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The **Spenser Review**

Wendy Wall, Recipes for Thought

by Joan Fitzpatrick

Wall, Wendy. *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern Kitchen*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2016. xii + 312 pages. ISBN: 978-0812247589. \$69.95 cloth.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in recipe collections from the Early Modern period; these documents are more than simply guides for turning ingredients into meals but, rather, they provide an insight into Early Modern attitudes to the body and physical health, diet, and identity in terms of gender and nationality. As Wendy Wall points out in the introduction to her book, recipe collections were “miscellaneous texts” offering technical information on how to make cosmetics, dyes, salves and other useful household items as well as providing instruction on surgical procedures (4). Whilst these books cannot be considered in any straightforward sense an historical record of everyday practice in households, neither were they completely disconnected from it since “corrections, annotations, and greasy stains show us that these texts were actively used in kitchens” (5). Building upon important work done by Elizabeth Spiller and Sara Pennell, Wall recognizes that recipe books are “neither categorically documentary nor prescriptive” but function as “modes of transmission and circulation, important in generating networks of people, ideas, and acts” (5-6). [1] This book considers recipe collections from 1573 to the late eighteenth century, tracing the changes that occurred in the light of social, economic and intellectual developments.

Chapter one shows how the early English recipe book was marketed as a “closet” for women, containing precious information and items of value for the female reader and housewife. Wall usefully traces the history of this problematic term: closets were not merely private spaces but “multipurpose sites” where a range of activities such as working, reading, praying, sleeping and doing business might take place. She cites Lena Cowen Orlin’s observation (in her article “Gertrude’s Closet”) that all closets could be locked and so would contain a household’s valuable possessions: jewels, paintings, and money but also expensive foodstuffs such as spices.[2] The first of these books aimed at female readers was John Partridge’s *The Treasurie of Commodious Conceits, & Hidden Secrets and May be Called, the Huswives Closet, of Healthfull Provision. Mete and necessarie for the profitable use of all estates both men and women* (1573), and it was clearly a popular work, reprinted in thirteen editions over eighty years. There are seven pages of prefatory material before the recipes begin, including a picture of a well-dressed man in a library and a dedicatory epistle, which forges a connection between the elite and literate world and the knowledge contained in the book. Partridge’s book influenced subsequent volumes in its claim to reveal to the housewife the secrets to which noble and gentle households were privy so they might learn the latest fashions and thus gain knowledge and social esteem; as Wall points out, these early books “silently embraced and even celebrated the international cuisine of elite households as the marker of social status” (33).

The mid-seventeenth century saw published recipe collections aimed less at the domestic female housewife and toward the professional male chef. Robert May’s *Accomplisht Cook*, first published in 1660, was the first volume in English to suggest that cookery was a skill that required specialist training; again, the book’s prefatory material offers an insight into its aims, with its title page, dedication, epistle and commendatory poems situating the chef as an expert author. Contesting this idea of cookery as a professional and male preserve were the numerous publications of Hannah Woolley, characterized by Wall as “the Martha Stewart of the seventeenth century,” who “reclaimed food preparation as part and parcel of female managed domesticity” (40). Amongst Woolley’s numerous books was her *Ladies Directory in Choice Experiments & Curiosities*, which developed a tradition established by Gervase Markham’s *English Housewife* (first published in 1615), which sought to return to female domestic expertise the knowledge celebrated in Partridge’s closet, where the recipe extends beyond just food preparation and into medicinal and other household skills practiced by women. As Wall notes, female eighteenth-century cookery writers, such as

Hannah Glasse, further developed this notion of female domestic culture by promoting the housekeeper as the guardian of proper English foodstuffs over the foreign dishes available in cookbooks written by and aimed at professional chefs.

Chapter two focuses on the intellectual wit, creativity, and pleasure at work in the culinary conceits contained in Early Modern cookery books. Wall argues that we need to look beyond “the early modern ideological framework of female recreation as a sign of trivialization” in order to see that “recipes constructed a notion of domestic pleasure centered on the intellectual wit of food making” (67-68). This “wit” demonstrated itself in the recipes contained within the book that projected food as art and also in the book itself as an attractive object, printed with drawings, fancy borders, and patterns. The recipes encouraged the artistic manipulation of ingredients in a playful and pleasurable manner. Some of the recipes, such as Robert May’s instructions for “Triumphs and Trophies in Cookery, to Be Used at Festival Times” (which appears in the prefatory material for his *Accomplisht Cook*), were derived from Medieval and Renaissance court entertainments. May’s recipe tells the reader how to mold sugar-paste into what Wall describes as “a theatrical stage set complete with backdrop and props” including “a ship with gunpowder-laden cannons, a deer, and a castle decorated with battlements and drawbridges” (75). Hugh Plat’s poetic preface to his *Delightes for Ladies* (1602) promotes the housewife’s ingenuity and artistry so that she might produce from marzipan what looked like a real bird, what Wall terms “the trompe l’oeil of the kitchen” (89). As Wall indicates, May and Plat raise questions about food artifice, via reference to the liveness of inanimate objects on the table, and also food genres: to which category does an animal or a piece of fruit made from sugar truly belong?

This raised serious philosophical questions about the nature of things, how one substance might be transformed into another, and inevitably, of course, of the controversial issue of transubstantiation, extending to sugar works depicting religious scenes and images. It also engaged with the Renaissance debate surrounding art versus nature. Wall describes how in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* the Bower of Bliss episode “designates the trompe l’oeil artistry seen in domestic confectionary as an immoral sleight of hand” (87) since Acrasia’s bower contains artificial substances (grapes and ivy) as well as real flowers and fruit; amongst the buildings torn down by Guyon is the banqueting house and its “cabinets,” which like “closet” was a term used to describe recipe

collections. From the mid-seventeenth century there was a demise in the wit and artistry promoted in earlier books whereby simple recipes with fewer ingredients were promoted as a means of asserting English national identity and virtue.

Chapters three, four and five shift from printed to manuscript recipe collections. Chapter three considers what the creation and maintenance of personal and family recipe collections indicate about the connection between writing and domestic practice. Wall challenges the assumption that seventeenth-century, overwhelmingly female-authored, recipe collections were the work of male scribes. She also makes thoughtful connections between knot-making as an important step toward learning cursive writing, encouraged by Early Modern handwriting manuals, the use of such designs in recipe collections, and the recipes for letters made from food, such as Plat's recipe for marzipan letters and John Murrell's recipe for cinnamon letters in his *Delightfull Daily Exercise for Ladies and Gentlewomen* (1621). Some manuscript collections, such as the recipe books containing poems and religious and political satire, also demonstrate the broader intellectual ambitions and accomplishments of their female authors, as well as the signatures and other writing that claim possession or indicate a desire to practice handwriting skills. In chapter four a connection is made between the preservation of foodstuffs and the preservation of memory via discussion of the commemorative function of manuscript collections. Wall has an eye on literature as context throughout this book: there are references to Milton's *Paradise Lost* in chapter one and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* in chapter three as well as the discussion of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in chapter two (mentioned above) whilst references to other literature come up elsewhere in the volume.

Chapter four provides an analysis of Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, specifically the play's engagement with Early Modern connections between seasoning bodies and seasoning foods, which Wall argues drew upon the discussion of preservation in recipe culture: preserving the body via medical recipes as well as the recipe collection as family memorial, with recipes "routinely transmitted across and through generations" (191). In chapter five Wall contends that seventeenth-century domestic and scientific communities overlapped, since both were involved in the testing and accumulation of data, while the collaborative nature of domestic experimentation echoed the working practices of seventeenth-century thinkers, with both groups in pursuit of knowledge. At the end of the century, however, "rural knowledge and artisanal lore" were being dismissed, "increasingly accepted as less creditable forms of knowing; vocational

specialization had much to do with this devaluation” (249). A similar marginalizing of the interested amateur by the advent of professionally trained experts occurred in the Early Modern brewing trade and in obstetrics. One wonders if this professionalization of certain activities would be more welcome amongst literary historians were it not for the fact that these seventeenth-century amateurs were usually female while the new experts invariably male. The evident bias towards the female amateur (ironic in that it comes from a formally educated expert) makes for a less successful chapter than those focusing more squarely on the form, content, and function of the recipe collections.

This book could be more easily navigated if its chapter titles provided clearer signposts to their contents. There is no indication from the table of contents that the first two chapters focus on printed sources and the next three on manuscripts until the reader is told this in the introduction. Similarly the chapter titles are vague: the title of chapter one “Taste Acts” gives little sense of what the chapter will actually contain; the introduction tells the reader only that chapter one is concerned “with the culinary” and they need to wait until the introduction to this chapter to learn that it deals primarily with the front matter of published recipe books. Of course this is a matter of style, but it would be useful if readers might dip into a particular chapter without having to read the introduction to the book or the introduction to each chapter to figure out what it contains. Another stylistic decision that proves frustrating for the reader is the division of Works cited into “Works Before 1800,” which are then further divided into “Manuscripts” and “Printed Works,” with a subsequent list detailing “Works after 1800,” which are effectively critical works. One can understand the rationale for this but it seems unnecessary since the reader can see from the date provided in the list of Works Cited whether the work was published before or after 1800 and manuscripts are clearly labelled as such with the abbreviation MS. These criticisms aside, this is a welcome addition to the study of recipe culture, especially for its attention to the important prefatory material that often goes unnoticed and for its interest in language, philosophy, and the broader cultural connections at work in these collections, as demonstrated by the links made to Shakespeare, Spenser, and other literary authors.

Joan Fitzpatrick
Loughborough University

[1] See Elizabeth Spiller, "Introductory Note," *Seventeenth-Century English Recipe Books: Cooking, Physic and Chirurgery in the Works of Elizabeth Grey and Aletheia Talbot Howard*, edited by Elizabeth Spiller, et al., Ashgate, 2008, The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works, series 3, vols. 3-4, and Sara Pennell, "Perfecting Practice? Women, Manuscript Recipes and Knowledge in Early Modern England," in *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Writing: Selected Papers from the Trinity/Trent Colloquium*, edited by Victoria Burke and Jonathan Gibson, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 237-58.

[2] Lena Cowen Orlin, "Gertrude's Closet," *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch*, vol. 134, 1988, pp. 44-67.

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