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0521026660 - The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic

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Excerpt

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Introduction

A SPECIES OF ANECDOTE

Spice is still very much with us. In the United States, where ‘spicy’ means anything hot or, often, any kind of seasoning, an ‘energy fuel’ drink called Hot Sauce interpellates the macho chili consumer, appealing to the image of the human as car. The role of spices in medicine is being revised. Cocaine is commonly referred to as spice. The British pop group Spice Girls, the US hip-hop crew Spice 1, the German techno group Spicelab and Eon’s techno track *Spice* are manifestations of spice in popular music culture. Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* and Patrick Suskind’s *Das Parfum* exploit the erotic aesthetics of spice. The popular culture of pheromones and the West Coast phenomenon of no-fragrance zones in bars and restaurants demonstrate the power of scent. Parallel with my 1993 apartment in the West Village in New York City, the Spice Shop jostled for attention with the neighbouring crystal shop. The exotic, erotic and esoteric are still being associated.

What is spice? What are spices? How are they represented, and how do they function as units of social discourse about food, capitalism, trade and so forth? These questions were uppermost in my mind as I ventured forth on my first shopping expeditions in the United States: perhaps not quite uppermost, for I recall abject poverty to have been at its peak around the time of my year-long stay at Princeton. How to afford the blasted things in the first place was probably uppermost, as *spice* on this side of the Atlantic appeared to mean something rather different from, and a lot more expensive than, the spice to which I was accustomed at home. Where I had found ‘seasoning’ on a product’s list of ingredients, I now found ‘spices’, and this generic term could include such items as chiles and peppers. The Americans seemed to have a different sort of

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love–hate relationship with flavourings from the British, though generalisations such as these quickly ceased to seem valid. While British spice racks in Sainsbury’s, Tesco and so on owed much to a post-imperialist celebration of the Raj and its orientalist blessings, America seemed primarily to be looking to Central and South America and the Pacific Rim. Diverse global networks of circulation and flow collected in the aisles of distant supermarkets.

This was a time when commodities seemed to be having a lot more fun than I was, their purchaser, often reduced to choosing between a Nishin noodle soup and a Three Musketeers bar. The fetishism of commodities had never seemed so depressingly, and expensively, real. What were the cultural Imaginaries that broached and sustained their hegemony over mere flesh and blood? A dream of far-off lands of plenty and opportunity had brought me to New Jersey, where I found too late that my wallet was empty. My research into vegetarianism in the early modern period was showing me the extent to which cultural patterns of consumption, and the figuration of consumption, involved the representation of other lands, both as exploitable resources (as in the myth of *Terra Australis incognita*) and as the loci of diverse, exoticised modes of consumption (as in the stories of Indian Brahmins which reached the ears of the European vegetarians).

I wanted to think about the world, about transnational capitalism and orientalist, exoticist ways of consuming and representing. I also wanted to write a book that would be in direct contrast to the themes explored in my doctoral thesis: something, perhaps, which would take me away from the monosodium glutamate and degradation of life on a couple of dollars a day. *Re-Imagining the Body*, which became *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, was about purity, abstention, anti-capitalism, guilt and redemption narratives and anxiety about the disfigurative qualities of language. I fantasised about a mirror-image book discussing luxury, eroticism and capitalism and celebrating language’s tropological twists.

The ‘politics and poetics’ of gender and race, as well as the rhetoric of commodities, play a large part in *The Poetics of Spice*. My mother’s ex-partner, Maurice, a Jamaican, informed me that Grenada is called ‘the spice island’, an appellation it shares with the Moluccas or East Indies, as they used to be called. The singularity of the definite article in that phrase, contradicting the cultural map of the world, carries with it a freight of oppression, exploitation,

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capitalist utopianism and slave labour. What role do spices and such luxuries of the New World as chocolate and sugar play in the construction of oppressive and liberating ideologies? Moving to Wimbledon Park when I was about ten years old, at the height of a media panic about racial unrest in Britain's council estates and inner cities, my mother and I were horrified to find that the underground station had been peppered with graffiti: 'Pakis stink' ('Paki' being racist slang for Pakistani). The racist implication was what the Lacanian post-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes as the fantasy of the theft of enjoyment: the fear that the Other has stolen the racist's enjoyment, by appearing to enjoy in a different way. In this case, curry and balti spices were being used to circulate this fantasy: 'Pakis stink' meant 'stink of curry'. In an early demonstration of what I eventually understood to be a form of Debordian *détournement*, some local genius, undoubtedly from the offended party, had written 'GREAT!' after the racist slur. I have always been impressed by the way in which the inclusion of a monosyllable could so disrupt and parody the supposedly rugged, aggressive new fixture on the walls of our train station. Spice, race and language were connected inextricably.

ORGANISATION

The Poetics of Spice is an experiment in the literary and cultural history of the commodity. I am not a trained anthropologist or cultural historian, but interdisciplinarity, if it is to mean anything at all, must let the object of inquiry answer back concerning what sorts of knowledge might be applied to it. I have brought my skills as a literary critic to a more open field. My discussion of the role of spice in literature and culture is not a comprehensive study. Nor is it a recapitulation of literature through spice. *Spice* is a discourse, not an object, naively transparent to itself.

Jacques Derrida has provided some of the more useful terms, such as *pharmakon* (discussed in chapter 2) and 're-mark'. His sense of the empty play of language is appropriate in the light of the transumptive and spectral qualities of spice and *spice*. His terms draw attention to the role of spice as a sign. Derrida is not the last word, however. Because the study of spice demands an engagement with ideology, there has to be some engagement with relationships

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between language, desire and power. Thus I have turned to the work of Žižek.

This mixture of Derrida and Žižek may sound eclectic, but ‘theory’ is used quite simply in this book, either as a way of developing an argument or as the subject of discussion itself. Ultimately, as in *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, theory is viewed as liquid evidence and evidence as hardened theory. Moreover, evidence can be used to critique theory. My reading of Derrida’s omission in his analysis of *Timon of Athens* is a case in point. It is never assumed that evidence is just an excuse for theory. Deconstruction has, however, helped to produce a more subtle interpretation of how spice was represented in culture.

The Poetics of Spice is not a literary history of spice, nor is it a spicy history of literature. It studies how a certain commodity is ideologically conceived in figurative language, and how certain forms of figurative language and theory are ideologically conceived through the commodity. *The Poetics of Spice* is not a meditation on the nature of eating in general, not what D. W. Curtin and L. M. Heldke, in a Heideggerian vein, call ‘Cooking, Eating, Thinking’. It is more like Jocelyne Kolb’s *The Ambiguity of Taste* (1995), a wide-ranging study of the relationships between poetic and culinary applications of ‘taste’ in the works of Molière, Fielding, Byron, Heine, Goethe and Hugo.

The Poetics of Spice is not an example of New Historicism, with its constrained epistemic contextualism. Nor is it quite cultural studies, with its antitheoretical narratives of authentication. It is historical in a different sense from these, taking a long view and gesturing towards a large, general picture. It is incomplete, not because I do not approve of totalising narratives for fear of their assumed totalitarian implications, but just because it is. I have tried to avoid coy assertions of incompleteness under the banner of post-structuralist anti-totalitarianism.

Why does *The Poetics of Spice* emphasise the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Aside from professional habits, there are five reasons why I have chosen this period as the focal point:

- (1) it was the point at which the spice trade *qua* traffic in cinnamon, pepper, and so forth had declined in importance relative to other trades that had taken over in its stead (tea, coffee, opium), but which shared similar functions with the spice trade
- (2) it witnessed the rise of empire, new forms of global hegemony. Orientalism became significant in imperial narratives and the

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period witnessed an ‘Oriental Renaissance’, a flourishing of European texts about Asia and in particular India¹

- (3) it was a period of archaism in culture and literature: intriguing *new* uses of spice were invented due to the development of that novel form of commodity, the antique
- (4) the cult of nature militated against and in part created the modern concept of supplementarity with which spice was perceived to be endowed
- (5) most significantly, as Colin Campbell has shown, Romantic-period styles of consumption included highly aestheticised modes for which the poetics of spice acted as a template.² It became possible to mount a critique of consumerism in a sophisticated way through poetry.

Studies of spice have tended to focus on periods before the eighteenth century. But the above factors show why the Romantic period is so rich a source for *The Poetics of Spice*. It was during the Romantic period, as Campbell points out, citing Joyce Appleby, that the modern consumer was born out of the consumer society of the eighteenth century depicted by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century ideas of the benefits of seeing humans as consuming animals with limitless appetites ‘did not gain widespread acceptance for almost a century’.³ So the Romantic period tells us about quintessentially modern discourses of consumption, and lets see how they may be enjoyed, attacked, parodied or ironically supported.

Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* demonstrates in the ‘Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment’ how the consumption of spice is non-purposive and hence aesthetic: ‘If a dish stimulates [*erheben*] our tasting by its spices and other condiments, we will not hesitate to call it agreeable while granting at the same time that it is not good; for while the dish is directly *appealing* to our senses, we dislike it indirectly, that is, as considered by reason, which looks ahead to the consequences.’⁴ Spice is strangely half-way between the beautiful (a non-purposive delight in the good) and the practical. What Pierre Bourdieu calls a Kantian mode of consumption is in effect here: a sophisticated way of consuming something which does not emphasise the practical benefits, but instead the aesthetic richness, of the experience. This is an aesthetic, self-reflexive interest in spice. Campbell describes the Romantic consumerist style as placing a direct value on pleasure, fetishising the novel and strange. It was a

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form of bohemianism, mocking the everyday bourgeois, but in doing so, legitimating modern consumption (one might for the sake of a clear image reduce this to the notion of ‘window shopping’ – aesthetic consumption without ‘purpose’ or purchase). The middle classes became concerned with aesthetic objects but not with emulating the upper classes. This is where Thorstein Veblen’s and Bourdieu’s emphases on emulation and conspicuous consumption are inadequate to the task of describing Romantic consumerism. This study has found semiotics, and related modes of reading such as deconstruction, to be more useful than Campbell finds them. For someone trained in the stringencies of literary theory it is hard to distinguish between a style of consumption and a way of representing that style, in that all styles are forms of representation.⁵

The first chapter of *The Poetics of Spice* sketches out some ways in which spice could be mapped historically and theoretically. Chapter 2 examines poetic discourses on trade, showing how spice’s role as a mark of tropological instability provided a means of imagining the circulating liquidity of capitalism. Even when ostensibly anti-capitalist poets such as Percy Shelley picked up the pen, they had the poetics of spice available to them in just this way. The book then explores the role of consumption in the poetics of spice in the Romantic period, showing how ekphrastic poetry was linked to discourses of luxury which both troubled the stable subject of the working world and suggested a dangerous surplus of enjoyment. Chapter 4 investigates how the language of surplus associated with sugar could be used in poetry not to promote but to criticise the labour exploitation inherent in capitalist production and most evident in the slave trade. The final chapter reads the poetics of spice as an emblem for poetry, placing a special emphasis on the representation of space. It reveals how the poetics of spice is an ‘ambient poetics’.

By taking the long view, by adopting a diachronic approach to the material and by including ‘images of spice in’ chapters, *The Poetics of Spice* may seem to violate certain current notions of literary-critical decorum. I acknowledge that this book looks at close range like a deconstructive essay, while from far away it appears, like a pointillist painting, to resemble an illustration of social life. Marxist and deconstructive readers may be sharpening their pencils and waiting in ambush either for a lapse into Whiggish history or for a lack of attention to figurative language. But a long view needs to be taken to

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respect the manifold speeds and spatiotemporal processes that make up literary history and the history of trade. If the thought of talking about everything from the Song of Solomon to *Song of Solomon* seems old-fashioned, I hope it will be tempered with a sense of the unusual but necessary nature of this project. The political is found to be inscribed within the minutest particulars of the poetic.

This is not a book about the changing political contexts of a recurring topos. I do not want to suggest that a ‘contextualist’ reading is adequate for the texts described here: this would be to concede the validity of a caricature in the recent backlash against historicism. It is not as if political meaning takes place somewhere behind the text, like a moving background of political life behind a coherent figurative stencil, for the political is saturated with figurality. Spice presents us with extraordinarily rich objects of investigation; indeed, the study of spice is of riches and value. It is also necessarily wide-ranging: I have found powerful, contradictory stories about spice from the Roman Empire to Frank Herbert’s *Dune*; from medieval recipes to modern aromatherapy and food ‘supplements’; from the Bible to Buddhism; from the Koran to Keats.

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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

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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

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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-