Transatlantic tubers
New World potatoes in early modern English literature

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After Christopher Columbus ‘discovered’ the New World in 1492, European sailing ships brought the Western and Eastern hemispheres together in new ways, creating a network of trading nodes across the globe. The meeting of the New and Old Worlds was a confluence of exciting and often overwhelming associations, burgeoning with new interstices of materials, knowledge, and trade. As the natural resources of the New World (tobacco, codfish, lumber, gold, etc.) took hold of Europe, so too did the development of capitalistic production. As Immanuel Wallerstein and Aníbal Quijano suggest in their analysis of the development of capitalism: ‘The Americas were not incorporated into an already existing capitalist world-economy. There could not have been a capitalist world-economy without the Americas’.¹ In the sixteenth century, European countries exploring the New World concentrated heavily on the commodities that came from the Americas: commodities that could be produced, transported, marketed, and sold throughout the world. During this time of global expansionism, the English mercantilists Thomas Mun, Edward Misselden, and Gerard de Malynes promoted trade as the source of wealth; the possession of land in the New World was not just about conquest, but also about access to natural resources. Significantly, Thomas Mun writes, ‘We get more by the Indian wares than the Indians themselves’.² Whether it was gold from Peru, spices from India, or tubers from South America, merchants hungered to trade in the materials that crossed the oceans, and writers mythologized those new materials in poems and plays.

New World plants were one of the central actors in this formative moment in global history. The agriculture of indigenous peoples shaped European society, and subsequently English literature, in new and startling ways. Indeed, the study of botany in Europe began after vessels returned with numerous new plants from the New World; the first modern medical garden was founded in Padua in 1545. After Columbus, an indigenization of Europe ensued, which assured that the colonizer and the colonized mutually constituted the early modern world. This study views the Americas – and
specifically the potato – as an active and crucial participant. The sixteenth-century potato was not the ubiquitous spud it is today. The sweet potato (Ipomoea batatas) was a rare culinary delight, often candied, while Europeans initially eschewed the common potato (Solanum tuberosum). The toxicity of the latter’s leaves, stem, and flowers (they belong to the family of nightshades) could be deadly, so it was avoided as a culinary item for decades despite the tuber having no dangerous toxins. By the late seventeenth century, however, both types of potatoes were widely consumed.

The potato struck William Shakespeare’s fancy in Troilus and Cressida (1602) when the rather lewd Thersites comments to a jealous Troilus while the two of them spy on Cressida with her rival lover in the Greek encampment: ‘How the devil Luxury, with his fat rump and/potato-finger, tickles these together! Fry, lechery, fry!’ In 1623, the same year that Shakespeare’s First Folio was published, Henry Cokeram produced a new edition of the English Dictionarie, where the headword ‘luxury’ was glossed as meaning ‘lecherie, riotousnesse’. Going back to old English, Geoffrey Chaucer treats the deadly sin of lechery in The Parson’s Tale as De Luxuria. Luxury, as Shakespeare knew it, was interchangeable with lechery. These definitions help explain the lasciviousness in the above quotation by Shakespeare, where the bawdy Thersites speaks of ‘fat rumps’ while he spies on Cressida with her rival lover. But, why ‘potato-finger’?

In today’s culture, a potato is hardly associated with sexual virility; yet, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the tuber was considered to be a powerful aphrodisiac. In 1577, William Harrison notes in The Description of England, ‘the potato and such venerous roots are brought out of Spaine, Portingale and the Indies to furnish up our bankets’; likewise, in 1596, Thomas Dawson refers to such potato dishes as being made to ‘excite Venus’; and John Gerard (who poses with a potato flower on the title page of his Herbal; see Figure 20.1) writes in 1597 that potatoes are good for ‘vehemently procuring bodily lust’. Indeed, throughout the seventeenth century, poets and playwrights frequently allude to the sexual qualities of the potato with phrasing such as ‘my former Punck the Potato-woman’, ‘will your Ladiship have a Potato-pie, tis a good stirring dish’, and ‘their Lecheries lend; Potato, Skirret, and Eringo’. The elongated sweet potato and somewhat phallic shape of other potatoes cannot account for this lusty attribute alone. Prior to sailors and merchants bringing potatoes from the New World, England already had other phallic-shaped vegetables, such as carrots and cucumbers, which never took on such a profound sexual aura. Shakespeare is one of many early modern writers to use the word ‘potato’ in such a bawdy fashion. Why did the New World potato elicit sexual lust in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Why did early modern writers, such as Sir Walter Ralegh, William Shakespeare, John Fletcher, and Philip Massinger, so notably refer to potatoes in relation to sexual pursuits?

The aphrodisiacal attributes of the potato derive from the tuber’s origin in the Americas, a source that was well established in early modern texts. This transatlantic origin reflects how important the cultivated plants of Native Americans became to the diet, myths, and urban legends of European society. In this manner, the sexuality associated with the potato took ‘root’ as a participant in the development of the early modern world – a material thing with agency, we might say. ‘The single most important new development in the history of early modern things’, writes Paula Findlen, ‘concerns the geography of objects and its implications for seeing the
history of material culture as an essential component of global history’. As Findlen suggests, material things from the Americas – tobacco, gold, silver, cochineal, codfish, and potatoes – shaped global history as much as the intrepid New World explorers discovering, colonizing, and exploiting the lands. ‘The thing has a history’, writes Elizabeth Grosz; ‘it is not simply a passive inertia against which we measure our own activity. It has a “life” of its own’. The fact that plants ‘live’ is beyond question, but discovering how they live drives this investigation.

The seafarers and explorers who visited those far-off lands wrote about the New World and its inhabitants in overtly feminine and sexualized language. Columbus, for instance, commented that the Earth was not round, as previous cartographers suggested, but shaped like a breast or pear, and America was the nipple. In this sense, New World potatoes come quite literally from a procreating Mother Earth: fertile, abundant, and seductive. Even the name ‘America’ is the feminization of the explorer Amerigo Vespucci’s first name. Tellingly, Vespucci relates explicit sexuality in his letters, such as ‘the women being very libidinous make the penis of their husbands swell to such a size as to appear deformed’, perhaps resembling a gnarled and bulbous tuber. Englishmen perform a kind of foreplay by stepping ‘their glad feet on smooth Guiana’s breast’ in George Chapman’s De Guiana, Carmen Epicum; and Ralegh’s The Discoverie of Guiana (1595) describes ‘a countrey that hath yet her maidenhead’, which awaits penetration by male sea voyagers. The feminization and sensational sexualizing of the New World and its female inhabitants became a constant in the literature of exploration; as Louis Montrose contends, Virginia ‘reconstitutes the land as a feminine place unknown to man’ and Mary C. Fuller writes, ‘Ralegh’s feminization of Guiana […] construes discovery and conquest as a form of sexual violence’. Identifying the origins of the sexualized potato in the feminized spaces of the New World reveals how non-human bodies such as the potato are more than just objects; rather, they are lively and self-organizing ‘actants’, as Jane Bennett argues in Vibrant Matter. Bennett writes ‘edible matter is an actant operating inside and alongside humankind, exerting influence on moods, dispositions, and decisions’. Europeans might have succeeded in colonizing the New World, but potatoes succeeded in colonizing the stomachs and libidos of the Old World.

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The chroniclers of New World exploration act as mediators, providing a voyeuristic and tantalizing glimpse of the Native Americans for armchair adventurers in Europe. One of the more popular travel writing translations in England was of the Italian chronicler of the New World, Pietro Martire d’Anghiera, whose work was translated by Richard Eden in 1555, and later in 1577 by Richard Jugge. In this passage from the 1555 edition, d’Anghiera provides a rather libidinous account of Columbus’ second voyage during a visit to the court of Anacauchoa:

There mette them a company of xxx. women, beinge al the kynges wyues and concubines, bearinge in theyr handes branches of date trees, singinge and dauncinge: They were all naked, sauynge that theyr pryue partes were couered with breeches of gossampine cotton. But the virgins, hauynge theyr heare hangyng...
D’Anghiera describes the naked bodies of the native women in an enticing manner and, more importantly, compares them to nymphs and fairies of antiquity and folklore. In European texts, there is something recognizably mythical about indigenous peoples of the Americas. The women are like wood nymphs (‘Dryades’), and fairies (‘fayres’) frolicking in some mystical forest fountain, pricking the hearts and minds of male European explorers with Eros and sexual fantasy. As Anne McClintock puts it in *Imperial Leather*, the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination – a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears. It was a titillating read at home for armchair travellers, or as Stephen Greenblatt writes, ‘A screen onto which Europeans projected their darkest and yet most compelling fantasies’. This transatlantic world – propelled by maritime trade in new materials and captured by writers in new myths – delivered the aphrodisiacal tuber to the shores of England and into English literature.

The potato notably appears in Fletcher and Massinger’s *The Sea Voyage* (1622). The play reveals many of the same colonial impulses as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, to which it is often, and rightly, compared. Like Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, this play involves extreme deprivation, shipwreck on an unnamed island, a sister losing her brother, characters referred to as monsters, and a Gonzalo-like commonwealth (albeit run by Amazonian-like women). While Shakespeare alludes to the racial inequities of servitude in the colonies through the characters of Caliban and Ariel, Fletcher and Massinger point to the more straightforward struggles of filling one’s belly and satiating one’s sexual appetite. The female characters in the *The Sea Voyage* are first described as sensual ‘fairies’:

*Albert:* They are come. Stand ready, and look nobly, And with all humble reverence receive ’em, Our lives depend upon their gentle pities, And death waits on their anger. [*Takes Aminta aside.*]

*Morillat:* Sure they are fairies.

*Tibalt:* Be they devils, devils of flesh and blood, After so long a Lent and tedious voyage, To me they are angels.

*Franville:* O for some eringoes!

*Lamure:* Potatoes, or cantharides.

*Tibalt:* Peace, you rogues that buy abilities of your ’pothecaries! Had I but took the diet of green cheese, And onions for a month, I could do wonders.
These sea-travelling gallants and merchants are ‘modelled on the younger sons of minor gentry’, Anthony Parr observes, ‘who hoped to find in the colonies the wealth and status denied them at home’. The feckless castaways are not in their element, and the gentleman above are startled and confused by the sight of women, as if they are not real. Not only do they associate the female islanders with ‘fairies’, as d’Anghiera, but also they immediately wish for aphrodisiacs: ‘eringoes’ are the candied root of the sea holly; ‘cantharides’ is more contemporarily known as the Spanish fly.

Along with the potato, these apothecary drugs supposedly induce sexual desire and prowess in the person who ingests them. These ‘things’ make things happen to humans. ‘Eating’, writes Jane Bennett, ‘constitutes a series of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman materials’. Although the potato is not a conscious actant and has no verifiable aphrodisiacal properties, the tuber clearly transformed, and continues to transform humans. In the passage above, the character of Tibalt (the more temperate and sensible of the shipwrecked sailors) tosses aside the various strange and foreign aphrodisiacs (perhaps carried by the surgeon who accompanies them), opting for a local diet of more simple sexual invigorators of ‘onions’ and ‘green cheese’. The first encounter with the women of the isle does not induce fear or curiosity (they immediately dispel with the idea that they might be devils), but instead provokes a desire to have sex. Notably, the same arousal never occurs around their captain Albert’s captive French virgin, Aminta, who had sailed with them prior to being marooned on the island. By the third act, the marooned group is starving and whittling away, but find themselves saved by a group of Amazons who provide food, and afterwards a promise of sex.

Fletcher and Massinger’s French sailors suffer the lure of female islanders, like the sailors of Ulysses seduced by Circe, or the sailors who discover women on the Isle of Love far east by the Malay islands in Camões’ Os Lusiadas. In early modern English literature, however, temperament and abstention are the more common approach of English men toward exotic females. Take the character of Acrasia, for instance, in the Bower of Bliss episode from Book II of Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene (1590). Greenblatt argues in Renaissance Self-Fashioning that Spenser’s Acrasia represents a seductive Native American woman. Spenser’s libidinous Acrasia and her New World Bower of Bliss must be destroyed, as Greenblatt notes: ‘a whole civilization was caught in a net and, like Acrasia, bound in chains of adamant; their gods were melted down, their palaces and temples razed, their groves felled’. While the English promoted sexual temperance, their colonizing behaviours were anything but temperate, no matter how hard they tried to hide it rhetorically.

In The Discoverie of Guiana, Ralegh uses the potato as a way of distinguishing English planters from the Spanish conquistadors, noting that one of the greatest distinctions between the Spanish and English narratives about the New World is the English rebuke of the Spanish treatment of native women. The famous English editor of England’s overseas exploration narratives, Richard Hakluyt, described Ralegh’s feelings this way: nothing could tear Ralegh away from ‘the sweet embraces of Virginia, that fairest of nymphs – though to many insufficiently known – whom
our most generous sovereign [Queen Elizabeth] had given you to be your bride’. 24
The nymphs of Virginia are not children of Queen Elizabeth, and certainly not hers
to give away in marriage, yet this is what the colonial propaganda would have the
people believe. As Montrose has argued, the sexualized landscape invites a form of
sexual conquest, but notably ‘Hakluyt’s suggestion was more chaste’, Daniel Carey
notes, ’containing the story within a narrative of marriage, while making coy insinua-
tions about hidden beauties’. 25 The English considered themselves kind planters (as
compared to Spanish conquistadors), an idea borne out in the plantations — linguis-
tically benign, but physically destructive of the land and the natives (and Africans).
Whether explorers were conquistadors or planters, the bottom line was the same: the
virgin land was available for the taking. 26

The propaganda of the benign conqueror is particularly evident in Ralegh’s The
Discovery of Guiana, as exhibited by an edited version of the manuscript housed
in Lambeth Palace (MS 250). Ralegh’s original manuscript contains many pas-
sages describing the womanizing behaviours of the lusty English with the Native
American women. The published text, which Joyce Lorimer has deftly analysed
and edited, contains various marked-up edits by Sir Robert Cecil, which eliminate
these references, and in some instances, confer some of the Englishmen’s lewd
behaviours on the Spanish. Lorimer notes that Cecil marked for excision a lengthy
passage about Ralegh’s roistering description of Guiana as a place where those willing to
join the adventure could ‘find store of pott companions,’ drink pineapple wine,
‘fytter for Princes, then for borachos,’ buy themselves as many women as they
wanted and smoke tobacco ‘till they become bacon’. 27

This passage did not appear in the published text. The language throughout
the published version reveals the reserve of the English versus the lustiness of the
Spaniards, particularly in a passage containing the potato, where the Spanish:


tooke from them both their wiues, and daughters daily, and vsed them for satisfy-
ing their owne lusts […] But I protest before the maiestie of the liuing God, that
I neither know nor beleue, that any of our companie one or other, by violence
or otherwise, euer knew any of their women, and yet we saw many hundreds,
and had many in our power, and of those very yoong, and excellently fauored
which came among vs without deceit, starke naked […] I suffred not anie man to
take from anie of the nations so much as a Piña, or a Potato roote, without giuing
them contentment, nor any man so much as to offer to touch any of their wiues
or daughters: which course, so contrarie to the Spaynards. 28

The passage above reveals colonial appetites: two edible plants from the New World,
the piña (pineapple) and potato are linked with the practice of ‘taking’ women as
sexual partners in the New World. England’s martial men wanted to emulate the
Spanish conquest; they defined ‘the character of its overseas expansion’, Richard
Helgerson writes, ‘in terms of its relation to Spain’, yet they controlled their ardent desires.29 Ralegh’s *The Discovery of Guiana* reveals just how duplicitous and intemperate the English were in their colonial discourse. Ralegh and his men reportedly abstain from any carnal pleasures with the Amerindians, which Montrose observes, ‘provides proof of the ascendancy of (what Sir Philip Sidney would call) their erected wits over their infected wills’.30 Yet Ralegh writes of the land in explicitly sexual language: Guiana is a virgin land that ‘hath yet her maidenhead’, as if it were awaiting male violation. Ralegh says he will free the Indians of their Spanish tyrants, but through giving them another master – the English. Indeed, according to Ralegh, the Indians already ‘pledged’ their allegiance to Queen Elizabeth by wearing necklaces with shiny coin pendants bearing ‘her majesties picture [...] with promise that they would become her servants thenceforth’.31 Ralegh writes that he will not take so much as a *piña* or *potato*, yet he describes the other various ‘commodities’ of Guiana he hopes to market for profit with painstaking accuracy. Such duplicity is what Michel de Certeau, in *The Writing of History* calls, ‘writing that conquers’. Inverting the common trope of European desire for the Americas, Ralegh’s rhetoric serves to convince Elizabethan courtiers and merchantmen that it is the Amerindians who do the desiring. It is *they* who desire the English to conquer and colonize their countries; it is *they* who desire the English to liberate them from the Spanish.

Ralegh forcibly pronounces the innocence of the English by stating that they would not take anything from the land without first ‘giving them contentment’; that is, a fair exchange as opposed to sexual satisfaction (although the sexual innuendo may be a holdover from lax editing). The passage is reminiscent of Columbus who first penned such rhetorical equivocation. Columbus writes in his first letter that he gave the natives worthless glass baubles and wiry trinkets, ‘taking nothing in return’.32 We know now, of course, that the Spanish, English, French, and Dutch did take something in return: *all* their land. By the time Ralegh wrote *The Discovery of Guiana* in 1595, the ‘potato roote’ was already well entrenched as an aphrodisiac and readers would have understood the sexual overtones of the passage.

The sexualized potato is one object that can contribute to the critical conversation about the location of Fletcher and Massinger’s island. Some critics, like Gordon McMullan, have mapped the island to the Americas and the operations of the Virginia Company, while others, such as Gitanjali Shahani, look to the trading operations of the East India Company; notably, Jean Feerick, points to an intentional muddiness about the island’s location.33 Rather than directly proposing the location of the island, this essay contributes to the discussion of gender as it relates to English myths about the New World landscape, its inhabitants, and the transatlantic objects, such as the potato.

Over the years, the sexual myth of the potato swung pendulum-like between food and aphrodisiac: in the early sixteenth century the Spanish chroniclers wrote about a nondescript foodstuff; the aphrodisiacal qualities began to spread when the potato took root in European soil in the 1570s; by the mid-seventeenth century the tuber returns to a simple foodstuff, primarily for the poor. According to Francisco Lopez de Gomara’s *Historia de las Indias* (1553), Columbus returned from the Caribbean in
1504 with ‘batatas’, or sweet potatoes, which he shared with Queen Isabella. The earliest mention of the ‘batata’ (1516) appears in d’Anghiera’s *Decades of the New World*: ‘They dygge also owte of the ground certeyne rootes growing of theim selues, whiche they caule Botatas’. The earliest most replete description occurs in Juan de Castellanos’ record of an expedition in South America in 1536. Here, he compares the potato (though yet unnamed) to European truffles.

The first naming of the potato occurs in a passage notable for the utilitarian use of the common spud-like tuber in the Peruvian Andes, when Pedro Cieza de León writes in 1553,

one is called potato, and is a kind of earth nut, which, after it has been boiled, is as tender as a cooked chestnut, but has no more skin than a truffle, and it grows under the earth in the same way.

He further notes that many Spaniards got rich in New Spain simply by selling the potatoes to the mineworkers, ‘where food for the thousands of workers was always in high demand’. The earliest account of the potato as food crop was in Europe in the 1570s, where the account books of the Hospital de la Sangre at Seville show that they bought 19 pounds of ‘patatas’ in 1573, and by 1576 ‘patatas’ regularly appear as part of their normal housekeeping records. While Sir Francis Drake and Raleigh previously received credit for introducing the potato to Europe in the 1580s, the above account from a hospital in Seville clearly demonstrates that New World potatoes were growing in the gardens of mainland Europe (the Canary Islands register potato crops in the 1560s) at least by the 1570s, if not earlier.

Like many similarly cultivated plants from the New World, the sweet potato and the more common ‘spud’ were frequently confused and the common name was used interchangeably; variations included batata, patata, potato, potado, potadon, and potaton. The sweet potato was more expensive and consumed largely by wealthy aristocrats, considered more of a delicacy and only grown in southern warm climates. In England, the first textual mention of the ‘venerous root’ (likely a sweet potato) occurs in the same decade as the Spanish hospital documents. These potatoes might have been imported for aristocratic banquets, but more likely the esculent was already growing in English fields, which suggests that they were the common spud as opposed to the rarer import. In what has become known as the Drake Manuscript, published around 1586, there are two drawings of yellow and purple potatoes (folio 10v, 23v, see Figure 20.2 for an example), or *patates* as they are labelled.
Figure 20.2  MA 3900 Histoire naturelle des Indes: manuscript, ca. 1586, fol. 10 verso Patates.
Transatlantic tubers

The text below the drawing notes on folio 10v

The Indians use this fruit as excellent nourishment and cook it with meat in a pot or braise it; it originates in the earth; is shaped like a root, and one can multiply it by cutting small pieces which one plants like a seed which grows.

The French adapted the word patata from the Spanish word batata (sweet potato).

In England, the more formative description of the potato and its lusty properties appears in John Gerard’s Herball of 1597 (see Figure 20.3):

This plant, which is called of some Sifarum Peruvianum, is generally of us called Potatus, or Potatoes …. There is not any that hath written of this plant, or saide any thing of the flowers, therefore, I refer the description therof unto those that shall hereafter have further knowledge of the same. Yet I have had in my garden divers roots …. (that I bought at the Exchange in London) where they flourished until winter, at which time they perished and rotted …. They are used to be eaten roasted in the ashes. Some, when they be so roasted, infuse them and sop them in wine: and others, to give them the greater grace in eating, do boil them with prunes …. Howsoever they be dressed, they comfort, nourish, and strengthen the bodie, procure bodily lust, and that with great greediness.42

Gerard poses on the frontispiece holding a potato flower (see Figure 20.1 above). Gerard left no clues as to why he wanted his portrait accompanied with a potato flower, but one can speculate that the vigour and virility associated with the ‘venerous tuber’ played a role in the decision – a sort of advertisement, if you will, for his manliness and virility.

In the same year, Shakespeare likely penned The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597), in which the infamous character of Falstaff enters the stage foolishly dressed as a deer with horns atop his head. Immediately upon seeing the object of his amorous desires, Mistress Ford, he exclaims:

My doe with the black scut! Let the sky rain potatoes; let it thunder to the tune of ‘Green Sleeves’; hail kissing-comfits, and snow eringoes. Let there come a tempest of provocation, I will shelter me here.43

The sexual innuendos abound in this passage. A ‘scut’ refers to female genitalia as well as the tail of a deer or rabbit; ‘Green Sleeves’ is a popular tune about an unfaithful woman (which Mistress Ford would become if Falstaff had his way); ‘kissing-comfits’ were sweetmeats used as breath fresheners; and as mentioned earlier, ‘eryngoes’ are the candied root of the sea holly plant and considered an aphrodisiac. The potato is in sexually tempestuous company. The erectile function of eating potatoes, which the character Lamure clearly desires when he calls for ‘Potatoes’ in The Sea Voyage, also occurs in Beaumont and Fletcher’s The Elder Brother (written in 1617–19):

A Banquet! – Well! Potatoes and eringoes
And, I take it, cantharides! Excellent!
Figure 20.3  John Gerard, The Herball, or, Generall histoire of plantes. Imprinted at London by John Norton, 1597. Pages 780–1.
Courtesy of the Missouri Botanical Garden, Peter H. Raven Library.
Figure 20.3 (Continued)
A priapism follows; and as I’ll handle it
It shall, old lecherous goat in authority.44

For Fletcher, it seems, banquets without potatoes simply are not a satisfying or full meal, especially when sexual exploits are in the air.

_The Sea Voyage_ is probably the most sustained early modern drama about hunger and sexuality in the New World, combining the two appetites continuously throughout the play. The play does not have the complexity of plot of _The Tempest_, but it has a tightly woven story line that undertakes aspects of maritime exploration that Shakespeare’s play does not. Foremost are the islanders, Portuguese women shipwrecked and marooned on the island who have access to food and have learned the habits of Amazons for survival, as the character Rosellia, ‘Governess of the Amazonian Portugals’, relates:

> Did fortune guide –
> Or rather destiny – our bark, to which
> We could appoint no port, to this blest place,
> Inhabited heretofore by warlike women
> That kept men in subjection? Did we then,
> By their example, after we had lost
> All we could love in man, here plant ourselves
> With execrable oaths never to look
> On man, but as a Monster?45

The Portuguese women marooned on this happy isle, adapted the ways of warlike women (Amazons) to survive without men. Shakespeare’s sole living female islander in _The Tempest_, Miranda, is notably weak by comparison and submits to the whims of her father, Prospero. In the end, Miranda is married off like so many seemingly powerful female Shakespearean characters (such as Beatrice and Portia). Fletcher and Massinger, to the contrary, portray several European women as sexually powerful faux Amazonians who wield control over male sensual and literal appetites (although by the end patriarchal norms return). Indeed, the men spend most of the play seeking either sex, food, or mercy from the Amazonian women. All three of these elements culminate in the final act of the play.

Unlike _The Tempest_, the starvation of the marooned characters in _The Sea Voyage_ immediately reaches life-threatening proportions, which accurately echoes many of the travel narratives of the period, particularly those of the English in Virginia where survival is the utmost concern. As Allison Brown and Jason Denman note, there are ‘specific verbal parallels with early accounts of Jamestown indicate that Fletcher and Massinger probably had access to written accounts of the so-called “Starving Time” (1608–10) that were unpublished at the time of the play’s initial performances’.46

Ironically, in _The Sea Voyage_ it is because the French pirates who find themselves shipwrecked on the island covet gold rather than food that leads to their demise. On the island, the French pirates encounter two starving Portuguese gentlemen, Sebastian and Nicusa, who were shipwrecked previously, and came ashore with a great treasure
of gold and jewels. (Sebastian, we learn later, is the husband of Rosellia.) Noting that the French ship is still seaworthy, the Portuguese bait the French with their heaps of treasure and escape to sea on their ship. The Captain’s sensible mistress, Aminta, admonishes the greedy French pirates: ‘She’s under sail, and floating./See where she flies – see, to your shames, you wretches,/Those poor starved things that showed you Gold’; and by the end of Act I, the French curse the gold and jewels, as the Boatswain notes: ‘This gold,/This damned enticing Gold!’

Similarly, attending more to New World riches than finding and harvesting food caused Captain John Smith in Jamestown, Virginia, in The Generall Historie of Virginia (1624) to warn his fellow colonists of imitating ‘The Spaniard [who] never more greedily desired gold then he victuall’. Indeed, Smith would further chastise colonists for seeking wealth through planting tobacco as opposed to food: ‘Besides they endeuoured so much for the planting Tobacco for present gaine, that they neglected many things might more haue preuailed for their good, which caused amongst them much weaknesse and mortality’. Tobacco was a sort of vegetable gold, becoming the most profitable crop in the English colonies; the power of greed was so strong, and the colonists sufficiently weak, that financial gain outstripped nutritional needs. Fletcher and Massinger clearly echo the harsh realities of English colonization. Like the Amazonian women who eventually supply victuals to the starving shipwrecked pirates in The Sea Voyage, the English colonizers in Jamestown relied on Native Americans to supply them with food. When in foreign lands, act with temperance, Fletcher and Massinger’s play advises.

Despite the debilitating lack of food, in Act III the French Captain, Albert, swims across a treacherous strait to the island inhabited by the Amazonian women. While the Governess of the Amazons, Rosellia, is initially reticent to entertain or assist any men, the youngest of the women, Clarinda, falls in love with Albert and persuades Rosellia to aid his men with food and shelter, somewhat like the famous Pocahontas–John Rolfe story from Virginia. The Amazons further concur that if they are to survive as a people, they must populate the island with more women. This, of course, can only be achieved by copulating with the men. Queen Rosellia decides that they will keep the men around for a month, pairing off a woman with a man, in hopes that many will get pregnant. Meanwhile, the Frenchmen remaining on the other island are famished, contemplating eating the soles of their shoes and finally degenerating to thoughts of cannibalism; proposing to eat the one woman, Aminta, first. She pleads with the sailors: ‘Are ye not Christians?’ To which usurer merchant, Lamure, replies with a bawdy joke, ‘Why, do not Christians eat Women?’ Lamure’s astounding response, echoing the sexual reference of each man desiring to eat first the female ‘hinder parts’, suggests the story of cannibalism among colonists that Brown and Denman identify in Smith’s other narrative about Virginia, A True Relation:

So great was our famine, that a Salvage we slew, and buried, the poorer sort tooke him up againe and eat him, and so did divers one another boyled and stewed with roots and herbs: And one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was knowne, for which hee was executed, as
hee well deserved; now whether shee was better roasted, boyled or carbonado’d, I know not, but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of.

Sensible Tibalt, the trustworthy friend of Captain Albert, hears Aminta’s cries and rushes in to stop the heinous act. At this moment, Albert returns with food and the Amazon women, whetting the Frenchmen’s appetite for something else they hunger: sex. While hunger for gold in the play leads to starvation, a threat of cannibalism is ultimately thwarted by a promise of sex.

Potatoes first appear in the text at this crucial moment, bringing together the satisfaction of two appetites (food and sex) in one item. At the time of *The Sea Voyage*’s production (1622), potatoes were growing in English gardens. For instance, ‘sixty pounds of potatoes were purchased at 10d per lb.’ on July 16, 1607, for King James, ‘presumably from the market gardeners, who were beginning to establish themselves in the nearby suburbs’. In 1629, the famed herbalist, John Parkinson, describes various methods for preparing potatoes to eat, but it was still likely a rare food substance except as a delicacy. By 1662, however, John Beale notes that ‘the Virginian Potato is become plebeian in Shropshire’, and by 1688 the ubiquitous tuber is a staple in Ireland: ‘Potatoes are muched used in Ireland, as in America, as Bread, and are themselves also an unusual food [these] may be propagated with advantage to poor people, a little ground yielding a very great quantity’. In the passage above where Lamure desires ‘potatoes, or cantharides’, it is clear that the tuber is desired to invigorate male sexual virility, as opposed to filling the belly. However, after a long period without food, the shipwrecked and destitute adventurers would certainly welcome a roasted potato for its food value too. *The Sea Voyage* is theatrically unique in its symbolic representation of the potato as both foodstuff and aphrodisiac.

The Amazons quickly disarm the men before beginning the process of the men choosing a companion, causing Tibalt to comment: ‘I have had many a combat with a tall wench,/But never was disarmed before’. Men always get into trouble when they hang up their swords and shields, and the same occurs here. The setting once again recalls Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* where Acrasia in the Native American Bower of Bliss seduces her European lover, Verdant, who has likewise hung his shield and sword aside to enjoy the ‘flowes in pleasures, and vaine pleasing toyes,/Mingled amongst loose Ladies’. The ‘allegorical’ gardens of paradise in Book II of the *Faerie Queene* – the Fortunate Isles and the Bower of Bliss, while carrying on the tradition of Tasso and Ariosto, are also echoed in *The Sea Voyage* when Raymond refers to the ‘Happy Isles’. In Act V, Raymond reveals how the French pirates had previously treated Rosellia’s people, ‘When first they forced the industrious Portugals/From their Plantations in the happy islands’, leading Claire Jowitt to contend that ‘the play participates in the history of French piracy against Portuguese territorial possessions’. Similarly, this canto from the *Faerie Queene* opens, like *The Sea Voyage*, with a warning against the intemperate greed for gold, as Sir Guyon sails past the ‘Gulfe of Greediness’, where there are many shipwrecks on the ‘Rocke of vile Reproch’. There is a clear allusion to the fabled wrecks of Spanish galleons laden with the gold mined by greedy Spaniards: ‘They passing by, a goodly Ship did see,/Laden from far with precious merchandize
Her selfe had runne into that hazardize'. The temperance shown by Spenser in the Faerie Queene is surely evident in Fletcher and Massinger's drama, but unlike Acrasia, who is soundly admonished for her wanton ways by the English knight, Sir Guyon, the French pirates eagerly embrace the Amazonian women, wishing they had potatoes to whet their appetites and invoke fornication. Unfortunately for the Frenchmen, a chivalrous decision to offer the Amazon women the jewels the Portuguese had left behind results in Rosellia recognizing the bounty as having come from her husband, Sebastian. She immediately believes they killed Sebastian for the treasure and imprisons all the Frenchmen with the intent of getting her revenge through another pagan ritual associated with New World cultures: a sacrificial killing.

Before the sacrifice, a great feast is spread out before the prisoners, who the Amazons release so that they can be observed. While all the prisoners speculate about whether eating the food will poison them, or disrespect and anger the host of the meal, the Master makes a second reference to potatoes:

Master: [Aside] This has been his temper ever. – See, provoking dishes: candied eringoes And potatoes.

Tibalt: I’ll not touch ’em, I will drink, But not a bit on a march. I’ll be a Eunuch Rather.62

Tibalt feigns abstinence here, having previously declared that he will stuff his belly regardless of the consequences; he will not be deprived of food even if he is soon deprived of his life. The food and ‘horrid musick’ is ‘Fit for a bloody Feast’, suggesting that the Europeans may not only be sacrificed, but also cannibalized and consumed by the faux Amazons. The Amazons, through the fear of sacrifice, have taught some of the sailors the virtue of temperance. Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish and René Girard in Violence and the Sacred have done much to enlarge the understanding of the history and significance of human punishment, sacrifice, and violence. In Violence and the Sacred, Girard writes that the sacrificial victim in any society is ‘a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence’, and ‘to reinforce the social fabric’. In Foucault’s words, punishment is an act ‘by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted’. In this sense, the Amazon women are not simply setting out to right the perceived wrongs committed by the Frenchmen, but they also seek to restore their social world back to its original order. The situation looks dire for the Frenchmen when suddenly Raymond, Aminta’s long lost brother, appears with the two Portuguese noblemen, Sebastian and Nicusa, husbands to the Amazonian women. Lost families are reunited, apologies accepted, misgivings understood, and the play ends by making ‘deadly enemies, faithful friends’.

The Sea Voyage – with its gold, Amazons, cannibalism, starvation, and sacrifice – is clearly based upon the common tropes and written chronicles about overseas exploration in the New World. The potato is one of many New World ‘things’, such as tobacco, corn, and gold, that visibly and physically alter European society. The
aphrodisiacal agency of potatoes to provoke lust is not the agency one associates with consciousness, but it is a material agency that makes things happen – at the very least, in a staged play. As Alfred Gell, one of the first scholars to discuss the agency of things writes, ‘Social agency can be exercised relative to “things” and social agency can be exercised by “things”’. In this manner, The Sea Voyage goes beyond merely representing a New World tuber on the stage; rather, Fletcher and Massinger’s drama illustrates how the potato creates new associations among humans, and how non-human objects employ just as much agency as the humans who interact with them. Past scholarship never doubted the aphrodisiac qualities of New World potatoes in early modern English literature. What scholars never sought to explain is why potatoes were considered aphrodisiacs. The fact that potatoes ‘live’ (like any plant) is beyond question, but discovering how they live – especially when transplanted or consumed – truly reveals the history and life of the venerous tuber.

Notes


20 Parr, Three Renaissance Travel Plays, p. 21.

21 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, p. 40.

22 For the identification of ‘onions’ and ‘green cheese’ as aphrodisiacs, see G. Williams, A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature, London: The Athlone Press, 1994, p. 972.

23 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, p. 183.


28 Ralegh, The Discoverie, pp. 120–1.


31 Ralegh, The Discoverie, p. 63.

32 Major, Select Letters, p. 7.

33 Feerick, “‘Divided’”, p. 29.


35 Arber and Eden, The First Three English Books, p. 82. The original Italian version was published in 1516.

36 Reader, Potato, p. 68; Castellanos did not publish his Elegías until 1601, though written much earlier.

37 Reader, Potato, p. 69.

38 Reader, Potato, p. 69.

39 Reader, Potato, p. 69.

40 For the debunking of the Drake and Ralegh reference to bringing potatoes to Europe, see Salaman, The History, pp. xiv–xv, 148–9. For the potato being grown in the Canary Islands in 1560s, see Reader, Potato, p. 91.
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46 A. Brown and J. Denman, ‘The Sea Voyage and Accounts of Famine in Colonial Virginia’, *Notes and Queries* 65/1, 2018, p. 119.
49 Smith, *Generall Historie*, vol. 1, p. 186.
54 Salaman, *The History*, p. 441.
55 For this timeline of potatoes being used as a food in England, see Salaman, *The History*, p. 106.

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