Sarah Neville. *Early Modern Herbals and the Book Trade: English Stationers and the Commodification of Botany*. **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 290 pp. ISBN 9781316515990. $99.99 hardback.**

by Ashley Buchanan

Sarah Neville's book *Early Modern Herbals and the Book Trade: English Stationers and the Commodification of Botany* questions whether printed herbals were the product of the early modern intellectual elite. To nuance our understanding of early modern herbals, Neville highlights the commercial genesis of English works such as William Turner's *A New Herball* (1551) and John Gerard's *The Herball* (1597). For Neville, it was not the brilliance and originality of these or other well-known early modern naturalists that spurred the creation of herbals in their distinctive form, but rather the constraints and opportunities of the English book trade. The agents of Neville's story are not the Latin-writing educated elite that authored early modern herbals but the middling publishers and printers who controlled the technology and risked the capital necessary to publish large format works.

Printed between the late-fifteenth and early-eighteenth centuries, early modern herbals were a hugely popular genre of interrelated books produced by naturalists, physicians, and herbalists that identified and described plants through text and/or illustrations and explained the medicinal virtues of plants. In recent years, scholars exploring women's interactions with early modern vernacular medical books, many of which were herbals, have demonstrated the centrality and importance of these works in the early modern home as well as how these works shaped the healing, reading, and writing practices of women and lay medical practitioners.

In the history of science, however, herbals and their authors have been largely studied in the context of their botanical discoveries. The creation, evolution,

proliferation, and popularity of the genre continues to be viewed as an essential process and product of the Renaissance culture of natural history and the progenitor of modern botany. Collectively, herbals are viewed as creations of an elite, learned culture. As Brian Ogilvie noted in his preface of *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe,* for example, herbals were the product of "the Latin-writing, humanistically educated elite" of the early modern world.[1]

The printed European herbals of the early modern period built on a tradition of ancient and medieval herbal manuscripts. Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries however, printed herbals became bestsellers and expanded in size, complexity, and function. The transformation of the herbal, from anonymous manuscripts copied from uncertain ancient sources with inadequate illustrations and plant descriptions into massive, printed books with detailed engravings, empirical plant knowledge, tables, indexes, and reference lists, is usually explained in terms of scientific progress. While the early modern study of plants still cited and replicated ancient authors, a new pictorial and descriptive model to study and catalogue plants emerged. In these narratives of scientific progress, the herbals produced by famed authors such as Leonhart Fuchs, Carolus Clusius, Pietro Andrea Mattioli, Rembert Dodoens, and Caspar Bauhin have served collectively as evidence for the emergence and importance of the empirical study of nature. While Neville's work does not attempt to dispel or undermine narratives of scientific progress, it raises further questions concerning the intellectual genesis and transformation of the printed herbal in Tudor England.

Neville begins with a lengthy prologue on "Milton's Trees" and introduces a telling vignette that frames her numerous arguments. In his description of the fall of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Neville observes, John Milton details the broad, smooth leaves Adam and Eve used to cover their shame. Although debates over Milton's botanical accuracy persist, Neville concludes that Milton, like many early modern readers, used his copy of John Gerard's popular herbal as an essential botanical reference. In addition, as Neville's careful reading of Milton's botanical referencing reveals, Milton was likely reading the 1633 reprint of Gerard, edited by Thomas Johnson.

[1] Brian Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), x.

Apothecary Thomas Johnson's edition updated many of Gerard's entries based on his personal experience and set them alongside new woodcut illustrations. In scrutinizing this edition, Neville calls attention to a deliberate publishing strategy that marked all of Johnson's additions clearly to the reader with a double cross. As Neville highlights, the careful interplay of textual authority between the famed herbalist Gerard and the critiques of the hands-on apothecary Johnson were made possible through print. Furthermore, Neville argues that commissioning Johnson to edit Gerard's popular herbal and the subsequent careful crafting of authoritative information were products of the publishers' choices, not those of the authors, and were driven by a careful understanding of the market forces of the English book trade. Publishers Joyce Norton and Richard Whitaker realized that, to sell more books, they needed Gerard's fame as well as Johnson's accuracy. As Neville implores us to remember, early modern herbals like Gerard's only existed because publishers thought they would sell.

For Neville, Milton's referencing of Johnson's updated description of the banyan tree within Gerard's popular herbal highlights the material nature of early modern herbals. Herbals were objects that were sold commercially to be used by consumers. As commercial objects, Neville argues, English herbals were thus not just the product of early modern intellectualism, but also the creation of the London stationers who commissioned, printed, and distributed these books. Neville inverts the genesis of the printed herbal arguing that book producers "were the agents that made Renaissance natural history possible" (16).

Early Modern Herbals and the Book Trade is divided into three parts, which the author describes as moving from "bibliographical and textual theory through the publishing and reception of herbals" (45). The first part of Chapter 1 is dedicated to bibliographical and textual theory and, as Neville states, "is designed to show those unfamiliar with methods of analytic, critical, and historical bibliography how such scholarship reframes traditional debates over the nature of authors' works" (46). Neville's emphasis on bibliographical and textual theory is intended to convince readers that herbals should be seen as discursive products. As she argues, the conflation of author and authority by textual scholars and historians of science collapses textual agency and ignores the materiality and technology of printed works.

Although Neville rightly points out that for many years scholars were overly concerned with locating original authorship in or for specific herbals, historians of

science have separated and nuanced notions of authoring and scientific authority. Thus, this section on Michel Foucault's "author-function" is less compelling than the second half of Chapter 1 and subsequent chapters, which outline the numerous non-authorial influences and constraints on herbal publishing such as early modern understandings of plagiarism and copyright (Chapter 1), the formation of the Stationers' Company, which protected printers and allowed them to invest in the printing of expensive herbals (Chapter 2), and the sizable materials, labor, and capital necessary to print an early modern herbal (Chapter 3). Although the theories presented by Neville are foundational, Neville's argument that the commercial practices of printers shaped not only readers' habits but also the development of botanical authority feels better supported by the historical evidence of these and later chapters.

To begin part two Neville jumps back to the beginning of the sixteenth century when publishers in England noticed the popularity of printed herbals from and on the continent and speculated that vernacular herbals would perform well in the English market. Neville examines editions of two popular anonymous English herbals: the little *Herball* (1525) and *The Grete Herball* (1526) (Chapters 3 and 4). According to Neville, these early anonymous examples demonstrate that the success and popularity of printed herbals was not driven by specific authors, but by consumers and printers. Furthermore, Neville argues that these un-authored works served as a proof-of-concept, paving the way for later elaborated and authored herbals, which required far more investment from publishers.

In the final two chapters of part two Neville explores how early anonymous herbals were read and judged by readers (Chapter 5) as well as how herbals were used on the early modern stage to signal medical and scientific expertise (Chapter 6). From marginalia, Neville concludes that readers of earlier anonymous herbals were less invested in textual authority. Instead, they simply augmented incorrect or dubious information with their own experiences, judgements, and evaluations. Neville concludes that "early modern readers did not automatically trust the information they found in printed books" (182). The use of authored herbals on the early modern stage, however, signaled a shift in the construction and perception of medical authority.

By the mid-sixteenth century, printed herbals were becoming more authoritatively designed and elaborately illustrated. This transformation of the herbal—from anonymous works, which were often spurious in their identification and

knowledge of individual plants, to massive and elaborate authoritative texts that paved the way for the development of botany—is understood by historians of science as the textual process through which early modern naturalists reconciled the errors of ancient and medieval texts and grappled with the great number of "new" plants introduced through European exploration and colonization. Again, Neville questions the genesis of this transformation by placing the focus back on the textual and material processes that facilitated its production.

In part three Neville explores the interplay of all the themes outlined in Chapters 1 through 6 as they culminate in the case studies of authoritative herbals by William Turner (Chapter 7) and John Gerard (Chapter 8). Neville argues that publishers saw opportunity in Turner's attempts to assert his medical expertise and authority in print. By criticizing prior works, Turner's argumentative approach offered publishers something new to sell. Publishers were willing to invest in Turner's work not for his superior botanical knowledge, but because they anticipated market demand for works by medical authorities during a period in which society continued to elevate the knowledge and position of physicians.

Neville's final chapter returns to Gerard. Picking up where the prologue left off, Neville returns to the story of Gerard's herbal and its later editions to demonstrate that the genesis of most early modern herbals was not in an individual author but in "the publishers who would finance and profit from the sale of such books" (238). As Neville explains, when publisher John Norton set out to publish a massive and expensive herbal, one to outsell the popular works of Dodoens and Turner, he likely began by sourcing the expensive woodcuts he would need for his illustrations. Norton secured a large collection of woodblocks, which had been used in numerous earlier printed herbals. Next, Norton had to find a respected and well-known author. Gerard, an eminent member of the Barber–Surgeons' Company and skilled herbalist, was then given the monumental task of organizing and authoring a massive tome around the images secured by his publisher. Like his contemporaries, as Neville demonstrates, Gerard leaned heavily on the works of previous herbal authors.

Despite the incredible popularity of his herbal published in 1597, Gerard's textual authority was short-lived. Neville questions why Gerard continues to be judged as a plagiarist and his 1597 text dismissed as an English translation of Dodoens's 1554 herbal. To redeem Gerard, Neville emphasizes the intertextuality of early modern herbals and highlights the publication and marketing strategies of Gerard's publishers.

Neville argues that the second edition of Gerard's herbal, corrected and added to by the apothecary Thomas Johnson, was only commissioned because Gerard's publishers needed to compete with John Parkinson's latest work. The act of inviting Johnson to critique Gerard without sacrificing the name recognition of an already famous author created an updated product for the publisher to sell while also allowing Johnson to advance himself professionally. Yet, as Neville observes, while the strategy sold books, Johnson's biting assessment of Gerard continues to influence assessments of Gerard's work.

For Neville the "fathers of English botany" (260) only became experts because publishers realized herbals were valuable commodities. Without market interest and publisher investment the elaborate herbals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would not exist. Of course, this is a bit of a chicken-and-egg argument. You could also argue that without authors capable of accessing, participating in, synthesizing, and translating the Republic of Letters' growing knowledge of plants and the natural world, elaborate herbals would not exist. Less important than debating a singular genesis is recognizing the multiple and overlapping geneses of early modern herbals. Neville's work highlights the competing interests of reader, author, and publisher in the world of early modern print.

Neville's work is a welcome addition to the history of early modern herbals, and I hope not the last. As Neville reminds us, the text in early modern herbals, even if written by an educated elite, was shaped by numerous and competing forces including consumers, markets, printers, publishers, merchants, and artisans. It is to be hoped that Neville's contributions to the study of early modern herbals inspire further investigations into the ways in which early modern herbals were also shaped by local or indigenous knowledge as well as lay medicinal practices.

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