

## The Handy Homemaker, Eighteenth-Century Style

### The Compleat Housewife: or Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion

By Elizabeth (Eliza) Smith. Introduction by  
Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace.  
Chawton House Library, 2009.  
Reproduced from 15th ed., 1753. xiii + 409 pages.  
6 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. £18.

Reviewed by Christine M. Mitchell.

Meat preservatives, homemade curatives, and home decoratives—such are the elements of everyday life addressed in Elizabeth Smith's *The Compleat Housewife*—everyday life in eighteenth-century England, that is. First published in 1727, the book offers “receipts” for all manner of dishes, ailments, and general housekeeping. As the first cookbook published in the American colonies (1742), *The Compleat Housewife* takes its rightful place as an early and inclusive compendium of prescriptions and recipes that seem quite foreign and rather disgusting to our modern tastes and sensibilities. However, at the time of publication, Smith's book met the growing need for a text to assist women with their task of maintaining a household.

As Elizabeth Wallace notes in her introduction, this book gives twenty-first century readers a much greater appreciation of “modern preservation and refrigeration” as well as the global transportation system which allows us to eat out-of-season fruits and vegetables. Yet, we may also be struck by the variety of provisions available to the English housewife—seasonal variety, to be sure, but variety nonetheless. The English countryside appeared to be teeming with both root and green vegetables, among them “turneps,” “brockala,” “colliflowers,” green beans, and artichokes. Adding to the variety, Smith presents recipes for no fewer than 30 types of seafood and some 35 kinds of birds, fowl, and rodents (including leverets, hares, and coneyes).

Smith also lists ways to prepare meats, both common—beef, pork, lamb, and

veal—and less common—eel and swan, for example. In addition, squeamish readers will have to hold their stomachs when they get to recipes using all parts of the animal, such as pickled ox-palates, fricasseed tripe, and hashed calf's head. It was a different culinary world!

And when Smith begins the section on cordial waters, medicines and salves, she includes over 300 “receipts” for treatment of everything from “gripe” (bowel pain), dropsy (fits), and cough to “distemper got by an ill husband,” miscarriage, and venereal disease. The idea that home remedies could treat and even cure such conditions speaks volumes about both the writer's optimism and the woeful state of medical knowledge in the eighteenth century. Yet Smith swears by a number of the preparations; indeed, her “thirty Years diligent Application” and “Experience of their Use and Efficacy” are what induced her to publish her volume.

Some of the book's more notable inclusions are the first published recipe for English “Ketchup” (made with mushrooms, anchovies, and horseradish); directions for making “the first Liquid Laudanum” (which does, indeed, use four ounces of opium); and three-plus pages of “an excellent Prescription for the Cure of Worms” (with “which vast numbers of people of all ages and both sexes are afflicted”). In addition, Smith gives instructions on such home maintenance questions as how to mix paint and varnish, destroy bugs, and whiten “cloaths.”

A glance at these previous examples alone tells us that the life of an eighteenth-century housewife was an important one. She functioned as chef, doctor, pharmacist, exterminator, chemist, laundress, and all-around handy-woman. Even if she were wealthy enough to engage servants, she was ultimately the household's CEO: responsible for all areas of the household. The “Accomplish'd Gentlewoman” had to be knowledgeable about practices to keep the home functioning.

However, since the food recipes are ones we would probably never prepare today, since the curatives are useless at best and harmful, perhaps fatal, at worst, and

since we purchase paint, bug spray, and laundry products at the store, what can this reproduction text tell us? Who would find it useful? There

are several answers to these questions, revealing that *The Compleat Housewife* is an important and valuable book.

For researchers in the fields of language arts, *The Compleat Housewife* is invaluable. Readers gain an essential glimpse into the world of Jane Austen and her contemporaries. We understand the concerns of Mrs. Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and other women of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society. Linguists will delight in the text's use of obscure terms from cookery, medicine, and culture. A copy of the OED would be handy for perusing the text, if only to discover such gems as “usquebaugh,” the Gaelic word for “whisky.” Technical writers such as Elizabeth Tebeaux note that among the earliest technical texts in English were cookbooks, with Smith's book as an excellent example, giving specific lists of ingredients, proportions, and procedures.

Finally, *The Compleat Housewife* is an historical artifact documenting life and culture in eighteenth-century England. Anyone researching that period, whether for personal amusement or professional purposes (such as film authenticity), would extract a profusion of information and detail from Smith's book. After reading it, we can be glad that we do not live in that period and speculate on which of our own habits will induce smiles or shivers of horror in the twenty-fourth century!

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