NEW PERSPECTIVES IN TRANSATLANTIC STUDIES

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Chapter 2

The Economy of the Marvelous: Columbus’s Transatlantic Tokens of Exchange

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In the documents of discovery, Columbus manipulates the exotic, the erotic, and the outlandish to overvalue the meager cargoes of gold he ships to Spain. Despite the high hopes these texts communicate, it is not gold, but rather the reported presence of alleged cannibals and Amazons that conveys the finding of lands of gold. While Columbus strays from one island to the next, hoping to uncover deposits of gold ore and locate the rich lands of the Great Khan, his writings employ unmistakable signs of the East—man eaters, women warriors, and parrots—with the double purpose of erasing his geographical error and of producing tokens standing for the treasures yet to be found. On the page, the quest for the precious metal becomes a search for alternative ways to represent the worth embodied by gold as the standard of monetary value.

At a time when gold, not paper money, is the norm, Columbus’s writing tenders the illusion of hard cash by generating mere tokens with no intrinsic value, such as the New World wonders, which are first depicted on paper and later displayed in Spain. The representative value of wonders relies on a cultural repertoire that establishes an
association between fantastic Oriental peoples and wealth. By replacing gold as a “fortune good” with “fortune signs,” this resilient mariner constructs a symbolic economy that runs parallel to the development of gold mining and colonial trade. 2 Within this paradigm of symbolic value, the novelty of the Amerindians, the rarity of their gold wares, and their exotic pets stand as bills of exchange that intimate an early rendering of gold. Following the notion of what early modern Europeans valued as wonders—that is, the exotic and the bizarre, and the interest for admiring and collecting objects never seen before—I call this process of substituting gold’s intrinsic value with cannibals, Amazons, parrots, and gold wares the “economy of the marvelous.” By bringing together the Journal of the first Voyage, Relation of the Second Voyage, letters written by members of Columbus’s crew, Peter Martyr’s correspondence, and royal performances, I describe the different layers of estimation that New World wonders accumulated in their trajectory from the page to the palace. I also include a close reading of the themes that visual texts incorporate from colonial discourse to represent the myth of the New World as a wonderland of untapped wealth so real it denied even strongly apparent symptoms of colonial disappointment.

Before discussing this paradigm of symbolic value that Columbus improvises to cope with the difficulty he had in producing reliable sources of gold, let me summarize some of the issues that I will address in this essay. After a brief account of mining and trade in the Caribbean, I will focus on the ways in which Columbus manages to oversell his first voyage. The spectacle that Columbus stages on his return to Spain, together with a special cargo he sends to show the achievements of his second voyage, are the two main scenes around which I trace the “economy of the marvelous.” My argument returns to these scenes in order to understand why New World wonders are tokens of American gold. Columbus’s display of captured Amerindians and artifacts exemplifies the effort to bring America to Europe. For those who could not make the trip to the New World and who either were not satisfied merely to read about it or did not trust graphic representations, direct presentations were provided. Specimens of all kinds were greatly admired for their visible and tangible connection with the New World. Each wonder functioned as pars pro toto, shards that reconstruct the new continent piece by piece in a carefully edited depiction of the New World. During the Renaissance, the interest in Americana is a manifested extension of the rise of the kunstkammern or Wunderkammern (Cámaras del tesoro). Private collections of curiosities, whether stored in cabinets or put on display for a select public, really emerge in the 17th century. The status of the collectors ranged from monarchs and aristocrats to humanist scholars. Collections of curiosities or wonders were conceived of both as potential source of knowledge and as ostentation of wealth.

“Wonder(s)” is a general term that denotes specimens of all kinds—human, animal, and inanimate—brought as proof of the lands discovered. In Columbus’s writing cannibals are the wonders which have the most relevant role. Even though the terms “cannibal” and “Amazon” have very specific meanings—man eater and warrior woman—they are also emblems of otherness that establish European stereotypes of Amerindians. Columbus’s texts contrast the Caribs, the group accused of eating human flesh, with the gentle Taíno. Yet, this difference is not maintained, since cannibal, Caribs, and Taínos are listed under a general rubric that includes the transgression of all taboos. While the Admiral writes, shows, and sells Caribs, the Amazons are as elusive as the unreachable Cipango. Yet, warrior women become the staple of the marvelous in later texts, and especially in allegories of the New World.

To elucidate how wonders can stand in for gold and why they are able to replace gold’s intrinsic value with alternative valences, I draw upon the difference between gold and the role of money as tokens lacking intrinsic value, as well as the correlation between value and desire. The “economy of the marvelous” begins with Columbus’s first voyage as he combines written reports with the parade of wonders he displayed on his return to Spain. This symbolic paradigm of value coexists with the Crown’s efforts to establish productive mining and trade in the colonies. While transatlantic economic ventures did not succeed because of mismanagement, disease, and the mistreatment of the indigenous population, the “economy of the marvelous” created a mirage of wealth that was more real than the slender monetary gains. The economy of La Hispaniola was never strong; gold production was very slim and succeeded only by imposing a policy of forced labor on the native population. What Frank Moya Pons has described as the “economy of gold” resulted, he argues, in an economy of flesh since selling and renting Indians was more profitable than mining. The production of gold decreased with the rapid decline of the native population and by 1508, gold was so insufficient that mining was soon replaced by sugar plantations cultivated by African slaves. 3 The same economic pattern applies to the colonies that were founded right after the decline of La Hispaniola. By 1510 Puerto Rico, Panamá, and Cuba exhausted their gold resources. Although this gold was depleted, the conquests of Mexico and Peru generated a consistent revenue.
However, the overall volume of gold continued to be very modest, since it did not surpass 30 tons.3 Columbus’s writing, however, tailors economic disappointment carefully so that it seems a minor shortcoming that will postpone briefly the estimated profits. Logs, letters, and accounts repeatedly include lengthy descriptions of gold wares and nuggets, pearls, reports of native informants describing golden lands, and even the price of expensive spices such as almastic, cinnamon, and aloe that Columbus claims he has found. The catalogue-like enumeration of goods goes hand-in-hand with reiterative appearances of cannibals, the slippery ubiquity of Amazons, beautiful naked Indians of both sexes, as well as sporadic manatees, sirens, and griffins. When Columbus reaches Spain, his accounts of the customs and mores of the Amerindians are, for the first time, backed up by the spectacle of Indians, crafts, and exotic animals. Columbus claims he has reached Cipango, where there is abundant gold. He also explains that he has settled a fort with several men who will trade and gather gold. Nevertheless, despite his promises, Columbus brought not gold, but New World wonders never seen before. In Seville, according to the eyewitness report of Las Casas, 7 Indians were displayed under the Arch of Saint Nicolas, along with colorful parrots, masks made with precious stones and gold, pieces of the finest gold, and many other strange items. When Ferdinand and Isabella received the Admiral in Barcelona, they were so impressed that they took all the marvels they saw as samples of the lavish earnings they anticipated.6

The news of Columbus’s expedition provoked great excitement. Columbus’s first letter was printed and published 9 times in 1493.7 Peter Martyr, the Italian humanist in residence at the Spanish court, writes that Christopher Columbus “has returned safe and sound.” Martyr reports that the Admiral has found marvelous things, and that he has produced gold as proof of the existence of mines in those regions.8 The news of the first voyage spread so quickly and made the West Indies seem so alluring that Columbus and Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, the archdeacon of Seville, had no difficulty in finding 1200 men to go on the second voyage. Once in La Hispaniola, members of the expedition, such as Pedro Chanca, the royal physician, report that gold is everywhere and that the monarchs are the richest princes in the world. A fellow traveler, Guillermo Coma, writes that gold can be easily removed from rocks, mines, and rivers.9 After the return of some of the settlers, Martyr describes in Decades his fascination with a big nugget of gold weighting 20 ounces that he handles and admires in the royal court.10

The excellent prospects for establishing a chain of trading posts along the islands are soon overshadowed by reports of Bernardo Boyl and Pedro Margarite, who, on their return with Torres’s relief fleet on February 2, 1494, informed the king and queen that the whole enterprise was a joke, that there was no gold on La Hispaniola, and that the expenditures of the crown would never be recovered.11 In “Relación del segundo viaje” Columbus declares that he is sending a map, along with several cannibals and their captives, some women and some castrated young males, as well as some parrots which can be given as gifts to different kings as signs of Castile’s successful colonial undertaking.12

The arrival of Torres’s fleet, on the other hand, shows that, despite the supposed gold of Cibao and the wonderful news of the River of Gold, they had to sell slaves in order to get cash to pay for food, supplies, and cattle. Juan Bardi, a member of the crew, reported that Columbus entrusted Torres with a few gold nuggets and the group of cannibals mentioned above, to which were added 52 parrots, 8 macaws, and some rabbits with no ears and tails.13 Memoirs of other adventurers who reached La Hispaniola on the second voyage also refer to the exotic and the erotic when hard commodities are scarce. The accounts of Simón Verde and Miguel de Cuneo demonstrate that the colony does not encompass bountiful lands. Verde writes that the spices shipped to Spain were useless, although some believed they had found cinnamon. Cuneo complains about food shortages and the difficulty of finding gold, with the exception of the little obtained through barter. Both travelers cope with their colonial disillusionment with the company of supposed cannibals. Their lengthy descriptions portray the Indians as beasts with degenerate appetites. Coma writes that the local women enjoy seducing white men with their lascivious dances, whereas Cuneo gives lustful portrayals of the concubines of the cannibals sent to Spain. He writes that Columbus gave him a young cannibal woman whom he raped. He also testifies that those slaves who did not fit in Torres’s second relief fleet on February 24, 1495 were given to the settlers for nothing.14

At the royal palace the Amerindians, along with their parrots and gold wares, stand for the fertile lands, great mines of gold and other metals, and the thousands of valuables that Columbus enumerates in his writings. The textual description and the actual exhibition of New World wonders constitute blank checks for the potential profits to be made. The explorer, as José Piedra contends, is able to advertise failure as success “in lieu of the fabled marketplaces sought out by Spain’s imperial aspirations.”15 I suggest that Columbus’s persuasive efforts
succeed by manipulating the cultural correlation between wonders and gold. Gold is the temptation that lured explorers across the Atlantic. Marvel is the word that fills all gaps, the name given to make comprehensible what remains in the margins. I argue that early modern Europe assimilates the New World through a system of improvised values that, in turn, constructs an illusion of wealth. The relationship between gold and wonders is tripartite since the latter, in addition to being indices of the legendary Orient, function as conceptual signs, related signifiers, and monetary symbols.

Among the collection of wonders that crisscrosses the *Journal of the First Voyage*, the cannibals are mentioned so often that they emerge as the emblem of the New World. Keeping the Amazons at a comfortable distance, the cannibals are not only the sharpest indicators of gold, but also the signifiers that constantly substitute for it, as well as the commodities sold for a price. While the sale of slaves remains secondary, natives are described, displayed, given, and kept as IOUs of transatlantic gold. The promise of future payment that wonders embody encapsulates a waiting game through which Columbus tries to produce expressions of value to supplement his monetary void. Buying time allows Columbus to extend his erratic course while he practices a “semitics of errancy” so that writing can convert the uncertain Caribbean into the known India. This attempt at translation entails procrastination. Columbus’s mistaken landfall implies a considerable delay in complying with the preset goals of the expedition as described in the “Title,” “Letter of Credence,” and “Articles of Agreement.” The imperial aspirations repeated in these documents, to “discover and acquire,” are partially completed. Of the two, the action of discovery is the only one that is realized, although it is limited itself to the coastline. Acquisition, on the other hand, depends on the arrival in Marco Polo’s Cipango and Cathay and is therefore postponed. The acquisition of “gold, precious stones, pearls, spices, and other things of value” only serves as a “symbolic field of reference,” as Rabasa puts it, that charts the proximity of the sought market places. While sailing and writing approach these destinations, the sight, description, and collection of cannibals and other wonders trace the itinerary and fill in the absence of expected assets.

The writing of Columbus traces his approach to Cipango by adapting the native name of Cibao and situating other names like Bohio and Baveque in the itinerary. Yet, these places are not indicated as part of the actual route, but rather as potential destinations that will please the royal sponsors. In the *Journal* the recorded information about fertile and rich locations leads to infinite excuses to keep searching for gold:

These islands are very green and fertile and the air very balmy, and there may be many things that I don’t know, for I do not wish to delay but to discover and go to many islands to find gold. And since these people make signs that it is worn on arms and legs, and it is gold all right because they point to some pieces that I have, I cannot fail (with Our Lord’s help) to find out where it comes from.

Paradoxically, the growing concern about wasting time causes the consistent delay of his quest for gold. From the moment he sets foot in the Caribbean to the time he sails back to Spain, Columbus has only collected bits and pieces of gold, which he has either traded bells for or found by chance. Just before setting sail for home, he claims he is finally reaching Cipango. At this point the gold he has not acquired is supplanted by tales of cruel one-eyed men with dog faces who cut off the genitals of their victims and drink their blood. Moreover, the so-called Caribs alternate between making war and making love to their harmless Taino neighbors, as well as to the warrior women who live on a nearby island. The depiction of the Caribs’ preferences for killing and mating are further enhanced by the fact that cannibals and Amazons live among members of the same gender and that they alternate between queer and straight eroticism and sexuality. The transgression of traditional roles and mores is also complemented with the possession of exceedingly rich mines, which interestingly enough are supposedly located on islands on the route to the Iberian Peninsula.

Cannibals, as well as Amazons, stand as tokens that fully guarantee gold by combining and accumulating different valences. Within Columbus’s circle of Caribbean exchanges, the cruelty and bestiality attributed to the cannibals constitute the most valuable chip when negotiating with Taino caciques. Whereas in a Western cultural context the threat of being eaten and consumed culinary or erotically construes the Caribs as the monstrous gatekeepers who prevent all sorts of mobility, following the logic of the metonymic association between the monster and the forbidden, the presence of cannibals implies the finding of treasures. Furthermore, the repeated themes of nudity and alternative sexualities represent, as Piedra contends, “libidinally created islands” that make cannibals, Amazons, and Amerindians “consolation prizes.”

The Caribs are sold in Spain as slaves in order to pay for food, cattle, and supplies urgently needed in La Isabella, the first colony in La Hispaniola. Although the frequent sale of slaves becomes the only reliable source of income, it is ironic that only the Indians presented as
wonders are able to communicate the dream of wealth that Spain’s imperial aspirations project to the other side of the Atlantic. Once American subjects and objects are displayed in Spain, their bodies expose the land of pleasure that writing has created. Dazzled by the spectacle of people and things never heard of, Ferdinand and Isabella see through New World wonders everything else that remains at the other side of the Atlantic. For Peter Martyr, the humanist reporting Columbus’s adventures, wonders amplify the samples of gold and pearls he has seen at the royal palace; whereas for Miguel de Cuneo, a crew member of the second voyage, naked natives replace gold with uninhibited libido. Somehow this third layer of estimation, the one that underwrites the Other as pleasure, becomes the currency of travel accounts, royal chronicles, and allegories of the New World.

The link between wealth and libido comprises not only the understanding of gold as the means to obtain and enjoy all pleasures, but also economic spheres that assimilate value and desire. Culturally, as Jean-Joseph Goux observes, there is an imaginary set through which gold is viewed as the object that possesses all fantasies in potentiality. The yellow metal is the polyvalent substitute that either is worth all gratifications or contains them in pose, in a general concentrated form. Likewise, wonders by virtue of being gold’s tokens embody all of the desires that gold may purchase.

The uninterrupted connection between wonders and gold becomes more apparent if one takes into account the context in which wonders circulate. The most important factor contributing to the vogue of the marvelous in early modern Europe is the discovery of the Americas. Explorers recreate their adventures by shipping trophies of their discoveries. In Europe exotic peoples, pets, and wares circulate among the family and friends of monarchs as recognizable signs of overseas advances. Within this exclusive circle, the consumers of wonder quench their appetite for the bizarre by hoarding all kinds of specimens. At the other end of the chain are avid readers who devour travel accounts. The series of letters that Martyr wrote from the Spanish court to cardinals and popes is a case in point. What may seem like ephemeral court spectacles are, thanks to writing and printing, coveted readings for men of letters and princes.

The avid curiosity for New World wonders delineates a realm in which use value has been displaced by desire. Taking into account the ideas of the marginalist movement and specifically Karl Menger, Goux looks at the relationship between economic value and desire in order to define economic utility as the subject’s desire to procure a given item at a given time. To create value, then, all that is necessary is to create a sufficient intensity of desire. In the specific case of Columbus, such intensity of desire derives from his ability to offer cannibals, Amazons, and naked Indians as perverse supplements of the real thing. By promising gold and displaying New World wonders, Columbus produces the scarcity that automatically increases the desire to enjoy both. The interstice that the spectacle of Amerindian subjects creates between abundance and scarcity, satisfaction and desire produces a “metaphoric thirst” which seeks satisfaction in comparable things and signs. The yearning for something else is consequently associated with lack and disappearance, since they are effective means to entice desire. Gold is always insufficient; New World wonders are equally scarce. Transplanted into a strange environment, people, pets, and crafts are exclusive specimens to be admired and collected. Their uniqueness, their status as fragments of the wealthiest lands, along with an imposed exotic and erotic cachet displace economic value with attraction value.

The disruption that desire imposes on value also affects the function of wonders as means of exchange. The problem set up by the marvelous is that despite the fact that it functions like hopeful coins for transatlantic gold, wonders cannot stand as method of payment. Offered as blank checks or IOUs for the riches to come, wonders keep expanding their credit at the risk of losing their value as instruments of circulation. The gold coin is ostensibly exchangeable for something hard and real, whereas wonders only have symbolic value and work as nominal money. In a time when gold, not paper money, is the norm, wonders bring about the dissociation of the functions filled by gold as money: the standard, a medium of exchange, and the treasury.

The gold piece is at once an ideal standard of economic value, a symbolic instrument of circulation, and finally a real value that can be placed in reserve. This remarkable conjunction is undone by New World wonders. The tokens that the “economy of the marvelous” puts into circulation have the purely symbolic function of being instruments of exchange. While “fortune-signs” replace “fortune-goods,” writing tries to guarantee wonders’ hard value by repeating fictions that will ultimately accumulate a stock of representations. The combination of colonial texts and the visual appreciation of specimens creates a thesaurus of representations through which Europe sees the New World. By “thesaurus” I mean both a treasure trove of words and images as well as a storage space for exhibiting and collecting.

In the end, the overlapping of texts, images, and collections construes the New World as a wish horizon that conjures up an illusion of wealth more powerful than colonial frustration and discontent. Among travel
accounts, diaries, chronicles, and maps, the texts that explain most directly the "economy of the marvelous" are the New World allegories that were so popular during the 16th and 17th centuries. If earlier colonial texts use the cannibals as the most welcome staple of exoticism and libido, the New World allegories shift their emphasis to the Amazon. The images that this allegoric genre portrays conflate traits of unruly nature and riches in the female body. Thus the colonial dream of gold is translated into metaphors of sexuality that convey wealth by demonstrating all the pleasures and violations that gold can buy. The overlapping of the monetary and the erotic constitutes an economy of infinite largess, whose currency and medium of exchange are bodies of pleasure. This register of estimation has a contradictory effect because it gives all without expecting anything in return. The absolute gift of lands, riches, and bodies imposes the desire to possess and the fear of being dispossessed, for the New World is so boundless that it makes the colonizer feel insignificant.

One of the larger-than-life characters representing this New World economy is the warrior woman. The Amazon has always been the central mediator in the representation of imperialist ideology. From the time of the Roman empire onward, the warrior woman has represented difference, exchange, accumulation, and commodification. Depicted as an Amazon, America offers the invitation to be conquered, while she posits the threat of engulfing and devouring her suitor. This dark side becomes apparent by the amalgamation of cannibalism and the unruly sexuality that America as a naked woman represents. Both elements are the norm in scenes that portray America as a warrior woman bearing weapons and holding decapitated heads, surrounded by other body parts. Set against a background depicting cannibal banquets, the cruelty of America is aggravated by the exotic animals that accompany her. In the earliest allegories, such as Crispín de Passe’s América (1564), a jaguar, a dog, big birds, and a winged snake are crafted in a manierist fashion with the intent to convey savagery and sinister bestiality. The aggregation of nudity, consumption of flesh, and animality demonstrates the explicit association between excess and wealth in this allegory. Indeed, it is by virtue of this chain of fantasies and fears that the jewels that dress America and the treasure trove that lies under her feet embody the rich continent that offers gold, labor, and love for the taking.

As chaotic nature, as the space of the feminine, the New World is not concerned with property. It constitutes what Hélène Cixous calls the "realm of the gift," where giving is a disinterested act of generosity whose goal is the other’s pleasure. America, the dark continent, the woman, can give all because she has nothing to lose, because she does not wear out. During the financial and political crisis of the 17th century, these images of feminine largess emerge in plays that re-enact the conquest of America as the consequence of love affairs between Spanish soldiers and Indian queens. These plays disclose the dealings of the “economy of the marvelous” as a means to evoke the illusion of wealth by conjuring up the myth of the Americas as a golden land. Portrayed as wealthy and powerful Amazons, the Indian queens' beautiful bodies are described as lavish treasure troves whose gold will provide the necessary riches so that the vellón, the copper coin intentionally overvalued, can shine as if it were gold. The representations of ancient imperial vigor and old wealth, just like copper money, are void; their worth is a chimera because it exists only as paper: bills of exchange, contracts, and promissory notes. Gold can no longer be considered as store of value, but rather as a conventional symbol of wealth. At this time of crisis, the means of exchange are a mere promise, just as Columbus’s tokens. Both the wealth written on paper and that inscribed in the body of wonders stand as promissory notes that can never be redeemed.

1 These documents include the “Tittle,” “Letter of Credence,” and “Articles of Agreement,” all of which are collected in the Capitulaciones de Santa Fe (April, 1492); the Journal of the first voyage, as edited by Las Casas; the “Letter to the Monarchs” (March 1493), and the “Letter to Santángel” (February 1493). I also include Relación del segundo viaje. For a discussion on the editorial role of Las Casas and the interrelation between these documents see Margarita Zamora, Reading Columbus (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993). I am indebted to Stuart Day for his comments and editorial advice.


7 Columbus’s “Letter to Santángel” reached 20 editions by 1500. For the diffusion of news about Columbus’s first voyage, see S. E. Morison, Christopher Columbus, Mariner (Boston: Brown, 1955), 108; Charles Verlinden and Florentino Pérez-Embíd, Cristóbal Colón y el Descubrimiento de América (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, 1967), 91-94.
Chapter 3

End-Time and Exorcisms in England: Witch-Hunting and Salvation in the 17th Century

Milissa Ellison-Murphree

Seventeenth-century England saw not two large witch-hunts. During the English Civil War, 7 contiguous counties north and east of London hosted an enormous hunt lasting from 1645 to 1647. A half-century later and across the Atlantic, the celebrated Salem witch-hunts began in 1692 and lasted for nearly 20 months. Each of these events was characterized by local leaders exhorting the godly to separate themselves from spiritual contaminants. From pulpits and in print, the Saints of East Anglia and those of Salem Village were urged to avoid divine wrath and rejection by casting from their midst those apostates who acted against God and Commonwealth. In both hunts, this call for an exorcism of the community was the spark that local tensions and predestinarian eschatology fueled when searching for the ungodly was redefined as witch-hunting. Many of these similarities are due to extensive reliance by the leaders of both hunts upon the writings of Richard Bernhard, whose Jacobean ministry included experience of both exorcism and witchcraft.

In June 1645, King Charles I suffered his decisive defeat at Naseby. Triumphant at last, the victorious Puritans turned to transforming