

## READING 23-2

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### The Herbal of John Gerard

The herbal of John Gerard (1545–1612) is the best known botanical work published in English. It has remained popular for over 400 years for its amalgamation of horticultural lore, its collection of medical “virtues” of plants, and, not least, its graceful and delightful English prose. It is still useful and still a delight.

Gerard was born in Cheshire, England and attended a village school in Wisterson. He was apprenticed for a career of a surgeon in 1562 and achieved eminence in his profession, being elected Master of the Company of Barber-Surgeons. He traveled the Baltic coast to “Denmarke, Swevia, Poland, Livinia, Russia” and even mentions Moscow!

Gerard’s reputation, however, rests on horticulture. As early as 1577, Gerard superintended several gardens and plant collections of William Cecil (Lord Burghley, the first minister of Queen Elizabeth) including his residence in the Strand and at Theobalds, Hertfordshire. In 1586 he was appointed curator of the College of Physicians physics garden. In addition, Gerard’s own garden at Holborn, between Chancery Lane and Fetter Lane included “all the rare samples” and “all manners of strange trees, herbs, roots, plants, flowers and other rare things ...”

Gerard’s list of plants in his Holborn garden published in 1596 was the first garden catalogue printed in English and included over 1,000 species including the first English mention of potato. However, Gerard’s most famous work is his *Herball or General Historie of Plants*, published in 1597 and dedicated to Lord Burghley. The opening sentence of his preface is a delightful example of his style:

*“Although my paines have not been spent (Curteous Reader) in the gracious discoverie of golden mines, nor in the tracing after silver veines, whereby my native country might be enriched with such merchandise as it hath most in request and admiration; yet hath my labour (I trust) been otherwise profitably employed, in descrying of such a harmlesse treasure of herbes, trees, and plants, as the earth frankly without violence offereth unto our most necessarie uses.”*

The origin of the *Herball* is an involved story. The publisher, John North, had commissioned a certain Dr. (Robert) Priest, a London physician, to translate *Stirpium historiae pemptades sex* (1583) of the Belgian botanist Rembert Dodoens (1517–1585) from Latin into English but who died before completing the task. The fate of Priest’s translation is obscure. Gerard stated in his preface to the *Herball* that he had never seen the manuscript but in a commendatory letter also printed in the *Herball*, Stephen Bredwell acknowledged Priest as follows:

*“D. Priest, for his translation of so much as Dodonaeus, hath thereby left a tombe for his honorable sculpture.”*

This sentence has been interpreted to conflict with Gerard’s account:

*.... Doctor Priest, one of our London Colleagues hath (as I heard) translated the last edition of Dodonaeus, which meant to publish the same; but being prevented by death, his translation likewise perished:...*

Gerard’s reputation has suffered as a result of the comment “as I heard,” in light of the contradictory comment by Bredwell. He has been accused of plagerism at the worst or dishonesty at the least. However,

if one assumes there is no innocent explanation for this discrepancy, the lack of suppression must be based on the assumption that Gerard did not read the dedicatory letters included on his behalf.

The *Herball* contained about 1800 woodcuts, most of them from the collection of *Tabernaemontanus* (Jacob Dietrich of Bergzabern, 1520–1590) published in his *Eicones plantarum* of 1590, illustrations without text. However, Gerard had difficulties coupling the figures with text and Mathias de l'Obel (1539–1616) was brought in by the printer to assist in this project. Difficulties ensued and l'Obel was dismissed by Gerard on the ground that he has forgotten his English.

The first edition of the *Herball* was without competition in England for 36 years. When it was learned that a new herbal by John Parkinson was in the offing the successors to the rights to the *Herball* decided to publish a second edition and commissioned Thomas Johnson, a London apothecary and botanist, to undertake the task. The feat was accomplished within a year and the second revised edition was published in 1633. Johnson's edition is even more famous than the first. All corrections and emendations are indicated by special markings. The illustrations were augmented to 2766, most obtained from Christophe Plantin of Antwerp (1514–1588) and many new plants were described including the plantain or banana.

Gerard's *Herball* is more than a mere compilation. Although he stresses medicinal qualities of plants, attention is drawn to ornamental and food values, and includes extensive comments on culture and history. Gerard, above all, wrote with felicity and style, and the charm of his prose has done much to make this herbal a beloved work of English letters.

According to J.W. Lever (1952) there is circumstantial evidence that Gerard's *Herball* may have been a source for William Shakespeare. *Love's Labour's Lost*, presumably written in 1588 but printed in 1598 "newly corrected and augmented," contains one of the more delightful songs of the great bard. The first stanza is as follows:

*I. The Cuckoo Song*  
*When Daises pied, and Violets blew,*  
*And Ladie-smockes all silver white,*  
*And Cuckow-buds of yellow hew*  
*Do paint the Medowes with delight:*  
*The Cuckow then on everie tree*  
*Mockes married men, for thus sings he*  
*Cuckow.*  
*Cuckow, Cuckow: O word of feare,*  
*Unpleasing to a married eare.*  
 (Love's Labour's Lost, v.ii, 902–10)

There are some odd horticultural allusions: (1) Ladie smocks (*Cardamine pratensis*) are pale lilac not silver-white; (2) Cuckow-buds (another name for Ladie Smocks) are not yellow!!!

The confusion is cleared up by a reading of Gerard's *Herball*. Chapter 18 of Book II, entitled "Of wilde water cresses or Cuckow flowers" lists six varieties all but one are termed ladie smocks.

The 5th variety is described as follows (italics provided by Lever):

5. Milke white Ladie smockes hath stalkes rising immediately from the roote, deviding themselves into sundrie small twiggie and hard braunches, set with leaves like those of Serpillum. The flowers growe at the top, made of fower leaves of a yellowish colour.

Gerard continues, describing the habitat, time of flowering, and nomenclature.

*The place.* These kinds of Cuckowe flowers, grow not so much in waters as they do in moist medowes...

*The time.* These flower for the most part in Aprill and Maie, *when the Cuowe doth begin to sing her pleasant notes without stammering.*

*The names.* They are commonly called Latine *Flos Cuculi*, for the reason aforesaid...it is called in the Geramine toong *Wildercress*: in French *Passerage sauuage*: in English Cuckowe flowers: in Northfolke, Caunterburie bels: at the Namptwich in Cheshire where I had my beginning, Ladie smockes, *which hath giuen me cause to christen it after my countrie fashion.*

Lever's conclusions are as follows:

“(i) that the Cheshire name ‘Lady-smocks’ came into standard English Through Gerarde’s idiosyncrasy, and that Shakespeare took it straight from the Herball; (ii) that the ‘milk-white’ variety, catching his fancy, was transmuted for aesthetic and perhaps metrical reasons into ‘silver-white’; (iii) that the ‘fower leaves of a yellowish colour’ (what Gerarde meant here is not clear—probably he was thinking of the pale-green calyx) became impossible cuckoo-buds of yellow hue; (iv) that the Meadow habitat, the spring season, and the cuckoo allusion all wove themselves into his song.”

How wonderful and fitting that Gerard. a continual delight to botanists and horticulturists for 400 years, should have also been a source for William Shakespeare.

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