



Wendy Wall. *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*

Wendy Wall. *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. xii, 312p., black and white ill. ISBN 9780812247589. US \$69.95 (hardcover).

Umberto Boccioni's *Development of a Bottle in Space* takes that simple, domestic form and explodes it geometrically into a complex structure quite unlike a bottle, yet derived from it. In *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*, Wendy Wall does something very like this for early modern English recipes, expanding these domestic artifacts into every implication of their structure and context. The result is thorough, wide-ranging, and never quite the abstract intellectual exercise it sometimes threatens to be. Rather the effect of this hyper-close reading is often passionate, that of an exuberant intelligence at (remarkably well-researched and grounded) play. The reader who comes to it expecting a simple overview of recipe collections may be surprised, but not necessarily disappointed. Embedded in this glittering analysis are numerous samples of little-known recipes along with the apparatus that surrounds them. This said, the book is not really one for the casual reader. Whenever one is tempted to skim yet another closely reasoned examination of some incidental aspect of a text, the desire to follow revealing observations and unexpected associations tends to win out over any urge to hurry on.

Simply put, there are few (if any) wasted words in this very dense text. Structurally the book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter explores the fact that early cookbooks were often presented as "cabinets," implying something secret and exclusive which was being opened to the public. Also, cookbooks began with the expectation that the lady of the house would herself be doing the cooking. Over time, this changed to an expectation that she would be directing others who did this work. With this came a separate, more professional idea of the cook's function. Writers like Hannah Woolley then returned to the idea that the woman of the house (not necessarily, by rank, a lady) would do the cooking. The second chapter develops the poetic idea of "conceits" - ranging from concepts to clever contrived tricks - as applied to cookery. In the third chapter, "Literacies: Handwriting and Handiwork," Wall looks at written artifacts in recipe books and manuscripts, which could identify the author, establish ownership, or provide commentary on the text. Much of this addresses the following question: "What counts as literacy for whom, and under what particular circumstances?" (115) The fourth chapter is on the issue of time and touches on everything from the multiple meanings of "season" to the implications of "preservation," both in preserves, such as jams



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and jellies, and in the simple act of preserving words. The fifth chapter begins with Anne Brumwich's inscription in her recipe book: "Learning I would desire and knowledge crave / If I were half-sepulchered in my grave." (209) In this chapter, Wall underlines the links between the scientific experimentation of the time and a desire in recipes to demonstrate their proven efficacy, exemplified by the (typically scientific) note *Probatum est* ([It is proven]; that is, demonstrated by actual trial).

The multi-layered analysis which unfolds these simple texts into more complex concepts might sometimes leave the impression that Wall is straining for meanings in word play and abstract nuance. But in fact for the reader prepared to follow her scrupulously documented, clearly reasoned elaborations, her insights are compelling and do indeed demonstrate how much more is "said" by these domestic texts beyond simple instructions for preparing food.

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