, moreover, occurs outside English literature and outside the early modern period. For instance, there is the *Spice* (and *More Spice*, and *Even More Spice*) show on New York's Time Warner Cable channel 35, the sex channel. And there is the notion that certain kinds of perfume contain 'spice notes'.

This is part of what I have chosen to call 'the spice effect'. In figurative language, spice appears as a species, or appearance, which has the qualities of a genus, or larger set of which the species is a part. The other aspect of the spice effect, however, seems to contradict the apparently blank, empty, generic set-like quality of the use of the word *spice*. Paradoxically, there is a potent concreteness about the empty signifier *spice*. Less an external substance than a cultural coefficient, spice behaves like a computer program, simulating value. To paraphrase Shakespeare, some commodities are born spicy, some achieve spiciness, and some have spiciness thrust upon them.<sup>12</sup> *Spice is a confection*.

Two theoretical issues inform this book. The first derives from the cultural significances of spice, the second from the etymological significance of *spice*. Among the most fascinating attributes of *spice* is its status as a cultural marker, and a strange one at that, halfway between object and sign, goods and money. Spice can become a sign of signs, and in poetry it serves as a figure for poetic language itself, a special kind of figure that Harold Bloom has called 'transumptive'.<sup>13</sup> In this role it approximates one of the economic values of spice in the early modern period, its capacity to be used as a sign of other goods, as a form of money. Moreover, spice in its consumption becomes an index of social value. It is a highly self-reflexive kind of substance-sign: 'about'-ness is what it is 'about'. However much spice is brought into the realm of *intellectus*, it also still remains within the realm of the *res* as a hard kernel of the Real, a flow of desire.<sup>14</sup> The poetics of spice is not only about materiality, however – it is also about poetics. Thus there are two aspects to the poetics of spice, which are in a rather asymmetrical relationship: materiality and transumption.

Lord Byron's poetry shows how transumption is found in the representation of spice. The poetic uses of spice in the Romantic period were partially caught up in orientalism, as is evident in images of spice as a metaphor about poetry itself. The luxurious, highly spiced dinner in Byron's *Don Juan* III (1818–20) includes wall hangings that feature delicate embroidery and 'Soft Persian sentences, in lilac letters, / From poets, or the moralists their betters' (III.lxiv.511–12).<sup>15</sup> The moralisms are ironised in their juxtaposition with the scene of luxury, of which the narrator wittily remarks:

These oriental writings on the wall,  
 Quite common in those countries, are a kind  
 Of monitors adapted to recall,  
 Like skulls at Memphian banquets, to the mind  
 The words which shook Belshazzar in his hall,  
 And took his kingdom from him: You will find,  
 Though sages may pour out their wisdom's treasure,  
 There is no sterner moralist than Pleasure. (III.lxv.513–20)

Pleasure acts as both poison and cure, a phenomenon closely associated with the representation of spice in Milton. The stern message is inscribed into the fabric of the arabesqued wall, the 'Oriental' writing functioning as in De Quincey both as the promise and as the threat of Otherness, as meaning but also as exquisitely embodied signifiers, 'Embroider'd delicately o'er with blue' (III.lxiv.510). The 'sentences' are 'Soft' and 'Persian', evoking luxury in their literal, tongue-in-cheek materiality. They also evoke the Asiatic, dangerously copious style desired and feared by masculine Renaissance rhetoricians flexing their Arabic-inspired intellectual muscles.

The writing is the culmination of a figurative series in which spice plays a dominant role:

The dinner made about a hundred dishes;  
 Lamb and pistachio nuts – in short, all meats,  
 And saffron soups, and sweetbreads; and the fishes  
 Were of the finest that e'er flounced in nets,  
 Drest to a Sybarite's most pamper'd wishes;  
 The beverage was various sherbets  
 Of raisin, orange, and pomegranate juice,  
 Squeezed through the rind, which makes it best for use.  
 These were ranged round, each in its crystal ewer,  
 And fruits, and date-bread loaves closed the repast,

And Mocha's berry, from Arabia pure,  
In small fine China cups, came in at last;  
Gold cups of filigree made to secure  
The hand from burning underneath them placed,  
Cloves, cinnamon, and saffron too were boil'd  
Up with the coffee, which (I think) they spoil'd.

(III.lxii–lxiii.489–504)

The Middle-Eastern banquet is sensually overwhelming despite the exquisite individual components, marked in the judiciously placed 'I think' in the final line. The writing gluts the eye and ear as much as its content. There is an effeminate tone: 'flounced' (a figure not of death but of erotic display), the figure of the Sybarite, the 'Drest' fish. Don Juan's meal employs figures of the Middle East as self-reflexive emblems of the power of poetic fancy. Figures are explicitly overcoded as writing – arabesqued pleasure becomes its own warning.

The second theoretical issue stems from the etymology of *spice*. *Spice* derives from the Latin *species*, from which we obtain notions of appearance and particularity, and also of money, specie.<sup>16</sup> The most significant detail of the Song of Songs, a work much reproduced by early modern writers, is the use of *double entendre*, a practice recalling Sumerian love songs.<sup>17</sup> The bride is addressed as *šemen tûraq šemekā* ('flowing perfume, your name' (line 3)), a phrase playing on the synonymy between 'perfume' and 'name' in Hebrew. Christian commentaries on the Song of Songs often interpreted this to mean Christ, since 'Thy name is an ointment' suggests the Greek for the anointed one.<sup>18</sup> The notion of perfume as name is most significant for the poetics of spice. These two notions of appearance and particularity are features of poetry that employs spice, for two modes are generally in play. One uses *spice* as a sign caught up in connotations of aesthetic detail; another uses *spice* to suggest wealth.

In pursuing the association of spice with money and appearance, *The Poetics of Spice* is informed by Shell's analysis of relationships between money, language and thought, though it also departs from this analysis. If, as Shell observes, coined money is as metaphorical as paper money,<sup>19</sup> how does it appear so? Is this only a feature of money visible to us, retrospectively, in the wake of the move towards paper money? Speculation about coinage was already out of date by the late eighteenth century. The furore over paper money, in which Percy Shelley became involved, was simply a moment when people

saw that the historical process of capitalism was ‘really happening’. But the bill of exchange, crucial in the spice trade, had already erased the difference between money and sign.

In its derivation from *species*, both in the sense of money and in the sense of sheer appearance, and with value and wealth, *spice* requires us to explore the paradoxes inherent in the dialectics of substance and subject, appearance and reality. Since a naive interpretative mimeticism is untenable, I have avoided solidified dichotomies between poetics and politics, poesis and praxis. If the discourses of spice constitute various ideologies, then it is necessary to develop ways of reading texts which reveal the transformation of prescriptive into descriptive statements. This inevitably involves *not* reading the text as a transparent mimesis of political reality. Unlike Roland Barthes’ *Empire of Signs*, which orientalises Japan by reading it like a text, inside out, with the signifiers betraying no depth, *The Poetics of Spice* sees the orientalism inherent in its topic’s emphasis on the play of surfaces as part of the ideologies which that topic sustains. In this I have been influenced by Marxist theories of ideology and culture. Since writers such as Georg Lukács, commodity fetishism has been on the agenda for cultural theory. *The Poetics of Spice* is meant to be a study of the cultural forms of commodity fetishism.

A form of Romantic Marxist analysis, often confused with Hegelianism, encourages the thought that ideology is an alienated expression of some original consciousness or labour. The arguments presented here have tried to avoid this by not assuming that there is anything ‘behind’ or ‘beyond’ cultural fantasies about spice. Rather, those fantasies contain a kernel of reality in their very form. Historians and theorists of consumption such as Mintz and Campbell have shown that ‘dreams of satisfaction’ are just as important as satisfaction itself.<sup>20</sup> The engaging fusion of ideas about desire and the study of ideology in Žižek has proved invaluable for sharpening this approach.

I return now to the first theoretical issue, the cultural significance of spice. How has spice been described in previous works on the rhetoric of commodities? Spice is usually denoted as a luxury good. In *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai defines luxury goods ‘not so much in contrast to necessities . . . but as goods whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated signs*’ rather than simply sustaining life. For example, he lists ‘pepper in cuisine, silk in dress, jewels in adornment, and relics in worship’. Acknowl-

edging Campbell, Appadurai declares that these signs exhibit ‘a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and personality’, and ‘can accrue to any and all commodities to some extent’.<sup>21</sup>

It is made clear that goods other than those Appadurai names can be incarnated signs, although he states this rather cautiously, adding the phrase ‘to some extent’, which threatens to cancel the previous phrase if read too emphatically. But what happens when a necessity, so called, is used as an incarnated sign? What if asceticism in vegetarian discourse became attached to an image of personality or subjecthood? In other words, is semiotic incarnation, or what Appadurai calls ‘semiotic virtuosity’, a sufficient condition of ‘luxury’?<sup>22</sup>

As Timothy Murphy’s work on William Burroughs and the heroin trade suggests, a substance that seems epiphenomenal in a necessity/luxury model may actually turn out to be the Thing in itself.<sup>23</sup> All binary models of consumption, such as necessity/luxury models, if they only attach signification to one term, such as luxury, tend to be metaphysical, however much leeway or ‘virtuosity’ they allow for the attachment of the signifier of luxury (objective and subjective genitive) to the substance in question.

This argument about binary models resembles Hegel’s critique of Kant. Kant failed to find the Thing in itself in the noumenal realm because the noumenal is really the reflection into the phenomenal of the phenomenal itself. The Thing does not lie behind the surface of some veil, but is itself that veil: hence ‘the spirit is a bone’, ‘wealth is the self’ and all the other Hegelian paradoxes. Spice, then, is not a special kind of commodity distinguished by its unusual capability for becoming an incarnated sign. *Spice is the very form of the idea of the commodity itself*, a form of what Žižek calls ‘“spiritual substance”’.<sup>24</sup> We can see this in the way poetry uses general forms such as ‘spicy’ instead of particular ones such as ‘smelling of saffron’. Figure 1 illustrates the confluence of sign and matter in the foods discovered in the New World.

Spices, then, cannot simply be an example of how ‘luxury’ is culturally commodified. *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* proposed that vegetarianism deconstructed Appadurai’s implicit opposition between commodities that are invested with the ‘incarnated’ sign of luxury and those that are not. Not that all products could not hypothetically be designated luxurious, but that ‘luxury’ was the

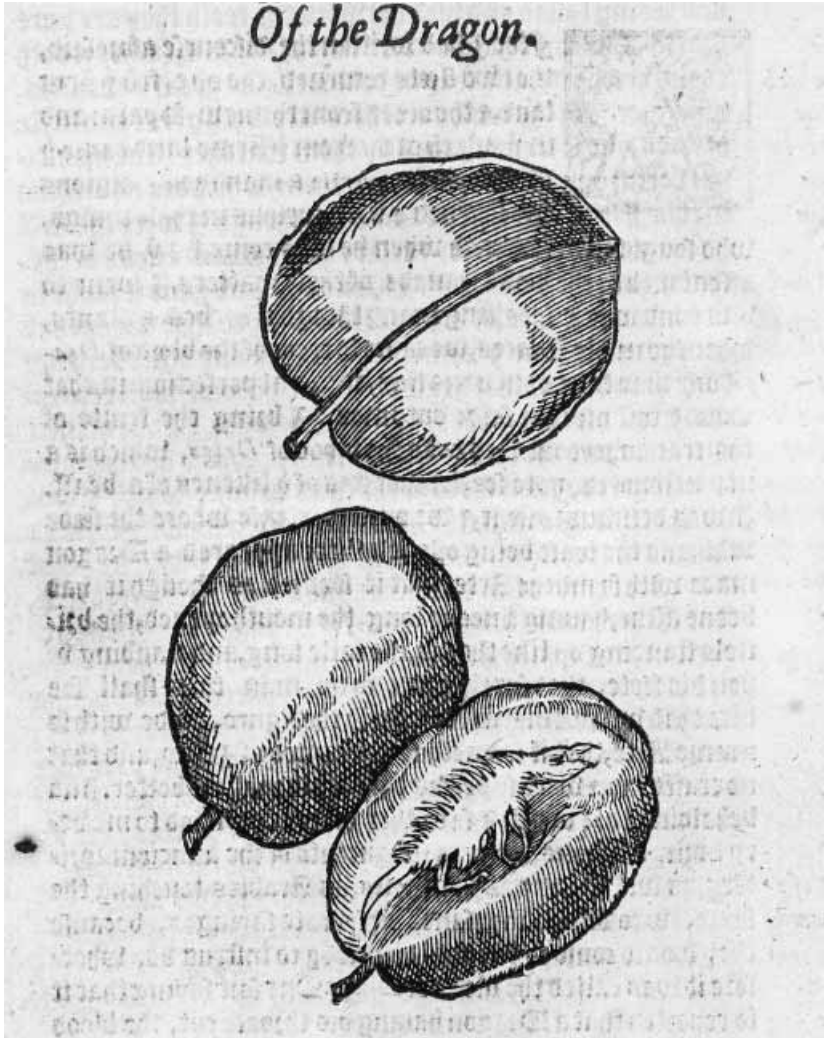


Figure 1 Signs and matter: 'Of the Dragon', from Nicolás Monardes, *Ioyfull Newes out of the New-found Worlde* (tr. 1596), fo. 71. Monardes describes 'Dragon's Blood' as a mythical substance written about by the Greeks, Arabs and Romans. No one really knows what it is but a tiny dragon likeness was found in this West Indian fruit (fos. 70–1). Symbols are found engraved in living matter, like the likeness of a monarch stamped on a coin. Like money, spice resides half-way between sign and matter.

exclusive outcome of such acts of designation. This issue is repeated in discussions of different modes of consumption amongst different social classes. Bourdieu's opposition between bourgeois and proletarian modes of distinction also becomes problematic when we consider the case of vegetarian diet. Braudel rearticulates these patterns when he describes luxury as the only 'culture' there is: the European upper classes amuse themselves with their riches, including spice, while the rest of us are left with the dregs. Yesterday's banquet ingredient becomes today's Dunkin Donuts apple cinnamon item. Campbell and I resist this notion of 'emulation'.

Thought about consumption often sets up too rigid oppositions between structure and superstructure, signifier and signified, material and immaterial culture. The history of the representation of spice, however, shows that the description of the commodity needs to become more complex. For example, the eighteenth century witnessed the growth of the concept of 'comfort': where is the space for comfort in a model that pits 'luxury' against 'necessity'? If the two terms are functional definitions within contemporary ideologies of capitalist trade, then that is all the more reason to analyse them critically.

The problem lies in the notion of incarnation. For Appadurai luxury is the sign of a sign's incarnation in a commodity. The notion of incarnation is mystifying, not really solving the ways in which we 'get from' use value to exchange value, from substance to trans-substance. Modern concepts such as 'comfort' deconstruct the oppositions luxury constructs between surface and essence, between supplement and deep structure. Comfort or *Gemütlichkeit* tends to belong to the discourses of the bourgeoisie rather than the aristocracy, which claims luxury as its own.<sup>25</sup> For that matter, why does Romantic poetry on bourgeois commerce employ potentially aristocratic images of spice?

Moreover, studies of spice need to take the fluidity of time and space into account. Appadurai leaves room for accounts of historicity. Because of its phenomenological tendency, Schivelbusch's *Tastes of Paradise* makes spice seem eternally invariant. For example, he generalises in asking 'Why did the Middle Ages have such a pronounced taste for dishes seasoned with oriental spices, and why did this craving disappear so suddenly in the seventeenth century?'<sup>26</sup> While it is in a limited way possible to draw such lines in the sand, it is not as interesting as considering the *persistence* of spice in literature

and culture. What about the spiced confectionery discussed in chapter 3, or the kedgeree and mulligatawny soup popularised in Victorian Britain? One might even suggest that premodernity only *appears* to be different from modernity in terms of the poetics of spice. However, there *are* changes and developments which this book sets out to chart.

The mobility of spice over great distances surely contributed to its premodern status as medicine, a status that is now reappearing in other guises in the cults of homeopathic medicine, herbal remedies, and vitamin and other dietary ‘supplements’ of all kinds. The notion of spice as medicine tends to collapse the distinction between luxury and necessity, if necessity is viewed as that which is essential to the health of the body. Indeed, this distinction smacks too much of the tendency in Britain and America to regard food as pure nutrition, a kind of ‘magic bullet’ approach to food which has given us vitamin pills, certain forms of vegetarianism and BSE or ‘mad cow disease’. BSE could only arise when eating had become capital-intensive at the level of production and as abstract as Piet Mondrian at the level of consumption. The US Health and Education Act (1993) contained clauses that might have given the FDA far greater control over dietary supplements, and a ‘save our supplements’ campaign was launched. Modernity is anxious about supplements.

Moreover, spice itself is more a flow than a solid object: as pulverised substance, it has already been liquefied. In the psychoanalytic language of Melanie Klein, it is a partial object. As a sign of wealth, spice is often figured as a flow, as in the poetry of Crashaw and Percy Shelley. Spices themselves are crossroads of spatiotemporal processes. This is obvious, since they have undergone numerous processes in their production which have rendered them hardly objects at all: pulverised, fluid, capable of being substituted for currency at a pinch.

We need to find a way of thinking about commodities which takes process rather than product as its main point of reference. The Kantian notion of absolute space regards space and time as a container unaffected by its contents. The Leibnizian notion of relative space conceives of space and time as processes. When things dominate processes in studies of society, Kantian space predominates. For example, the city is often construed as a container in social theory. But if the spice trade was involved with spatiotemporal processes, then a city such as Venice, one of the most active in the



spice trade in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, could not be thought of as a thing but as a fluid mixture of processes. The process-oriented approach requires a longer view of history and a more nuanced sense of the representational strategies involved in that history.<sup>27</sup>

Marx understood that political economy had been trying to understand money in itself without considering *Verhältnisse*, his notion of ‘relatedness’, similar to the notion of ‘process’ which I have been suggesting here. ‘Things’ derive from certain conditions of spatiotemporality, which in turn derive from processes. This is not, however, to claim that poems about spice are on the same ontological plane as toothbrushes. As the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has recognised, it is important to stress the relative autonomy of cultural symbolism.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the symbols under discussion in *The Poetics of Spice* evoke materiality. It is not so easy to dismiss historical materialism in a book about cultural materialism.

The study of ‘imagery’ alone is a highly limited way of understanding figurality. It is rather fixed and scopical. The same applies to the cultural history of the commodity. In both cases, attending to flow and circulation is appropriate. The cultural representation of spice as flow is bound up with its representation as supplement or as luxury. For the discourse of the supplement becomes significant in the case of spice when its flow becomes suspect, needing to be controlled. This involves distinctions between centre and border, essence and decoration.

‘Luxury’ and ‘necessity’ have suffered from the substantialism with which cultural concepts are frequently imbued. If consumption involves a dialectic of desire, then the difference between luxury and necessity is only the semantic difference between the position of the subject in the following phrases: ‘You need two litres of water a day to stay healthy’; ‘you need a good spanking.’ ‘Need’ in the latter, if not in the former, is the want of the Other (a form of demand), demonstrating the disjunction between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated. If there is such a disjunction, then there is certainly no clear way of distinguishing between luxury and necessity. This part of the theoretical framework of *The Poetics of Spice* is informed by Žižek’s fusion of psychoanalysis and ideological analysis.

These features of the social symbolic order are what is left out of Berry’s *The Idea of Luxury*. While Berry sees objects as capable of