

Gerard's Herbal

The OED defines the word 'herbal' (n) as: 'a book containing the names and descriptions of herbs, or of plants in general, with their properties and virtues; a treatise in plants.' Charles Singer, historian of medicine and science, describes herbals as 'a collection of descriptions of plants usually put together for medical purposes.



Illustration of Gooseberries from Gerard's Herbal (1633), demonstrating the intricate detail that characterises this text.

The term is perhaps now-a-days used most frequently in connection with the finely illustrated works produced by the "fathers of botany" in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.¹ Although the origin of the herbal dates back to 'remote antiquity'² the advent of the printing press meant that herbals could be produced in large quantities (in comparison to their earlier manuscript counterparts) with detailed woodcut and metal engraving illustrations. The first herbal printed in Britain was Richard Banckes' *Herball* of 1525³, which was written in plain text. Following Banckes, herbalists such as William Turner and John Gerard gained popularity with their lavishly illustrated herbals.

Gerard's Herbal was originally published in 1597; it is regarded as being one of the best of the printed herbals and is the first herbal to

contain an illustration of a potato⁴. Gerard did not have an enormously interesting life; he was 'apprenticed to Alexander Mason, a surgeon of the Barber-Surgeons' Company'⁵ and probably 'travelled in Scandinavia and Russia, as he

frequently refers to these places in his writing'⁶. For all his adult life he lived in a tenement with a garden probably belonging to Lord Burghley. He was clearly very fond of this garden, because in 1596 he published a list of all the plants it contained. Possibly the most intriguing aspect of Gerard's life was his involvement in the Herbal. The work was originally commissioned to Robert Priest (London College of Physicians) but he died before it was finished and Gerard was asked to carry on, however Gerard claimed that the original draft had vanished and the entire book was his own work⁷. Moreover, it is believed that the Herbal is essentially a translation into English of Rembert Dodoens' *Stirpium Historiae Pemptades Sex* (1583).⁸ As Gerard wasn't knowledgeable enough to match every plant illustration to its corresponding description, Matthias de l'Obel (physician and botanist) was asked to check the

¹ Charles Singer, 'Herbals', *Edinburgh Review* 237:483 (1923), pp. 95-105

² *Ibid.*

³ Agnes Arber, *Herbals, Their Origin and Evolution, a Chapter in the History of Botany 1470-1670* (Cambridge, 1986).

⁴ *John Gerard* (http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/aconite/gerard.html)

⁵ Marja Smolenaars, 'Gerard, John (c.1545-1612)', in *ODNB*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/aconite/gerard.html

⁸ *Herball, General Historie of Plants* (London, 1597)

(http://www.hsl.virginia.edu/historical/rare_books/herbalism/gerard.cfm)

Herbal for mistakes, but after he reportedly found over one thousand Gerard sacked him and let the Herbal go to press as it was⁹.



Illustration of a Mandrake from Gerard's Herbal (1633). Remarkably reminiscent of the common conception of the mandrake as depicted in the Harry Potter films.

New College owns a copy of the 1633 edition of Gerard's Herbal, enlarged and amended by apothecary Thomas Johnson; a third edition was printed three years later. The 1633 edition is 1630 pages long and contains 1800 woodcuts, not all of which match the plant they are supposed to illustrate. The descriptions tend to be rather dull, but Gerard's criticism of folklore is often quite amusing. One such example is his derision of those who 'have little or nothing to do but eate and drinke' who carved briony roots to resemble the 'shape of men and women' in order to fool 'simple and unlearned people'¹⁰

into thinking they were mandrakes. Most of the plants listed in the Herbal are supplied with descriptions of their appearance, where to find them, when in the year they grow, what names they are known by, their

'temperature' and how they could be used. Although mandrakes, for instance, were commonly thought to increase fertility, Gerard dismisses this, showing that the arguments for such properties are flawed. Instead, he describes the mandrake as being primarily useful to 'causeth sleepe'¹¹ and purge 'the belly exceedingly from flegme and melancholike humours'¹².



A plant found within the pages of the Herbal (unfortunately does not correspond with the plant illustrated).

Becci Hutchins (New College Library)

⁹John Gerard, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/aconite/gerara.nmi.

¹⁰ Gerard, John. The herball or Generall historie of plantes. London : Printed by Adam Islip, Joice Norton and Richard Whitakers, 1633.

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*