

Reading and Receiving the Early Modern English Mind

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Abstract:

Wendy Wall's recent work analyses a number of English recipe books written in the period between 1570 and 1750. It is crucial to Wall's enquiry that the term "recipe" is understood in its early modern context; its etymology is sketched out as derived from the Latin *recipere*, meaning "to take back or receive". Wall builds upon the non-culinary aims for the recipe book by examining its potential to communicate political allegiances, scientific findings, and conduct other intellectual enquiries, in order to ultimately argue that early modern recipe books can be used as a guide to early modern thinking. The first, second, and final chapters are the most successful in making this case. The opening two chapters analyse the concepts of "taste" and "wit" to demonstrate the personal and aesthetic aspects of communication through recipe writing, while the final chapter discusses the concept of "proving" recipes to validate their usefulness in order to consider recipe writing as a knowledge-sharing system.

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“The cook must be neither a madman nor a simpleton”, quotes Wall from a fifteenth century recipe book, “but he must have a great brain” (p. 2). Wall reflects on the work of such brains (and their owners) in creating and transmitting knowledge in England roughly between 1570 and 1750. It is crucial to Wall’s enquiry that the term “recipe” is understood in its early modern context; its etymology is sketched out as derived from the Latin *recipere*, “to take back or receive”. The word was closer to “receipt” in its usage, and recipes-as-receipts therefore constituted “transit points that actively created and defined knowledge communities” (p. 3). It is also emphasized that recipes were not necessarily instructions for the preparation of food. Recipes could dictate processes for creating many other things, including inks, dyes, medical items, and cleaning products (p. 4). Building on the observations that recipes were exchanged by individuals as markers of both community and community standing and that recipes could contain non-culinary knowledge, Wall sets out to demonstrate that recipe books from this period were also used to communicate political allegiances (p. 75), scientific findings (p. 18), and to perform enquiries pertaining to several branches of philosophy (p. 18, p. 109).

Wall sets out her enquiry using the terms “knowledge”, “wit”, “literacy”, “taste”, and “time” (p. 1) and dedicates a chapter to each. Of these terms, “taste” and “wit” are the most telling. Taste can be understood beyond its simple function of identifying and reporting flavours and sensations to a diner; it also arbitrates which flavours and sensations form praiseworthy combinations and thereby values these combinations in terms of cultural capital. The latter function then fosters a kind of consumer identity politics. Where the production of confectionary and medicinal concoctions were the prized aims of noble women’s recipe books, those of merchants’ wives aimed simply to introduce more expensive food into their diets and social circles (p. 25). Taste is also an important conceptual marker for gender, as recipe producers played a role in establishing “the figure of the female practitioner [as] a fantasy housewife with ‘perfect taste’ who was also a ‘lady’” (p. 22). If taste is often a class or gender referent in its protocols, wit reveals the personality or views of a cook or producer on a more blatant aesthetic (or even performative) level. The clearest example of this is Wall’s description of a seventeenth century “triumph” (p. 75). Among its many entertaining elements, this dish included a deer filled with wine (which would “bleed” when an arrow was removed from its sugar-paste skin) and a pastry casing filled with live birds and frogs. This would also be opened during the course of the

evening, resulting in a living shower of birds and frogs, and with it, “much delight and pleasure to the whole company” (p. 76). The addendum to this recipe yearns for pre-civil war England, and thereby signals the recipe writers’ political loyalties. Wall argues that the writer of this particular recipe would have understood its unfeasibility, but perhaps this makes the point clearer, as the communicative capacity of the recipe is almost completely divorced from its status as “food”.

The third chapter is devoted to “literacies”, broadening the concept of what it means to be able to read. This is a response to the research which has estimated that only five to ten per cent of women at the beginning of the seventeenth century could read. Wall’s central argument, that recipe books offer a window into the early modern English mind, is thereafter a difficult case to make. While this chapter uncovers some interesting overlaps between the spheres of reading and the kitchen, such as kitchens being the shared sites of production of quill pens and food, these estimated literacy figures are never convincingly demonstrated to be incorrect and the chapter is therefore never entirely successful in solving the problems of literacy and readership.

The remaining chapters deal with time and mortality, the relationship between recipe writing and domestic health management, and the function of recipes in disseminating and validating knowledge. Of these concerns, the latter is the most engaging; but on the whole, chapters Three to Five do not maintain the pace or focus of the first two and often feel like parts of separate works. These issues of the book are compounded somewhat by Wall’s insistence that the work is not a study of female domestic workership (p. 5). The number of recipe books referred to and analysed which address English “huswives” and “gentlewomen” in their titles, or aimed to teach cooking and other kinds of household production as part of an overarching curriculum of ladylike conduct makes questions of gender inescapable. Some of the book’s most interesting findings demonstrate that knowledge and ignorance of domestic production processes were alternately valued as aspects of ladylike character, so it seems an odd manoeuvre for Wall to distance herself from the questions of gender when they could have been used to anchor the other areas of enquiry in the book.

In spite of these difficulties, Wall’s book is successful in raising areas of an underappreciated cultural practice to the critical eye. Wall’s broad research of the recipe books themselves demonstrates that these textual artefacts are much more nuanced than is commonly thought, and the detail in which she studies these artefacts through the early modern period will interest cultural historians. For readers outside the field of history, the book is most compelling when it considers the recipe collections in connection with the foods and other items they produced, especially when these connections are compared to their equivalents in modern recipe books. Wall’s discussions of particular cooks and their lives (especially that of Hannah Woolley, “the Martha Stewart of the seventeenth century” [p. 40]) constitute some of the book’s most successful passages in regard to the goal of accessing the minds of the early modern world. The best method of approaching this work, therefore, is to read it something like

one would a recipe book. In both the recipe books analysed here and those on our own bookshelves, the measurements are often less than perfect, but their key functions are to inspire production and to give this production direction towards particular ends and aesthetics. Wall's book succeeds in directing minds towards those of early modern England, and exposes some of the currents of mind during that place and time that are deserving of further reflection in both culinary and cultural studies.