

The Pulverized Poetic:

A literary exploration of spices and colonial America

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The Concept of Nature in Early American Literature

The culinary linguistics of Medieval Europe elevated spices to a status among the world's most precious commodities. The substances themselves—cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper—and the chronicles based upon them stimulated the taste buds of mouth and mind, and culminated in explorations meant to satisfy both appetites. Because spices catalyzed the birth of “America” as a country, they were fitting instruments in the formation of American culture and identity. I will examine the concept of spice as it contributed to the germination of American literary tradition. An analysis involving poems, cookery and medical manuals, and liturgical texts will demonstrate that spices in these pieces of literature help to describe early American understandings of God, the natural world, and human nature.

When attempting to describe the world of spice in any context, one encounters a dilemma: how to convey the richness of scent and taste through the visual medium of text. The reader cannot literally smell or eat the words presented by the author. As Timothy Morton writes, “Spice in culinary ekphrasis poses the same problem as pigment in visual ekphrasis: the issue of evoking the immediacy of smell in the temporality of language” (135). Yet, there exists an organic union between spice and text that renders them compatible. Both are essences of a larger body: spices are concentrations of the plant kingdom, and written words are extracts of the sphere of language. Words and spices are both *flows*, rather than objects; they transcend the boundaries of time, preserving those things to which they are applied. Often, they require human intervention to interpret or break open and reveal their natural expressions. Like spices, manuscripts are consumed by the reader who savors them. They may serve as soothing balms, or stimulators of desire. Although the authors discussed here usually refer to

spices directly, ultimately, any writer who chooses words with precision may evoke the essence of spice, regardless of subject matter.

It is necessary to provide a definition of the word “spice” as it will appear in this discussion. Early Americans sometimes used the words “spice” and “sauce” interchangeably when referring to a culinary embellishment. In the strictest sense, however, a spice is a flavoring of vegetable origin, often ground into powder to convey its aromatic qualities in food, cosmetics, or medicine. Whereas herbs arise from the watery leaves, stems, and roots of a plant, spices are associated with seeds, rinds, barks, hulls, and pits that are dry enough to pulverize. Spices’ foreign origin was an important component of metaphor; few, if any, products endemic to America could be called spices. Christopher Columbus denied this reality by naming American red chilies, “peppers,” a linguistic faux pas of the same strain that made the native peoples “Indians” (The Economist 51). Colonial settlers saw themselves as “spices:” prized commodities from a far-away land, sprinkled onto a bland and rotted wilderness, exuding the essence of God. Long before the odors of colonialism wafted toward America, however, spices scattered their charms across Europe.

The fetish for spices arrived in Europe as Christian crusaders returned to their homes having developed a taste for the native cookery of conquered lands (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 66). The climate and custom of Eastern empires promoted the liberal use of spice; as a result, the market for exotic flavorings spiked. Lengthy journeys from the East, and exchanges through chains of merchants made spices expensive—a province for the wealthy. As it happened, feudalism experienced a parallel escalation. Early in the feudal society, lords and vassals were similar in appearance and manner.

Gradually, the elite began to employ materials and behaviors distinct from those of the lower class. This separation required the wealthy to assemble unfamiliar items that peasants could not obtain, resulting in imports of silk, pieces of furniture, and spices from the Arabic countries. Schivelbusch (9) suggests that the increasing need for these exotic substances contributed to the formation of Europe's "borrowed culture," and a phenomenon of dependence that continues to this day. "As a consequence," he writes, "the Occident became substantially dependent upon the Orient as supplier—a situation comparable to that of twentieth-century European dependence on Arab oil. Just as oil is a vital raw material for the energy supply of industrialized countries, in the Middle Ages oriental luxury goods were indispensable to the lifestyle of the European upper classes."

Thus, in the same way that rocks became gold and pupae cases became silk, humble seeds, rinds, and barks transformed into materials of fortune and catalysts for world exploration. An alluring cordial of high demand, limited supply, and difficult access stimulated multiple spice-missions toward the Orient. At the close of the fifteenth century, ships led by Vasco da Gama arrived at the port of Calicut in Southwest India. The members of his crew stepped onto solid ground and proclaimed their mission: "For Christ and spices!" (The Economist 51). While Syrian missionaries had beaten them to the evangelical half, da Gama and his companions were not disappointed. With Christianity already planted, they proceeded to their second objective, and returned to Portugal with pepper-laden ships (The Economist 51).

Da Gama and other European explorers seeking a water route to the Spice Islands engaged in an expensive and dangerous task. Teams of voyagers relied on each others' nautical prowess through journeys that lasted months at a time and required extensive

monetary investment. Many crews pulled away from their homeland shore envisioning aromatic riches; only a portion of these returned, rarely accompanied by their intended goods. Even so, European monarchs continued to fund such expeditions in the hope of discovering the legendary gateway to spice dominion. The Dutch East India Company made its first significant business deal in trading New Amsterdam (the island that would become Manhattan) for the nutmeg-infused Banda archipelago (The Economist 54). As the Dutch expanded their industry to include cloves, they exerted ruthless control on the market, slaying any person caught with unauthorized possession of spice plants. The massacre devastated native tribes, and proved only temporarily effective for the Company, which went bankrupt by the eighteenth century (The Economist 54).

Columbus' journey, therefore, was not innovative in its intent, but in its direction. Traveling far enough westward, he assumed, one would arrive in the East to find spices waiting on a virgin shore. Failing to reach India, Columbus encountered an unfamiliar, spiceless land mass, a situation that he attempted to justify by redefining "Indian" and "pepper." In this linguistic scramble, Columbus distorted the concept of the "American." The term would come to refer to European colonists, rather than native peoples. Like "Americans," spices would have to be imported to the New World.

Sacred Spice: a liturgical perspective

Many of the first immigrants to America belonged to the Puritan religious community. Despite associations of cleanliness and chastity attributed to the word "Puritan," the imputation of bland austerity remains. The sect itself might have preferred to be known simply as "Christian," even though the etymology of that term is more

extravagant. The Greek root of “Christ” means “anointed,” a word that refers to “smearing with balm” (“Christ,” def. 1; “Anointed,” def. 1). Anointing the newly-baptized, the ill, and the dying with spiced oils was fundamental to the early Christian tradition. The scent of spice lingered as a reminder of the regal, healing presence of the Messiah. Puritan ministers infused their sermons with analogies based on spices, likely in the hope that their message might linger in the collective mind of the congregation. In these metaphors, the features and extensions of God became fragrant spices.

One divine extension was the church itself, which received emphatic promotion by Puritan ministers. Cotton Mather proclaimed the Lord’s Day a time “to gather the Spices of Heaven” (“Frontiers well-defended” 19). The rich image of spice was intended to draw dedicated followers. Gilbert Tennent praised his flock, “Blessed are your ... feet that freely and frequently carry you to the beds of Spices (the Assemblies of the faithful) where you may meet and serve your Jesus” (“A solemn warning” 184). His words echoed those of John Flavel, “These Beds of Spices ... are the particular churches, the compounds of Believers ...” (26). Later in his discourse, Flavel repeated the comparison. “The rest of the World is a waste Wilderness,” he wrote, “But the Church is the Paradise of the Earth ... Its Beds, are Beds of Spices ...” Flavel’s interpretation removed spices from the natural wilderness that the Puritans experienced as America, and placed them in a separate realm of supernatural oases. Roger Williams saw spices as a product of the entire land transformed by God’s cultivation of humans: “When He turns our wilderness (wholly a wilderness) into a Garden, then we bring forth his sweet Fruits, Flowers, and Spices” (248). The difference between Flavel’s and Williams’ metaphors stems from spice’s complementary capacities for infusion and diffusion. According to Flavel, the

spice of the church is concentrated at a specific location; in Williams' case, God's influence causes humans to diffuse sacred spice throughout the garden of the earth. The former inspires a community united by the aroma that separates them from the world; the latter imagines universal fragrance, unlimited in position.

Regardless of the extent to which their scents spread, spices of holiness were to be present in the world, rather than locked within a person. Contrary to most familiar Puritan messages, this implied that humans possess innate goodness requiring only sacred initiation. Cotton Mather wrote, "The Graces of GOD, in a Soul Renewed and Possessed by His Holy SPIRIT, what are they but Grateful Spices? ... The Spices ly in a Frozen condition; Twill not be perceived, that a Garden has any Spices in it; Except the Holy SPIRIT please to come, and Blow, upon the Garden" ("Divine afflations" 15). In a less encouraging moment, Mather had reminded his congregation of spices' capacity to inflict physical pain upon the tongues of those who consume it. The metaphor transformed God into a chef, armed with a blend of fiery seasonings for the unregenerate: "The curse of God is the Sauce in every Dish, the Spice in every Cup with which thou meddlest" ("Unum necessarium" 66).

In other contexts, the Name of God became a spice. Considering the power of a name in communicating the essence of the one who bears it, the impression of name-as-spice is quite effective. Like crushed kernels of spice stirred into a soup pot, a name evokes its source, infusing conversation, memory, and prayer with its intrinsic sensory associations. For the religious devout, the entire experience of the Deity is concentrated in a name, the way a certain smell or taste might encapsulate a host of emotions. Gilbert Tennent compared "The venerable Name of our dear Lord!" to "fragrant Ointment

poured forth, and aromatick Spices broken!” (“Brotherly love” 27). Richard Alleine (103), overcome by the glories of the Divine, proclaimed: “The Lord God... Oh what a bundle of Myrrhe, what a garden of Spices, is here Enclosed? What a sweet smelling savor doth it send forth to them who have their senses excited to discern both good and evil?” As the tongue is both the organ of taste and speech, name-as-spice provides the ideal intersection for linguistic and gustatorial/olfactive inspiration.

Given that spices represented the church, and the church represented Heaven, spices in early America evoked the essence of Paradise. The foreign realm of Heaven and the perceived risk involved in the journey toward it paralleled colonial conceptions of the Spice Islands. To European settlers, Eastern spices combined supernatural exoticism with the natural gratification of sweetness, the same mixture that defined Heaven. Classen, Howes, and Synnott (66) suggest that “the general belief that spices came from the Garden of Eden, made their consumption a quasi-religious experience—breathing in the scent of spices, one could feel that one was catching a whiff of Paradise.” Cotton Mather (“A soul well-anchored” 19) employed the metaphor to suggest that noble acts drew a person closer to Heaven: “When such a work of Grace is really felt, in its Operation, the Happy Cape is reached, the Isles of Spices are in view.” Samuel Lee (“Contemplations on mortality” 21) made the image of death more immediate in his assertion that, “All passe through [the Valley of the Shadow of Death], but a Saint walks through it to the Mountains of Spices.” These analogies appear to be rooted in the early Christian reports of saints expressing sweet fragrances upon death. Such a miracle would have inspired generations of parishioners. As Classen, Howes, and Synnott (53) note, “The fragrance exuded by the bodies of saints offered a striking contrast with the

customary putridity of corpses, especially in an age when most people were all too familiar with the reek of death.” Embalmers, who depended on the pungencies of death and spices for their income, followed the tradition ancient Egyptians, who used anise and mace to preserve royal bodies (The Economist 52), and employed by the women to whom Biblical tradition credits with first recognizing Christ’s resurrection. Spices preserve the corpse, postponing inevitable stench and decay. Enduring and transcendental, spices straddle the divide between identities of life and death. Embalming conveys the reality of death because it is only performed at death; paradoxically, spices keep the body vivid in nature by sustaining its form. The theme of the lasting soul comforted grieving Puritans, and appeared often in funeral sermons. In one requiem service, (Oakes 5) emphasized the purity of the deceased by suggesting that his memory would not decay: “Here need no Spices, Odours, curious Arts, No skill of Egypt to embalm the Name of such a worthy.” Another (Willard 16) proposed that noble deeds performed in honor of the dead were preservative spices. “We should embalm the memory of the Saints with the sweet smelling Spices that grew in their own Gardens, and pick the chiefest Flowers out of those Beds to strew their Graves withal.” Archibald Cummings (23) encouraged those grieving a lost soul to immortalize him in their speech: “There is no Spice so sweet to embalm the Dead... as a virtuous & upright Conversation! ‘Tis this that perfumes the relicks of their corruption; that preserves and defends their character against malicious Obloquy.” Benjamin Colman (16) took the elegy as an opportunity to express his own perspective on embalming. “In vain is the body wrapt up with spices, or perfumed with sweet Oyntments: these can only protract its Corruption for a day or two... It is more Decent for the Corps to be Interr’d by Mournful friends, than to

fall under the Imbalmers Operation; to be cut open, Spiced, Salted, Boiled &c.” Perhaps he intended to warn the congregation that God would recognize a hypocrisy-scented soul, spiced on the exterior and rotted within.

As Puritan clergy stressed the power and anger of God, the image of their Lord wielding a Great Mortar and Pestle would have been particularly satisfying. “Torches give the best light, when beaten,” wrote Thomas Brooks (91), “Grapes yield most Wine, when most pressed; Spices smell sweetest when pounded.” Such images justified hardships and confusing ironies: just as spices become more potent when they are pounded, so God’s people, receiving life’s trials, disperse the essence of holiness. “Precious Spice is thoroughly pounded, to yield forth its most refreshing Fragrancy & Virtue. Painters Grind with vile Pebblestones their richest colours for their most glorious Pictures” (Danforth 16). Christ was the first Spice to be broken in this way, so that he might be diffused throughout the world. Christians following his example could expect to endure the crushing of God. Increase Mather (“A sermon” 15) encouraged his congregation with these words: “The Lord hereby aymeth At the Good of his people. They are bettered as to their spiritual estates, by all those sufferings which in this world they are subject unto. God’s children are like Stars, that shine brightest in the darkest night; like Spices, that smell sweetest when pounded.” Richard Steele (159) implied that hardships were part of the Christian’s obligation to share the mildness of Christ. “How mellow & sweet doth a fit of sickness, the loss of a child, or a prison make the soul, to whom it is blessed? The sweetest Spices enjoy their own sweetness, till they be bruised; then they diffuse it, and all the room perceive their odour: and the most precious Saints are oftentimes hid, till they be bruised by the Cross of Christ.”

With the bleak misery that greeted European settlers in their first decades in America, they would have related to their new land as a grinding surface with the weight of God's stone pressing down on them. A brutal image, but one that supported the notion of Manifest Destiny, in which Christians were spices sent to the new world to infuse it with holy fragrance, and augment it with the riches of Christ. The ancient Romans called the Arabic country *Arabica Felix*, "happy Arabia," because of the seemingly endless riches it contained in its abundant spices (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 67). Cotton Mather ("Souldiers" 32) carried over this relationship to the colonies. In a speech of encouragement soldiers bound for war against the Indians, he suggested that his own country was so enriched by Christians willing to die for each other, that it should be called "New England the Happy." Spices often appeared in lists of worldly goods to demonstrate their insignificance compared to the fortune one receives in Christ. "I say, What are the Treasures of the East, the Gold of the West, the Spices of the South, and the Pearls of the North...? This, or whatsoever thou dost imagine, are not to be compared unto the blessed Jesus" (Dyer 6). Ministers recalled that the infant Jesus received incense and spiced perfume from the magi, and that Christians could continue to gift him with the spices of righteous living.

Syllabubs and Balm Waters: Domestic Aromatics

Part of the mystery and appeal of spices was due to their capacity to be ingested; as components of food and medicine, spices become part of the person who swallows them. Both cases demonstrate the limits of spice's "luxury" identity. While abundant in the goblets and saucers of the aristocracy, a pinch of spice made the struggling colonist's

dish of gruel a bit more palatable. Few families could obtain spices during their first years of colonial settlement; they focused on meeting the immediate need for nourishment, rather than refining the flavors of their recipes. Beyond the survival stage, many colonists continued to subsist on cornmeal porridge for morning and evening meals. Certain Puritan circles prohibited even the limited use of spices—“serious-minded Christians, it was argued, should not indulge in such gastronomic excess, but keep to plain, unpretentious fare” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 68). A spice might serve the purpose of embellishment in cookery, but its role in medicine was much more defined. It transformed from an accessory meant to reward the appetite (a symbol of health), to a featured ingredient valued for its therapeutic properties.

Nicholas Culpeper’s *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* provided models of physicians’ use of spice. Culpeper wrote the volume following his own sense of duty toward Nature. He judged that by providing a manual for the mixing and dispensing of medicinal compounds, he was facilitating the design of Nature to preserve and beget the human species. The first order of Nature, he wrote, is the “Virtue Procreative,” which is augmented by “the strength of Venus, by her Herbs, Roots, Trees, Minerals, etc” (8). According to Culpeper, each of these compounds belonged to categories of specific temperature, coinciding with the perceived temperatures of the body’s organs. “Consider the Natural Temperature of the part of the Body afflicted, and maintain that, else you extinguish Nature, as the Heart is hot, the Brain cold” (32). This idea of “extinguishing Nature” with Nature’s own components has intriguing *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* implications. If Nature had created substances that could heal in some instances and destroy in others, those who handled such substances carried a certain degree of power.

Since there were few scientific standards at this time, apothecaries and physicians relied on outward physical qualities of patient and plant, rather than molecular clues, to determine the limits of Nature. Concoctions containing spices had a reputation for heat. With fevers being the most common ailment in the New England colonies, Culpeper cautioned against prescribing spice-infused “waters” to feverish patients “because by their hot quality they inflame the blood, and add fuel to the fire” (92).

Pharmacopoeia Londinensis employed the curative features of spice to remedy complaints ranging from rickets to bad breath. A recipe including cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, cardamom, and fennel and anise seeds distilled in Spanish wine, listed among its virtues: “it heats the stomach and strengthens it and the Lungs, expels wind, and helps digestion in ancient people.” Those who could obtain high-quality cardamom pods known as “Grains of Paradise,” might have used them in a balm-water tonic, a virtual panacea for memory loss, baldness, melancholy, lisps of the tongue, and toothaches. More widely available and less expensive than spices, herbs were prominent ingredients in the apothecary’s collection; however, this text reveals that herbs did not carry the emblem of Paradise, the near-magic that was essential to medicinal spices.

Because filth seemed to cause a range of diseases, spices were praised for their alleged cleansing properties. People assumed that breathing unclean air made the body susceptible to sickness, and that inhaling the fragrant, pleasant air that arose from spices would guard against airborne illnesses. Culpeper (31) included a recipe in which he concurred that foul air might be filtered back to its natural state by the cleansing perfumes of spice. Coriander and caraway seeds bruised and steeped in angelica water made a concoction that “resisteth the Pestilence, and all other corrupt Airs, which indeed

are the natural causes of Epidemic Diseases.” Cinnamon, in particular, won approval as a purgative of the skin, lungs, and bladder, and according to the author, when “snuffed up in the nose, cleans the head of Rheum gallantly.”

Native Americans shared a belief in the healthful attributes of pure air, but unlike the European colonists, the Indians purified their air with smoke. Juniper bark and branches produced a fragrant smoke with which Indians filled their dwellings (Kavasch 161). The men and women might bask in this smoke, or fill pipes with smoldering juniper and sumac berries to inhale it in a concentrated form. Pipe-smoke was thought to benefit the mouth, ease soreness of the throat, and, according to one of Kavasch’s references (163), provoke “the urge to sing.” The word “perfume” comes from the French phrase “to smoke through” (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 16), which demonstrates that the Europeans might have related to the concept of burning woods and dried herbs to produce invigorating fragrances.

The heat of the cooking stove generated aromas to greet the appetites of hungry colonists. For many seventeenth-century Americans, meals consisted of little more than a bowl of starchy cornmeal porridge, and spices were essential to the home cook in her efforts to vary the taste of such a bland staple (O’Conner 11). Spices were among the trio of flavorings that colonists could not grow or prepare on their own. Along with salt and sugar, spice was a crucial ingredient that had to be imported and purchased from a local merchant. Native Americans did not have seasonings that Europeans recognized as “spices;” however, certain native plants were harvested and processed in ways that resembled the Europeans’ treatment of spice. Kavasch notes that the Indians used ashes from fragrant woods like cedar and hickory to flavor their foods. The ashes of charred

coltsfoot leaves were prized for their salty taste. This savory essence was so indispensable to Indian cooking that Western tribes would engage in warfare to secure patches of coltsfoot plants (27). Berries of the spicebush, when the natives could find them, were spicy delicacies. The plants rarely fruit, and the dried berries, when crushed, exude aromatic qualities similar to those of pepper (19).

Colonial cooks could make use of spices in any dish. "Cut your Salmon into little pieces," instructs an early recipe, "season it with Pepper, Salt and Nutmeg" (O'Conner 89). Directions for "Apple Pye" (121) call for lemon peel, cinnamon, and mace to be mixed with stewed apples, adding for future reference: "Every species of fruit such as peas, raspberries, blackberries may be only sweetened, without spices." As colonists adjusted to the American habitat, they made use of any available food resources, which explains recipes for "eel pie" (118) and "hog's ear ragout" (87). In these concoctions, spices probably served to tweak the taste of unfamiliar foods toward a resemblance of European staples. The spice itself rarely acted as the featured ingredient, although when sugar could be procured the two were paired to great effect in dessert recipes. The baker who invented "Portugal Cakes" obviously desired to convey the richness of that country through her palate of ingredients: a pound each of flour, butter, and sugar, "a Nutmeg grated, four perfumed Plumbs, or some Ambergrease" (Smith 72). The protocol for a spiced syllabub required the cook to "Sweeten a quart of cyder with refined sugar and a grating of nutmeg, then milk your cow into your liquor until you have the amount you consider proper" (O'Conner 136).

Early Americans relied on preserved fruits and vegetables from their gardens to sustain them through long New England winters. Pickles, relishes, and catsups were

heavily spiced to make up for the food's loss of natural flavor over time. In addition to replacing and enhancing flavor, spices often served to overpower or disguise the flavors of food that was less than wholesome. Stale bread combined with spices and fruits to make "beggars' puddings" (Booth 185). It was common practice to prepare a piece of rotten meat with extra pepper in order to render it edible, and to include a liberal quantity of spices in the non-descript sausages and blood puddings concocted after a livestock slaughter. *The Compleat Housewife* outlines the technique for cooks who want "To Recover Venison When it Stinks." After bathing the offending cut in salt water, the author instructs, "season it with pepper and salt pretty high, and put it in your pastry" (Smith 20). Consuming tainted food was a new habit, generally not practiced in medieval Europe (Hammond 83), and without understanding its connection to disease, there was no reason to avoid it. As in embalming, the quality of spice to overwhelm Nature's course—to conquer Nature's patterns with her own tools—was a valuable resource.

Emotive essence: early American poetry

As in recipes, spices in poems are rarely the featured ingredient. Rather, spices serve to embellish and accentuate the theme. Puritans saw poetry in general as blasphemy, a mockery of the Bible's verses. To include spices (and the worldly, lustful connotations that accompanied them) in a secular poem was to nourish the work of the devil on earth. It is not surprising, then, that when spice appears in Puritan verse, it is usually in the context of a sermon, an offering to God, or a metaphor for the graces of Christ. The covert lines of Edward Taylor are like spices in themselves: nuggets hidden from the author's contemporaries, containing the natural extractions of his era.

Spices crossed the standard Puritan boundary separating sacred from profane, as did poetry itself. Pastor and parishioner alike would have acknowledged Biblical spices' uncomfortably close association with prostitutes and hypocrites. "Bell-Religion is but mocking of God," Samuel Lee ("The joy of faith" 147) wrote, "when lewd men and women run to the Assemble to shew their clothes, store upon their goatish paramours, and like the strange woman in the Proverbs, pay their peny at the Temple, and then with an impudent face deck their Bed with Tapistry, and perfume it with Spices." For a group that aimed to purge themselves of every bodily pleasure, spices were threatening: they represented chaos, temptation, and (worst of all) satisfaction by their dispersive scent. They signified that the body could never attain complete control over nature. Humans might exert their authority over the natural world by pounding and grinding spices out of their natural structures, but spices hide their richness in seed or bark, and tempt humans via the vulnerable, animal sense of smell. As humans draw out the scents of spice, spices draw out the lustful nature of humans.

If poets could not resist including spices in their work, they redeemed themselves by centering the poem on a religious theme. In a volume whose title begins "Meat out of the eater," Michael Wigglesworth assembled the Puritan version of "Chicken Soup for the Soul." Intending to help the faithful understand the trials of life, Wigglesworth prefaced a portion of his text with a clever metaphor comparing his explanation of Christian conundrums to a dispersal of fresh spices. "Riddles Unriddled," he titled the section, "or Christian Paradoxes Broke open, smelling like sweet Spice New taken out of Boxes." He followed with this little morsel:

Each Paradox, is like a Box,
That cordials rare incloseth:

This Key unlocks, op'neth the Box
And what's within discloseth;
That whoso will may take his fill,
And gain where no man loseth. (51)

George Herbert based his poem, "The Odour," on a passage from Corinthians, and enlisted the name-as-spice model to convey God's savory nature: "How sweetly doth *My Master* sound! *My Master!* / As Amber-greese leaves a rich scent/ Unto the taster: / So do these words a sweet content, / An orientall fragrancie, *My Master.*" (lines 1-5). Expressing the dual lingual pleasures of delicious tastes and "speaking sweets," Herbert wrote of the nourishing resonance these words imparted. In a later stanza (lines 14-15), he added a prayer that the words *My servant* "might creep & grow / To some degree of spicinesse" to God. He fulfilled the spice metaphor with the economic suggestion that if God were to breathe *My servant*, "This breathing would with gains by sweetning me / (As sweet things traffick when they meet) / Return to thee. / And so this new commerce and sweet / Should all my life employ and busie me" (lines 25-30).

In "The Banquet," Herbert created an ode to the communion ritual, repeating the declaration, "Thy delight / Passeth tongue to taste or tell" (lines 5-6). Following the manner of the favorite Puritan analogy, he recalled the breaking of Christ's body in comparison to spices: "But as Pomanders and wood / Still are good, / Yet being bruis'd are better sented: / God, to show how farre his love / Could improve, / Here, as broken, is presented" (lines 19-24). Edward Taylor also wrote on the banquet theme in "A Psalm for Solomon." (One will note that it contains several lines that contrast with Cotton Mather's "Warning for the Unregenerate.") "Knead in thy Bread, I eate, thy Love to mee, / And spice thy Cup I take, with rich grace so, / That at thy Table I may honour

thee" (lines 2-4).

Taylor chose to meditate on the more risqué Biblical poetry, such as the Song of Songs. The sumptuous imagery in Solomon's verses inspired poetry that had to be sequestered from Taylor's contemporaries in order to preserve his reputation and life. Released from some of the bonds of calculated Puritan metaphor, Taylor brought forth lush imagery. Beginning one poem, "Oh that I was the Bird of Paradise," he borrowed the idea of Heaven as a fragrant garden, and imagined himself among the spices:

These all as meate, and med'cine, emblems choice
Of Spirituall Food, and Physike are which sport
Up in Christs Garden. Yet the Nutmeg's Spice
A leathern Coate wares, and a Macie Shirt,
Doth far excell them all. Aromatize
My Soule therewith, my Lord, and spirituall wise. (7-12)

The poet knew that, in addition to making the soul aromatic, spices could keep it free from corruption. He wrote of a "myrrhiz'd" soul, "Such med'cine, Lord, I lack my Sin to calm, / To kill Corruption and my Soule Embalm... This myrrh in killing putrid vermin Sins, / Will keep my Soule from putrifying here, / Will ease the Conscience of its dreadfull Stings: / And sweeten all with its perfumed Cheere" ("I have gathered my Myrrh with my Spice" lines 11-12, 33-36). Taylor suggested that God's grace was spice enough to embalm the soul. The poem lamented that sin inhibited his ability to sing God's praises, and pondered the rapture of God's anointing graces: "My Spirits stufft with sweetest joy will bring / Thy Glory tun'de on my perfumed String" (55-56).

Joy became a spice in Taylor's poetry, inspired by the Canticles. William King's poem, "The Art of Cookery," was also penned after the structure of another poet. King's muse was Horace, not Solomon, and the "spices" described in his poem ranged from

“ginger” to “mirth.” One might interpret “The Art of Cookery” as a set of culinary instructions drawing “upon popular re-appropriation of the Roman chef Apicus,” (Morton 97) as a satire of Horace’s “The Art of Poetry,” or as a commentary on luxury. Literally, the poem provides hints on food preparation and etiquette. King advised novice chefs that taste is more important than appearance, (“Unless some Sweetness at the Bottom lye, / Who cares for all the crinkling of the Pye?”), that one should present traditional menus in a new light (“Credit to the Artist will accrue, / Who in known things still makes th’appearance new”), and that the quality of a product depends on the quality of its ingredients (“Make your transparent sweetmeats truly nice, / With Indian Sugar and Arabian Spice”). Morton (99) asserts that King’s poem resembles Horace’s in its “rules of decorum and episodic structure,” and publishing the two as parallel texts affirmed King’s intention to mimic the literary nature of “The Art of Poetry.” In addressing the issue of luxury, King laced his text with references to spice, both subtle and direct.

Morton (100) writes, “At the moment in the modern period in which antiquarianism was being developed, spice became an antiquarian marker of modern capitalist expansion, luxury, and desire.” King recognized that although the spice trade itself would decline, he could preserve an illustration of spice in society through his poetry, and demonstrate that certain “spices” were not luxuries, but subtle moments encountered by rich and poor alike. In one example (69), he implied that mirth was a spice, generally reserved for the wealthy, but sometimes enhancing the commoner’s circumstances: “Sometimes the Vulgar will of Mirth partake, / And have excessive Doings at their Wake: / Ev’n Taylors at their yearly Feasts look great, / And all their Cucumbers are turned to Meat.” Among remarks on “Roguish mustard” and “the

enticing gold of Ginger-bread,” King mentioned that “sharp hunger” was the universal seasoning, a flavor known to both princes and peasants (119). He transformed criticism into a dish, suggesting that each person would receive his or her share: “Judgement provides the Meat in Season fit, / Which by the Genius drest, its Sauce is Wit” (131). Thus, King’s poem, spiced with metaphors for spice took on spice’s transcendence: consistent flavor throughout the varied design of Nature.

The theme of spice remains a part of the American identity. Despite shifts in population, economy, and politics, the structure of America is bound to origins in European colonialism, which might have had different results without explorations inspired by spices. Most Americans, like spices, are not “natural” to America; they have alien origins, but have “naturalized” under the influences of time and ubiquity. The nature of God remains in question: should one seek to satisfy a deity who grinds hardship into the earth, or should one find comfort in diffuse spiritual fragrance? Peppercorns are no longer cash equivalents, but their scent continues to stimulate chefs and poets, just as it did for seventeenth-century Americans. Hunger, in all of its guises, endures, prompting modern journeys toward the taste of satisfaction, the aromatic tonic to alleviate suffering and purge regret, and the elixir of youth. As long as the earth remains distant from Heaven, Americans will search for the essences of Paradise, nourishment, and preservation. They will cling to icons of comfort and luxury. The task of the American author is not to overwhelm reality with perfume, but to identify capsules of spice in Nature, and open them to invigorate the world: sustaining a tradition of relishing words.

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