Chapter 3

Flesh Economies in Foreign Worlds: The Unfortunate Traveller and The Sea Voyage

Bromley:
Oh I could with my nailes turn’d Vultures talons,
That I might teare their flesh in mammocks, raise
My losses from their carcasses turn’d Mummy.

S.S., The Honest Lawyer

Ferdinand:
I will stamp him into a cullis, flay off his skin, to cover one of
the anatomies this rogue hath set I’ th’ cold yonder in Barber-
Surgeons’ Hall.

John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that
by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The
nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the
stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we con-
cerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly
as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production.

Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy

Whether or not corpse pharmacology is a form of early modern
cannibalism, considerations of the body as a consumable commodity
inevitably give rise to metaphors of cannibalism that tap into a complex set of cultural meanings. As I.M. Lewis argues, “The ideology of man-eating provides a pregnant cluster of imagery and metaphor to express the exercise and experience of power, domination and subjection which may be realized in different forms in particular historical and cultural contexts.” It is logical then that the fertile figurative constellation of bodies, appetites, exchanges, and consumptions produced by the medical trade in corpses should generate notions of cannibalism, and be enthusiastically embraced by writers such as Thomas Nashe, John Fletcher, and Philip Massinger. This chapter explores the representations of bodies as consumable commodities in the Dr. Zachary episode in Nashe’s novella, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, and in Fletcher and Massinger’s tragicomedy, *The Sea Voyage*. The idea of cannibalism has the potential to disturb the sediments of fear, belief, need, and bodily desires related to food, sex, love, and religion. Thus, figurations of the violated and ingested pharmacological corpse are elastic and frequently transcend the medical realm to suggest other bodily concerns and engagements. Fantasies of corpse pharmacology in these works resonate with these multilayered associations, in particular their erotic and spiritual suggestiveness. The task here is to attempt to tease out the significations of cannibalism associated with the corpse pharmacology market that these texts mediate.

In many ways, what unites these writers is their enactment of broader European engagements with cannibalism, in particular those of commentators such as Hans Staden, André Thevet, and Jean de Léry, whose detailed accounts of Brazilian cannibalism provide a mirror for reflecting European practices and are finessed by Michel de Montaigne in his essay “On Cannibals.” Montaigne’s essay purports to provide a case study of a cannibal practice that is situated spatially and temporally outside of Europe—in that exotic, distant “other world,” the “vast…country” of the Brazilian Tupinambas—where it is portrayed as comprehensible, admirable even, “as a measure of extreme vengeance,” in comparison to parallel incomprehensible European behaviors. Yet ultimately, “On Cannibals” makes no real pretense at ethnography; rather, the practice of cannibalism is elided by discourse, which has the effect, as Frank Lestringant points out, of raising the Brazilian cannibal “to the status of an orator and philosopher, a free and fraternal citizen of a back-to-nature utopia: as such, he no longer provokes horror.” The cannibal act is thus stripped of “the stigma of the flesh.” In these terms, Brazilian cannibalism is a logical, ritualized, socially beneficial practice that is ordered and contained. Montaigne makes several deft rhetorical moves to line up