

## Preserving Past Tastes

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**Wall, Wendy. *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2016. 328 pages. ISBN 9780812247589. \$69.95.**

Food studies is an omnivorous field within cultural studies: at its best it can provide an illuminating interdisciplinary approach to various historical and literary topics, relying on the terminology and theoretical background of such fields of study as gender studies, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and biopolitics. The very same feature, however, can be the major drawback of being academically engaged with food studies, as superficial interpretations can boil down to a miscellaneous list of commonplaces concerning the pleasures of eating or its interconnections with sexuality and power. Wendy Wall's 2016 volume is a fortunate example of the in-depth kind of cultivation of this emergent field of study. An American literary historian from the University of Pennsylvania, Wall has published gender studies-based books on early modern domesticity and authorship (*The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* [1993] and *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* [2002]). With *Recipes for Thought*, Wall seems to have created a synthesis of her academic interests in the gender politics and traditions of literacy in the Early Modern period. She focuses on the genre of the recipe as a previously ignored source of socio-cultural signification: "as densely encoded textual and material forms, recipes also acted as relay points through which people learned, mediated, argued, networked, remembered, showed off, thought through problems, imagined, fantasized, played, and emoted" (251).

While the book is the result of meticulous archival research into original early modern English domestic sources, it is not theory-heavy: apart from a few sporadic mentions of Pierre Bourdieu, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Norbert Elias, and Peter Stallybrass—Foucault is strikingly absent—the individual chapters are primarily based on Wall's own readings of the selected corpus of primary sources. She repeatedly mentions the Szathmary Culinary Arts Collection in Iowa, created by the Hungarian-American chef, Louis Szathmary, who arrived in the US in 1951. Her conclusions are well argued, authentic, and provide a great basis for further research, especially in literature from or about the examined period. *Recipes for Thought* has a historical as well as a gender-based approach to the culture of writing, collecting, and

circulating recipes, emphasizing thematic junctures such as the notion of the conceit, handwriting and handiwork, preservation, seasoning, and memory work. In terms of form, Wall contextualizes the recipes as a genre resembling the personal, micro-historical tone of “memoires, travelogues, culinary novels, literary banqueting scenes, dietaries, household manuals” (13); disclosing several aspects of everyday life by studying recipes for “cosmetics, inks, dyes, cures, salves, deodorants, pain relievers, wines confectionaries, perfumes, cleansers, pesticides, toothpastes, air fresheners, lotions, herbal cordial waters” (4). Due to the ramifying nature of early modern recipe culture permeating several somatic discourses, three central concepts mentioned by the introduction can be delineated: gastronomy, manners, and medicine.

Three important large-scale narratives emerged in these bodies of scholarship: (1) the rise of the medical profession, in which female amateurs were gradually excluded as practitioners in the move towards male-dominated professionalization; (2) the evolution of the domestic sphere from a site of economic production to one of consumption, a movement that curtailed women’s economic power in an emergent modern public sphere; and (3) the unfolding of the “civilizing process,” which produced self-regulating subjects fit for a developing modern nation state. (4)

Food culture as the first and most obvious category of recipe history is closely connected to early modern ideas of Englishness and national identity. Wall introduces her research by spelling out the well-known stereotype that “English cooking, with its soggy puddings and dry roast beef, is notoriously boring” (vix), and later explains how this negative image came about historically. It might surprise present-day readers to learn that seventeenth-century English food was far from boring. Nevertheless, the arrival of the New French cuisine of natural flavors and delicacy brought Neoclassical values such as balance, art, and nature to the forefront, thus creating a clash between purist and transmutationist food ideologies. The latter tradition was inherited by Renaissance England from the medieval period, which “conceived of nature primarily as material to be manipulated, disguised, and reconstituted” (68).

It is especially intriguing how the volume explores linguistic and cultural historical phenomena such as the complex meaning of the notion of the conceit, which was used both in a poetic and a culinary sense, referring to “abstract ideas conceived in the mind as well as particularly ingenious and

witty modes of expression” and a “sugary trifle, fanciful sweetmeat” (66). Similarly, we learn that there is a supposed etymological connection between the Old English word for carve which is cognate with the Greek *grafein*, “to write” (141). Since “serving meat tested bodily control, composure, and manners” (161), it is no wonder that Laertes uses it as a metaphor to explain Hamlet’s inability to choose his own wife to his liking “He may not, as unvalued persons do, / Carve for himself” (162). As this example shows, Wall often supports her findings with examples from literature (Voltaire, Milton, Ben Jonson, among others), yet her interest remains primarily in history.

While it is known that the growth of the middle class and nationalism had a major role in the circulation of recipes, it is much more surprising to see how family recipe collections as representations of seventeenth-century housewifery can be read as personal, domestic, genealogical histories mapping female “scribal communities” (115). One of Wall’s most important discoveries is that these recipe books were also used for cooking purposes: “it was assumed that people who actually performed manual labor were illiterate. As such, handwritten recipe collections have been assumed to be presentation copies exchanged in patronage-gift economies and/or proudly displayed, the equivalent of modern-day coffee-table books” (213). The point is still valid in light of low literacy rates for women, estimated at “between 5 and 10 percent around 1600” (10). The authorship of female recipe writers often manifests in the form of marginal but telling comments, such as Latin phrases expressing the proven nature of the dish (“*recipe probatum est*” [16]) or candid reviews of others’ recipes like “this is the worst way to doe [sic] them” (14). Wall also puts her finger on the shift of “wit” and “pleasure” being reassigned to the discourse of high culture and rationality, while reading, writing, and sharing recipes became socially unacceptable for a middle- or upper-class woman.

Whereas recipe producers of the early seventeenth century had toiled to install working literature housewives/ladies as arbiters of taste and whereas they envisioned recipe culture as a means of proving gentility, eighteenth-century recipe writers reconceptualized domesticity so that the leisured lady’s status depended on her removal from the nitty-gritty details of work. (57)

This process is similarly evoked by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) as the ideally invisible labor of the female servant and the equally invisible pleasures of the Victorian

Angel in the House. Thus, Wall's research can be of interest even for Victorian studies.

In the last category of recipe culture, medicine, the fields of medical humanities and biopolitics may find the volume inspiring, as it establishes an important connection between early modern ideologies of health and the evolution of gastronomy. The gradual centralization of theoretical knowledge and the devaluation of practical skill went hand in hand in the period, while humoralism gradually lost ground to more scientific theories of the human body. While the intersections of the "curative/culinary project" (181) initially meant the central function of women as the cultivators of "ladies chemistry" (249) in handling the "economy of putrefaction" (175), the emergence of masculinized Enlightenment epistemology finalized the split between domestic and medical knowledge: "[w]hat the Greeks called metis (practical intelligence based on acquired skill) was considered a lesser form of knowledge than episteme or Scientia (certain knowledge). Metis was divided into praxis (the study of particular experience) and techne (which involved bodily labor)" (228). Just like the notion of the conceit in connection with manners, the mapping of the meanings of preservation prove to be one of the most interesting results of the book. "In medical recipes, 'preserving' could indicate three different aims: maintaining life by warding off disease, keeping people energetic, and eradicating the effects of aging" (173). Apart from creating cures and following the seasonal rhythm of nature, women sometimes also lead a family registry of important dates and events on the pages of these collections, providing a rich basis for diagnostic research.

The prologue of *Recipes for Thought* uses Isaac Disraeli to introduce the volume: "[t]he Italians call the preface *La salsa del libro*, the sauce of the book, and if well seasoned it creates an appetite in the reader to devour the book itself" (vix). I hope that this review can function in this way by contextualizing Wendy Wall's research for academics working in the fields of food, gender, and early modern studies. A small and seemingly fleeting genre the recipe might be, the book manages to convince the reader that early modern English food culture reveals a lot about historically specific and anthropologically universal human features as well, as "[r]ecipes mobilize the psychic desire to go on desiring, a force tethered to the dream of effecting a transformative otherness; in the process, social kinds, structures, and identities take shape" (253).

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