

JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS



2015

Volume 4 Issue 8
Item 6

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Sir Hugh Platt's Delightes for Ladies by Doina-Cristina Rusu

by

Malcolm Thick



JJHI 2015

Volume 4 Issue 8

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A response to: Writing for Women at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century. Sir Hugh Platt's *Delightes for Ladies* by Doina-Cristina Rusu

Malcolm Thick *

A short response to Doina-Cristina Rusu's article on Sir Hugh Plat pointing out that the editorial process she described when moving recipes between two of his published works also occurred between his manuscripts and books. Also, there is no evidence that Plat was much regarded during his lifetime but his work was much admired in the second half of the seventeenth century.



1 DOINA-CRISTINA RUSU has well documented Sir Hugh Plat's process of simplification, removal of philosophical matter, and speculation, from recipes originally published in *The Jewell House*, which he then republished in *Delightes for Ladies* and her explanation for these changes is convincing. She details several examples, reproducing in full the recipes for cakes made with parsnip flour from both *The Jewell House* and *Delightes for Ladies*, showing that a query about *how* to turn dried parsnips into flour is omitted from the recipe in the latter book. As she points out, the originals of many of these recipes can be found in Plat's surviving notebooks in the British Library and the parsnip cake recipe is included there. Here is a full transcription:

* bellglass@waitrose.com.

+ 31 C A new kinde of bread wherof to make moste pleasant cakes.

[inserted- gre of stammpinge these rootes, iff so they will bee made into a paste to mak cakes of./ per T.Gas.]

C Slice greate and Sweete parsnipp rootes into thinn slices after you have washed and scraped them, then drie them & beate them into fine powder and searce them (gre iff they will not grinde), then put either 2 parts wheate flower to i parte therof, or i parte to one, & yt will make very dainty bread, this I didd both Invente and prove in Cakes and as I remember after the first proportion of one to one./gre of dried pompions./ gre of dried chestnutts./ skirret rootes, & the cakes of almonds after the oyle is expressed will mak excellent bread per olde Cropt./

[side margin- gre what the seedes of pompions wolde doo in any victuall.]¹

The process of stripping recipes of speculation and ideas for further research when reproducing them in print can be seen, in this example, to be not only a feature of Plat's writing for women, but also an editorial process when transferring material from notebooks to the printed page. Print inevitably involves tidying up. It would have been possible for Plat to include all his queries in the printed text of *The Jewell House* but that would have added numerous notes to the recipe along the lines of:

1. Is 'stamping' into a paste better or easier than drying slices and beating into powder? A close friend, Thomas Gascoine suggests this.
2. Can the dried slices be *ground* into powder?
3. Which ratio of parsnip to flour is best, 2:1 or 1:1?
4. Can similar flour be made from- dried pumpkin, pumpkin seeds, dried skirret roots, chestnuts?
5. Cropton, (a friend), suggests the residue of almonds after pressing for oil might be used to make such cakes, is this viable?

Plat includes only query 2 in *The Jewell House* version. Publishing all these queries would have confused the reader and would not have inspired confidence in the author. Another reason, which would apply to both the books cited, is that

¹ British Library, *Sloane Mss*, 2210, f45.

Plat may well have *resolved* the questions in the manuscript before the recipes were published. All this does not however, destroy Dr. Rusu’s argument. I agree with her that the removal in particular of alchemical and philosophical matter from recipes transferred from *The Jewell House* to *Delightes for Ladies* shows that Plat was editing his text for a female readership.



2 I WOULD add one small criticism of an excellent article: I do not believe Plat’s work was appreciated in his own lifetime and Dr. Rusu’s assertion: “Platt was a well-known writer in his time and a source for later natural philosophers (...) *The Jewell House of Art and Nature*, Platt’s masterpiece, was one of the most widespread books of secrets in England in the early modern period” is inaccurate. He himself acknowledges his failure in the introductory poem to *Delightes for Ladies*. After a brief summary of his publications he laments: “I write to all but scarcely one beleeves”. Only one of his books had more than one edition during his lifetime, *Delightes for Ladies*, and this book remained popular in the half century after his death. Ironically, as Dr. Rusu argues, this was a book to delight and amuse, and was almost devoid of serious scientific enquiry. The 1593 edition of *The Jewell House* rarely appears at auction today and very few libraries worldwide have copies, indicating the print-run was small. Plat’s work attracted little attention in his lifetime—the most he received in print was as an object of scorn in Sir John Harington’s *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject Called The Metamorphosis of Ajax*.¹ Plat was much more appreciated as a natural scientist in the second half of the seventeenth century. *The Jewel House* was republished in 1653 and in the same year appeared the second edition of his gardening book which was further reprinted in the seventeenth century. In the

¹ Elizabeth Story Donno ed., *Sir John Harington’s A New Discourse of a Stale Subject Called The Metamorphosis of Ajax* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 165-172.

1650s several correspondents of Samuel Hartlib commend Plat's work and he continued to attract attention from early members of the Royal Society. Moreover, there were squabbles over the ownership of his surviving papers which were believed to contain valuable alchemical secrets.¹



Dutch School, 17th century, Trouble Comes to the Alchemist, Fisher Collection, Chemical Heritage Foundation, photograph by Will Brown
(<http://tinyurl.com/trouble2alch>).

¹ Malcolm Thick, *Sir Hugh Plat: The Search for Useful Knowledge in Early Modern London* (Totnes, Prospect Books, 2010), 366-378.